



Product Differentiation and Customer Value: Basis for Proposed Strategies to Enhance Café's Competitive Edge

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Abstract

Cafés operate in an increasingly competitive food and beverage environment where product similarity, limited brand distinction, and shifting customer expectations can weaken market positioning. This study examined customer perceptions of product differentiation and customer value among café customers in the western part of Batangas province as basis for identifying strategies that may strengthen café competitiveness. Using a descriptive-comparative quantitative research design, data were gathered from 388 café customers selected through purposive and snowball sampling. A structured questionnaire measured product differentiation in terms of product quality and uniqueness, branding and identity, service excellence, and innovation and adaptability. Customer value was assessed in terms of functional, hedonic, relational, and communication value. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondent profiles and variable assessments, while Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis H tests were used to determine significant differences across profile groups. Findings showed that respondents generally agreed that the cafés demonstrated favorable product differentiation and customer value. Service excellence and innovation and adaptability received the highest assessments among product differentiation dimensions, while relational value ranked highest among customer value dimensions. Significant differences were observed across selected profile variables, particularly age, occupation, frequency of visit, and monthly income or allowance. The findings suggest that cafés may strengthen competitive positioning by improving product uniqueness, service efficiency, personalized communication, and value-oriented offerings for student and young professional market segments.

Keywords: *café marketing; competitive edge; customer value; product differentiation; service experience; Western Batangas*

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1. Introduction

The café industry has become increasingly competitive as cafés are no longer viewed merely as places where customers purchase coffee, snacks, or light meals. They now function as social spaces, study areas, informal meeting venues, lifestyle destinations, and experience-based consumption settings. As customer expectations continue to shift, cafés are compelled to differentiate not only through product taste and menu variety but also through branding, service quality, ambiance, innovation, and the overall value perceived by customers. In this context, product differentiation and customer value become central strategic concerns for cafés seeking to strengthen their competitive edge.

Product differentiation refers to the process by which a business distinguishes its products or services from those of competitors through attributes that customers perceive as unique, valuable, or superior. These attributes may include product quality, freshness, presentation, branding, service experience, innovation, and adaptability to changing customer preferences. In highly competitive markets, differentiation enables firms to avoid direct price-based competition by emphasizing distinctive qualities that influence customer preference and loyalty (Kopp, 2025). For cafés, differentiation

is especially important because many establishments often offer similar beverages, food items, and service formats. Without clear differentiation, customers may find it difficult to identify meaningful distinctions among competing cafés.

Customer value refers to the customer's overall evaluation of the benefits received in relation to the costs incurred. These benefits may be functional, emotional, relational, or communicative. Functional value concerns the practical usefulness of the product or service, such as taste, freshness, serving adequacy, price fairness, and service efficiency. Hedonic value refers to the pleasure, enjoyment, and emotional satisfaction associated with the café experience. Relational value involves the quality of interaction between customers and café personnel, including friendliness, attentiveness, trust, and personal recognition. Communication value refers to the clarity, responsiveness, and usefulness of information provided by the café, whether through staff interaction or digital platforms. When cafés are able to create value across these dimensions, they are more likely to generate satisfaction, repeat patronage, and stronger customer attachment.

The café sector in the western part of Batangas province reflects both opportunity and challenge. The increasing number of cafés indicates a vibrant entrepreneurial environment and a growing customer base for coffee, food, and experience-oriented consumption. However, this growth has also intensified competition. Many cafés appear to offer similar products, comparable interiors, and familiar promotional strategies. This creates a risk of market homogeneity, where establishments struggle to project a distinct identity. In such a setting, café owners need a clearer understanding of which aspects of product differentiation are actually valued by customers and which dimensions of customer value contribute most strongly to perceived competitiveness.

The problem becomes more significant when cafés rely mainly on imitation rather than strategic differentiation. Some cafés attempt to replicate the practices of already established brands by adopting similar menu concepts, aesthetic designs, or social media approaches. While imitation may offer short-term visibility, it may not necessarily generate sustainable customer value. Customers may initially respond to attractive interiors or trendy products, but long-term competitiveness requires a stronger alignment between what the café offers and what customers genuinely value. Thus, café owners need empirical information on whether customers value quality and uniqueness, branding and identity, service excellence, innovation and adaptability, functional convenience, hedonic experience, relational connection, or communication responsiveness.

The study is anchored on the strategic premise that product differentiation and customer value are mutually reinforcing. Differentiation becomes meaningful only when customers recognize and value the distinguishing features of the product or service. Similarly, customer value becomes stronger when the café provides offerings and experiences that customers perceive as distinct from those of competitors. Edward Chamberlin's theory of product differentiation provides a useful basis for understanding how firms may gain advantage by offering products or services that consumers perceive as different from competing alternatives. In café settings, such differentiation may emerge through product quality, design, branding, service, ambiance, personalization, or customer experience. Value-based marketing theory also supports the need to align organizational strategies with customer needs and preferences, emphasizing that long-term success depends not merely on offering products but on creating superior value for target customers (Meeprom & Kokkhangplu, 2025).

Although product differentiation and customer value have been widely discussed in marketing and business strategy, there remains a need for localized empirical studies that examine these constructs in the context of small and medium-sized cafés. Much of the existing discussion on café competitiveness is often shaped by examples from large chains or established specialty brands. Less attention has been given to how local café customers assess differentiation and value in smaller market environments, particularly in areas where cafés are expanding but may still lack clearly defined strategic positioning. This gap is relevant because local cafés operate under different resource conditions, customer expectations, price sensitivities, and branding capacities compared with large national or international coffee chains.

