

***PRODUCT DIFFERENTIATION AND DIGITAL PROMOTION IN A BAKSO RUSUK
MICROENTERPRISE IN KONAWE***

**DIFERENSIASI PRODUK DAN PROMOSI DIGITAL PADA UMKM BAKSO
RUSUK DI KONAWE**

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis strategi pemasaran UMKM Bakso Rusuk di Kabupaten Konawe dengan memandang diferensiasi produk dan promosi digital sebagai praktik terpadu untuk membangun posisi pasar. Studi kasus kualitatif ini menggunakan wawancara mendalam dengan pemilik usaha, observasi langsung selama dua hingga tiga jam pada jam operasional, dan catatan lapangan; data dianalisis secara deskriptif melalui pengorganisasian tematik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa daya tarik pasar terbentuk melalui keunikan Bakso Rusuk berbasis rusuk sapi, penggunaan Instagram, Facebook, dan WhatsApp, harga terjangkau, layanan ramah dan cepat, serta pemanfaatan bahan baku dan tenaga kerja lokal. Kebaruan penelitian terletak pada konfigurasi identitas produk lokal, komunikasi digital, kualitas layanan, dan keterlekatan sumber daya lokal dalam konteks UMKM kuliner daerah. Secara teoretis, diferensiasi dan promosi digital perlu dipahami sebagai praktik yang saling memperkuat. Secara praktis, pelaku UMKM perlu memperjelas identitas produk, menonjolkan keunikan visual, memperkuat hubungan pelanggan melalui WhatsApp, dan mengomunikasikan nilai lokal secara konsisten.

Kata kunci: Pemasaran Digital, Diferensiasi Produk, Posisi Pasar, UMKM Kuliner, Konawe

Abstract

This study analyzes the marketing strategy of a Bakso Rusuk culinary microenterprise in Konawe Regency by treating product differentiation and digital promotion as integrated practices for building market positioning. The qualitative case study used an in-depth interview with the owner, two to three hours of direct observation during operating hours, and field notes; the data were analyzed descriptively through thematic organization. Market appeal was shaped by the distinctiveness of beef-rib meatballs, the use of Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp, affordable pricing, friendly and quick service, and local ingredients and labor. The study's novelty lies in explaining how local product identity, digital communication, service quality, and locally embedded resources operate as a configuration in a regional culinary microenterprise. Theoretically, differentiation and digital promotion are mutually reinforcing

rather than separate practices. Practically, owners should clarify product identity, highlight visual uniqueness, strengthen customer relationships through WhatsApp, and communicate local value consistently.

Keywords: *Digital Marketing, Product Differentiation, Market Positioning, Culinary Microenterprise, Konawe*

INTRODUCTION

Local culinary microenterprises operate in increasingly competitive regional markets, where customers assess culinary products not only on the basis of taste, but also through presentation, perceived value, hygiene, service experience, and the accessibility of product information through digital platforms. Digital marketing has therefore become increasingly important for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises because it can strengthen market visibility and expand customer reach (Aljabari et al., 2024; Amin et al., 2025; Bennacer et al., 2025; Checchinato et al., 2025; Cordova et al., 2025; Hidayat et al., 2025; Romero & Mammadov, 2025; Sharabati et al., 2024). Social media also supports customer engagement, brand communication, and promotional interaction, particularly for businesses with limited conventional marketing resources (Fatorachian et al., 2025; Fiona et al., 2024; Jawadu et al., 2026; Loku & Havolli, 2024; Mahesh & Rathnapriya, 2025; Matosas-López, 2024; Srinita & Saputra, 2023; Vasquez-Reyes & Cordova-Buiza, 2024). Together, these digital practices can contribute to stronger marketing performance by helping culinary microenterprises communicate product value more effectively and maintain closer relationships with customers.

Product differentiation helps small culinary businesses distinguish their offerings through ingredients, menu variation, serving style, presentation, local identity, or a recognizable consumption experience. Research on SMEs and food businesses links innovation, product development, brand identity, digital capability, and market orientation with performance, competitiveness, and sustainability (Diatmika & Rahayu, 2025; Hassan et al., 2024; Haug et al., 2024; Kaihatu et al., 2024; Lestari et al., 2026; Manurung et al., 2025; Olivia et al., 2026; Radicic & Petković, 2023; Septiani et al., 2024; Taneo et al., 2023; Wibowo et al., 2025; Widjajanti & Jumbri, 2025; Winarso et al., 2023; Wulan et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025)

In Konawe Regency, Bakso Rusuk combines a familiar meatball dish with a distinctive beef-rib serving style. Its taste, visual appeal, and dining experience differentiate it in a market where competing products often resemble one another in price, ingredients, and basic flavor. A recognizable identity and clear value communication are therefore central to market positioning.

