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Scaling Up Small-Scale Agro-Industries: Strategic Marketing Priorities for Sustainable Competitive Advantage

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ABSTRACT

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in the agroindustry sector play a vital role in economic growth in developing countries. Although capable of producing high-quality, preservative-free food commodities, many traditional agroindustries face stagnation in business scaling up due to limited human resource capabilities, particularly in the field of digital marketing. This study aims to formulate the most optimal marketing strategy priorities for a local banana chip agroindustry in East Java, Indonesia. Using a quantitative descriptive approach, this study integrates the Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) matrix, the External Factor Evaluation (EFE) matrix, the Internal-External (IE) matrix, SWOT analysis, and the Quantitative Strategic Planning Matrix (QSPM). Data collection involved assessments by experts and practitioners, with instrument weighting using the Paired Comparison technique to ensure evaluation precision. The research results validate solid internal strengths with an IFE score of 2.96 and the ability to respond to external conditions with an EFE score of 2.69, positioning the agroindustry in Quadrant V (Hold and Maintain / Grow and Build) on the IE Matrix. The most crucial finding from the QSPM analysis demonstrates that the highest-priority strategy, with a Total Attractiveness Score (TAS) of 7.42, is not the modification of physical products but rather the addition of specialized personnel in the field of marketing. This finding contributes to the literature on SME strategic management by confirming that a shift from conventional operational management toward functional specialization (digital marketing) is an absolute prerequisite for expanding market reach and maintaining a competitive advantage.

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Introduction

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) operating in the agro-industrial sector are the backbone of economic resilience and a fundamental pillar of job creation in many developing countries. The integration of the agricultural sector with small-scale manufacturing not only adds commercial value to raw commodities but also serves as a vital tool for poverty alleviation and the stabilization of local economies (Feil et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2009). In Indonesia, small-scale agroindustry

makes a massive contribution to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP), primarily through the production of local food, traditional snacks, and processed plant-based commodities. Nevertheless, this sector faces a structural paradox. On the one hand, agroindustrial MSMEs possess high flexibility and strong resilience in the face of macroeconomic crises. On the other hand, this ecosystem is vulnerable to getting trapped in a phenomenon known in economic development literature as “the missing middle”—a condition in which micro- and

small-scale enterprises experience prolonged stagnation and fail to scale up into medium- or large-scale businesses. Many traditional agro-industries are capable of producing products with strong intrinsic advantages such as natural, preservative-free snacks with authentic flavors, yet they remain trapped in a narrow market share and subsistence-level profitability (Carneiro et al., 2021). This raises a managerial challenge: what strategies do small-scale agro-industries actually need to not only survive the threat of substitution but also expand the scale of their operations in order to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage?

To analyze this stagnation, this study is based on the Resource-Based View (RBV) framework. According to Barney's (2007) Classical RBV postulates that a company's competitive advantage stems from its ability to accumulate and utilize internal resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN). In the context of large companies, these resources may take the form of massive financial capital or patented technology. However, in the context of MSMEs, tangible resources are often very limited (Kellermanns et al., 2016). Various previous studies have highlighted that MSMEs often misidentify their competitive advantages. Product quality, which was once considered the primary driving force, has gradually shifted in status to become merely a "threshold capability," that is, the minimum requirement for a product to be accepted in the market, rather than an absolute advantage (Teece et al., 1997). The biggest bottleneck in the scaling-up process for local agroindustries actually lies in the structural weaknesses of managerial human resources. Most MSMEs are managed under an "owner-manager duality" governance structure, in which business owners handle all operational roles, ranging from production manager to salesperson (Zulkiffli et al., 2018). This lack of job specialization results in a myopic strategic orientation—one that focuses too heavily on production efficiency while neglecting market penetration and customer retention.