For café owners and managers, the findings of this study may provide practical insights into how product differentiation and customer value can be strengthened. By identifying which dimensions receive favorable assessments and which areas require improvement, café operators may develop more targeted strategies for enhancing customer experience and competitive positioning. For entrepreneurship and marketing scholarship, the study contributes localized

evidence on customer perceptions within the café sector, particularly in relation to product differentiation, customer value, and demographic differences among consumers.

This study aimed to examine product differentiation and customer value as basis for proposed strategies to enhance the competitive edge of cafés in the western part of Batangas province. Specifically, it sought to describe the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of age, sex, occupation, monthly income or allowance, frequency of café visits, and average spending; determine the café's product differentiation in terms of product quality and uniqueness, branding and identity, service excellence, and innovation and adaptability; assess customer value in terms of functional value, hedonic value, relational value, and communication value; test the significant differences in product differentiation and customer value when grouped according to respondent profile; and propose strategies to enhance the café's product differentiation and customer value.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Product Differentiation in Café Markets

Product differentiation is a central marketing strategy for businesses operating in markets where customers are exposed to many similar alternatives. It involves emphasizing the qualities, features, design, service attributes, brand meanings, or customer experiences that allow a product or service to be perceived as distinct from competing offerings. In competitive food and beverage markets, differentiation reduces the risk of direct price competition by giving customers specific reasons to prefer one establishment over another (Ellis, 2024; Kopp, 2025). For cafés, this is particularly important because coffee, pastries, beverages, interiors, and promotional tactics can easily become similar across establishments.

Comparable evidence from Philippine SME strategy suggests that businesses in saturated local markets may strengthen competitiveness by shifting away from price-led imitation and toward value innovation, particularly through redesigned customer utility, improved service delivery, digital engagement, and differentiated customer experience (Teodosio et al., 2025). This perspective is relevant to café markets because local cafés often compete under similar conditions of product similarity, limited resources, and the need to create recognizable value beyond basic product availability.

In the café sector, differentiation may begin with the core product but must extend beyond coffee alone. Grant (2021) noted that cafés and roasters increasingly diversify their offerings to create additional revenue streams, strengthen brand identity, and offer products that reflect the values of the business. Starbucks has often been cited as a global example of differentiation because its strategic advantage is not limited to coffee quality but includes personalization, brand experience, store ambiance, technology-enabled loyalty, and localized product adaptation (Mousa, 2025). These examples suggest that café differentiation requires a combination of product, service, symbolic, and experiential elements.

Product quality and uniqueness remain foundational to this differentiation process. Product quality influences customer trust, repeat patronage, brand reputation, and favorable word-of-mouth, while uniqueness helps distinguish the café from competitors that may offer comparable products (Caramela, 2025). In specialty coffee settings, quality must also be communicated consistently through preparation, ingredients, service, packaging, and the overall brand experience (Mott, 2025). Thus, product differentiation in cafés is not merely a matter of adding new menu items. It requires the deliberate creation of a distinctive value proposition that customers can recognize, remember, and associate with the café.

2.2 Branding, Service Excellence, Innovation, and Adaptability as Differentiation Mechanisms

Branding and identity are important differentiation mechanisms because they help customers interpret what the café represents. Brand identity includes visual elements such as logos, colors, typography, packaging, store design, and social media presentation, but it also includes intangible meanings such as personality, values, lifestyle association, and customer expectations (Andrivet, 2023). In the coffee industry, branding has historically helped roasters and cafés distinguish themselves from competitors by shaping consumer familiarity, recognition, and loyalty (Melheim, 2022). Cowling (2025) argued that coffee businesses increasingly depend on brand personality because product quality alone may not be sufficient to sustain customer preference in a crowded market.

Parallel evidence from Philippine retail strategy indicates that brand trust remains a critical competitive asset, but such trust must be renewed through digital responsiveness, service modernization, and adaptation to changing consumer expectations (Atento & Atento, 2025). For cafés, this suggests that branding should not be limited to visual identity or aesthetic appeal; it should also be reinforced through reliable service encounters, updated communication channels, and customer experiences that remain relevant to evolving market behavior.

Service excellence also strengthens differentiation because customer experience in cafés is shaped by human interaction. Service excellence refers to the consistent ability to meet or exceed customer expectations through attentiveness, responsiveness, professionalism, and problem resolution (Yoong, 2024). In the café context, service does not function merely as transaction support; it becomes part of the experience that customers remember. Research on coffee shop service quality indicates that warm service, timely preparation, and a comfortable atmosphere can make customers return even when competing cafés offer similar products. Apigo et al. (2024) likewise confirmed that service quality practices in coffee shops influence satisfaction, loyalty, and overall customer experience.

Innovation and adaptability further enhance differentiation by allowing cafés to respond to changing consumer preferences, technological shifts, and market trends. Innovation does not always require radical transformation. It may include improvements in service processes, digital communication, product presentation, menu development, or customer engagement (Boyles, 2022). Adaptability enables businesses to adjust to evolving customer expectations and competitive pressures (Davis, 2024). In cafés, this may include using digital platforms, adapting menus to dietary preferences, introducing seasonal products, improving ordering systems, or engaging customers through social media. Ho (2025) observed that coffee shops increasingly rely on technology, sustainability practices, mobile applications, and customer-centered design to remain relevant in a changing market.

In a related hospitality context, app-enabled personalization has also been proposed as a basis for value innovation, particularly when standardized service formats limit customers' ability to align the experience with their specific needs (Benosa et al., 2026). This supports the view that innovation in café settings may emerge not only from new menu items but also from personalized ordering, improved digital interaction, flexible service processes, and experience designs that give customers a stronger sense of relevance and control.