Studies of small food and hospitality businesses identify service quality, customer experience, e-service quality, purchase decisions, satisfaction, customer orientation, and repurchase intention as important to market performance (Akanpaadgi et al., 2024; Alam, 2023; Kwarteng-Amaniampong & Tait, 2026; Lima et al., 2024; Lopes et al., 2025; Martha et al., 2023; Melany et al., 2024; Munir et al., 2025; Nurjaya et al., 2025; Rani et al., 2025; Rini et al., 2026; Sunarta et al., 2025). Local creativity, community-based enterprise, green entrepreneurship, local food industries, cultural adaptation, and rural microenterprise

integration also support sustainability (Fawaid et al., 2026; Muis et al., 2024; Rizkita et al., 2025; Sklavos et al., 2024; Thompson & Rust, 2025; Timisela et al., 2026; Wahid et al., 2026). Although digital marketing and product innovation are widely studied, qualitative evidence on how they interact in local culinary microenterprises remains limited, especially outside major cities where businesses rely on owner knowledge, local inputs, community labor, and low-cost digital communication. This study examines how a Bakso Rusuk microenterprise combines differentiation and digital promotion with pricing, service, and local resources to build case-specific market positioning.

This study analyzes product differentiation and digital promotion in a Bakso Rusuk microenterprise in Konawe Regency. It asks how the product differs from conventional meatballs, how digital platforms communicate that difference, and how pricing, service, and local resources support positioning. Its novelty is a regional, integrated configuration in which product identity, digital visibility, service reliability, and local embeddedness operate together.

The framework integrates differentiation, digital marketing capability, market positioning, service quality, and local embeddedness. Differentiation creates recognizable value (Porter, 1985), while digital promotion communicates that value and extends engagement and visibility (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Pricing and service support customer value delivery (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Parasuraman et al., 1988), whereas local ingredients, owner knowledge, and community labor are embedded resources that may sustain authenticity and operations (Barney, 1991).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a qualitative case study design to examine the marketing strategies of a Bakso Rusuk culinary microenterprise in Konawe Regency, Indonesia. This design was appropriate because the study focused on understanding marketing practices within a specific business context rather than testing causal relationships across a large sample. The exploratory case study approach allowed the research to explain how product differentiation, digital promotion, pricing, service quality, and local resource utilization were applied in the daily operation of a local culinary microenterprise. Because the research is based on one case, the analysis is intended to produce contextual and analytical insight rather than statistical generalization.

Research Setting and Case Selection

The study was conducted at a Bakso Rusuk food stall located in Unaaha District, Konawe Regency, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. The case was selected purposively because the business offers Bakso Rusuk as a distinctive variation of conventional meatball products, serves a mixed local customer base, and uses social media as part of its promotional practice. Fieldwork was conducted in July 2025 through one field visit. The in-depth interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, while direct observation was conducted for approximately two to three hours during operating hours. These procedures were considered suitable for an

exploratory study, although the empirical claims are presented cautiously because the study did not include repeated visits, customer interviews, sales records, or platform analytics.

Data Source and Participant

The primary data were obtained from one business owner who served as the key informant. The owner was considered a key informant because the owner possessed comprehensive knowledge of daily operations, product preparation, pricing, customer interaction, promotional practices, supply purchasing, and labor involvement. Although the business was managed by a husband-and-wife team, the interview was conducted with the owner who was directly involved in daily business management. The study also used observational data collected from the business setting, including service practices, product presentation, hygiene conditions, and promotional activities. Field notes were used to document relevant information during data collection.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through a semi-structured in-depth interview, direct observation, and field notes. The interview covered the history of the business, product differentiation, pricing strategy, customer segments, digital promotion practices, service quality, operational challenges, and the role of local resources in business activities. Direct observation focused on product presentation, serving style, cleanliness, speed and friendliness of service, customer interaction, and visible promotional practices. Field notes were written during and after the field visit. An audio recorder was not used to maintain participant comfort; therefore, interview data were documented through written notes. Any quotation presented in the findings is based on field-note documentation and should be understood as a field-note quotation that requires author verification against the original notes before final publication.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive approach with thematic organization. The analysis involved organizing interview and observation notes, identifying information related to marketing practices, grouping the data into key themes, and interpreting the relationship between product differentiation, digital promotion, service quality, pricing, local resource utilization, and market appeal. The main analytical categories were product differentiation, digital promotion, pricing, service quality, local resource utilization, and contribution to the local economy. These categories were interpreted using sensitizing concepts from differentiation strategy, digital marketing, customer value, service quality, and the resource-based view to move the discussion beyond description toward analytical explanation.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To strengthen trustworthiness, the study used methodological triangulation by comparing information from the interview, direct observation, and field notes. Key points from the interview were informally confirmed with the participant at the end of the field visit to reduce

