

The Role of Creativity, Product Quality, and Innovation in Enhancing MSME Competitive Advantage

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Abstract

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) operating in the food and beverage (F&B) sector in Depok City face increasing competitive pressures in a rapidly evolving market environment. Despite their significant contribution to local economic development, many F&B MSMEs continue to encounter challenges related to limited creativity, inconsistent product quality, and insufficient product innovation, which may constrain the development of sustainable competitive advantage. This study aims to investigate the effects of creativity and product quality on competitive advantage, with product innovation serving as a mediating variable. A quantitative explanatory research design was employed, involving 200 F&B MSMEs owners in Depok City, Indonesia. The findings reveal that both creativity and product quality positively and significantly influence product innovation. Product innovation, in turn, has a significant positive effect on competitive advantage. Furthermore, product innovation mediates the relationship between creativity and competitive advantage, as well as the relationship between product quality and competitive advantage. These findings underscore the critical role of product innovation in translating organizational capabilities into sustainable competitive advantage.

Keywords: Competitive Advantage; Creativity; Food and Beverage MSMEs; Product Innovation; Product Quality

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INTRODUCTION

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) have a crucial role as the backbone of Indonesia's national economy (Lubis & Salsabila, 2024). According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (2025), approximately 20.11% of MSMEs are concentrated in West Java, the highest concentration in Indonesia. This indicates that West Java has the highest MSME growth in Indonesia. Among the cities in the province, Depok ranks as the third largest MSME center. Furthermore, in 2025, Depok was recognized as one of the leading regions for the development of food and beverage MSMEs (Depok City Cooperatives and Micro Enterprises Agency, 2025), highlighting its strategic role in supporting entrepreneurial growth and competitiveness within the sector.

The growth of MSMEs in Depok City also marks a significant competitive challenge. With increasing market competition, MSMEs can no longer rely exclusively on traditional products and operational efficiency. The capacity to produce creative concepts and convert them into unique goods has emerged as a crucial element

in achieving differentiation and sustaining competitive advantage (Andini et al., 2025). As a result, creativity and product innovation are increasingly acknowledged as strategic assets that facilitate the survival and growth of MSMEs in a dynamic market.

A pre-survey was conducted with 60 MSMEs to confirm the challenges faced by Food and Beverage (F&B) MSMEs in Depok. This initial pre-survey was designed to assess the baseline operational capacities of MSMEs owners across three critical domains: entrepreneurial creativity, product quality orientation, and product innovation. As shown in Table 1, most MSMEs have not fully leveraged creativity and product quality as strategic resources to support innovation. A considerable number of MSMEs also reported limited efforts to generate new ideas, improve product quality, and adjust their products and services to follow consumer trends and demand. Such conditions may constrain MSMEs' ability to innovate and remain competitive in the growing market.

Table 1. Pre Survey

Variable	Question	Yes	No
Creativity	Do you frequently try new methods for presenting or conceptualizing your food/beverages?	21	39
	Has the creativity you apply to your menu or business concept proven to make your business more attractive to customers?	23	37
Product Quality	Do you actively make efforts to improve the quality of your products?	24	36
Product Innovation	Have you ever made changes or modifications to your existing products?	15	45
	Are your products adapted to match current market trends or consumer preferences?	27	33

Recent studies suggest that limitations in entrepreneurial creativity, quality management practices, and organizational knowledge can constrain the innovation performance of MSMEs (Utomo et al., 2025). As a result, businesses may struggle to update and innovate their products and adapt to changing market demand. These conditions underscore the need for a deeper understanding of how internal organizational resources can be leveraged to foster product innovation and strengthen competitiveness in an increasingly saturated market. From a theoretical perspective, these issues can be explained through the Resource-Based View (RBV) proposed by Wernerfelt (1984) and Barney (2001). According to the RBV, sustainable competitive advantage arises from the effective use of valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources. In the context of MSMEs, intangible resources such as creativity, product quality, and innovation capability are strategic assets that can support long-term competitiveness despite limited financial and physical resources. When integrated into organizational routines and product development processes, these resources become challenging for competitors to replicate and may act as significant sources of differentiation (Ekawati & Prasetyo, 2026). This study conceptualizes creativity and product quality as strategic resources that enhance product innovation, thereby contributing to competitive advantage.

Despite the growing body of literature, several important research gaps remain. First, prior studies have predominantly examined the relationships between creativity and product innovation (Castillo-Vergara et al., 2024; Agyapong et al., 2025), product quality and innovation (Somalua et al., 2022; Ferdiansyah et al., 2025), and innovation and competitive advantage (Afrizal, 2021; Al Fajari & Purnama, 2023) as separate research streams. Consequently, limited empirical evidence explains how these strategic resources jointly contribute to competitive advantage through a unified structural mechanism. Second, although product innovation has frequently been identified as an important outcome of organizational capabilities, its mediating role in translating creativity and product quality into competitive advantage remains underexplored, particularly in the MSME setting. Existing studies have focused primarily on direct effects, providing only a limited understanding of the mechanism through which internal resources generate superior competitive outcomes. Third, most empirical evidence has been obtained from manufacturing firms, large enterprises, or MSMEs in countries outside Indonesia, while studies focusing on food and beverage MSMEs in rapidly growing urban markets remain scarce. Considering the distinctive characteristics of Indonesian MSMEs, including resource constraints, heterogeneous managerial capabilities, and intense local market competition, findings from previous studies may not be directly generalizable to this context.