2.3 Customer Value in Café Consumption

Customer value refers to the perceived worth that customers assign to a product or service after considering the benefits received and the costs incurred. It is not limited to price or product utility. Rather, it includes the functional, emotional, relational, and communicative benefits customers experience when engaging with a business (Hayden, 2022). In café consumption, value is created not only by the taste of coffee or adequacy of servings but also by the atmosphere, service interaction, brand meaning, social experience, and clarity of communication.

Functional value concerns the practical usefulness of the café's offerings. It answers whether the product or service performs its expected function and whether the customer perceives the exchange as worthwhile. Functional value may be reflected in good taste, freshness, price fairness, serving adequacy, order accuracy, and prompt service (Michelli, 2021; Shrivastav, 2025; Zmijewski, 2023). For cafés, functional value remains essential because customers are unlikely to sustain patronage if the basic product and service delivery are unreliable.

Hedonic value refers to the pleasure, enjoyment, emotional fulfillment, and sensory satisfaction derived from consumption. In cafés, hedonic value may arise from ambiance, lighting, music, interior design, aroma, food presentation, and the emotional comfort of spending time in the establishment. Kurnianingsih et al. (2025) found that hedonic value influences satisfaction, loyalty, repurchase intention, and emotional attachment, particularly when consumption involves sensory and experiential dimensions. The role of hedonic value is especially relevant to cafés because many customers visit not only to consume beverages but also to relax, socialize, study, or experience a particular atmosphere.

Relational value concerns the quality of connection between the customer and the business. It is built through friendliness, trust, attentiveness, personal recognition, and the perception that the customer is valued beyond the transaction. Relationship marketing literature emphasizes that retaining existing customers and cultivating loyalty can be more strategically valuable than merely attracting new customers (Hugoboom, 2024; Roytman, 2023). In cafés,

relational value is expressed through courteous staff, personalized attention, reliable service recovery, and an environment that encourages customers to return (Konkin, 2025). Communication value complements this by ensuring that customers receive clear, useful, timely, and responsive information. Effective communication allows cafés to explain menu items, recommend products, respond to inquiries, and inform customers about promotions or seasonal offerings (Brenner, 2025; Hall, 2022; Sen, 2025).

2.4 Café Customer Behavior, Demographic Differences, and Competitive Positioning

Customer behavior in cafés is shaped by a combination of product attributes, service expectations, social motivations, and demographic characteristics. Studies on café customer behavior suggest that taste, menu variety, accessibility, and social media influences are associated with customer preferences and loyalty. This supports the view that café choice is multidimensional. Customers may be attracted by product quality, but their loyalty is also shaped by convenience, variety, social influence, and perceived fit with their lifestyle.

Recent coffee consumption studies also suggest that customer segments differ in how they interpret value. Karabulut (2023) examined young people's coffee shop perceptions and emphasized the role of taste, sensory experience, perceived quality, and lifestyle meaning in shaping café evaluation. Alnafissa et al. (2024) likewise showed that segmentation and spending patterns matter in understanding coffee markets, since different customer groups may vary in their willingness to spend, preferred experiences, and expectations of specialty coffee. These findings are important for local cafés because a student-heavy or young professional market may evaluate cafés differently from older, higher-income, or more convenience-driven customers.

In adjacent education-market research, social-media discourse has been treated as a source of consumer insight, showing how community values may be translated into marketing messages, engagement design, and relationship-building strategies (Atento & Espelita, 2025). Although situated outside the café industry, this finding is conceptually useful because cafés also rely on digitally mediated impressions, community resonance, and value-aligned communication to attract and retain young consumers.

The relationship between product differentiation and customer value is also influenced by price sensitivity and perceived food quality. Tacardon et al. (2023) found that food quality and perceived food value influence purchase intention in the Philippine food consumption context. Although their study focused on street food, its implications are relevant to cafés because consumers in price-sensitive markets often evaluate whether the quality, experience, and service received justify the amount spent. Prataga and Santoso (2022) similarly showed that food quality and physical environment influence café customer satisfaction, suggesting that both tangible product attributes and environmental design contribute to customer evaluation.

For cafés seeking competitive positioning, the implication is that differentiation must be aligned with the specific value expectations of the target market. A café may have strong branding, but if customers do not perceive functional value, repeat patronage may weaken. It may offer high-quality products, but if communication and service are poor, customers may not develop relational attachment. Conversely, strong ambiance and friendly staff may increase hedonic and relational value, but these must still be supported by consistent taste, freshness, price fairness, and operational reliability.

2.5 Synthesis and Literature Gaps

The reviewed literature shows that café competitiveness is shaped by the interaction between product differentiation and customer value. Product differentiation allows cafés to distinguish themselves through product quality, uniqueness, branding, service excellence, innovation, and adaptability (Ellis, 2024; Grant, 2021; Kopp, 2025). Customer value explains why those differentiating features matter to customers, particularly when value is experienced as functional usefulness, hedonic enjoyment, relational connection, and communication responsiveness (Kurnianingsih et al., 2025; Michelli, 2021; Roytman, 2023; Sen, 2025). Together, these perspectives indicate that café strategy should not rely solely on menu offerings or visual appeal. It must integrate product, service, brand, emotional, relational, and communication dimensions.

However, the literature remains limited in two respects. First, much of the discussion on café differentiation is based on global brands, industry commentaries, or broad marketing principles rather than localized empirical evidence

from smaller café markets. Second, while studies have examined customer preference, loyalty, food value, and café atmosphere, fewer studies have jointly examined product differentiation and customer value using the specific dimensions of product quality and uniqueness, branding and identity, service excellence, innovation and adaptability, functional value, hedonic value, relational value, and communication value. This study addresses that gap by examining how café customers in the western part of Batangas province assess these dimensions and how such assessments may serve as basis for proposed strategies to enhance café competitiveness.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-comparative quantitative research design to examine product differentiation and customer value among café customers in the western part of Batangas province. The descriptive component was used to determine the respondents' profile, their assessment of product differentiation, and their perceived customer value. The comparative component was used to test whether significant differences existed in product differentiation and customer value when the respondents were grouped according to selected demographic and consumption-related profile variables.