misunderstanding. Before data collection, the participant was informed about the purpose of the study. Participation was voluntary, verbal consent was obtained, and the information collected was used only for academic purposes. Because the study involved non-sensitive business information, confidentiality was maintained by avoiding disclosure of sensitive operational details. The study also applies analytical caution by distinguishing between observed practices, owner-provided explanations, and interpretations of possible market positioning effects.

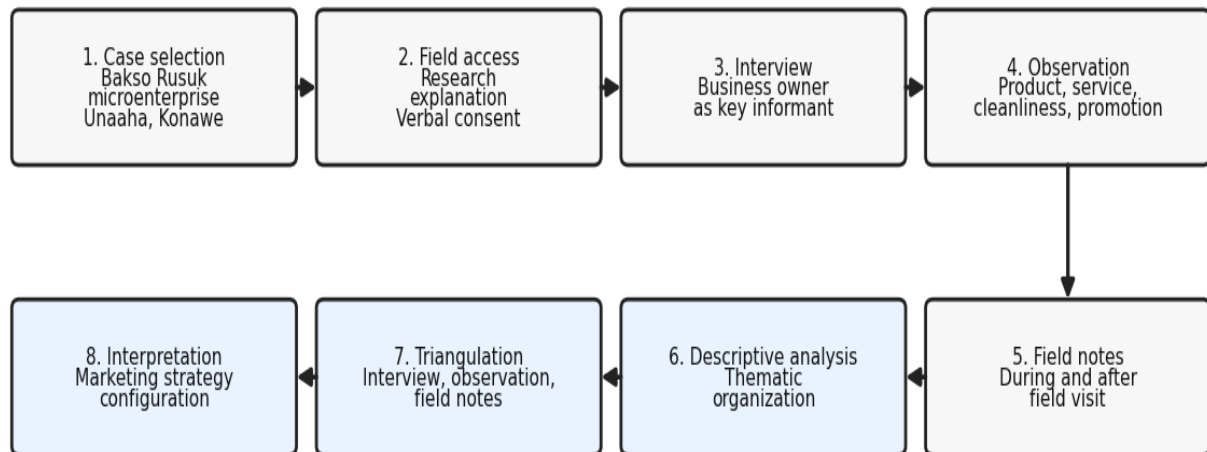


Figure 1. Research procedure of the qualitative case study

Source: Author's elaboration based on (Hidayat et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Findings are organized into case profile, product differentiation, digital promotion, pricing and service, and local resource utilization. Empirical descriptions are separated from the broader interpretation presented in the discussion.

Case Profile of the Bakso Rusuk Microenterprise

The enterprise is a Bakso Rusuk microbusiness in Unaaha District that has operated for about four years under a husband-and-wife team. It also sells mie pangsit and serves students, office workers, health-center employees, and nearby residents. Because no customer survey was conducted, this profile reflects owner information supported by observation rather than measured segmentation.

Product Differentiation through Bakso Rusuk and Menu Variation

Bakso Rusuk is the enterprise's main differentiator: combining meatballs with beef ribs creates a strong visual cue and a more memorable experience than ordinary meatballs. The owner stated, "Customers like Bakso Rusuk because it is different from ordinary meatballs." Menu variety, taste consistency, and ingredient attention also support appeal. As recipes, production volumes, and customer quality assessments were not collected, quality is reported as an observed and owner-identified concern rather than a measured outcome.

Digital Promotion through Social Media

Instagram and Facebook introduce products and extend visibility, while WhatsApp enables direct customer communication. Together, these platforms display the visual appeal of Bakso Rusuk, share information, and maintain contact beyond walk-in traffic. Without analytics, posting frequency, engagement, user-generated content, or conversion data, digital promotion is interpreted as a visibility- and relationship-supporting practice rather than a verified performance driver.

Pricing and Service Practices

Competitive pricing and friendly, relatively quick service support the differentiated product. Pricing is interpreted as value-oriented because it keeps the offer accessible, while cleanliness, presentation, responsiveness, and empathy strengthen the service experience. Since customer satisfaction and price benchmarking were not measured, these findings remain descriptive evidence from observation and the owner.