Accordingly, the novelty of this study lies in developing and empirically validating an integrated Resource-Based View (RBV) model that positions creativity and product quality as strategic internal resources, product innovation as the mediating capability, and competitive advantage as the organizational outcome. Unlike previous studies (Somalua et al., 2022; Ferdiansyah et al., 2025) that mainly investigate these constructs separately or emphasize direct relationships, this study explains the mechanism by which creativity and product quality translate into competitive advantage through product innovation. Furthermore, by focusing on food and beverage MSMEs in Depok, this study extends the applicability of RBV to a highly competitive emerging-market context. It provides context-specific evidence for innovation-driven competitiveness among MSMEs.

Therefore, this study examines the effects of creativity and product quality on competitive advantage among food and beverage MSMEs in Depok City, with product innovation serving as a mediating variable. By addressing the identified theoretical, empirical, and contextual gaps, this study contributes to the RBV literature while providing practical implications for MSME owners and policymakers seeking to strengthen innovation capabilities and long-term competitiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory

The theoretical foundation of this study is the Resource-Based View (RBV), a prominent theoretical framework in strategic management. This theory, first introduced by Wernerfelt (1984) and subsequently elaborated by Barney (2001), posits that a company's sustainable competitive advantage derives from its internal resources rather than its external market conditions. The theory distinguishes between common resources, which are accessible to all firms and facilitate basic operational functions, and strategic resources that meet the VRIN criteria. These strategic resources must be valuable (enhancing value creation), rare (not commonly held by competitors), inimitable (challenging to replicate due to causal ambiguity, historical context, or social complexity), and non-substitutable (unable to be replaced by alternative resources). This subset of strategic resources is the foundation of sustained competitive differentiation (Barney et al., 2001).

The Resource-Based View (RBV) is relevant in the context of F&B MSMEs because it emphasizes intangible resources, including knowledge, skills, organizational culture, and individual competencies, that small enterprises can develop despite their limited capital. This category of strategic resources is exemplified by creativity, an intangible cognitive ability, and product quality, a commitment embedded in operational practices, according to a systematic review conducted by Ekawati & Prasetyo (2026). RBV is particularly pertinent to small enterprises, as their inimitable internal assets, including individual expertise and innovative capacity, are the primary factors contributing to sustained competitive advantage. Eravia & Samsir (2025) further elucidated that innovation, as defined within the RBV framework, is the dynamic expression of internal resource utilization. It is the result of applying creative, quality-oriented capabilities in response to market demands. Consequently, the theoretical framework of this study is consistent with the RBV paradigm: product quality and creativity are internal strategic assets; product innovation is the dynamic capability that is achieved through the utilization of these assets; and competitive advantage is the market outcome achieved through this capability.

Competitive Advantage

A competitive advantage is a business's capacity to consistently outperform competitors by providing customers with greater value through strategic decisions that competitors find difficult to replicate (Mariam, 2022). In the context of MSMEs, competitive advantage is often not achieved through economies of scale or substantial capital investment; rather, it typically stems from the ability to adapt quickly to market fluctuations, maintain robust customer relationships, and offer unique product attributes. Lestari (2019) identifies three critical dimensions for evaluating competitive advantage: product uniqueness (the presence of unique characteristics that distinguish offerings from competitors), product quality (the ability to maintain consistent standards that encourage consumer trust and loyalty), and competitive pricing (the ability to establish price points that attract customers without sacrificing margins). Echdar & Maryadi (2019) contend that the competitive advantage of small and medium enterprises is significantly influenced by creativity and product innovation, which enable the continuous renewal of value propositions and dynamic responses to changes in consumer preferences.

Creativity

Creativity is the individual ability to generate ideas, methods, or solutions that are both innovative and valuable, incorporating elements of originality while providing practical relevance within a specific context (Sunarjo, 2024). In entrepreneurship, creativity is crucial, as it enables business owners to envision new products, anticipate emerging consumer demands, and develop innovative solutions to common problems. Munandar (2016) delineates four quantifiable dimensions of creativity: fluency of thought (rapid generation of numerous ideas), flexibility (examining a problem from various viewpoints), elaboration (enhancing and detailing an idea), and originality (creating uniquely different ideas not previously encountered in the market). Collectively, these dimensions define the creative entrepreneur who can transcend convention and produce truly innovative offerings. (Sunarjo, 2024) observes that creativity is influenced by individual factors such as risk tolerance, curiosity, and cognitive flexibility, as well as environmental factors including organizational culture, leadership support, and the design of physical workspaces.

Empirical evidence shows that creativity is a powerful driver of product innovation. Castillo-Vergara et al. (2024) found that creative capacity significantly helps SMEs turn original ideas into actual product advancements. Similarly, Agyapong et al. (2025) noted that higher creative fluency leads to better innovation outcomes, particularly in the food and consumer goods sectors. Supporting this, Putri and Maulani (2025) demonstrated that creativity directly and significantly boosts product innovation among Indonesian startups, enabling them to meet

changing market demands. Together, these findings reinforce that creativity is essential for MSMEs to develop novel products and sustain their innovative performance. Based on this foundation, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: Creativity has a positive and significant effect on product innovation among F&B MSMEs in Depok City.