This design was appropriate because the study did not manipulate any variable. Instead, it gathered structured customer responses to describe existing perceptions of café differentiation and customer value and to identify group-based variations that may inform proposed strategies for enhancing café competitiveness.

3.2 Respondents of the Study

The respondents were 388 café customers who had actual experience visiting the selected cafés in the western part of Batangas province. The respondents represented different age groups, sex categories, occupations, income or allowance levels, frequency of café visits, and average spending levels.

The selected cafés were included based on accessibility, relevance to the study context, and the researcher's ability to coordinate data collection with the establishments. Since the study focused on customer perceptions, only individuals who had visited or patronized the selected cafés were qualified to participate. A screening question was included to ensure that respondents had actual customer experience with the cafés being evaluated.

3.3 Sampling Technique

The study used purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was used to identify respondents who were actual customers of the selected cafés and therefore had sufficient basis to evaluate product differentiation and customer value. Snowball sampling was also used by requesting initial respondents to share the survey link with other individuals who had also visited the cafés.

This combined sampling approach was appropriate because café customers are not always available in one location at a fixed time. The approach allowed the researcher to reach a wider pool of qualified respondents while maintaining the requirement that all participants must have actual experience with the cafés included in the study.

3.4 Research Instrument

The primary data-gathering instrument was a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative and standardized responses from café customers regarding their profile, assessment of product differentiation, and perception of customer value.

The instrument consisted of three parts. Part I gathered the profile of respondents in terms of age, sex, frequency of café visits, occupation, monthly income or allowance, and average spending. Part II measured product differentiation in terms of four dimensions: product quality and uniqueness, branding and identity, service excellence, and innovation and adaptability. Part III measured customer value in terms of functional value, hedonic value, relational value, and communication value.

Responses to the product differentiation and customer value indicators were measured using a four-point Likert scale: 4 = Strongly Agree, 3 = Agree, 2 = Disagree, and 1 = Strongly Disagree.

The instrument was validated by business management experts to ensure that the items were aligned with the objectives and variables of the study. A pilot test was also conducted to assess the reliability of the instrument. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.817 to 0.941, indicating good to excellent internal consistency.

Table 1. Reliability Results of the Research Instrument

Variable / Dimension	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items	Interpretation
Product Quality and Uniqueness	0.941	5	Excellent
Branding and Identity	0.836	5	Good
Service Excellence	0.933	5	Excellent
Innovation and Adaptability	0.817	5	Good
Functional Value	0.842	5	Good
Hedonic Value	0.927	5	Excellent
Relational Value	0.910	5	Excellent
Communication Value	0.921	5	Excellent

The reliability results indicate that the instrument was suitable for data gathering. All dimensions met acceptable reliability thresholds, with most dimensions falling within the excellent range.

3.5 Data Gathering Procedure

The study began with the identification and refinement of the research topic, followed by a review of related literature on product differentiation, customer value, café competitiveness, and customer experience. After the research variables and dimensions were finalized, the structured questionnaire was developed and submitted for validation.

After validation, a pilot test was conducted among respondents who were not included in the actual study. The reliability results were then computed using Cronbach's alpha. Once the instrument was found reliable, the researcher proceeded with actual data collection.

Data were collected using online survey forms and printed questionnaires, depending on respondent accessibility. The online questionnaire was distributed through digital platforms, while printed questionnaires were used for on-site data gathering when applicable. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study before answering the questionnaire. Completed responses were reviewed for completeness before encoding, tabulation, and statistical analysis.

3.6 Data Analysis

The study used descriptive and inferential statistical tools. Frequency and percentage distribution were used to describe the respondents' profile in terms of age, sex, frequency of café visits, occupation, monthly income or allowance, and average spending.

Weighted mean and composite mean were used to assess product differentiation and customer value. The weighted mean determined the respondents' level of agreement with each indicator, while the composite mean summarized the overall assessment for each dimension.

Since the data were ordinal in nature and were derived from Likert-scale responses, non-parametric tests were used for group comparisons. The Mann-Whitney U test was used for profile variables with two groups, particularly sex. The Kruskal-Wallis H test was used for profile variables with more than two groups, including age, frequency of café visits, occupation, monthly income or allowance, and average spending. When significant differences were found using the Kruskal-Wallis H test, post hoc comparisons were examined to determine which specific groups differed.

The level of significance was set at 0.05. Results with p-values below 0.05 were interpreted as statistically significant.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical standards in conducting research involving human participants. Ethical clearance was secured from the university's research ethics committee prior to data collection. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any point.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. No respondent names were disclosed in the study, and responses were used solely for academic purposes. The collected data were handled securely and presented objectively, without manipulation or misrepresentation of findings.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Profile of the Respondents

The study included 388 café customers from the western part of Batangas province. Most respondents were aged 18 to 25 years old, representing 80.7% of the sample. This indicates that the findings largely reflect the perceptions of young adult customers, particularly those belonging to the student and early-career consumer segments. Female respondents slightly outnumbered male respondents, accounting for 54.9% of the sample.

In terms of café visit frequency, the largest group consisted of respondents who visited cafés anytime they needed to go, representing 40.2% of the sample, followed closely by weekly visitors at 38.1%. This suggests that café patronage among the respondents was both situational and habitual. The café was not necessarily a daily destination for most customers, but it served as a recurring venue for study, leisure, social interaction, or personal convenience.

