



## The Effect of Customer Experience and Brand Image on Customer Loyalty with Mediation of Customer Satisfaction in the Culinary Industry

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### ABSTRACT

Indonesia's culinary industry is experiencing rapid growth, driven by people's increasing interest in food trends and the eating out lifestyle. One trend that is attracting attention is the consumption of spicy food, which is growing thanks to social media challenges with extreme levels of spiciness. In an increasingly fierce competition, business strategies based on customer experience, brand image, and customer satisfaction are key factors in increasing customer loyalty. This study shows that while customer experience contributes to satisfaction, the relationship does not directly guarantee loyalty. Other factors, such as taste and facilities, still play an important role in building competitiveness in the culinary industry.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the current era of globalization, the success of a business is greatly influenced by the innovation and creativity of business people. Entrepreneurs are required to create new ideas that can provide added value to consumers. In addition, the ability to recognize opportunities that have the potential to grow in the future is also very important. One sector that has experienced significant growth is the culinary industry, especially the restaurant business. Today, many restaurants and eateries compete to offer a variety of products, and continue to innovate to stay relevant to trends and attract consumers' attention to increase sales. Innovation also provides an opportunity for businesses to compete with other business players. Most Indonesians tend to like fast food because it is served practically, has a delicious taste, and can save time. With more and more new restaurants offering a variety of products, competition in the culinary industry is getting tougher. In this competitive context, business strategy becomes a key element to achieve optimal revenue.

The rapid growth in the culinary business is triggered by the increasing public interest in culinary. This high interest can be seen from the consumption of people who not only fulfil their basic needs, but also make culinary as part of their lifestyle. The culinary business has an appeal that will not fade over time. As long as people still need food, the culinary business will continue to grow. Over time, with the rapid development of the culinary business and the high interest of the community, coupled with changes in consumer tastes that always adapt to the times, will create increasingly fierce business competition. In this digitalization era, the existence of technology is also an important factor in supporting the growth of the culinary business. Digital platforms, such as food ordering apps, social media, and food delivery services, have helped businesses reach consumers more easily and efficiently. Technology also allows entrepreneurs to analyze consumer behavior, so they can design more targeted strategies. Therefore, technology integration in the culinary business is no longer just an option, but a necessity to stay competitive in a dynamic market.

The growing interest in spicy food among teenagers and young adults is an interesting phenomenon to examine, especially in the context of evolving culinary trends. The habit of consuming spicy food is often seen as a form of challenge, which is further encouraged by the proliferation of social media content featuring extreme dishes with high levels of spiciness. On the other hand, the lifestyle of urban dwellers who eat out more often has also driven the significant growth of various eateries, including restaurants, cafes, food courts, coffee shops, and other food outlets. As competition in the culinary industry intensifies, retaining existing customers is a very important strategy. Loyal customers are not only a valuable asset for businesses, but also provide long-term benefits due to their willingness to make repeat purchases and spread positive reviews. Loyal customers prefer to make repeat purchases on a fairly large scale, which will certainly benefit the business because they are willing to spend more money to get the right value.

Kotler & Keller stated in (Tamadesha 2018: 21) that maintaining current clients will be more profitable than trying to get new clients which will cost a lot. In (Pujiawati, 2020), Schiffman and Wisenblit state that customers who are truly satisfied with a product are customers who remain loyal to that product by making additional purchases. In the case of company products, loyal customers do so because they have used products that exceed their expectations or because they will tell others about the company in a positive way. Customer loyalty can be said to be very important because loyal customers can facilitate faster business growth in terms of increased revenue. So it can be concluded that food quality, appropriate price, good service, convenient location, and attractive environment are factors that must be managed properly to ensure customer satisfaction and build strong customer loyalty. Planting the existence of a brand in the minds of customers has an important role that must be pursued by the company in building the company's image for the better and increasingly recognized by the public. Indrasari (2019: 94) emphasizes that if the company's image is well defined and difficult to change, the company will have a stronger competitive advantage over its competitors if the image remains consistent over time. In addition, companies that are able to provide positive experiences to customers so that these experiences are unforgettable and stick in the minds of consumers.

