

LEVERAGING DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY IN THE CULINARY SECTOR: A CASE STUDY OF SEBLAK PRASMANAN'S COMPETITIVE STRATEGY THROUGH SWOT-TOWS ANALYSIS IN LHOKSEUMAWE, ACEH.

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the competitiveness of *Seblak Prasmanan*, a micro culinary enterprise in Lhokseumawe Aceh, using the SWOT and TOWS Matrix approaches. The SWOT analysis identifies key strengths, including the unique buffet-style concept, consistent product quality, and a loyal local customer base. However, notable weaknesses are limited digital marketing capacity, the absence of professional financial management, and high dependence on the local market. Externally, opportunities arise from the rapid growth of digital platforms, government support for MSME digitalization, and the enduring appeal of traditional culinary culture. Conversely, threats include intense competition, shifting consumer preferences, and economic fluctuations affecting input costs and profit margins. The TOWS Matrix develops four strategic alternatives. The SO strategies recommend leveraging product uniqueness to expand into digital markets through collaboration with food delivery platforms and targeted social media campaigns. The WO strategies highlight internal capacity building through digital training and government assistance. The ST strategies focus on product differentiation and loyalty programs to mitigate competition. Meanwhile, the WT strategies adopt a defensive approach emphasizing operational efficiency and gradual adoption of digital tools. This study underscores the importance of balancing the preservation of local culinary authenticity with the adoption of digital strategies to enhance competitiveness. The findings contribute to the literature on MSME strategic management by providing empirical evidence on the application of the SWOT-TOWS framework in the context of traditional food businesses in emerging markets.

Keywords: *SWOT, Strategy, Culinary MSMEs, Competitiveness, Digitalization*

Introduction

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a vital role in Indonesia's economy, contributing to employment, poverty reduction, and economic resilience (Tambunan, 2019). Their significance is underscored by their sheer volume; as of 2023, MSMEs constituted over 99% of all business units in the country, a testament to their pervasive influence on national development (Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs, 2023). These enterprises are crucial for fostering a resilient economy, particularly in the face of global economic fluctuations, by distributing wealth and reducing poverty across various regions (Sutrisno & Widodo, 2021). The culinary sector, in particular, holds a unique and prominent position within the MSME landscape, blending cultural heritage with strong and consistent consumer demand (Rahayu, 2020; Fauzi, 2022). This sector not only provides staple goods but also acts as a cultural ambassador, preserving and promoting local flavors. However, despite their vital role, culinary MSMEs are grappling with a complex array of modern challenges, including intense market competition, the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of consumer preferences, and the urgent need to embrace digital transformation (Gunawan & Hidayat, 2020). The advent of the digital era has fundamentally reshaped the business environment, creating both unprecedented opportunities and significant threats for MSMEs. Digital platforms like GrabFood, GoFood, and ShopeeFood have become integral to the modern consumer experience, effectively transforming the traditional culinary landscape (Prasetyo & Sutopo, 2021). These platforms have democratized access to markets, allowing small businesses to reach a wider audience without the prohibitive costs of traditional marketing. The shift has made digital adoption not just a luxury but a necessity for survival. The ability to navigate this new ecosystem—from managing online orders to crafting a compelling digital presence—is now a key determinant of an MSME's long-term viability and growth potential (Putri & Sanjaya, 2022). For many, this transition has been challenging due to limited resources, lack of technical expertise, and a knowledge gap in digital marketing strategies (Suryadi & Kurniawan, 2020). In this

evolving context, the case of Seblak Prasmanan in Lhokseumawe, Aceh, offers a compelling and relevant microcosm of the broader challenges and opportunities facing culinary MSMEs. Seblak Prasmanan is a local business specializing in a popular Indonesian street food, with a unique "prasmanan" (buffet-style) concept that allows customers to customize their dishes. This innovative approach, combined with its strong local flavor profile, has earned the business a loyal customer base. However, despite its popularity, the enterprise struggles with several critical issues. Its marketing efforts remain largely traditional and limited, leading to a restricted market reach beyond its immediate vicinity. Furthermore, the business faces challenges in maintaining operational consistency and a limited digital footprint, which hampers its ability to capitalize on the expansive online market (Sari & Wulandari, 2021). The lack of a robust digital strategy prevents it from competing effectively with digitally savvy competitors and tapping into the convenience-driven demands of modern consumers.

