

The Influence of Business Networks and Perception of Product Quality on the Competitive Advantage of SME Products in Langkat

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Abstract

This study seeks to assess the influence of business networks and perceptions of product quality on the competitive advantage of small and medium companies (SMEs) in Langkat. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are vital for fostering local economic development; yet, company stakeholders encounter escalating competitive constraints. Corporate networks are seen as a strategic asset that facilitates access to broader markets, resources, and information essential for corporate development. Simultaneously, perceptions of product quality affect consumer image and trust, which are essential for sustaining excellence in a competitive marketplace. This research employs a quantitative methodology, utilizing data gathered from a survey of SMEs in Langkat. We employ multiple linear regression analysis methods to examine the simultaneous and partial impacts of the variables under investigation. The analytical results demonstrate that business networks and perceptions of product quality substantially affect competitive advantage. The findings underscore the necessity for SMEs to broaden their business networks and enhance product quality to compete successfully. Recommendations include enhancing company collaboration and creating creative goods that fulfill consumer expectations.

Keywords: Business Network, Product Quality Perception, Competitive Advantage

Introduction

Small and medium companies (SMEs) are the foundation of the Indonesian economy, significantly contributing to economic expansion, social stability, and employment generation. According to figures from the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs (2023), SMEs account for around 61.07% of Indonesia's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employ over 97% of the workforce, rendering it a crucial sector for national economic advancement. In Langkat Regency, North Sumatra Province, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are pivotal in fostering regional economic development. The Langkat Cooperatives and SMEs Service reports that the region is home to approximately 5,000 SMEs in 2023, including diverse sectors like agriculture, fishing, crafts, culinary, and creative industries. These sectors substantially impact the local economy; yet, the difficulties of competitiveness remain a serious concern.

Despite the ongoing rise in the number of SMEs, the competitiveness of SME goods in Langkat remains comparatively low comparing to products from other regions in North Sumatra and Indonesia as a whole. Data from the North Sumatra Central Statistics Agency (BPS) indicates that the contribution of Langkat SMEs to regional exports is below average in comparison to other districts in the area. Multiple reasons contribute to this diminished competitiveness, including restricted market access, insufficient product innovation, and inadequate management of business networks, which can enhance the reach and influence of SMEs.

Amidst intensifying competition, a vital method for enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs is the fortification of business networks. Robust business networks enable SMEs to access broader resources, including market intelligence, innovative technology, and strategic collaboration prospects. Research indicates that SMEs with comprehensive and organized business networks may enhance operational efficiency, expedite innovation, and broaden access to both national and international markets (Al-azzam et al., 2024). Nonetheless, the study indicates that several SMEs in Indonesia,



particularly in regions like Langkat, continue to have challenges in establishing and sustaining efficient business networks. The challenges encountered consist of a deficiency of trained personnel, insufficient infrastructure, and restricted cash for forming strategic alliances.

Besides business networks, the perception of product quality is a crucial aspect in assessing the competitiveness of SMEs. In a more competitive market, consumers seek not just cost-effective items but also superior quality and distinctive benefits. Research (Singh et al., 2022) indicates that the impression of product quality strongly influences consumer pleasure and loyalty, thereby impacting business performance. Factors influencing the impression of product quality encompass reliability, design innovation, the quality of raw materials, durability, and aesthetics (Behnert et al., 2024). Many SMEs in Langkat, however, have challenges in upholding consistent quality standards, especially when competing against imported items that frequently provide benefits in pricing and manufacturing efficiency.

The literature recognizes the significance of business networks and perceived product quality separately; nevertheless, a considerable study gap exists in comprehending the interaction between these two characteristics and their concurrent impact on the competitive advantage of SME goods. Prior research typically examines each variable in isolation. For instance, (Brabenec, 2021) assessed the impact of business networks on operational efficiency and market expansion for SMEs, although did not address the issue of product quality. Conversely, (Wijayanti, 2021) acknowledged the significance of product quality and its influence on consumer loyalty, although overlooked the contribution of business networks in enhancing competitive advantage. Consequently, it is imperative to address this research gap by examining the concurrent influence of business networks and perceived product quality on competitive advantage, particularly within the context of SMEs in Langkat.