Product Quality

Product quality is defined as a product's total capacity to fulfill the functional and experiential expectations of its users, encompassing both explicit performance dimensions such as durability, conformance to specifications, and reliability, and implicit aesthetic dimensions such as visual appeal and sensory experience (Kotler & Armstrong, 2017). Harjadi & Arraniri (2021) emphasize that quality is not merely a technical attribute but a strategic commitment that signals to customers the firm's reliability and trustworthiness. In the F&B sector, product quality carries particular weight because consumers evaluate products across multiple dimensions simultaneously: taste consistency, hygienic preparation, attractive presentation, appropriate packaging, and freshness at the point of consumption. The indicators adopted in this study, conformance, aesthetics, and durability, are drawn from Kotler & Armstrong (2017) and operationalized through five items specifically adapted to the F&B MSME environment.

Product quality is a key driver of product innovation because a commitment to high standards naturally leads to continuous improvement. When challenges arise, such as rising ingredient costs or shifting consumer expectations, quality-conscious operators are motivated to innovate through recipe reformulations, better packaging, or new product variants. Somalua et al. (2022) confirmed that product quality significantly influences product innovation, as higher quality standards stimulate development activities aligned with market demands. Supporting this, Manzani et al. (2022) demonstrated that strong quality management practices directly boost an organization's innovation capabilities. Similarly, Ferdiansyah et al. (2025) found that quality dimensions, such as design aesthetics and performance, serve as foundational inputs for competitive innovation. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₂: Product quality has a positive and significant effect on product innovation among F&B MSMEs in Depok City.

Product Innovation

Product innovation is the process of creating or meaningfully improving existing goods or services by applying new ideas, technologies, or creative design approaches to enhance product functionality, market appeal, and consumer value (Asari et al., 2023). In the F&B context, product innovation encompasses a broad spectrum of activities, from introducing entirely new menu items to redesigning packaging, adapting existing recipes to accommodate dietary trends, and developing limited-edition products aligned with seasonal preferences. Kotler & Armstrong (2016), as operationalized by Irnanda (2024), identify three measurable dimensions of product innovation: product quality innovation (creating products that deliver distinctively superior value compared to existing alternatives), style and design innovation (developing more visually compelling product presentations), and product variety (introducing trend-responsive offerings that differentiate the business from competitors).

The link between product innovation and competitive advantage is well established. Afrizal (2021) confirmed that product innovation boosts competitive advantage in MSMEs by increasing market visibility and consumer attraction. Similarly, Al Fajari and Purnama (2023) found that innovative products create distinctive features that strengthen competitive positioning and business resilience. Supporting these findings, Athoillah (2025) demonstrated that continuous product innovation significantly drives competitive advantage, enabling businesses to differentiate themselves, adapt to changing consumer preferences, and sustain their market position. Consequently, product innovation serves as a key strategic resource in highly competitive markets. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₃: Product innovation has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage among F&B MSMEs in Depok City.

The Mediating Role of Product Innovation on Creativity and Competitive Advantage

Creativity is the ability to generate unique and valuable ideas that lay the groundwork for product innovation. In business, these creative concepts need to be turned into tangible products to deliver real added value to consumers. Aisyah and Hidayatulloh (2023) showed that creativity boosts competitive advantage and drives product innovation, which ultimately makes a business more competitive. Similarly, Chelin (2022) noted that high creativity allows firms to offer more variety, helping them stand out from competitors. Supporting this, Yi et al. (2021) found that creative capabilities directly strengthen competitive advantage by enabling firms to design unique, meaningful products that are difficult for rivals to copy. Ultimately, creativity serves as the initial spark for product innovation, which then builds a lasting competitive advantage. Based on this rationale, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₄: Creativity has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage, mediated by product innovation.

The Mediating Role of Product Innovation on Product Quality and Competitive Advantage

Product quality is key to meeting customer expectations. High-quality standards naturally push businesses to continually improve through better designs, new features, or a wider product variety, thereby directly driving product innovation. Sari et al. (2022) showed that both quality and innovation significantly enhance competitive advantage, with product innovation playing the dominant role in improving business competitiveness. Similarly, Agustina and Ali (2025) noted that a firm's commitment to quality must be continually channeled through innovation to create lasting value. Supporting this perspective, Ratnaningtyas et al. (2024) found that firms maintaining high product quality are more likely to engage in continuous product innovation to respond to changing market demand and improve organizational performance. Their findings suggest that product innovation functions as a strategic mechanism through which quality-oriented firms create greater value and strengthen their long-term competitiveness. Ultimately, product quality serves as the foundation for product innovation, which in turn builds a stronger competitive advantage. Based on this rationale, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₅: Product quality has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage, mediated by product innovation.