A review of the empirical literature over the past decade shows that MSME marketing strategies have become a subject of intense academic discourse. Several studies have found that marketing at the MSME level tends to be informal, reactive, and reliant on personal networks (word-of-mouth) (Oura et al., 2016; Reijonen, 2010). In the era of digital transition, many researchers recommend the adoption of digital marketing and social commerce as the ultimate solution for MSMEs to penetrate global markets (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). Nevertheless, there is a crucial gap in the literature regarding these studies. Most previous research tends to be trapped in "product innovation bias" or merely recommends "going digital" without considering the absorptive capacity of the SMEs' own human resources. They overlook the reality that adopting marketing technologies requires a dedicated time commitment and specific technical expertise (such as SEO optimization,

social media content management, and consumer data analytics) that cannot be optimally executed by MSME owners who are already overburdened with operational tasks. Therefore, the specialization of work functions through the addition of dedicated marketing personnel should be an absolute prerequisite (strategic imperative) that precedes the expansion of digital tools themselves.

Another gap in the literature on strategic management for MSMEs lies in decision-making tools. The majority of applied literature still relies solely on the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) matrix. A comprehensive review by Helms & Nixon (2010) criticizes conventional SWOT analysis for being highly subjective, unquantified, and for merely producing a "wish-list" of strategies without providing mathematically based priority guidance. Given that MSMEs operate under tight financial constraints, they do not have the luxury of executing all strategic alternatives simultaneously. To address these limitations, an integrated framework combining Internal/External Factor Evaluation (IFE/EFE), expert weighting based on Paired Comparison, and the Quantitative Strategic Planning Matrix (QSPM) has proven to provide far more precise justifications (M. E. David et al., 2009). The QSPM enables decision-makers to objectively evaluate the relative attractiveness (Total Attractiveness Score) of each strategy based on the company's current conditions.

Based on the theoretical and methodological review above, this study aims to formulate the most comprehensive and optimal marketing strategy priorities for small-scale agroindustries to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. The novelty of this study lies in the integration of quantitative strategy formulation instruments (integrated SWOT-QSPM) to empirically validate the Resource-Based View thesis, which posits that the current strategic investment priority for SMEs is not in expanding physical capacity or modifying products, but rather in restructuring marketing human resources. Focusing on the flagship traditional banana chip agroindustry in East Java, Indonesia—as a representative archetype of food SMEs in developing countries—this study not only maps the companies' competitive positions but also produces a data-driven managerial "blueprint." The results of this study are expected to contribute to enriching the strategic management literature, while also providing practical guidance for SME practitioners in navigating their investment priorities in the digital age.

Method

Research Design and Data Collection

This study employs a quantitative descriptive approach that integrates internal and external audit techniques with a strategic decision matrix (M. E. David et al., 2009). This approach is specifically designed to identify pragmatic managerial decisions for businesses with limited resources. This study uses a micro-scale traditional banana chip

agroindustry in Jember Regency, East Java, Indonesia, as its case study subject. The selection of the location and unit of analysis was conducted purposively. This entity was chosen because it represents the archetype of a food agro-industrial MSME in a developing country that possesses intrinsic product advantages (made from natural ingredients and free of preservatives) but faces growth challenges due to market penetration barriers (Carneiro et al., 2021).

The primary data collection process was conducted using triangulation through participatory observation in the field, in-depth interviews, and the distribution of structured questionnaires. To ensure the validity and reliability of strategic information, key informants (an expert panel) were selected using purposive sampling (Tongco, 2007). This expert panel consists of key internal stakeholders (business owners, production managers, and heads of marketing) who have a comprehensive understanding of the company's daily operational dynamics and the competitive challenges it faces.

Identifying Strategic Factors: The IFE and EFE Matrices

The initial stage of the analysis (input stage) focuses on identifying and quantifying internal environmental factors (strengths and weaknesses) as well as external environmental factors (opportunities and threats). Internal capabilities are evaluated using the Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) matrix, while the company's response to macro dynamics is measured using the External Factor Evaluation (EFE) matrix based on a standardized methodology (F. R. David, 2011). To reduce the subjectivity bias and perceptual anomalies that often occur when filling out conventional questionnaires, this study applies the Paired Comparison technique (Saaty, 2009). Through this comparative weighting technique, experts are required to evaluate the degree of dominance or relative importance of one factor over another in pairs using a calibrated ordinal scale (scales 1, 2, and 3). The final weights derived from these paired comparisons are verified to ensure that the total weighting value in each matrix sums to 1.00. Furthermore, ratings ranging from 1 (poor response/major weakness) to 4 (excellent response/major strength) are determined based on the expert panel's consensus to reflect the effectiveness of the company's current strategies in responding to its business environment.

