

The Effect of Innovative Product, Brand Image, and Opinion Leader on Customer Retention in the Covid-19 Pandemic Era

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Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic has been going on for two years, during which time there were many regulations in various fields, such as restrictions on community activities in various sectors which had an impact on changes in consumer behavior. These conditions encourage each company to survive, in the midst of uncertain conditions and increasingly fierce competition through a customer retention strategy built from innovation efforts, brand image enhancement, and opinion leaders as community marketing targets. For this reason, this study, which took 294 customers of Garudafood products by purposive sampling, aims to describe and examine the influence of innovative products, brand image, and opinion leaders on customer retention. Through path analysis it is known that innovative products have an effect on customer retention, and brand image affects customer retention; while the influence of the opinion leader on customer retention has a probability that cannot explain the influence or correlation to customer retention. The correlation value of determination explains that innovative products and brand images are able to make an effective contribution that is quite sufficient for the company's efforts to retain customers.

Keywords: Innovative Product, Brand image, Opinion leader, Customer retention

INTRODUCTION

Human resources play a vital role in the success of any company. Alongside natural and capital resources, the contribution of human resources is crucial in achieving company goals (Agustian et al., 2023). The performance of employees directly impacts the overall success of the company. In today's highly competitive business landscape, every company must enhance its capabilities to stay ahead of the competition and thrive (Babayev & Balajayeva, 2023). To do so, companies need to develop a deeper understanding of their customers and establish a mutually beneficial relationship. Implementing relationship marketing is one effective strategy that can drive business success.

Relationship marketing is shaped by trust, commitment, communication and complaint handling. Strong relationships build trust and commitment, driving customer loyalty in the form of positive experiences and emotional bonds (Layarda & Achmadi, 2024). In this fiercely competitive era, it is imperative for every entrepreneur to prioritize delivering unparalleled customer service and offering top-notch products to cultivate and maintain customer trust and loyalty (Lestari & Ganawati, 2023).

Retaining customers is essential for the sustainability of a business in a competitive market (Kyei & Bayoh, 2017). Marketers are recognizing the value of keeping customers from switching to competitors, as it is more cost-effective than trying to regain them. They are employing preemptive and proactive retention

strategies to ensure customer loyalty. Preemptive strategies are used before customers exhibit any signs of leaving, while proactive strategies are implemented when initial signs of defection, like complaints or reduced service usage, are identified (Kyei & Bayoh, 2017).

Entering the era of globalization, competition in various industrial sectors is getting tighter which encourages every business actor to use strategic steps to maintain business continuity (Sánchez & De Batista, 2023). The early era of globalization was also accompanied by the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic disaster in which almost every country was affected by an outbreak that affected the joints of life, the entire education and economic sector was paralyzed, as well as the industrial and trade sectors which had reduced operational activities and even quite a lot of them carried out workforce downsizing. In the second quarter of 2020 the impact of Covid-19 experienced a drastic increase in Indonesia, so the government responded by declaring it an emergency with large-scale social restrictions and social restrictions on community activities (Hermawan & Kurrahman, 2022). This effort was seen as tactical to inhibit the spread of the epidemic, but had an impact on limiting economic efforts and public consumption, as well as all business sectors, especially the food and beverage sector. For this reason, companies engaged in the food and beverage sector, such as PT. Garudafood immediately determines strategic policy steps in anticipation of consumer behavior during the pandemic

Product innovation plays a crucial role in customer retention (Lestari & Ganawati, 2023). By launching new products or improving the functionality, quality, consistency, or aesthetics of existing ones, companies can address the changing demands of consumers and maintain their competitive edge in the marketplace. Research conducted by Hilliyah et al. (2023) indicates that upholding product quality and engaging in continuous innovation are essential for customer retention. This approach not only enhances the product's market position but also cultivates a robust relationship between customers and manufacturers, ultimately aiding in customer loyalty. Additionally, a study by Salsabila et al. (2024) reinforces the beneficial effects of product innovation on retaining customers. While the referenced studies do not explicitly establish a direct link between product innovation and customer retention, the broader literature implies that product innovation, as an integral component of a comprehensive marketing strategy, can enhance purchase interest and customer satisfaction. Consequently, this leads to increased customer loyalty and improved retention rates.

The second factor that affects customer retention is brand image. Brand Image is a way in which the overall perception of the brand and is formed in such a way from information and past events about the brand (Saputra & Agustin, 2022). Brand image can describe how consumers feel about a brand and how they see it (Hartono, 2022). This is supported by research conducted by (Narteh & Braimah, 2020), which states that brand image has a positive and significant effect on customer retention in the Banking sector. The increase is not in accordance with the increase in the number of third-party fund customers at Islamic Banks in the last five years in percentage growth. Customer retention will be high if the brand image can be highlighted and tends to satisfy customers (Puspaningrum, 2020).