Based on the hypotheses developed above, the conceptual framework for this study is presented below:

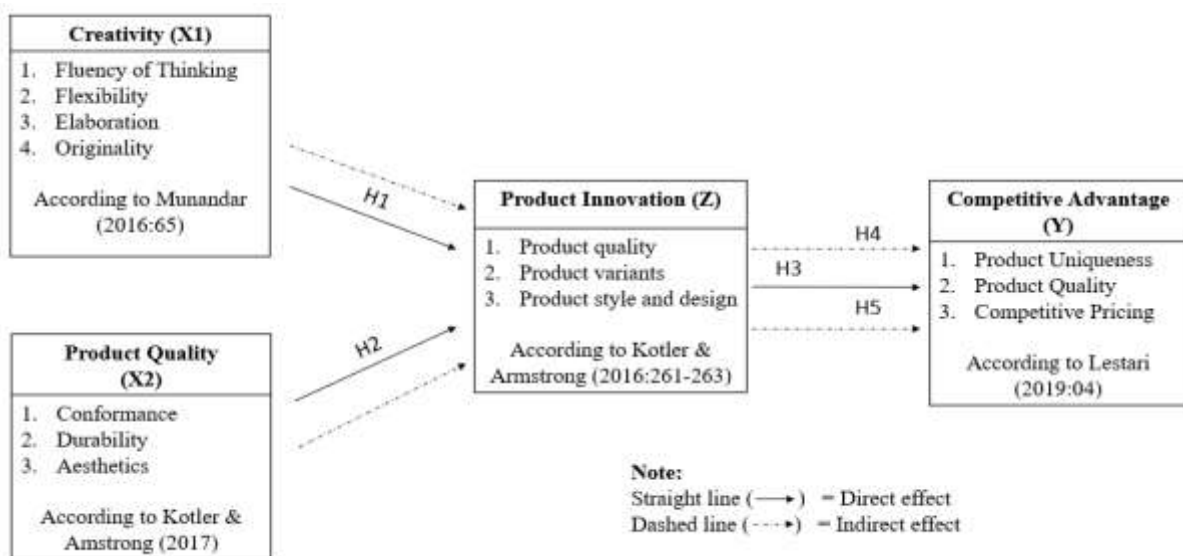


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Source: Adapted from Han dkk (2018)

METHOD

This study adopts a quantitative explanatory research design to test the proposed structural relationships among creativity, product quality, product innovation, and competitive advantage. The research population comprises all F&B MSME operators defined as individuals who actively own and manage food or beverage businesses located across the eleven subdistricts of Depok City, West Java. Sampling was conducted using a quota sampling technique. To determine the minimum sample size, this study uses the inverse square root method proposed by Kock and Hadaya (2018) and recommended by Hair et al. (2022). Assuming a statistical power of 80%, a 5% significance level, and a minimum path coefficient ($\rho_{\min}$) of 0.2, the calculation is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Tingkat signifikansi 5\%} &= n_{\min} > \left(\frac{2.406}{(\rho_{\min})} \right)^2 \\
 &= n_{\min} > \left(\frac{2.406}{0.2} \right)^2 \\
 &= 151,505
 \end{aligned}$$

Based on this formula, the absolute minimum requirement is 152 respondents. However, to ensure more stable results, adequate statistical power, and a more robust model estimation in the PLS-SEM analysis, the target data collection was expanded. A total of 200 valid questionnaires were obtained between May 9 and May 18, 2026, using a dual-approach method. For the online approach, Google Forms were disseminated through social media platforms, including Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok. Meanwhile, the offline approach involved visiting

MSME locations in person and distributing hard-copy questionnaires to business owners. This final sample size of 200 safely exceeds the statistical minimum required for the model (Hair et al., 2022).

The research instrument consisted of 24 closed-ended items measured on a four-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree). Creativity was assessed using 8 items (KK1-KK8) based on Munandar's (2016) four-dimensional framework, adapted to the F&B MSME context. Product quality was measured using 5 items (KP1-KP5) derived from Kotler & Armstrong (2017), covering conformance to quality standards, product aesthetics, and product durability. Product innovation was operationalized with 5 items (IP1-IP5) adapted from Kotler & Armstrong (2016) and Irnanda (2024), covering quality innovation, design innovation, and product variety. Competitive advantage was measured using 6 items (KB1-KB6) adapted from Lestari (2019) and Angelina (2024), encompassing product uniqueness, quality consistency, and competitive pricing.

Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS version 4.0. PLS-SEM was selected for its suitability for moderate sample sizes and non-normal data distributions, its capacity to simultaneously test measurement and structural models, and its proven applicability in MSME research contexts (Hair et al., 2022). The analysis proceeded in two stages: (1) outer model testing to evaluate indicator reliability and construct validity through outer loadings, Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), cross-loadings, and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio; and (2) inner model assessment to evaluate structural relationships through R-Square (R^2), Effect Size (F^2), and bootstrapping-based hypothesis testing with a one-tailed significance threshold of t-statistic > 1.64 and p-value ≤ 0.05 (Hair et al., 2022). Mediation analysis was conducted using the specific indirect effects output from bootstrapping, with mediation type classified according to the Hair et al. (2022) framework as complementary, competitive, or indirect-only.