This research is anchored in the need to provide a structured and actionable framework for small businesses operating in the digital economy. The study will employ a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis to meticulously evaluate Seblak Prasmanan's internal and external environment. This diagnostic approach will identify the core competencies and existing challenges within the business, while also pinpointing the market opportunities and competitive threats it faces. Following this, the TOWS (Threats, Opportunities, Weaknesses, Strengths) Matrix will be utilized to formulate specific and practical strategies. The TOWS matrix moves beyond mere identification and transforms the findings into concrete action plans, such as leveraging strengths to seize opportunities or developing strategies to mitigate weaknesses and threats (Weihrich, 1982; David & David, 2017). The ultimate significance of this study is its contribution to the academic and practical understanding of MSME competitiveness in a digital-first world. By focusing on a specific, real-world case, this research will not only provide a detailed roadmap for Seblak Prasmanan but also offer a transferable strategic framework that other culinary MSMEs can adapt and implement. The findings will be invaluable for business owners, policymakers, and academics alike, illuminating the pathways to enhanced competitiveness, operational resilience, and sustainable growth within the dynamic digital economy of Indonesia. This structured approach aims to bridge the gap between theoretical strategic management concepts and their practical application in the context of small-scale enterprises (Wibowo & Handoko, 2020).

Literature Review

The strategic management framework of SWOT analysis has been a cornerstone of business planning since its formal introduction by Weihrich in 1982. The model's primary function is to provide a systematic evaluation of an organization's internal attributes—Strengths and Weaknesses—and its external environment, identifying potential Opportunities and Threats (Weihrich, 1982). Its enduring relevance is evident in its widespread application across diverse industries and organizational scales, including its use in analyzing the competitiveness of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) (Gurel & Tat, 2017). This framework is particularly valuable for small businesses that may lack the resources for more complex strategic analyses, providing a straightforward yet comprehensive diagnostic tool.

In the context of Indonesia's vibrant economy, numerous studies have leveraged SWOT to gain insights into the performance and challenges of small businesses, especially within the high-growth culinary sector. For instance, research by Kusumawati and Purnamasari (2020) demonstrated that while Indonesian culinary MSMEs possess a significant competitive edge due to their cultural uniqueness and authentic local flavors, they are frequently hindered by internal managerial weaknesses, such as inconsistent quality control and rudimentary financial management. Similarly, Nurhayati (2021) underscored the transformative impact of digitalization on food enterprises, noting that when digital tools are strategically integrated into business models, they can substantially expand market reach and enhance brand visibility, turning a potential threat into a significant opportunity.

Complementing the diagnostic power of the SWOT analysis is the TOWS Matrix, also proposed by Weihrich (1982). Unlike SWOT, which is primarily a descriptive tool, the TOWS matrix is a prescriptive one, designed to generate actionable strategies by aligning the internal and external factors identified in the SWOT analysis. This alignment results in four distinct strategic alternatives: Strengths-Opportunities (SO) strategies, which involve using internal strengths to capitalize on external opportunities; Weaknesses-Opportunities (WO) strategies, which focus on overcoming weaknesses to take advantage of opportunities; Strengths-Threats (ST) strategies, aimed at using strengths to mitigate or avoid external threats; and Weaknesses-Threats (WT) strategies, which are defensive in nature and seek to minimize weaknesses while avoiding threats. This systematic approach transforms a simple list of factors into a dynamic plan for growth and resilience (David & David, 2017).