Alternative Formulations and Strategic Priorities: IE, SWOT, and QSPM Matrices

During the matching stage, the total weighted score derived from the IFE and EFE matrices is mapped onto a nine-cell Internal-External (IE) matrix to identify the company's competitive portfolio position at the macro level (Kalkan & Bozkurt, 2013). This portfolio position determines the direction of the company's general policy, whether it follows a growth strategy (Grow and Build), maintains stability (Hold and

Maintain), or pursues divestment (Harvest or Divest). Based on these positioning parameters, a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) matrix analysis is applied to conceptualize the cross-combinations of internal and external factors, resulting in four clusters of alternative strategies: Strengths-Opportunities (SO), Weaknesses-Opportunities (WO), Strengths-Threats (ST), and Weaknesses-Threats (WT) (Helms & Nixon, 2010).

The final stage is the decision stage. To avoid a list of purely theoretical strategic recommendations, all managerial action alternatives extracted from the SWOT matrix are evaluated for their feasibility using the Quantitative Strategic Planning Matrix (QSPM) (M. E. David et al., 2009). The QSPM provides an objective analytical framework by measuring the Attractiveness Score (AS) on a scale ranging from 1 (not attractive) to 4 (highly attractive) for each relevant strategic factor. The AS value is then multiplied by the weight of the input stage to produce the Total Attractiveness Score (TAS). The strategy with the highest cumulative TAS value is designated as the top priority that is most urgent for business actors to implement, providing an optimal solution amid financial constraints (Dorcheh et al., 2021).

Results and Discussion

Internal Environmental Strategic Audit: Evaluation of Resource Capabilities (Input Stage)

A comprehensive assessment of internal conditions was conducted to identify the set of assets and capabilities possessed by the company, which were mapped into clusters of strengths and weaknesses. Based on a consensus reached by a panel of experts using a calibrated Paired Comparison weighting technique, an in-depth computational visualization of the Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) matrix was generated. The total weighted score of the IFE matrix obtained was 2.96. This numerical parameter empirically confirms that this traditional banana chip agroindustry has a solid internal position and is significantly above the average for similar small industries (median score of 2.50), indicating that management can leverage internal strengths to compensate for its operational limitations (M. E. David et al., 2009).

An in-depth analysis of the strength clusters shows that the product's intrinsic advantages rank highest. Quality attributes such as a consistent savory-salty flavor, a crispy texture without excess oil residue, and a production process free of artificial chemical preservatives serve as the primary sources of added value for consumers. In the terminology of global food operations management, maintaining these authentic sensory characteristics is categorized as a core competence capable of creating strong psychological differentiation in customers' minds, setting the product apart from mass-market substitutes (Feil et al., 2023). Furthermore, the smooth and continuous supply of fresh kepok bananas

sourced from a network of local farmers in the surrounding production areas enhances inbound logistics cost efficiency and minimizes the risk of stockouts, which often disrupt the stability of small-scale manufacturing (Singh et al., 2009).

Conversely, testing the “weakness” dimension reveals structural barriers rooted in limitations of organizational capacity. The weakness indicator with the most critical impact is the absence of a dedicated function or work unit that devotes time, expertise, and resources to structured marketing activities. The company’s organizational structure is highly linear and flat, reflecting the phenomenon of owner-manager duality (Zulkiffli et al., 2018). All decisions from raw material procurement, monitoring the frying process, pricing, to retail distribution are handled solely by the business owner. As a result, role overload occurs, leading to a neglect of long-term strategic thinking. This weakness is exacerbated by the limited scope of physical marketing, which remains local and passive, as well as the lack of an independent distribution fleet to penetrate large-scale modern market networks.