## **LITERATUR REVIEW**

### **Customer Experience**

Every customer is expected to experience an exceptional purchase journey. This sensation comes when they use the product, which is accompanied by an emotional reaction that reflects whether they like the product and service provided. In other words, this includes product and service quality and a satisfying user experience. Customers tend to feel more satisfied when the situation encountered is positive and pleasant. Research by Wahyuningsih (2021) shows that customer experience has a significant impact on their level of satisfaction. A positive experience can build a strong relationship between the company and the customer, where customer satisfaction contributes to loyalty. Customers who have a high commitment to buy and support a particular brand consistently will not be easily influenced by situational factors or marketing strategies from competitors. They will continue to choose to buy products from the same brand. Brands have their own appeal, uniqueness, and preferences. A positive brand image tends to encourage customers to make more frequent purchases (Putri & Roslina, 2023).

Customer experience is an effort to create superior value, where the experience gained by the customer becomes an added value for the product offered. Today, customer experience has become a major focus in marketing practices. Experience is considered a significant added value for consumers. According to Smith et al. (2002), companies that want to integrate experience in their marketing strategy should be able to deliver five elements of experience through several stages. The first element, Sense, relates to the five senses, including experiences gained through sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. The second element, Feel, reflects the brand's influence on consumers, both in terms

of mood and emotions experienced. The third element, Think, focuses on encouraging customers to be interested and think creatively, either through inspiration, technology, or surprise, so that consumers can re-evaluate. The fourth element, Act, describes long-term behavior patterns and lifestyles formed from experiences of interaction with other individuals, groups, and social communities (Wibisono et al., 2015).

### **Brand Image**

Brand image is a perception that is formed in the minds of consumers based on their experience with a particular brand. If a brand is able to build a good image, there is a high probability that consumers will make repeat purchases of the brand. (Chalil et al., 2020). Brand image is sometimes referred to as brand perception, is the way customers prepare for a brand and how that impression is reflected in brand associations in their memory. They also emphasize that brand image refers to how customers perceive a brand in general, including their thoughts and beliefs.

The way people see a brand is determined by the associations they have with the brand. Although the concept of image is easy to understand, it is difficult to provide a systematic explanation due to its abstract nature. The brand of a product is an indicator of its quality. Customers will associate a product with a brand they have known for a long time. Customers can identify and judge products, reduce purchase risks, and gain experience and happiness that distinguish products by using brand image. Ideas, beliefs, values, interests, and distinctive qualities are examples of tangible and intangible components that make up a brand image. Positioning the company in the minds of customers needs to be done correctly to build a more positive brand image that will stick in their minds and impact purchases.

### **Customer Loyalty**

A customer is any person or buyer who consistently uses a company's products for their personal needs (Setyobudi & Daryanto, 2014; Kotler & Keller, 2009). It is also related to customer satisfaction, which is defined as a feeling of pleasure or disappointment after evaluating what has been achieved or how well the product is made in relation to the anticipation of receiving satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Kotler & Keller, 2009). Customers will be disappointed and leave a business that offers a product or service if the product does not match their expectations, which can be characterized as a feeling of pleasure or disappointment. However, if a business can meet its customers' expectations, Sangadji and Sopiah (2013) assert that customer delight can be maintained over time. The intention to repurchase is influenced by a number of factors, including customer happiness. For example, when happy customers tend to buy goods from businesses that operate as promised, this is known as customer loyalty. Clients like this are difficult to convince by competitors because they are happy with the performance of a business that matches their expectations (Tjiptono & Diana, 2015). One of the key components of any marketing plan is customer loyalty, a business needs loyal customers in order to survive (Kristianti et al, 2024). Consumer loyalty which is included as one of the commitments made by

consumers in making continuous purchases of products or services in the future by being influenced by situations that occur and marketing efforts that can provide changes in consumer behavior towards other brands (Gunawan, 2021). Customer (customer) is different from consumer (consumer), a person can be said to be a customer if that person starts to get used to buying the product or service offered. This habit can be built through repeated purchases within a certain period of time, so that person cannot be said to be a customer but as a buyer or consumer.