RESULT

Respondents Profile

The study involved 200 F&B MSME operators distributed across all 11 subdistricts of Depok City. Bojongsari recorded the highest concentration of respondents (30, 15%), followed by Pancoran Mas (23, 11%), Sawangan (22, 11%), Sukmajaya (22, 11%), and Tapos (21, 10%). In terms of gender, the majority were female (116 respondents, 60.4%), reflecting the higher participation rate of women in small-scale culinary entrepreneurship. Most respondents (129, 66.5%) had operated their businesses for 1-5 years, indicating a predominantly established yet developing business profile. Food businesses dominated the sample (145 respondents, 74.1%), followed by combined food and beverage businesses (28, 13.2%) and beverage-only businesses (27, 12.7%). Regarding annual revenue, 86 respondents (43.3%) earned below Rp50 million per year, 85 respondents (42.9%) earned between Rp50 million and Rp500 million, and 29 respondents (13.8%) earned above Rp500 million, a distribution consistent with the micro and small enterprise classification under UU No. 20 Tahun 2008.

Table 2. Respondent Profile

Profile	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	116	60.4%
Male	84	39.6%
Duration of Business		
< 1 Year	14	6.6%
1-5 Years	129	66.5%
> 5 Years	57	26.9%
Type of Business		
Food	145	74.1%
Beverage	27	12.7%
Food & Beverage	28	13.2%
Annual Revenue		
< Rp50,000,000	86	43.3%
Rp50,000,000 - Rp500,000,000	85	42.9%
> Rp500,000,000	29	13.8%

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Table 3 summarizes the distribution of responses regarding creativity, product quality, product innovation, and competitive advantage. These figures provide a clear overview of the participants' operational realities and the practical constraints they encounter on the ground.

Table 3. Respondent Response Distribution

Question Items	Respondent's Answer				Mean	%	Information
	STS	TS	S	SS			
KK1	54	46	56	50	2,57	64,25%	Agree
KK2	51	56	53	46	2,53	63,25%	Agree
KK3	52	55	46	53	2,56	64,00%	Agree
KK4	49	53	54	50	2,59	64,63%	Agree
KK5	51	49	51	55	2,61	65,25%	Agree
KK6	50	57	54	45	2,53	63,25%	Agree
KK7	52	53	50	51	2,56	64,00%	Agree
KK8	54	54	49	49	2,53	63,13%	Agree
KP1	37	64	65	40	2,60	65,00%	Agree
KP2	41	66	69	30	2,50	62,50%	Disagre
KP3	43	62	66	35	2,53	63,13%	Agree
KP4	40	71	59	36	2,52	62,88%	Agree
KP5	40	67	61	38	2,55	63,63%	Agree
IP1	37	60	85	24	2,54	63,50%	Agree
IP2	40	60	66	40	2,59	64,75%	Agree
IP3	38	59	74	35	2,59	64,75%	Agree
IP4	44	71	61	30	2,45	61,13%	Disagre
IP5	34	73	61	38	2,58	64,38%	Agree
KB1	36	70	61	39	2,58	64,38%	Agree
KB2	38	66	67	35	2,56	63,88%	Agree
KB3	40	62	76	28	2,52	63%	Agree
KB4	29	85	64	28	2,52	62,88%	Agree
KB5	27	88	71	20	2,48	62%	Disagre
KB6	39	72	58	37	2,53	63,13%	Agree

The responses show that most operators are heavily focused on maintaining daily business stability, leaving little room for long-term strategic planning. Although many owners recognize the importance of creativity, the heavy demands of managing day-to-day operations leave them with limited capacity to explore new concepts. There is also a persistent reluctance to experiment with unfamiliar menus due to the risk of alienating existing customers and incurring financial losses from wasted ingredients. Maintaining consistent product quality poses another significant hurdle, primarily due to fluctuating raw material costs. To navigate these economic pressures, many microentrepreneurs resort to using basic packaging materials, a compromise that diminishes the visual appeal of their offerings and affects product freshness during transit.

These ongoing financial and operational strains directly impede the microentrepreneurs' capacity to innovate. Adapting to fast-paced culinary trends or upgrading brand presentation requires surplus capital, which remains scarce for most small operators. Establishing a genuine competitive advantage is a formidable task, leading many businesses to sell generic items with minimal differentiation. They are unable to compete purely on price due to already narrow profit margins, nor can they justify premium pricing without reliable product quality. Ultimately, these structural barriers compel local F&B MSMEs to prioritize immediate operational survival over the establishment of an innovation-driven competitive edge.

Outer Model Test Results

All indicators returned outer loading values of 0.70 or higher, confirming their ability to represent their respective constructs reliably. Table 4 presents selected outer loading results.

Table 4. Outer Loadings of Research Indicators

Indicator	Construct	Outer Loading	Status
KK1–KK8	Creativity	0.714 – 0.793	Valid
KP1–KP5	Product Quality	0.862 – 0.909	Valid

Indicator	Construct	Outer Loading	Status
IP1–IP5	Product Innovation	0.755 – 0.800	Valid
KB1–KB6	Competitive Advantage	0.710 – 0.827	Valid

Cronbach's Alpha values ranged from 0.826 (Product Innovation) to 0.927 (Product Quality), all well above the 0.70 threshold. Composite Reliability (Rho_c) values ranged from 0.878 to 0.945, confirming excellent internal consistency across all constructs. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.564 to 0.773, all exceeding the 0.50 criterion and confirming satisfactory convergent validity (Hair et al., 2022). Discriminant validity was confirmed through cross-loadings, where each indicator loaded significantly higher on its own construct than on any other, and through HTMT analysis, with all values below 0.90 (maximum: 0.778 for Creativity → Product Innovation). Together, these results confirm that the measurement model demonstrates sound reliability and validity across all dimensions.