The respondents were predominantly students, comprising 77.1% of the sample, while employed respondents accounted for 20.1%. This profile is important because student customers may be more price-sensitive, more influenced by ambiance and social media presence, and more likely to use cafés as third spaces for study, relaxation, and peer interaction. In terms of monthly income or allowance, 50.5% reported having less than ₱10,000, while 29.1% reported ₱10,001 to ₱20,000. Average spending was concentrated between ₱100 and ₱300 per visit, with 32.7% spending ₱100 to ₱200 and 33.0% spending ₱201 to ₱300. These figures indicate that the café market examined in the study is largely young, budget-conscious, and moderately spending, which has implications for pricing, product bundling, and value-based differentiation.

4.2 Assessment of Product Differentiation

Table 2 presents the summary of respondents' assessment of product differentiation. The overall composite mean was 3.34, interpreted as Agree. This indicates that respondents generally perceived the cafés as differentiated across the measured dimensions, although the ratings remained below the Strongly Agree level. The result suggests that the cafés had established recognizable differentiation but still had room to strengthen their distinctiveness.

Table 2. Summary of Product Differentiation Dimensions

Product Differentiation Dimension	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Product Quality and Uniqueness	3.31	Agree	4
Branding and Identity	3.33	Agree	3
Service Excellence	3.36	Agree	1.5
Innovation and Adaptability	3.36	Agree	1.5
Composite Mean	3.34	Agree	

Legend: 3.50-4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50-3.49 = Agree; 1.50-2.49 = Disagree; 1.00-1.49 = Strongly Disagree.

Service excellence and innovation and adaptability obtained the highest weighted means, both at 3.36. This suggests that customers perceived the cafés' service quality, responsiveness, digital engagement, and trend adaptability as the strongest aspects of differentiation. For cafés competing in a relatively crowded local market, these dimensions are important because customers do not evaluate cafés only through beverage quality. They also consider whether the café provides attentive service, accommodates customer needs, and adapts to contemporary consumption habits.

Branding and identity ranked third, with a weighted mean of 3.33. This indicates that the cafés had achieved a generally favorable level of brand recognition and consistency, but the rating also suggests that the brand identity may

not yet be strong enough to produce a deeply distinctive market position. In a café environment where visual presentation, packaging, signage, and social media content shape customer impressions, branding must communicate not only recognition but also a clear lifestyle association.

Product quality and uniqueness ranked lowest, with a weighted mean of 3.31, although it was still interpreted as Agree. This is a strategically important finding. It implies that while customers generally perceived the cafés' products positively, the uniqueness of the core product offerings may not be as strong as the service and innovation dimensions. For a study centered on product differentiation, this suggests that the cafés may need to strengthen signature offerings, ingredient freshness, localized flavors, and menu creativity. As discussed in the literature, product differentiation becomes more sustainable when customers can identify distinctive product attributes that are not easily replicated by competitors (Ellis, 2024; Grant, 2021; Kopp, 2025).

4.3 Assessment of Customer Value

Table 3 presents the summary of customer value across four dimensions. The overall composite mean was 3.36, interpreted as Agree. This indicates that respondents generally perceived the cafés as providing favorable customer value. However, as with product differentiation, the results did not reach the Strongly Agree level, suggesting that the cafés had achieved moderate strength but not yet exceptional value delivery.

Table 3. Summary of Customer Value Dimensions

Customer Value Dimension	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Functional Value	3.30	Agree	4
Hedonic Value	3.38	Agree	2
Relational Value	3.39	Agree	1
Communication Value	3.36	Agree	3
Composite Mean	3.36	Agree	

Legend: 3.50-4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50-3.49 = Agree; 1.50-2.49 = Disagree; 1.00-1.49 = Strongly Disagree.

Relational value ranked highest, with a weighted mean of 3.39. This indicates that customers placed strong value on friendly staff, attentiveness, trust, and an environment that encouraged return visits. This finding supports the view that cafés function not only as commercial establishments but also as relational spaces where customers value recognition, courtesy, and social comfort. Relationship marketing literature emphasizes that customer retention is strengthened when businesses build continuing relationships rather than focusing only on one-time transactions (Hugoboom, 2024; Roytman, 2023).

Hedonic value ranked second, with a weighted mean of 3.38. This suggests that customers valued the emotional and experiential aspects of café consumption, including atmosphere, relaxation, enjoyment, and sensory pleasure. The finding is consistent with the literature on hedonic consumption, which explains that customer satisfaction and loyalty are influenced by pleasurable and emotionally meaningful experiences, particularly in settings where ambiance and sensory stimulation are part of the consumption process (Kurnianingsih et al., 2025).

Communication value ranked third, with a weighted mean of 3.36. This indicates that customers generally perceived the cafés as responsive and informative, particularly in answering inquiries, explaining menu items, and providing updated information through social media or direct staff interaction. In a young and digitally oriented customer segment, communication value is strategically relevant because customers often encounter the café first through social media, online reviews, posts, or messages before visiting the physical establishment.

Functional value ranked lowest, with a weighted mean of 3.30. Although still interpreted as Agree, this finding suggests that customers were relatively less convinced about practical value concerns such as price fairness, serving adequacy, promptness, and consistency. Since most respondents were students and budget-conscious consumers, functional value remains a critical area for improvement. A café may have strong atmosphere and service relationships, but if customers perceive that price, serving size, speed, or product consistency is not sufficiently strong, overall value perception may weaken.

4.4 Differences in Product Differentiation by Respondent Profile

Table 4 presents the differences in respondents' assessment of product differentiation when grouped according to profile variables. The results indicate that age and occupation were the most influential profile variables, while sex and average spending did not produce significant differences across any product differentiation dimension.