This study seeks to address the gap by delivering a thorough examination of the influence of business networks and product quality perceptions on the competitive advantage of SMEs in Langkat. We expect this study will provide substantial insights that SMEs may leverage to create more successful business strategies. Furthermore, the findings of this study might offer critical insights for policymakers in formulating more comprehensive SME enhancement programs that encompass business network expansion and product quality improvement. Consequently, SMEs in Langkat are anticipated to enhance their competitiveness in both local and international markets, so contributing more significantly to regional economic growths.

Theoretical Review

Competitive Advantage

The competitive advantage of SME goods denotes the capacity of small and medium firms to effectively compete in both local and international markets, distinguishing their offerings from those of rivals (Pasaribu et al., 2023). This advantage is vital as it may be a decisive element in the survival and growth of SMEs in a competitive market (Fadli, 2021). SME products can attract customer attention by providing superior value through quality, pricing, design, or innovation due to their competitive edge (Razaq et al., 2024). This enhances product competitiveness, leading customers to favor it over rival offerings (Asamoah, 2014). Their benefits enable SMEs to broaden their market share, both geographically and by market category (Al-azzam et al., 2024). Products of superior quality or specific attributes will captivate customer interest, even outside the local market (Ginting et al., 2023).

Products possessing a durable competitive edge can establish enduring ties with customers. Client satisfaction with quality and advantages increases the likelihood of repeat purchases and fosters client loyalty, hence enhancing revenue stability. A product's competitive advantage is not just reliant on low pricing to entice consumers; it may also manifest through superior quality, appealing looks, or new features (Hs & Hou, 2023). This enables SMEs to maintain competitiveness without substantially reducing pricing. SMEs can adapt to changing market dynamics and survive in a highly competitive market by offering products that possess a competitive advantage (Levianti, 2023). This advantage provides SMEs with a more robust position to confront diverse difficulties and capitalize on future possibilities (Hirzi, 2023).

Business Network

Business networks have a crucial role in enhancing the competitive advantage of SME goods (Purba, 2021). A business network denotes the relationships and connections among SME participants and diverse external entities, including suppliers, distributors, business partners, industry associations, and customers (Dwumah et al., 2024). Through an extensive business network, SMEs may obtain essential resources, including high-quality raw materials, cutting-edge technology, and market intelligence (Muna et al., 2023). This enables SMEs to enhance product quality, innovate, and manufacture things to superior standards (Harmawan Saputra & Adiati Pratomo, 2023). SMEs possessing higher-quality items enjoy a more robust competitive edge over rivals without equivalent access (Abdul Rahman et al., 2023). An effective business network enables SMEs to collaborate with partners in distribution, marketing, or production technologies.

The Business Network offers SMEs the ability to interact with other entities in the development of new ideas in goods, production methods, and marketing techniques (Galib et al., 2022). Innovations arising from this partnership can serve as a crucial differentiator in the market, providing SME goods with a competitive edge that is hard for rivals to replicate (Nugroho, 2023). Furthermore, Business Network facilitates chances for SMEs to augment their market share, both nationally and globally (Ojotu et al., 2021). Establishing ties with distributors or marketing networks enables SME products to access a broader customer base. This network enables SMEs to compete in a broader market, enhancing the visibility and appeal of their products. By cultivating robust relationships within the business network, SMEs may enhance the reputation of the brands of business entities. For instance, collaborating with esteemed business partners or industry groups helps enhance product image (Tiwasing, 2021a). Consumer trust is frequently linked to a strong reputation, resulting in enhanced customer loyalty and product competitiveness (John, 2024).

Product Quality Perception

Product quality perception denotes the manner in which customers evaluate a product's quality based on several perceived features, including dependability, durability, design, innovation, and attractiveness (Nasib, Harianto, et al., 2024). This perspective is essential in determining the competitive advantage of small and medium-sized company (SME) goods (I. L. Nasib, 2021). High-quality products can foster a favorable perception among consumers, hence enhancing the product's market appeal (Khairani, 2023). Consumers express satisfaction with the product's quality, and commercial entities are more inclined to select SME products over those of rivals (Siregar, 2022). This advantage enables SME products to compete more successfully in both local and international markets, since customers frequently choose items seen as high quality (A. F. Nasib, 2019). Elevated satisfaction levels generally correspond with positive quality perception, therefore promoting customer loyalty (Nasib, Simanjuntak, et al., 2024). Satisfied customers typically develop loyalty towards a product, leading to repeat purchases and recommendations to others (Nasib et al., 2019). Customer loyalty is essential for achieving a competitive advantage, as it can produce steady revenue and reduce marketing costs, thus attracting new clients (Lim, 2021).