Table 5. Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Variable	Cronbach's α	CR (Rho_c)	AVE	Status
Creativity	0.890	0.912	0.564	Reliable & Valid
Product Quality	0.927	0.945	0.773	Reliable & Valid
Product Innovation	0.826	0.878	0.589	Reliable & Valid
Competitive Advantage	0.867	0.900	0.602	Reliable & Valid

Discriminant validity was confirmed through cross-loading analysis, in which each indicator loaded highest on its own construct, and through the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, which remained below 0.90 for all construct pairs (Table 6), ruling out problematic overlap between latent variables.

Table 6. HTMT Discriminant Validity Results

Path	HTMT Value	Status
Creativity → Product Innovation	0.778	Acceptable
Product Quality → Product Innovation	0.703	Acceptable
Product Innovation → Competitive Advantage	0.655	Acceptable

Inner Model Test Results

The R-Square (R^2) value for Product Innovation was 0.636, indicating that Creativity and Product Quality together explained 63.6% of the variance in Product Innovation, which is classified as having moderate predictive power. The R^2 for Competitive Advantage was 0.542, indicating the model accounts for 54.2% of the variance in the outcome variable, which is at a moderate level per Hair et al. (2022). The Effect Size (F^2) for Creativity → Product Innovation was 0.216 (medium effect), while Product Quality → Product Innovation yielded $F^2 = 0.136$ (small-to-medium effect), indicating that both predictors meaningfully contribute to the model but with different intensities. Hypothesis testing via bootstrapping (one-tailed, 5,000 subsamples) yielded the results presented in Table 7, with all five hypotheses confirmed as statistically significant at the $p \leq 0.05$ level.

Table 7. Hypothesis Testing Results (PLS-SEM Bootstrapping)

Hypothesis	Original Sample	T-Statistics	P-Value	Decision
H1: Creativity → Product Innovation	0.132	3.020	0.003	Accepted
H2: Product Quality → Product Innovation	0.741	2.896	0.000	Accepted
H3: Product Innovation → Competitive Advantage	0.736	3.031	0.000	Accepted
H4: Creativity → Product Innovation → Competitive Advantage (mediation)	0.097	2.924	0.003	Accepted
H5: Product Quality → Product Innovation → Competitive Advantage (mediation)	0.546	5.280	0.000	Accepted

These empirical findings offer valuable guidance for F&B MSME owners in Depok City as they make strategic business decisions. When we compare the path coefficients, it becomes clear that product quality is a much stronger driver of product innovation (Original Sample = 0.741) than creativity (Original Sample = 0.132). Similarly, the indirect effect of product quality on competitive advantage through product innovation is strong (Original Sample = 0.546), whereas the indirect effect of creativity remains relatively small (Original Sample = 0.097).

Consequently, MSME owners should focus their strategic efforts and financial budgets primarily on strict quality control. This means prioritizing consistency in taste, hygiene, visual presentation, and value for money,

rather than spending too much energy on unstandardized creative ideas. Since the data show that high-quality standards are the real engine of successful development, businesses need to translate these standards into concrete product innovations. Practical steps could include introducing high-quality ingredients through modern packaging or launching trendy new flavor variations. Ultimately, centering management decisions on this quality-driven innovation path will yield the best results in building a strong, long-term competitive advantage in a crowded market.

DISCUSSION

The Effect of Creativity on Product Innovation

Hypothesis 1 (H1) was accepted, with a path coefficient for the original sample of 0.132, a t-statistic of 3.020, and a p-value of 0.003, confirming that creativity has a positive and statistically significant effect on product innovation among F&B MSME operators in Depok City. Although the coefficient magnitude is modest compared to the product quality pathway, the significance level is robust, and the direction is consistent with theoretical expectations. The finding indicates that operators who demonstrate higher levels of creative fluency (KK1, KK2), cognitive flexibility (KK3, KK4), structured idea elaboration (KK5, KK6), and original thinking (KK7, KK8) are more likely to engage in product development activities, experimenting with new flavors, redesigning presentations, or adapting concepts to emerging consumer preferences.

This relationship reflects the real challenges documented in the field. Pre-survey responses revealed that many operators cited time pressure, operational demands, and fear of product failure as primary barriers to creative expression and product experimentation. However, those who invested in developing their creative thinking capacity through informal learning, market observation, or peer networking demonstrated meaningfully higher product renewal activity. The practical implication is that building creative habits and mindsets is not merely a personality trait but a cultivable organizational capability. When operators practice creative problem solving, attend culinary workshops, or intentionally explore diverse food concepts, they build the cognitive repertoire from which innovation springs.