Customer loyalty to a business is an important indicator in assessing the relationship between the two. This level of loyalty provides insight into the likelihood of consumers switching to another brand, especially if that brand offers better quality and differences in price and features.

### Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is when the chosen option meets or exceeds customer expectations after purchase, when the results (outcomes) do not match expectations, the customer will feel dissatisfied (Tjiptono, 2014: 354). Customer satisfaction is a person's view of the performance or results of a product compared to his expectations, which can cause feelings of satisfaction or disappointment (Keller & Kotler, 2009: 177). According to (Irawan, 2008: 37), the factors that drive customer satisfaction are:

1. Product quality, after buying and using goods customers will be happy if the product quality is good.
2. Price, for sensitive customers, usually cheap is a source of satisfaction because customers will get high value for money.
3. Service quality, quality and customer satisfaction are usually difficult to replicate, SERVQUAL is one of the many dimensions that make up the drivers of service quality.
4. Emotion, customers will feel satisfied (proud) because of the emotional value provided by the brand of the product.
5. Cost and convenience, if getting a product that is convenient, and efficient to obtain will make customers happier.

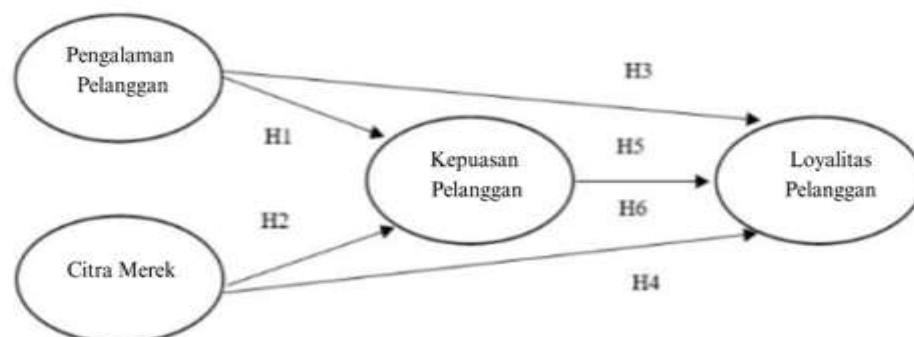


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

- H1: Customer experience has a positive effect on Customer Satisfaction.
- H2: Brand image has a positive effect on customer satisfaction
- H3: Customer experience has a positive effect on Customer Loyalty
- H4: Brand Image has a positive effect on Customer Loyalty
- H5: Customer satisfaction has a positive effect on customer loyalty
- H6: Customer experience and Brand Image Positively Affect Customer Loyalty Through Customer Satisfaction

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research uses the literature review method. The approach is carried out by searching the literature thoroughly, assessing the quality of the material, and analyzing the integrated findings (Jailani et al, 2023). This study uses previous research as a theoretical basis for the research being conducted. The data retrieval technique is done by analyzing previous research with the aim of testing the hypothesis that has been set. In this study, the analysis method used is Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Square (SEM PLS). PLS was chosen because of its ability to develop theory in the context of exploratory research, focusing on explaining the variance of the dependent variable when analyzing the model. PLS serves as an alternative to SEM analysis when data are not multivariate normally distributed. In PLS SEM, the value of the latent variable is estimated through a linear combination of manifest variables related to the latent variable, which is needed to replace the manifest variable. One of the advantages of PLS SEM is its ability to handle situations where there are uncertain factors and unacceptable solutions (Hair & Alamer, 2022).