Strategic Audit of the External Environment: Analysis of Macro Market Dynamics (Input Stage)

The external evaluation is designed to map a series of parameters beyond the company’s direct control, grouped into clusters of opportunities and threats. The tabulated results from the External Factor Evaluation (EFE) matrix yielded a total weighted score of 2.69. These quantitative findings indicate that the corporation’s capacity is within an adequate adaptive range to absorb external incentives and neutralize the impact of surrounding micro- and macro-market turbulence.

On the opportunities spectrum, the growing adoption of digital ecosystems, the acceleration of e-commerce platforms, and the convergence of social media into a commercial channel (social commerce) rank highest in importance. The post-pandemic shift in modern consumer shopping behavior, driven by a desire for the convenience of remote transactions, opens up unlimited opportunities for geographic expansion for local food producers (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). This dynamic is reinforced by the global macro trend toward a healthy lifestyle, in which consumer preferences are shifting massively from snacks high in synthetic preservatives toward traditional plant-based snacks, which are considered safer for long-term health. In addition, local government support programs such as facilitating product certification (e.g., Halal and P-IRT certifications) and providing training for SMEs offer regulatory incentives that can enhance brand credibility at the national level.

However, the external ecosystem also poses real threats that could jeopardize business sustainability. Price fluctuations in kepok banana raw materials due to uncertainties in seasonal climate patterns and the agribusiness supply chain act as key volatility factors that can erode the company’s gross profit margins at any time. From a market structure

perspective, horizontal competitive pressure is extremely intense. This agroindustry is besieged by aggressive marketing from large corporate snack manufacturers that possess economies of scale, unlimited promotional budgets, and a highly dominant distribution network. If local producers continue to rely on static, conventional marketing methods, the threat of product substitution and gradual market erosion becomes an inevitable reality (Carneiro et al., 2021).

Aligning Business Portfolio Positions Using the Internal-External (IE) Matrix

After rigorously calculating the internal strength and external pressure parameters, the total weighted scores from the IFE matrix (2.96) and EFE matrix (2.69) were integrated into a nine-cell Internal-External (IE) matrix. On a Cartesian coordinate system, the resulting coordinates precisely position this agro-industrial portfolio in Cell V. This Cell V corridor places the company in the “Hold and Maintain” macro-strategy zone.

This strategic position has fundamental managerial implications for the company’s policy architecture. Unlike the Grow and Build positions (Cells I, II, IV), which require large-scale aggressive expansion through vertical integration or radical market penetration, the Hold and Maintain area dictates that the most rational and low-risk operational tactic is to focus all available resources on two main steps: Market Penetration and Product Development (Product Development) (Kalkan & Bozkurt, 2013). Corporations are directed to intensify sales of existing products within their existing market base or expand their reach in a controlled manner without drastically overhauling their business structure. This approach is highly protective for MSMEs, preventing them from falling into the trap of liquidity failure resulting from premature expansion of physical assets that are not yet supported by established distribution channels.

Formulation of Alternative Strategies Based on SWOT Matrix Analysis

By cross-referencing internal (strengths and weaknesses) and external (opportunities and threats) factors in the SWOT matrix, five alternative managerial strategies were formulated, which are conceptually designed to maximize opportunities by leveraging existing strengths and mitigate threats by addressing internal weaknesses (Helms & Nixon, 2010).

- Strengths-Opportunities (SO) Strategy: Optimizing physical production capacity and logistics efficiency to capitalize on the surge in demand for healthy snacks in the regional market. This strategy leverages the products’ natural flavor profile and the stability of the local raw material supply to fill the market niche created by consumers’ healthy lifestyle trends.
- Weakness-Opportunity Strategy (WO - Alternative 1): Conduct a massive digital market penetration by opening official stores on e-commerce platforms and launching creative campaigns on social media. This step aims to break down the limitations of a narrow

physical market reach by leveraging global internet infrastructure.