To provide a more holistic understanding of the competitive environment, these frameworks are often integrated with other strategic models. For instance, Porter's Five Forces (1980) offers a broader lens to analyze industry structure and competitive pressures, including the threat of new entrants, the bargaining power of suppliers and buyers, the threat of substitute products, and the intensity of rivalry. The modern business landscape, particularly for MSMEs, has been profoundly altered by the rise of the digital economy. The Resource-Based View (RBV), a prominent theory in strategic management, posits that a firm's unique internal resources and capabilities are the primary drivers of sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). In the digital era, this perspective extends to include a firm's digital assets and capabilities. Kraus *et al.* (2019) emphasized that for MSMEs to thrive, they must strategically integrate digital tools with their core competencies. This means that simply having a social media account is not enough; the true advantage comes from leveraging that presence to build customer relationships and streamline operations. For culinary MSMEs, this integration has become a matter of survival. The adoption of digital platforms like food delivery services (e.g., GoFood and GrabFood), the strategic use of social media marketing to build brand loyalty, and the implementation of mobile payment systems (e.g., e-wallets) have become critical components of a robust competitive strategy (Nugroho, 2022; Utami & Haryadi, 2021). These digital resources not only expand market reach but also improve operational efficiency and enhance the customer experience.

In the context of Lhokseumawe, Aceh, a region with a burgeoning culinary scene, understanding these competitive dynamics is crucial. Local culinary MSMEs face unique challenges, including a dense market and evolving consumer expectations. The case of Seblak Prasmanan, with its unique buffet-style concept, provides an excellent subject for a detailed analysis. The business's strengths, such as its innovative product offering and loyal customer base, must be balanced against its weaknesses, like limited digital presence and marketing efforts. The external environment, including the growing popularity of food delivery apps (an opportunity) and intense local competition (a threat), further highlights the need for a structured strategic approach. Therefore, the combination of SWOT and TOWS analysis provides an exceptionally appropriate analytical framework for this study. By diagnosing Seblak Prasmanan's current situation and then formulating a set of actionable, data-driven strategies, this research aims to offer not only a practical roadmap for the business but also a valuable case study that other culinary MSMEs in the region can adapt to enhance their own competitiveness in the digital age (Saputri & Budiyanto, 2022).

Methodology

This research utilizes a qualitative case study design to conduct a detailed and nuanced analysis of Seblak Prasmanan's competitive strategy in the Lhokseumawe, Aceh, culinary sector. This approach is highly effective as it allows for an in-depth, holistic exploration of a single business within its specific operational environment. By focusing on a real-world case, the study can thoroughly investigate the complex interplay between internal and external factors that influence a business's survival and growth in the dynamic digital era. The case study method ensures that the research findings are not merely theoretical but provide practical, actionable insights tailored to the specific challenges and opportunities faced by the subject enterprise.

To ensure a robust and comprehensive data set, a multi-method data collection approach was employed, enhancing the reliability and validity of the research findings through triangulation. Primary data were gathered from two main sources. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the owner and key staff members. These interviews were designed to be flexible, allowing for deep exploration of topics like operational practices, marketing efforts, and the business's overall strategic thinking, while also providing room for the emergence of new, unexpected insights. Second, direct observation of the business operations was performed on-site. This provided a crucial, first-hand understanding of daily activities, customer interactions, and operational efficiency, which helped to corroborate and enrich the information collected during the interviews. These primary data were supplemented by secondary data analysis of academic literature, government reports, and industry publications to provide a broader context of the culinary MSME landscape and digital trends in the region.

The analytical process was systematic and structured into two key stages. The initial stage involved a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis. The qualitative data from interviews and observations were carefully coded and categorized to identify the internal strengths (e.g., unique product concept, loyal customer base) and weaknesses (e.g., limited digital presence, inconsistent marketing). Concurrently, external factors such as the growth of food delivery apps (opportunities) and intense market competition (threats) were mapped from secondary sources. In the second stage, the findings from the SWOT analysis were used to develop a TOWS Matrix. This powerful strategic tool moves beyond simple identification by linking the internal and external factors to generate concrete, actionable strategies. By systematically creating SO, WO, ST, and WT strategies, the research provides a clear roadmap for Seblak Prasmanan to enhance its competitiveness. This methodological rigor ensures

that the study's recommendations are both well-grounded in data and directly applicable to the business's real-world challenges.