Table 4. Differences in Product Differentiation by Respondent Profile

Profile Variable	Significant Product Differentiation Dimensions	Non-significant Dimensions	Interpretation
Age	Product quality and uniqueness (H = 8.171, p = .043); branding and identity (H = 19.509, p < .001); service excellence (H = 17.802, p < .001); innovation and adaptability (H = 12.395, p = .006)	None	Age groups differed in all product differentiation assessments.
Sex	None	All dimensions (p > .05)	Male and female respondents assessed product differentiation similarly.
Frequency of Café Visits	Product quality and uniqueness (H = 13.645, p = .003)	Branding and identity; service excellence; innovation and adaptability	Visit frequency affected only perception of product quality and uniqueness.
Occupation	Product quality and uniqueness (H = 10.612, p = .014); branding and identity (H = 13.979, p = .003); service excellence (H = 9.051, p = .029); innovation and adaptability (H = 11.044, p = .011)	None	Occupational groups differed in all product differentiation assessments.
Monthly Income / Allowance	Service excellence (H = 8.682, p = .034)	Product quality and uniqueness; branding and identity; innovation and adaptability	Income or allowance affected only perception of service excellence.
Average Spending	None	All dimensions (p > .05)	Product differentiation was perceived similarly across spending levels.

Legend: Sig. = Significant at p < .05; NS = Not significant.

Age showed significant differences across all product differentiation dimensions. This indicates that respondents from different age groups did not evaluate product quality and uniqueness, branding and identity, service excellence, and innovation and adaptability in the same way. This finding is reasonable because younger customers may be more responsive to social media engagement, aesthetic appeal, menu creativity, and digital adaptability, while older customers may place greater emphasis on service consistency, product reliability, and practical value. Since the respondent base was heavily concentrated among 18- to 25-year-olds, the result also suggests that cafés should be careful not to assume that one differentiation strategy will appeal equally to all age groups.

Occupation also showed significant differences across all product differentiation dimensions. This suggests that students, employed respondents, self-employed respondents, and unemployed respondents may have different expectations of what makes a café distinct. Students may evaluate cafés based on affordability, ambiance, Wi-Fi accessibility, and suitability for studying or socializing. Employed customers may place higher value on prompt service, comfortable meeting spaces, and reliable product quality. Thus, differentiation strategies should not be generic. They should consider the functional and symbolic needs of the café's major customer segments.

Frequency of café visits showed a significant difference only in product quality and uniqueness. This suggests that customers who visit more often may become more sensitive to the distinctiveness and consistency of the café's products. Frequent customers are likely to notice whether menu items remain fresh, whether flavors are unique, and whether quality is maintained across repeated visits. For managers, this finding indicates that product quality and uniqueness are especially important for retaining habitual or recurring customers.

Monthly income or allowance showed a significant difference only in service excellence. This suggests that customers with different financial capacities may vary in their expectations of service. Customers with higher income or allowance may expect more refined, efficient, and personalized service, while lower-income customers may place greater emphasis on affordability and basic service adequacy. Average spending, however, did not produce significant differences across any product differentiation dimension. This indicates that customers' assessment of differentiation was relatively consistent regardless of how much they typically spent per visit.

4.5 Differences in Customer Value by Respondent Profile

Table 5 presents the differences in customer value when grouped according to profile variables. Similar to the product differentiation results, age and occupation showed the most consistent differences, while sex and average spending did not produce significant differences in any customer value dimension.

Table 5. Differences in Customer Value by Respondent Profile

Profile Variable	Significant Customer Value Dimensions	Non-significant Dimensions	Interpretation
Age	Functional value (H = 17.170, p < .001); hedonic value (H = 11.077, p = .011); relational value (H = 19.225, p < .001); communication value (H = 11.874, p = .008)	None	Age groups differed in all customer value assessments.
Sex	None	All dimensions (p > .05)	Male and female respondents perceived customer value similarly.
Frequency of Café Visits	Functional value (H = 8.332, p = .040)	Hedonic value; relational value; communication value	Visit frequency affected only functional value.
Occupation	Functional value (H = 11.067, p = .011); hedonic value (H = 12.206, p = .007); relational value (H = 21.587, p < .001); communication value (H = 14.182, p = .003)	None	Occupational groups differed in all customer value assessments.
Monthly Income / Allowance	Relational value (H = 11.102, p = .011)	Functional value; hedonic value; communication value	Income or allowance affected only relational value.
Average Spending	None	All dimensions (p > .05)	Customer value was perceived similarly across spending levels.

Legend: Sig. = Significant at p < .05; NS = Not significant.

Age showed significant differences across all customer value dimensions. This means that functional, hedonic, relational, and communication value were not perceived uniformly by all age groups. Younger customers may derive value from ambiance, social media responsiveness, aesthetic presentation, and the suitability of the café as a study or social space. Older or working-age customers may be more attentive to speed, reliability, comfort, and personalized service. This supports the need for age-sensitive marketing and service design.

Occupation also showed significant differences across all customer value dimensions. This reinforces the finding that the café serves multiple customer roles. For students, cafés may function as study hubs, leisure spaces, or affordable social venues. For employed customers, cafés may function as work-break locations, informal meeting venues, or convenience-oriented consumption spaces. The implication is that customer value should be designed around use occasions rather than only around demographic categories.

Frequency of café visits showed a significant difference only in functional value. This suggests that practical concerns such as taste consistency, freshness, serving size, price fairness, and prompt service become more salient as customers visit more frequently. Occasional customers may be more influenced by ambiance or novelty, while frequent customers are more likely to evaluate whether the café remains reliable over time. For customer retention, this finding is

important. A café can attract customers through atmosphere, but it keeps frequent customers through dependable functional value.