## **RESEARCH RESULT**

A positive brand image plays an important role in shaping consumers' perceptions of the products and services offered by a business. When a brand is able to create a good image in the minds of consumers, this not only increases the attractiveness of the product, but also strengthens the emotional connection between customers and the brand. This research shows that a good brand image significantly contributes to increased customer satisfaction. Consumers tend to feel more satisfied when they have a positive perception of the brands they use. Furthermore, satisfaction resulting from a strong brand image plays a major role in building customer loyalty. Satisfied customers not only make repeat purchases, but are also more likely to recommend the brand to others, thus creating a very favorable word-of-mouth marketing effect.

Customer experience, on the other hand, encompasses the entire interaction that occurs between the customer and the brand, from the purchase process to the use of the product. Positive interactions, such as friendly, responsive service and products that meet expectations, can directly increase the level of customer satisfaction. A satisfying customer experience not only provides added value to customers but also strengthens their relationship with the brand, ultimately contributing to loyalty. Customers who feel satisfied with their experience are likely to return and make repeat purchases, and are more likely to remain loyal to the brand even when faced with offers from competitors.

Customer satisfaction acts as an intervening variable that connects the influence of brand image and customer experience on customer loyalty. This research shows that the relationship between brand image and customer experience with customer loyalty is not always direct. Instead, customer satisfaction is a key element that bridges the relationship. In other words, a strong brand image and good customer experience can increase customer loyalty if they feel satisfied with the product or service they receive. Therefore, creating consistent customer satisfaction is an important strategy for companies in building long-term loyalty in an increasingly competitive market.

## **DISCUSSION**

Based on the literature review, there is data showing that customer experience does not have a significant effect on customer satisfaction. This indicates that the company's efforts to improve customer experience for customers will not necessarily have a direct impact on increasing the level of customer satisfaction. In contrast, brand image is proven to have a significant positive influence on customer satisfaction. This fact shows that building a good and positive brand image can effectively increase customer satisfaction with the products or services offered by the company. Furthermore, it was found that customer experience does not have a significant influence on customer loyalty. This means that even though companies try to improve customer experience through various strategies, it does not necessarily have a big impact on customer loyalty. Customer experience also does not show a positive relationship with customer loyalty, which means that even if customer experience is improved, the effect on customer loyalty remains minimal or insignificant.

The results of the analysis also reveal that the effect of customer experience and brand image on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction shows that customer satisfaction does not successfully mediate the relationship between customer experience and brand image with customer loyalty. In other words, customer satisfaction resulting from their experience while interacting with the company is not strong enough to make them loyal customers, especially in the context of the culinary industry in Indonesia. Customer loyalty in the culinary industry in Indonesia is apparently influenced by various other factors, such as the taste of the food served, the quality of service, the atmosphere of the place, and the facilities offered by the culinary business. Therefore, companies in this sector need to pay attention to various other aspects besides customer experience and brand image for the long term of the company.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Customer experience has a significant effect on customer satisfaction in the culinary industry in Indonesia. Delicious taste and attractive presentation can provide satisfaction to customers.
2. Brand image has a significant effect on customer satisfaction in the culinary industry in Indonesia.
3. Customer experience directly has no significant effect on customer loyalty in the culinary industry in Indonesia.
4. Brand image has a significant effect on customer loyalty in the culinary industry in Indonesia.
5. Customer satisfaction directly has no significant effect on customer loyalty in the culinary industry in Indonesia.
6. Customer satisfaction does not mediate the relationship between customer experience and brand image in the culinary industry in Indonesia. This is because customer satisfaction derived from customer experience is not enough to make customers loyal to a restaurant.

## **ADVANCED RESEARCH**

Further research could focus on segmenting customers by demographics or behavior to identify significant differences in the influence of brand image and customer experience on customer loyalty across different segments, such as age, income, or food preferences. In addition, longitudinal studies can also be conducted to observe how changes in brand image and customer experience affect customer loyalty over time, providing insight into the long-term impact of marketing strategies. Research can also include comparative studies with other types of restaurants or eateries to evaluate a brand's competitive position in influencing customer loyalty compared to its competitors.

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