Local Resource Utilization and Economic Contribution

Meat, vegetables, and spices are sourced from nearby markets, linking the enterprise to local supply chains, while local residents assist in operations on a small scale. These practices may reinforce a community-based identity and local embeddedness. Because purchasing volumes, wages, and multiplier effects were not measured, the economic contribution is presented qualitatively rather than as quantified impact.

Overall, market appeal emerges from an integrated configuration: Bakso Rusuk provides distinctiveness, social media communicates it, pricing and service support acceptance, and local sourcing connects the business to community resources.

Table 1. Summary of empirical findings

Theme	Main finding	Data source	Data boundary
Case profile	The enterprise has operated for approximately four years, is managed by a husband-and-wife team, and serves students, office workers, health center employees, and local residents.	Interview, observation, and field notes	No detailed performance records or formal customer segmentation data
Product differentiation	Bakso Rusuk is positioned as a distinctive variation of conventional meatball dishes because the beef-rib component provides visual, functional, and experiential value.	Interview, observation, and field-note quotation	No customer perception survey, standardized recipe analysis, or quality measurement

Theme	Main finding	Data source	Data boundary
Digital promotion	Instagram and Facebook support product visibility, while WhatsApp supports direct communication and customer relationship maintenance.	Interview and field notes	No platform analytics, posting-frequency analysis, engagement data, or sales conversion data
Pricing and service	Competitive value pricing, friendly and quick service, cleanliness, and product presentation support customer accessibility and perceived value.	Interview and observation	No systematic satisfaction data or price benchmarking
Local resource utilization	Local market ingredients and local resident involvement connect the enterprise to community-based supply and labor networks.	Interview and observation	No quantitative local economic impact data
Integrated market appeal	Product identity, digital visibility, service reliability, affordable pricing, and local embeddedness operate together as a case-specific market-positioning configuration.	Cross-theme interpretation of interview, observation, and field notes	Analytical inference limited to the studied case

Discussion

The central finding is that market appeal arises from an integrated configuration of product identity, digital visibility, accessible pricing, reliable service, and local embeddedness. This explains how practices often studied separately are combined in the daily operation of a regional culinary microenterprise.

The first finding concerns product differentiation. Through Porter (1985) differentiation perspective, Bakso Rusuk functions as a value-creating distinction because it changes a familiar product category into a more recognizable culinary experience. The beef-rib component offers functional value through a different menu composition, experiential value through a stronger visual and eating experience, and symbolic value through a local product identity that customers can remember. This suggests that differentiation in micro culinary enterprises does not necessarily depend on advanced technology or formal research and development. It can emerge from meaningful modification of ingredients, serving style, and product presentation. However, the sustainability of this advantage remains uncertain because similar businesses may imitate the product if demand increases; therefore, consistent taste, service quality, and digital storytelling are needed to protect the differentiated position.

The second finding relates to digital promotion. The use of Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp is not novel by itself because many SMEs use the same platforms. The more important analytical point is how these platforms translate product uniqueness into market visibility. Instagram and Facebook can display the visual appeal of beef ribs and menu

presentation, while WhatsApp can support direct communication, repeat ordering, and relationship maintenance. In this case, digital promotion is better understood as a basic digital marketing capability that connects product differentiation with customer awareness and potential electronic word-of-mouth. Because engagement rates, follower growth, and conversion data were not collected, the study does not claim that social media statistically improves performance; it only shows how digital communication supports the visibility of a differentiated product.

The third finding shows that pricing and service quality support product differentiation. A distinctive product may attract attention, but it becomes more acceptable to local customers when the price is perceived as accessible and the service experience is reliable. The pricing practice can be interpreted as value-oriented pricing rather than premium differentiation because the enterprise seeks to offer a unique product without excluding price-sensitive customers. Service practices such as friendliness, quick response, cleanliness, and product presentation are also consistent with key service-quality dimensions, particularly responsiveness, empathy, and tangibles (Parasuraman et al., 1988). This finding indicates that product uniqueness must be supported by a service system that makes the differentiated product easy, comfortable, and trustworthy for customers.

The fourth finding concerns local resource utilization. The enterprise sources ingredients from nearby markets and involves local residents in daily operations. From a resource-based view, these practices may be interpreted as locally embedded resources that support operational continuity and authenticity (Barney, 1991). Local sourcing can shorten procurement channels and strengthen ties with surrounding suppliers, while local labor involvement reinforces the community-based character of the business. Although the economic contribution is small and not quantitatively measured, this finding extends the discussion of microenterprise marketing by showing that local competitiveness is shaped not only by consumer-facing promotion but also by the way the business is embedded in local supply and labor networks.