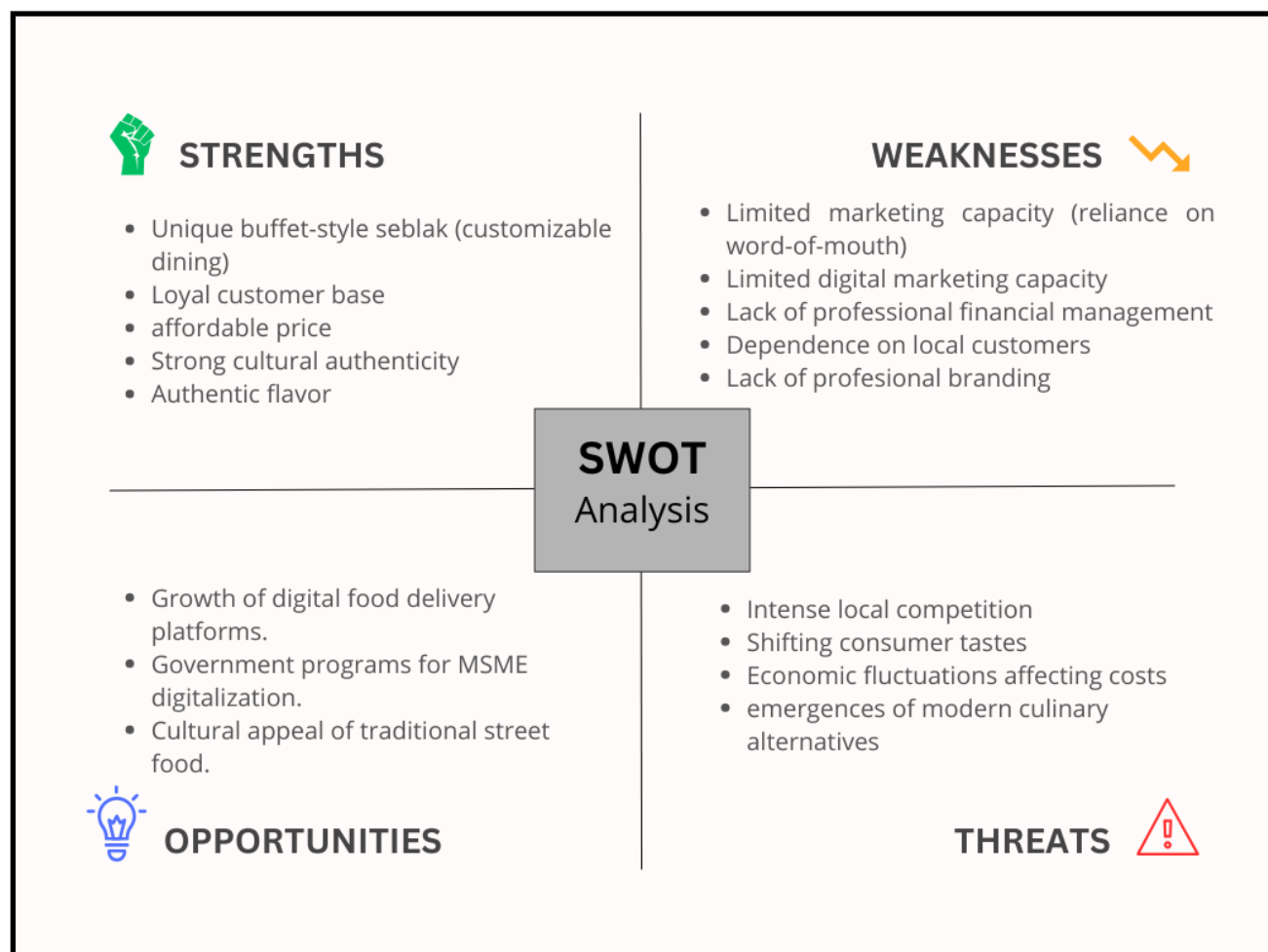
Result and Discussion

1. SWOT Analysis

The SWOT analysis serves as a foundational tool in strategic management, allowing businesses to systematically assess their internal capabilities alongside the external conditions that shape their competitive environment (Gurel & Tat, 2017; Helms & Nixon, 2010). For *Seblak Prasmanan* in Lhokseumawe, this framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how strengths can be leveraged, weaknesses addressed, opportunities exploited, and threats mitigated in the context of the rapidly evolving culinary sector. Given the increasing importance of digital transformation in Indonesia's micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), applying SWOT analysis offers valuable insights for positioning the business toward sustainable competitiveness (Tambunan, 2019; Prasetyo & Sutopo, 2021). The

comprehensive SWOT analysis of seblak prasmanan can be seen on the figure 1 below. From an internal perspective, the Strengths of *Seblak Prasmanan* lie primarily in its unique product and value proposition. Unlike many small culinary businesses that replicate common menu items, this enterprise distinguishes itself with a buffet-style *seblak* concept, providing customers with the freedom to personalize their dining experience. This differentiation not

Figure 1. SWOT analysis



only caters to diverse taste preferences but also aligns with consumer trends favoring customizable food options (Gunawan & Hidayat, 2020). In addition, the business has cultivated a loyal customer base through consistent product quality and affordable pricing, which is particularly significant in price-sensitive local markets. Such strengths

reinforce its ability to generate steady revenue streams while maintaining cultural authenticity, a factor that often enhances consumer attachment to traditional culinary products (Rahayu, 2020). At the same time, the business faces critical Weaknesses that limit its potential for growth. One of the most prominent weaknesses is its limited marketing capacity, as *Seblak Prasmanan* relies heavily on word-of-mouth promotion and lacks a professional online presence. This poses a substantial disadvantage in an era where consumer decision-making is increasingly influenced by digital content and online reviews (Kraus et al., 2019). Furthermore, the