Consumers prioritize the quality received by corporate entities, allowing items with superior perceived quality to typically attract greater costs than their rivals (Tiwasing, 2021b). The competitive advantage of SME products relies not alone on cheap pricing but also on the perceived additional value derived from quality (Ali, 2021). Small and medium-sized enterprises can sustain elevated costs without compromising competitiveness owing to the favorable perception of product quality (Ju, 2022). A favorable sense of quality contributes to the establishment of a robust brand reputation (Vavensy, 2023). Products are deemed high-quality, hence fostering a favorable perception of the SME brand overall (Yang et al., 2022). A positive reputation enables SMEs to secure a more robust market position and distinguish their products from those of rivals who may provide inferior quality (Felföldi, 2022). A robust reputation facilitates collaboration with corporate partners, hence enhancing product distribution prospects (Abidin et al., 2023). The impression of high quality also allows SMEs the liberty to innovate. When customers prioritize product quality, corporate entities will be more amenable to innovation or further quality enhancements (Jordà, 2021). Product innovation in SMEs, including the development of new variations or enhancements of existing functionalities, can enhance competitive advantage by addressing changing market demands (Kimbu, 2021).

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative methodology with a descriptive and explanatory research design. This technique was used to examine the concurrent impact of two factors, specifically business network and product quality perception, on the competitive advantage of SME goods in Langkat Regency. We choose the quantitative method for its capacity to objectively quantify variables and examine their interrelations via suitable statistical tools. The study's population comprised all SME participants enrolled with the Langkat Regency Cooperative and SME Service. According to data from the Langkat Cooperative and SME Service, over 5,000 SMEs are distributed throughout many economic sectors. The study's sample comprised 40 SME participants that have been in operation for a minimum of two years and have promoted their products in both local and national markets. We employed a purposive sampling strategy to choose samples based on factors pertinent to the study aims.

This study utilizes primary and secondary data, both of which play a crucial part in achieving the study's aims. Excellent We directly acquired primary data from respondents representing small and medium companies (SMEs) in Langkat Regency. We conducted primary data collection by disseminating questionnaires aimed at assessing three principal factors in this study: business network, product quality perception, and competitive advantage. The questionnaire has many parts aimed at gathering precise information on each variable.

This study utilizes both primary and secondary data acquired from current sources. This secondary data comprises yearly reports issued by the Cooperatives and SMEs Service of Langkat Regency, offering an overview of the SME sector's progress in the region. We utilize pertinent literature on the research topic, including scientific journals, books, and other related papers, to deepen our comprehension of the ideas and practices that inform the variables under investigation. This secondary material is beneficial for enhancing the analysis and offering a wider context for empirical study results.

Small and medium-sized enterprises assess the business network variable using indicators such as the quantity of business relationships, their connection with suppliers and distributors, and their degree of involvement in various business association networks. These measures seek to determine the degree to which SMEs may leverage networks to broaden their markets and get resources that facilitate company growth. We measure the perception of product quality based on how SME actors and consumers evaluate the quality of business actors' products. This assessment considers several factors, including product reliability, the degree of innovation used, product durability, and the aesthetics or look of the product, all of which may significantly Competitive advantage is assessed by analyzing factors such as the market share of SME goods, customer loyalty levels, and the distinctiveness or difference of the product from comparable offerings in the market. Comparable items available in the market. This indicator seeks to elucidate the product's competitiveness in a more dynamic market.

This study employed multiple linear regression analysis to examine the simultaneous impact of two independent variables business network and product quality perception on the competitive advantage of SME goods. The multiple linear regression model assesses the simultaneous effect of each independent variable on the dependent variable and elucidates the relationships among these variables within a complex system.

Results and Discussions

Results

Hypothesis Testing

Table 1 indicates that business networks and quality perceptions exert a favorable and significant influence on the competitive advantage of SME goods in Langkat Regency. Among the two factors, quality perceptions exert a more significant effect than business networks in enhancing the competitive advantage of SME goods in Langkat Regency.