Theoretically, this study shows that regional culinary microenterprises can differentiate familiar products through simple modifications, use social media to connect product uniqueness with market visibility, and combine product identity, digital promotion, pricing, service quality, and local resources into an integrated marketing configuration. Practically, culinary businesses should strengthen visual branding, use Instagram and Facebook to present products and local identity, and apply WhatsApp Business for communication, ordering, and customer retention. Claims about local ingredients and community labor should remain accurate. The findings are limited by a single case, one owner informant, the absence of customer data, sales records, satisfaction measures, social media analytics, and audio-recorded interviews. Future studies should compare multiple enterprises, include customer perspectives, and examine the effects of differentiation and digital promotion on loyalty and business performance.

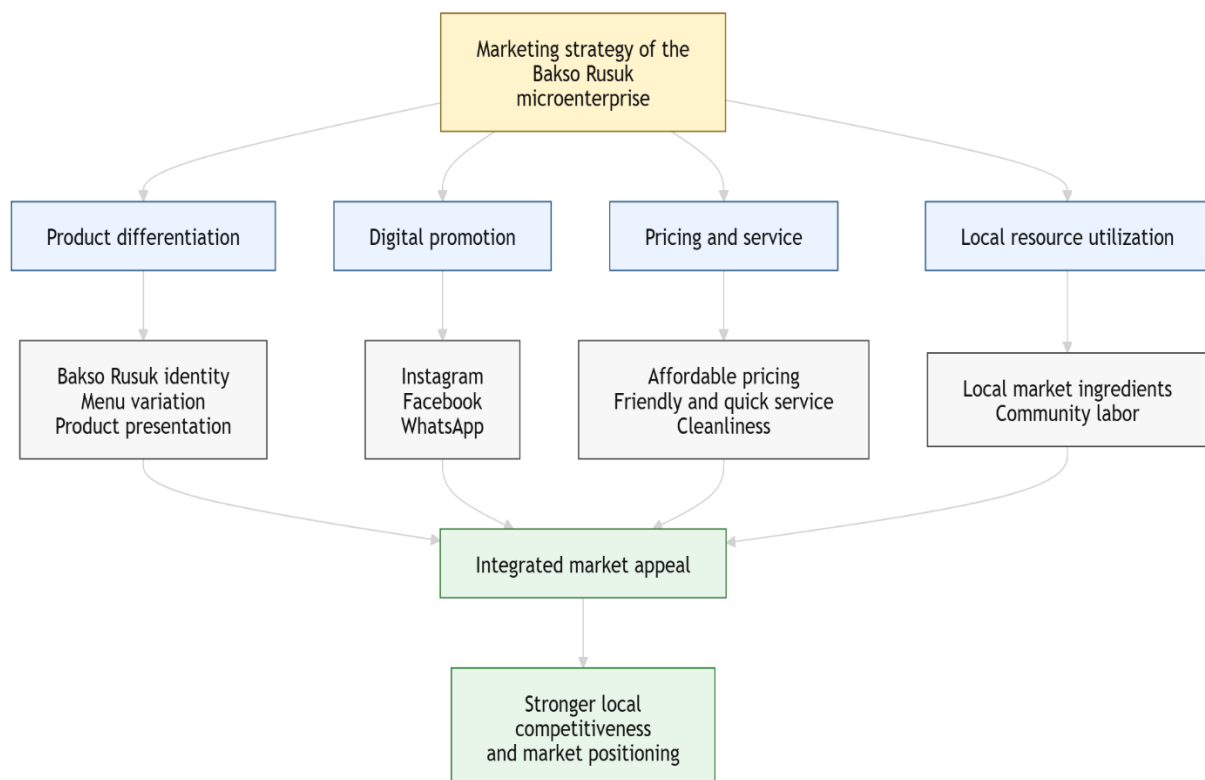


Figure 2. Marketing strategy configuration of the Bakso Rusuk microenterprise

CONCLUSION

The Bakso Rusuk microenterprise builds its market position by combining product differentiation, digital promotion, affordable pricing, reliable service, and local resources. Beef ribs create a distinctive product identity, while Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp extend its visibility, although their performance impact was not statistically measured. Culinary microenterprises should emphasize visual uniqueness, customer-generated content, WhatsApp Business, and service consistency. Since the study relies on one case and limited data, future research should test this configuration across multiple businesses using customer and digital-performance evidence.

Generative AI Use Statement

The authors used generative AI solely for language editing and manuscript refinement. It was not used to generate data, fabricate references, alter findings, or replace scholarly judgment. All data, analyses, interpretations, and references were verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the manuscript's integrity.

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