Monthly income or allowance showed a significant difference only in relational value. This indicates that customers from different income or allowance groups may vary in how they value personal attention, trust, staff friendliness, and the environment that encourages return visits. Customers with greater financial capacity may expect a higher degree of relational recognition or personalized service. At the same time, customers with lower allowance levels may still value friendly treatment, but may prioritize affordability and basic functional benefits. Average spending showed no significant differences across all customer value dimensions, suggesting that customer value perceptions were broadly similar regardless of transaction size.

4.6 Discussion

The findings indicate that the cafés were perceived positively in terms of both product differentiation and customer value, but the ratings remained within the Agree range rather than reaching Strongly Agree. This pattern suggests a moderate but not yet exceptional competitive position. The cafés appear to have established a generally favorable customer experience, but the data also point to specific areas where sharper differentiation and stronger value creation are needed.

In product differentiation, service excellence and innovation and adaptability emerged as the strongest dimensions. This suggests that customers noticed the cafés' service behavior, customer engagement, digital presence, and responsiveness to trends. For a JESMI-oriented interpretation, this finding is important because it shows that local café competitiveness is not purely product-based. It is also shaped by the entrepreneurial capacity to adapt, communicate, and provide a service experience that customers perceive as current and responsive. This aligns with the literature indicating that café differentiation increasingly depends on a combination of product, service, brand, and experiential attributes rather than on beverages alone (Grant, 2021; Mott, 2025).

At the same time, product quality and uniqueness ranked lowest among the product differentiation dimensions. This does not mean that product quality was poor. Rather, it indicates that the café products may not yet be sufficiently distinctive in the minds of customers. In a competitive café market, this is a critical issue because cafés that offer similar drinks, similar interiors, and similar promotional styles may eventually become interchangeable. Product differentiation must therefore be strengthened through clearer signature offerings, better communication of ingredient freshness, seasonal product development, and menu items that customers can associate specifically with the café.

For customer value, relational value ranked highest. This suggests that customers appreciated the interpersonal quality of the café experience. Friendly, polite, and attentive staff, together with an environment that encourages return visits, appear to be important sources of value. This finding reinforces the view that cafés function as social and relational spaces, not merely as food and beverage outlets. In markets dominated by young customers and students, the café's capacity to provide belonging, comfort, and recognition may be a strong contributor to repeat patronage.

Functional value ranked lowest among the customer value dimensions. This finding should be treated as a managerial priority because functional value represents the practical foundation of customer satisfaction. Customers may enjoy the ambiance and appreciate the staff, but concerns about price fairness, serving adequacy, speed, or product consistency may still affect repeat visits. Since most respondents were students and many had limited monthly allowance, perceived value for money is especially important. Thus, cafés should not rely only on ambiance and social media appeal. They must ensure that the basic product-service exchange remains practical, fair, and reliable.

The significant differences by age and occupation show that customer perceptions are segmented. Younger customers, students, employed customers, and other occupational groups do not necessarily evaluate café differentiation and customer value using the same criteria. This finding is important for entrepreneurial strategy because it discourages a one-size-fits-all approach. For student customers, cafés may emphasize affordability, comfort, study-friendly spaces, group seating, and social media communication. For employed young adults, cafés may emphasize speed, quiet work areas, professional ambiance, mobile ordering, and efficient service. These segmented strategies may help cafés strengthen competitiveness without abandoning their broader customer base.

The absence of significant differences by sex and average spending also has strategic value. It suggests that the cafés' differentiation and value delivery were perceived similarly by male and female respondents and across spending levels. This may indicate that the café experience is relatively inclusive and not strongly limited by gender or transaction size. For managers, this means that basic service quality, relational value, and communication responsiveness should be maintained consistently for all customers, regardless of how much they spend per visit.

Overall, the findings show that the cafés' competitive edge may be strengthened by balancing three strategic priorities: improving the uniqueness of the core product, reinforcing functional value, and preserving the relational and experiential strengths already recognized by customers. The results support the argument that café competitiveness is not achieved by product differentiation alone or customer value alone. It emerges when distinctive offerings are aligned with what customers actually perceive as valuable.

5. Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

5.1 Conclusions

The respondents were predominantly young café customers, particularly female students aged 18 to 25 years old, with monthly income or allowance below ₱10,000 and average spending concentrated between ₱100 and ₱300 per visit. This profile indicates that the cafés examined in the study primarily served a young, student-heavy, and budget-conscious market segment. Their café patronage was largely situational and recurring, with many respondents visiting weekly or whenever they needed a place for study, leisure, social interaction, or personal convenience.

The cafés were generally perceived to demonstrate favorable product differentiation. Among the dimensions assessed, service excellence and innovation and adaptability received the highest ratings, suggesting that customers recognized the cafés' strengths in customer handling, responsiveness, digital engagement, and ability to adapt to trends. However, product quality and uniqueness received the lowest rating among the product differentiation dimensions. Although still positively assessed, this indicates that the cafés' core product offerings may not yet be sufficiently distinctive to produce a stronger competitive identity.

The respondents also generally agreed that the cafés provided positive customer value. Relational value received the highest assessment, indicating that customers valued friendliness, attentiveness, trust, and an environment that encouraged return visits. Hedonic and communication value were also positively evaluated, showing that ambiance, enjoyment, information clarity, and responsiveness contributed to the café experience. Functional value received the lowest assessment, suggesting that price fairness, serving adequacy, promptness, and consistency require further improvement.