Table 1. Hypothesis Testing

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Devi- ation (STDEV)	T Statistics ($O/STDEV$)	P Values
Business Network (X1) → Competitive Advantage (Y1)	0.5732	0.618	0.372	3.280	0.001
Product Quality Per- ception (X2) → Competitive Ad- vantage (Y1)	0.455	0.621	0.317	3.3.67	0.000

Discussions

The Influence of Business Network on Competitive Advantage

Data research indicated that business networks substantially impact the competitive advantage of SME goods in Langkat Regency. This study indicates that a robust and efficient interaction between SME stakeholders and diverse external entities, including suppliers, distributors, business partners, and industry organizations, significantly impacts the competitive capacity of SME goods in the market. Small and medium-sized enterprises in Langkat Regency must enhance and fortify their commercial networks with external entities, including suppliers, distributors, business partners, and industry groups. Enhancing access to this corporate network will yield significant advantages, including the enhancement of product quality, access to cutting-edge technology, and potential for mutually advantageous collaboration. Consequently, it is imperative for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to proactively pursue partners that can facilitate network expansion and augment the operational competencies of company stakeholders. The local government or affiliated organizations might provide programs or training to aid SMEs in establishing and sustaining business networks. This involves connecting commercial entities with prospective partners, industry groups, or new markets that can facilitate their development.

The conclusions of this study align with Sugiarto's research, which showed that strategic business networks, including relationships with major entities or industry groups, may substantially enhance competitive advantage (Nohong, 2020)(Abidin et al., 2023)(Piccolo, 2021). As noted in (Galib et al., 2022), the extent of the network, encompassing both the quantity of partners and the caliber of existing links, significantly impacts the enhancement of SMEs' competitive standing. A broad network and robust contacts enable SMEs to get essential resources, including cutting-edge technology, market intelligence, and advantageous cooperation possibilities (Tambunan et al., 2024). Moreover, establishing alliances with major entities or industry groups not only confers legitimacy upon SME products but also bolsters customer confidence in them (Hou, 2024).

The Influence of Product Quality Perception on Competitive Advantage

The findings of the data analysis in this study demonstrate that the impression of product quality significantly affects the competitive advantage of SME goods in Langkat Regency. This research substantiates that favorable impressions from customers and business stakeholders regarding the quality of SME products significantly enhance the competitiveness of these items in a more competitive market. Consequently, SMEs in Langkat Regency must prioritize enhancing product quality as a primary strategy for attaining competitive advantage. Products exhibiting superior quality in functionality, design, durability, and dependability will garner more customer attention in both local and national markets. Small and medium enterprises in Langkat Regency have to diligently seek quality certifications pertinent to their respective product categories. Halal certification or Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) can enhance customer trust in food items. Likewise, acquiring quality certificates or accolades for handmade items may augment their reputation. Small and medium-sized enterprises in Langkat Regency could capitalize on the superiority of their product quality in their marketing strategies. Businesses may emphasize the quality attributes that consumers prioritize, such as

durability, safety, or innovation, and convey these effectively through advertising, social media, or exhibits.

This study's results corroborate prior research, indicating that the impression of product quality substantially affects competitive advantage (Chopra et al., 2022). Enhancing product quality is essential for sustaining market relevance (Mrozek, 2021). Small and medium-sized enterprises that persist in innovating, particularly in quality and product design, will more readily sustain their competitive edge (Rakshit et al., 2022). Small and medium-sized enterprises must create a systematic innovation policy and continuously adjust to fluctuations in market trends and consumer demands (Mitreaga, 2023). A consistent and trustworthy product quality is directly associated with a strong brand reputation (Piccolo, 2021). Favorable quality views, which underpin brand reputation, might augment market trust and strengthen the competitive stance of SMEs (Vătămănescu, 2022). Enhancing and preserving brand reputation should be a primary emphasis for SMEs. (Purba, 2021).

Conclusions

This study effectively analyzes the impact of business networks and perceptions of product quality on the competitive advantage of SME goods in Langkat. The study's results demonstrate that these criteria substantially influence the competitiveness of SME goods. Research indicates that a business network serves a strategic function by providing access to an expanded market, essential resources, and knowledge that promotes firm success. Conversely, the impression of product quality directly influences customer trust and brand image, both of which are crucial for sustaining a competitive advantage. The results underscore the necessity for SMEs to enhance their commercial networks and consistently elevate product quality to maintain competitiveness in a progressively changing market. Recommendations include establishing extensive commercial ties and generating novel goods that fulfill customer demands and expectations, ultimately enhancing the competitiveness and growth of SMEs in Langkat.

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