absence of structured financial management exposes the enterprise to inefficiencies and potential risks in resource allocation. Dependence on a narrow local customer base also increases vulnerability to changes in demand, particularly as urban consumers may shift preferences toward more modern dining experiences or branded culinary outlets (Setiawan & Widodo, 2021). Addressing these weaknesses is essential to building long-term resilience and competitiveness.

Externally, several Opportunities present themselves, especially through digital innovation and supportive policy environments. The rapid growth of food delivery platforms such as GoFood and GrabFood has revolutionized the culinary landscape in Indonesia, offering small businesses unprecedented access to larger consumer markets without significant capital investment (Prasetyo & Sutopo, 2021). Government programs promoting MSME digitalization further enhance this opportunity by providing training, subsidies, and access to digital infrastructure (Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs, 2023). Beyond digitalization, cultural factors also play a role, as traditional street foods like *seblak* continue to hold a strong nostalgic and emotional appeal among Indonesian consumers. This enduring demand for local culinary traditions positions *Seblak Prasmanan* to capitalize on a broader market that values authenticity and affordability (Fauzi, 2022).

Despite these opportunities, *Seblak Prasmanan* must navigate considerable Threats that could undermine its competitive position. The culinary sector in Lhokseumawe is characterized by dense competition, with numerous small vendors offering similar low-cost dining alternatives. This saturation increases the risk of customer attrition, particularly in the absence of strong brand differentiation. Shifting consumer preferences also present a challenge, as younger demographics increasingly experiment with international cuisines or opt for healthier alternatives, potentially reducing demand for traditional dishes (Nurhayati, 2021). Moreover, broader economic fluctuations, including rising ingredient costs and unstable household incomes, can directly impact profit margins. For a business that relies heavily on affordability as a competitive advantage, even small increases in costs may erode its pricing strategy (Setiawan & Widodo, 2021).