This finding is consistent with Castillo Vergara et al. (2024), who demonstrated that creativity positively contributes to product innovation in SMEs by enabling the transformation of abstract ideas into commercially viable product changes. Agyapong et al. (2025) similarly found that high-creativity entrepreneurs demonstrate stronger innovation outputs. Furthermore, this outcome is supported by Putri and Maulani (2025), who demonstrated that creativity significantly boosts product innovation among startups to meet changing market demands. For the Depok F&B sector, where product similarity is pervasive and consumer switching costs are low, cultivating creative capacity is one of the most accessible and cost-effective pathways to building a distinctive, innovation-capable enterprise.

The Effect of Product Quality on Product Innovation

Hypothesis 2 (H2) was accepted, with the strongest direct path coefficient in the model (original sample: 0.741), a t-statistic of 2.896, and a p-value of 0.000, confirming that product quality has a highly significant and positive effect on product innovation. This result is particularly notable in its magnitude, suggesting that among F&B MSME operators in Depok, the commitment to product quality is a substantially stronger driver of innovation behavior than creativity alone. This finding has important theoretical implications: it suggests that quality orientation functions as an innovation-triggering disposition rather than merely an outcome measure.

The underlying mechanism appears to operate as follows: operators who genuinely commit to high quality ensuring that the product's value matches its price point (KP1), meeting customer expectations (KP2), maintaining an attractive visual aesthetics (KP3), providing added value through presentation (KP4), and ensuring the product's durability until consumed (KP5) develop an evaluative mindset that continuously asks whether current products meet the expected standards. When quality benchmarks are not met due to supplier variability, equipment limitations, or seasonal ingredient changes, quality-conscious operators are motivated to experiment, reformulate, or develop alternatives. This cycle of quality-driven evaluation and adjustment constitutes a sustained innovation process that, over time, produces meaningful product development. In this sense, quality orientation is not a static state but a dynamic commitment that perpetuates innovation.

These findings align with Somalua et al. (2022), who demonstrated that a strong orientation toward product quality drives companies to invest in product innovation that more precisely matches evolving market demands. Ferdiansyah et al. (2025) confirmed that quality-related elements, including product design and consumer-responsive features, serve as the raw material for innovative product development. Additionally, this perspective aligns with Manzani et al. (2022), who demonstrated that robust quality management practices directly boost an organization's internal innovation capabilities. The practical recommendation derived from this finding is that government training programs and business development support for F&B MSMEs in Depok should prioritize food quality management, standardization, and product development practices, as these are likely to generate innovation dividends that extend well beyond quality itself.

The Effect of Product Innovation on Competitive Advantage

Hypothesis 3 (H3) was accepted, with a path coefficient for the original sample of 0.736, a t-statistic of 3.031, and a p-value of 0.000, confirming that product innovation has a strong, positive, and highly significant effect on competitive advantage. This is the largest structural coefficient in the direct effects portion of the model, identifying product innovation as the most proximate and influential driver of competitive advantage among the variables examined. This result positions product innovation not merely as one of many competitive tools but as the primary mechanism through which F&B MSME operators convert their internal capabilities into market-facing differentiation.

Respondents who scored higher on the product innovation scale, indicating that they actively created superior value products (IP1), possessed advantages over competitors (IP2), developed more visually appealing designs (IP3), made their products stand out (IP4), and adapted offerings to current food trends (IP5), also reported stronger competitive positions. This pattern suggests that innovation creates a multiplier effect across the dimensions of competitive advantage. When a business introduces a genuinely novel menu item with distinctive packaging, it simultaneously enhances product uniqueness (KB1, KB2), reinforces consistent quality standards (KB3, KB4), and potentially justifies an affordable yet competitive price point relative to competitors (KB5, KB6).

These findings are supported by Afrizal (2021), who demonstrated that product innovation positively affects competitive advantage in MSMEs by increasing consumer attraction and market visibility. Al Fajari & Purnama (2023) similarly confirmed that innovative products deliver distinguishing characteristics that strengthen a firm's competitive positioning. This dynamic is further reinforced by Athoillah (2025), who demonstrated that continuous product innovation is a key strategic driver for sustaining market position. In the context of Depok's saturated F&B market, where consumer attention is fragmented across numerous similar offerings, product innovation is the most reliable mechanism for capturing and retaining customer attention and, by extension, for building sustainable business performance.

The Mediating Role of Product Innovation: Creativity → Competitive Advantage

Hypothesis 4 (H4) was accepted, with an indirect effect coefficient for the original sample of 0.097, a t-statistic of 2.924, and a p-value of 0.003. The mediation pattern was classified as complementary mediation because both the direct effect (creativity → competitive advantage) and the indirect effect (creativity → product innovation → competitive advantage) were simultaneously significant and directionally positive. Complementary mediation indicates that product innovation reinforces, rather than fully replaces, the relationship between creativity and competitive advantage, the total effect being greater when both direct and indirect pathways operate in concert.