Significant differences were found in product differentiation and customer value when grouped according to selected profile variables. Age and occupation showed the most consistent significant differences, indicating that different customer groups do not evaluate café differentiation and value in the same way. Frequency of café visits was significant in relation to product quality and uniqueness and functional value, while monthly income or allowance was significant in relation to service excellence and relational value. Sex and average spending did not show significant differences, suggesting that the cafés' differentiation and value delivery were perceived relatively consistently across gender and spending categories.

Overall, the findings indicate that cafés may strengthen their competitive edge by improving the uniqueness of their product offerings, reinforcing functional value, and preserving the relational, experiential, and communication strengths already recognized by customers. Competitive advantage in the local café market is therefore not built on product differentiation alone, but on the alignment between distinct offerings and the specific forms of value that customers actually experience.

5.2 Recommendations

Café owners and managers may strengthen product quality and uniqueness by developing signature beverages, locally inspired flavors, seasonal menu items, and limited-time offerings that customers can clearly associate with the café. Since product quality and uniqueness ranked lowest among the product differentiation dimensions, cafés should

avoid relying only on standard beverages or common menu formats. Freshness, originality, presentation, and menu identity should be made more visible to customers.

The cafés may improve functional value by reviewing price-to-quality alignment, serving size adequacy, order accuracy, and speed of service. Since many respondents were students with limited income or allowance, value-for-money should be treated as a major strategic concern. Cafés may introduce student-friendly bundles, loyalty-based discounts, affordable snack-and-drink pairings, or time-specific value offers without weakening the perceived quality of the brand.

Service efficiency may be improved through better queue management, clearer ordering procedures, staff workflow training, and digital pre-order options. Since service excellence was already a strength, the next improvement should focus on consistency and speed. Prompt service is especially important for employed customers and young professionals who may value time-saving convenience.

Café owners may preserve and further strengthen relational value by training staff to provide courteous, attentive, and personalized service. Staff may be encouraged to remember regular customers' preferences, offer relevant product recommendations, and handle concerns promptly. A simple loyalty or customer recognition system may help convert friendly service into more personalized customer relationships.

Marketing strategies may be segmented according to customer profile. For students, cafés may emphasize affordability, study-friendly spaces, group seating, Wi-Fi access, and social media promotions. For employed young adults, cafés may emphasize efficient service, comfortable work areas, premium beverage options, digital ordering, and a more curated professional ambiance. Since age and occupation produced significant differences, differentiated marketing strategies may be more effective than one general approach for all customers.

The cafés may enhance communication value by maintaining updated social media pages, posting clear information about new products and seasonal offerings, and responding promptly to inquiries. Since many customers are young and digitally oriented, online responsiveness should be treated as part of the customer experience rather than merely as promotion.

Future researchers may extend the study by including a larger number of cafés across different municipalities or cities. Comparative studies may also be conducted between independent cafés and chain cafés to determine whether product differentiation and customer value are perceived differently across business types. Further research may also examine the direct relationship between product differentiation, customer value, customer satisfaction, loyalty, and actual repeat purchase behavior.

Table 6. Proposed Strategic Action Plan to Enhance Café Product Differentiation and Customer Value

Key Area	Basis from Findings	Recommended Strategy	Expected Outcome
Product quality and uniqueness	Lowest product differentiation dimension	Develop signature beverages, seasonal menu items, locally inspired flavors, and clearer freshness cues.	Stronger product identity and reduced similarity with competing cafés.
Functional value	Lowest customer value dimension	Review price-to-quality alignment, serving adequacy, order accuracy, and value bundles for students.	Improved perception of value-for-money and greater repeat patronage.
Service efficiency	Service excellence is a strength but speed remains strategically important	Improve queue flow, staff workflow, and digital pre-order options.	Faster service and better convenience for students and young professionals.
Relational value	Highest customer value dimension	Institutionalize personalized greetings, preference recall, loyalty recognition, and service recovery protocols.	Sustained relational loyalty and stronger customer attachment.
Segmented marketing	Age and occupation showed significant differences	Design separate value propositions for students and employed young adults.	More precise targeting and improved market responsiveness.
Communication	Digital	Maintain updated social media pages,	Better customer

value	responsiveness contributes to customer value	clear product announcements, and prompt response to inquiries.	awareness, stronger engagement, and higher visit intention.
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5.3 Implications of the Study

The findings have practical implications for café entrepreneurs and managers. In a market where many cafés offer similar products and aesthetic concepts, competitiveness depends on the ability to translate differentiation into value that customers can recognize. Service quality, digital engagement, ambiance, and relational connection are important, but they must be supported by functional value and product uniqueness. Cafés that are friendly and attractive but weak in price fairness, serving adequacy, speed, or product distinctiveness may struggle to sustain long-term advantage.

The study also has implications for entrepreneurial strategy. Local cafés should not imitate larger brands or competing cafés without identifying their own distinctive value proposition. Strategic differentiation should be grounded in the actual preferences of the target market. For student-heavy markets, affordability, comfort, accessibility, and social media engagement may be central. For young professionals, speed, reliability, premium quality, and personalized service may be more important. Entrepreneurial competitiveness therefore requires customer segmentation, not merely product expansion.

For marketing practice, the study reinforces the importance of viewing customer value as multidimensional. Functional, hedonic, relational, and communication value each contribute to the overall café experience. A café may attract customers through ambiance, but retain them through relational trust and functional reliability. Likewise, strong social media communication may generate visits, but repeat patronage depends on whether the actual product and service experience meet customer expectations.

For research, the study contributes localized evidence on café customers in the western part of Batangas province. It supports the view that café competitiveness in smaller local markets should be examined not only through pricing or product variety, but also through customer-perceived differentiation and value. The significant differences by age and occupation also suggest that demographic and lifestyle factors should be included in future models of café patronage, customer satisfaction, and entrepreneurial positioning.

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