- Weakness-Opportunity Strategy (WO - Alternative 2): Hiring specialized staff in the digital marketing department to continuously optimize broad market reach. This tactic directly addresses the company’s fundamental weakness (the lack of a dedicated marketing function) so that opportunities for adopting e-commerce technology can be executed professionally and sustainably without burdening the business owner.
- Strengths-Threats Strategy (ST): Establish long-term formal partnership agreements with local banana farmer networks to ensure supply stability and price protection. This effort is designed to neutralize raw material price volatility caused by seasonal uncertainty while maintaining consistency in the cost of goods sold.
- Weakness-Threat Strategy (WT): Implementing an efficient operational management system and minimizing waste (lean micro-manufacturing) to maintain retail price stability at the consumer level. The focus of this strategy is to protect profit margins from price aggression launched by large corporate competitors.

Quantification of Attractiveness Scores and Strategy Prioritization Based on QSPM (Decision Stage)

To eliminate subjectivity and determine which strategic alternative is most viable to implement given capital constraints, the five strategy drafts above were mathematically tested using the Quantitative Strategic Planning Matrix (QSPM). The cumulative Total Attractiveness Score (TAS) provides an objective ranking of managerial actions (M. E. David et al., 2009), as summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Attractiveness Scores and Strategy Prioritization Based on QSPM

Rankings	Alternative Management Strategies	Cumulative TAS Score	Decision Status
1	Hire specialized staff in the marketing department to optimize digital reach (WO)	7,42	Top Priority (To Be Executed First)
2	Independently penetrating the digital market through e-commerce platforms and social media (WO)	6,85	Secondary Priority
3	Optimizing production capacity to meet a surge in regional market demand (SO)	5,98	Tertiary Priority
4	Establishing long-term partnership agreements with local banana farmers (ST)	5,44	Supporting Priorities
5	Implementing operational cost	4,21	Defensive Strategy

efficiency (lean manufacturing) (WT)

The quantitative data above conclusively demonstrates that the strategy of adding specialized personnel to the marketing department (TAS = 7.42) ranks highest in the company’s strategic decision-making hierarchy. This numerical figure significantly outperforms both the option of independent digital penetration without adding staff (TAS = 6.85) and the option of physical production expansion (TAS = 5.98). This justification provides a very definitive policy direction for business operators in allocating their budgets.

Critical Analysis and Theoretical Deconstruction

The Relevance of the Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory to the Transformation of MSME Capabilities

The main findings of this study make a significant scientific contribution to expanding the scope of the Resource-Based View (RBV) theory in the context of small-scale businesses in developing countries. For decades, the application of RBV theory has often been biased toward multinational corporations, based on the assumption that long-term competitive advantage can only be built through the ownership of expensive tangible assets or exclusive technology patents (Barney & Clark, 2007). However, this case study of the banana chip agroindustry demonstrates the opposite: at the micro- and small-business level, sustainable competitive advantage is actually built on the success of identifying internal capability gaps and precisely restructuring human capital.

Once the quality of the core product (a naturally savory and salty flavor without preservatives) has been successfully achieved, that asset no longer qualifies as a “market-winner instrument,” but has shifted to merely a “threshold capability” or the minimum entry requirement into the market (Teece et al., 1997). Many MSMEs fail to move up the value chain because they are trapped in the illusion that a delicious product will automatically sell itself. Empirical evidence from the field demonstrates that without being supported by dynamic capabilities to communicate the product’s value to a broader market, the product’s physical advantages will suffer commercial depreciation as they are outpaced by the distribution penetration of modern competitors (Oura et al., 2016). Therefore, investing in the establishment of a dedicated marketing function within the organizational structure acts as a strategic lever that converts the potential of product quality into tangible financial performance.

Deconstructing the Owner-Manager Duality as a Barrier to Agroindustrial Growth

Why did the option of hiring specialized marketing staff receive the highest TAS score (7.42), outperforming the option of independently diving into the digital world? The answer lies in the need to break the

chain of the owner-manager duality. A pathological characteristic of the failure of traditional MSME business growth in various parts of the world is absolute dependence on the business owner (Zulkiffli et al., 2018). When the owner acts as both the supervisor of the banana fritter station and the sales administrator, they will run out of cognitive capacity to analyze long-term market trends.