2. TOWS Matrix

The TOWS matrix serves as a crucial extension of the SWOT analysis, transforming diagnostic findings into a practical set of strategic alternatives. While SWOT primarily identifies internal strengths and weaknesses alongside external opportunities and threats, TOWS advances this process by structuring actionable strategies that match internal conditions with external realities (Wehrich, 1982). This structured approach is particularly relevant for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), such as *Seblak Prasmanan* in Pidie, Aceh, which face complex challenges in a rapidly digitalizing marketplace. By mapping internal factors against external environments, the TOWS matrix in Figure 2 provides a roadmap for sustainable growth and competitive resilience (Gurel & Tat, 2017).

Figure 2. TOWS Matrix

	Strengths (S)	Weaknesses (W)
Opportunities (O)	S-O strategies - Partner with digital food delivery apps - Launch Targetted social media campaign - Highlight cultural uniqueness online	W-O strategies - Engage in digital marketing and financial training. - Seek government support for digitalization - Build stronger online presence
Threats (T)	S-T strategies - Differentiate with innovative flavors - Develop customer loyalty programs - Strengthen brand through quality consistency	W-T strategies - Improve operational efficiency - Gradually adopt digital tools to reduce risks - Diversify customer base beyond local market

The SO (Strengths–Opportunities) strategies highlight how *Seblak Prasmanan* can leverage its internal strengths—such as a unique product offering, cultural authenticity, and a loyal customer base—to exploit opportunities in the expanding digital food ecosystem. Digital platforms such as GoFood and GrabFood have become essential distribution channels for culinary MSMEs in Indonesia, enabling small businesses to access wider markets without significant infrastructure investment (Prasetyo & Sutopo, 2021). By combining the uniqueness of *seblak* with a robust online presence, supported by targeted social media campaigns, the business can strengthen its brand visibility and customer engagement (Kraus et al., 2019). This proactive strategy aligns with findings that MSMEs adopting digital marketing experience improved sales performance and customer loyalty (Rahayu, 2020).

The WO (Weaknesses–Opportunities) strategies emphasize the importance of addressing internal vulnerabilities, such as limited digital literacy and weak financial management, in order to capitalize on external opportunities. Many Indonesian MSMEs face similar constraints, with managerial capacity and technological adoption cited as persistent obstacles to growth (Tambunan, 2019). By engaging in digital skills training and participating in government-led capacity-building initiatives, *Seblak Prasmanan* can mitigate these weaknesses. Government programs, such as those initiated by the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs, provide training, financial access, and mentorship opportunities for small entrepreneurs (Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs, 2023). Leveraging these external supports not only strengthens business operations but also ensures that the enterprise is better positioned to compete in an increasingly digitalized economy.

The ST (Strengths–Threats) strategies adopt a more defensive stance by mobilizing strengths to neutralize external threats. In the case of *Seblak Prasmanan*, intensifying competition and economic uncertainty pose significant challenges. However, the business can differentiate itself by developing innovative menu variations, such as healthier versions of *seblak* or limited-edition seasonal flavors, which cater to evolving consumer preferences (Gunawan & Hidayat, 2020). At the same time, implementing loyalty programs, whether through discount schemes or digital reward systems, allows the enterprise to consolidate its existing customer base and reduce vulnerability to competitors. Differentiation and customer retention are critical strategies in saturated markets, enabling MSMEs to maintain their relevance even in volatile economic conditions (Setiawan & Widodo, 2021).

Finally, the WT (Weaknesses–Threats) strategies represent defensive measures aimed at reducing vulnerability from both internal weaknesses and external threats. For *Seblak Prasmanan*, this entails enhancing operational efficiency, such as by adopting simple digital bookkeeping applications and optimizing supply chain

management. These steps minimize risks from financial mismanagement and external shocks, such as rising ingredient costs or fluctuating consumer demand. Gradual adoption of digital tools ensures that the business remains adaptable without overwhelming its limited resources. Defensive strategies are often overlooked, but research indicates that systematic risk management is essential for the long-term sustainability of culinary MSMEs (Fauzi, 2022).