This finding carries an important strategic message for F&B MSME operators in Depok. Creative thinking (KK1 to KK8) alone does not automatically translate into competitive advantage; an operator may conceive many original product ideas yet fail to translate them into market-ready innovations (IP1 to IP5) due to operational constraints, a lack of implementation skills, or an absence of structured product development processes. The mediation results confirm that creativity's contribution to competitive advantage (KB1 to KB6) is substantially amplified when channeled through a deliberate product innovation process. Ideas must be systematically tested, refined, and launched to produce competitive value. This insight calls for a shift in how operators conceptualize innovation, not as a spontaneous event triggered by inspiration, but as a structured, habitual practice that converts creative potential into tangible business outcomes.

Aisyah & Hidayatulloh (2023) similarly found that creativity positively affects competitive advantage and that product innovation serves as a critical mediating mechanism through which creative capacity translates into market performance. Chelin (2022) confirmed that high-creativity enterprises produce more varied and innovative product portfolios, with innovation serving as the lever that links creative capacity to competitive differentiation. Furthermore, this empirical link is supported by Yi et al. (2021), who found that creative capabilities significantly strengthen competitive advantage by enabling firms to design unique products that are difficult for rivals to replicate. The managerial implication for Depok's F&B operators is to institutionalize the creative-to-innovation pipeline by designating time for idea generation, establishing low-cost product-testing routines, and building feedback loops with customers to ensure that creative ideas are regularly screened, developed, and launched.

The Mediating Role of Product Innovation: Product Quality → Competitive Advantage

Hypothesis 5 (H5) was accepted, with the highest indirect effect in the model's original sample of 0.546, a t-statistic of 5.280, and a p-value of 0.000. The mediation type was classified as indirect-only mediation, meaning that product quality does not independently produce competitive advantage but must operate through the intermediary mechanism of product innovation to generate competitive outcomes. This classification is theoretically significant, as it indicates that quality, as operationally practiced in F&B MSME contexts, is a necessary but insufficient condition for competitive advantage without the connective tissue of product innovation.

The logic underlying indirect-only mediation in this pathway is contextually compelling. In a market where many operators maintain broadly similar quality standards, such as offering basic price-to-quality matches (KP1), meeting general customer requirements (KP2), keeping clean preparation environments (KP5), or presenting decent aesthetics (KP3, KP4), quality parity does not create differentiation. When all competitors reach a similar quality floor, quality alone ceases to be a source of competitive advantage and becomes a table stakes requirement. To convert quality into competitive advantage (KB1 to KB6), operators must embed their quality commitment within a product innovation process: using high-quality ingredients to develop superior value and advantages over competitors (IP1, IP2), applying consistent preparation standards to new product designs (IP3, IP4), or packaging quality products in innovative formats that follow current trends (IP5). Through these innovation activities, quality becomes a differentiator rather than a baseline expectation.

Sari et al. (2022) found that product quality and product innovation jointly and significantly influence competitive advantage, with product innovation identified as the dominant factor in this relationship. Agustina & Ali (2025) confirmed that product quality influences competitive advantage but emphasized that quality commitments must be continually developed through innovation channels to sustain competitive value. This structure is further supported by Ratnaningtyas et al. (2024), whose findings suggest that product innovation serves as a strategic mechanism by which quality-oriented firms respond to market demands to improve long-term competitiveness. For MSME operators and policymakers in Depok, the indirect mediation finding provides a clear strategic directive: quality improvement programs must be explicitly linked to product development activities. Standalone quality training, without integration with product innovation practice, is unlikely to produce meaningful competitive differentiation in the current market environment.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how creativity and product quality shape competitive advantage, with product innovation serving as the central mediating link among food and beverage micro-enterprises in Depok City. The empirical analysis validated all proposed structural relationships. Specifically, entrepreneurial creativity positively drives product innovation, confirming that a capacity for creative thinking enables operators to generate and execute novel product concepts. Meanwhile, product quality exerts an even more pronounced effect on product innovation, reflecting how a strict orientation toward quality naturally triggers innovative behavior in daily culinary operations. Product innovation, in turn, proved to be the most influential direct predictor of competitive advantage, establishing itself as the critical mechanism that translates internal strengths into visible market differentiation.

Regarding the mediating pathways, product innovation serves as a complementary bridge between creativity and competitive advantage, demonstrating that creative potential must be operationalized through tangible product development to achieve its full market impact. More significantly, product innovation serves only as an indirect mediator between product quality and competitive advantage. This reveals that quality investments alone are insufficient to secure a superior market position; standards must be actively channeled through innovation to generate genuine differentiation rather than mere baseline compliance. Together, these insights position product innovation as the indispensable strategic link that renders internal resources competitively meaningful in a crowded marketplace.

These findings offer clear practical lessons for both business owners and policymakers. Local food and beverage operators should actively establish structural innovation routines, dedicating time and resources to flavor experimentation, trend monitoring, and customer feedback rather than relying on static offerings. Furthermore, creative development activities such as attending culinary showcases and participating in peer networks should be treated as vital business investments rather than optional tasks. For local authorities, particularly the Depok City Department of Cooperatives and MSMEs, business support programs should explicitly integrate quality management training with practical innovation workshops to help operators maintain high standards while continuously upgrading their products. Future studies can build upon this framework by incorporating variables such as digital marketing adoption or market orientation and utilizing longitudinal designs to track how small businesses develop their innovation capabilities over time.

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