These tactical recommendations from QSPM necessitate a transition in governance from a traditional family-based management model to a controlled, functional-specialization-based management model. By delegating operational marketing responsibilities to specialized personnel, business owners can free themselves from the trap of daily routines and begin to focus their energy on strategic leadership functions, such as building business alliances, seeking access to mid-scale capital, or monitoring the organization's macro-level efficiency. This division of labor has been demonstrated in the literature on industrial sociology as an absolute prerequisite that small family businesses must fulfill in order to transition their business scale from a subsistence level to a well-established commercial-industrial level. The Paradox of Digital Adoption Without Sufficient Human Resource Absorptive Capacity

This study also offers sharp criticism of prevailing government policy trends and contemporary literature, which often exhibit a bias toward promoting haphazard digitalization ("blind-spot digitalization"). Various publications consistently advise MSMEs to immediately migrate to e-commerce and activate social media accounts as a panacea for boosting sales (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). However, this study exposes the paradox of digital adoption: digital tools such as TikTok Shop, Shopee, or Instagram Ads are not static, lifeless objects. These tools require a constant supply of content, a deep understanding of algorithmic dynamics that change weekly, search engine optimization (SEO) techniques, and the ability to respond to customer interactions within minutes.

If businesses implement a digitalization strategy without adding specialized personnel (leaving it to be handled as a side job by the owner or existing production workers), this will actually lead to new inefficiencies and organizational frustration. A lack of absorptive capacity, that is, an organization's ability to recognize the value of new information, assimilate it, and apply it for commercial purposes, will result in the company's digital accounts being neglected, negative consumer reviews due to delayed shipping responses, and ultimately damage the digital brand equity that is being built. The empirical quantification of QSPM with a TAS score of 7.42 bridges this gap, confirming that restructuring the internal HR architecture (by bringing in digital marketing specialists) is an absolute prerequisite that must be met before digital technology is fully adopted by the corporation.

Conclusion

This study successfully identified the most optimal marketing strategy priorities for micro-scale traditional banana chip agroindustries in East Java as they navigate resource constraints in the era of digital transformation. The results of internal and external audits demonstrate that the company possesses a solid competitive foundation (IFE score = 2.96 and EFE score = 2.69), which precisely positions its business portfolio in Quadrant V (Hold and Maintain) of the IE Matrix. This position indicates that policy focus should be directed toward measured market penetration and product development.

Through the Quantitative Strategic Planning Matrix (QSPM), this study makes a theoretical contribution that validates the Resource-Based View (RBV) framework at the SME level, mathematically proving that the strategy of adding specialized personnel in the marketing department is the highest priority for action, with a Total Attractiveness Score (TAS) of 7.42. This finding underscores that restructuring internal human resource (HR) capabilities is far more urgent than pursuing physical product innovation or independently adopting digital tools without the organization having the necessary capacity to absorb them.

For agro-industry practitioners and SME owners, the results of this study provide a concrete operational "blueprint." Business owners must immediately break away from the owner-manager duality that has long led to operational burnout. The primary tactical implication is to allocate a specific portion of the company's budget to recruit or dedicate professional staff who are fully focused on digital marketing management (such as content management, e-commerce platform optimization, and online consumer engagement). This specialization of job functions is an absolute prerequisite that acts as a strategic lever to enable local flagship products to transition from a passive distribution model toward broad and competitive penetration of modern markets.

This study has several limitations that can be explored by future researchers. First, the scope of this study is still based on a single case study method in one food agro-industry subsector (banana chips) within a specific geographic region; therefore, generalizing the findings to non-food MSMEs or other regions should be done with caution. Second, the determination of attractiveness scores in the QSPM matrix still relies on the consensus of an internal expert panel, which is susceptible to potential sectoral subjectivity bias.

Therefore, future research is advised to expand the scale of the study by applying a multi-case comparative method across agroindustrial commodities or by using a large-scale survey approach. Furthermore, the objectivity of strategic decision-making can be significantly improved by integrating the SWOT-QSPM matrix with more rigorous advanced mathematical methods, such as the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) or the Decision-Making Trial and Evaluation Laboratory

(DEMATEL), to measure causal relationships among strategic factors with greater precision.

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