In sum, the TOWS matrix provides a structured framework that not only outlines strategic alternatives but also ensures their alignment with both internal capacities and external conditions. For *Seblak Prasmanan*, implementing SO, WO, ST, and WT strategies creates a balanced portfolio of proactive and defensive approaches. This dual orientation strengthens the enterprise's resilience, enabling it to harness digital opportunities while simultaneously safeguarding against competitive and environmental risks.

3. Strategic Implications and Theoretical Contribution

The case of *Seblak Prasmanan* underscores a central challenge for traditional MSMEs in Indonesia: how to maintain cultural authenticity while adapting to the demands of a digital economy. On the one hand, the enterprise's strengths—its product uniqueness and cultural relevance—constitute a valuable foundation. On the other hand, digital adoption has emerged as a non-negotiable element of competitiveness, particularly as consumer behavior shifts toward online engagement and convenience (Prasetyo & Sutopo, 2021). The balance between preserving authenticity and embracing technological change reflects the broader strategic dilemma facing many MSMEs across the developing world.

From a theoretical standpoint, the SWOT–TOWS framework proves valuable not only for diagnosing the current state of small enterprises but also for translating abstract findings into practical strategies. This study reinforces prior research that emphasizes the utility of SWOT–TOWS in MSME contexts, where businesses require simple yet robust frameworks to guide strategic decision-making (Gurel & Tat, 2017; Weihrich, 1982). By applying the framework to a localized, culturally specific business, this case contributes to the academic literature by illustrating how global strategic models can be adapted to grassroots entrepreneurial contexts. It also extends the evidence base on digital adaptation as a pathway to resilience among culinary MSMEs.

Ultimately, *Seblak Prasmanan*'s pathway to sustainable competitiveness lies in a dual approach: proactively engaging with digital platforms and marketing while simultaneously consolidating its unique cultural identity. This hybrid strategy ensures not only immediate gains in visibility and market access but also long-term relevance in a dynamic and competitive culinary sector. The case demonstrates that traditional enterprises, when guided by systematic strategic analysis, can position themselves effectively in the digital era without losing their cultural roots.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Seblak Prasmanan* through the SWOT–TOWS framework underscores the critical intersection between cultural authenticity and digital transformation in sustaining MSME competitiveness. The findings reveal that the business possesses strong internal capabilities, particularly its distinctive buffet-style seblak concept, affordable pricing strategy, and loyal customer base. These strengths provide a foundation for competitive advantage in the increasingly dynamic culinary sector of Lhokseumawe. However, structural weaknesses—including limited marketing capacity, lack of financial management expertise, and dependency on a localized consumer base—pose significant barriers to growth if left unaddressed.

Externally, *Seblak Prasmanan* operates in an environment characterized by both promising opportunities and significant threats. The expansion of digital food delivery services, coupled with government initiatives promoting MSME digitalization, provides avenues for business growth and modernization. At the same time, intensifying competition, shifting consumer preferences, and vulnerability to economic fluctuations demand a strategic response that balances innovation with resilience.

The TOWS matrix has proven instrumental in translating SWOT findings into actionable strategies. The SO strategies emphasize leveraging strengths to seize digital opportunities through collaborations with online delivery platforms and targeted social media campaigns. WO strategies recommend reducing weaknesses through digital literacy training and institutional support. Meanwhile, ST strategies highlight differentiation through product innovation and customer retention initiatives, while WT strategies focus on efficiency improvements and phased digital adoption to mitigate risks.

Taken together, these strategies illustrate that *Seblak Prasmanan*'s future competitiveness depends on its ability to adapt to the digital economy without losing its cultural uniqueness. By strategically integrating digital tools into its operations while maintaining the authenticity of its offerings, *Seblak Prasmanan* can not only strengthen its

local market position but also serve as a model for other MSMEs navigating similar challenges in Indonesia's rapidly evolving culinary industry.

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