PT. Garudafood, Tbk with products that have the Garuda brand, are food & beverage products made from peanut shells, coated peanuts, pilus, and various

snacks made from potatoes and corn. Product innovation (product variance) was carried out during the Pandemic period, namely December 2020, so that the Garuda brand has around 41 SKUs (Stock Keeping Units). The Garuda brand, in addition to carrying out variances as a product innovation step, also expands business scope as an increase in brand image outside of products (Garuda Crunchy), and Instant Popcorn (Garuda O'Corn), whose innovation and brand image is a step known as fast moving consumer goods (FMCG).

The company PT Garudafood Putra Putri Jaya Tbk., and was able to record net sales of IDR 6.34 trillion as of September 30 2019 (Ahidin, 2020). The previous year, 2018, for a full year, this company achieved net sales of IDR 8.05 trillion. This illustrates that the market success carried out by PT. Garudafood is retaining customers (customer retention), which success is related to efforts to innovate products, brands that are continuously strengthened.

The third factor that influences customer retention is Opinion leader. Opinion Leader is a process by which a person can influence the actions and attitudes of others informally (Pratiwi et al., 2017). A study on the impact of opinion leaders on customer engagement found a positive and significant relationship between opinion leaders and customer engagement, both directly and indirectly through brand awareness (Bismo et al., 2022). In the context of customer retention, this means that opinion leaders can influence customers to remain loyal to a brand or product, as they are often considered a trustworthy source of information and advice.

Opinion leader in the form of a marketing community, it starts with building supply chains through empowering peanut farmers in Central Java, East Java, Lampung and West Nusa Tenggara. Peanut farmers, whose production is sometimes not properly accommodated, now have a definite market (Handerson, 2020). As was done in NTB, up to 8,000 farmers were empowered in the Garudafood supply chain (Handerson, 2020). The company's CEO (Sudhamek, 2021) explained that every industry has an industry key success factor (IKSF). Particularly for the food and beverage industry, there are four IKSFs, at least based on his experience leading Garudafood companies, "namely areas of mastery related to know how and technology, mastery of distribution networks, building brand equity, and innovation in a broad sense." Those four things, according to Sudhamek, are well managed at Garudafood so that almost every product is able to dominate the market. For this reason, this research is considered important to re-examine the assumptions made by the management of PT. Garudafood as well as several studies as stated by (Ahidin, 2020; Ascarza et al., 2017; Febriani et al., 2018) who alluded to innovative products, brand image and opinion leaders carried out in Garudafood's successful marketing strategy and (Ahidin, 2020; Febriani et al., 2018) who alluded to innovative products, brand image and opinion leaders carried out in Garudafood's successful marketing strategy and who alluded to innovative products, brand image and opinion leaders carried out in Garudafood's successful marketing strategy (Ahidin, 2020; Febriani et al., 2018).

This study fills important research gaps by investigating the combined influence of novel products, brand perception, and influential figures on customer loyalty amid the Covid-19 crisis, particularly within the food & beverage industry where such a comprehensive examination was previously lacking. The research provides valuable insights by presenting empirical proof on effective customer

retention strategies during times of crisis, specifically through a case study on Garudafood products in East Java. The results expand on existing literature by highlighting the crucial role of product innovation and brand perception in retaining customers during challenging market conditions, along with shedding light on the significance of opinion leaders in marketing tactics. Moreover, the study offers practical utility by presenting a framework for comprehending customer loyalty in the context of government-enforced restrictions and delivering valuable guidance for businesses operating in developing markets during crises.

This study breaks new ground by examining how innovative products, brand image, and opinion leaders impact customer retention in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially for agents and retailers of Garudafood products in East Java. This confirms the importance of product innovation and strong brand image building as key strategies in retaining customers, especially during the pandemic. The findings provide new insights into effective customer retention strategies during crisis conditions such as the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as suggesting the important role of opinion leaders in marketing strategies even though their influence is not as strong as other factors.

METHODS

This marketing research takes agents and retailers as customers of Garudafood products with the assumption that agents and retailers are customers, both reselling and self-consuming. This sampling selection is to test the accuracy of assumptions about innovative products, brand image, and opinion leaders related to customer retention strategies.

Research that takes the customer population of PT. Garudafood in the East Java marketing area. The research sample was taken by purposive sampling, namely customers (users, retailers and agents), with the sample size referring to the Isaac and Michael tables (Sugiyono, 2020). The research scale was compiled using a multiple-choice questionnaire distributed to agents in the Cities in East Java, namely 294 agents and retailers, with the following background. Data analysis was carried out according to the validity test procedure (Pearson's internal validity) and the reliability of measuring instruments (Cronbach's alpha), and analyzed using the path analysis approach (path analysis) through SPSS (see Figure 1).

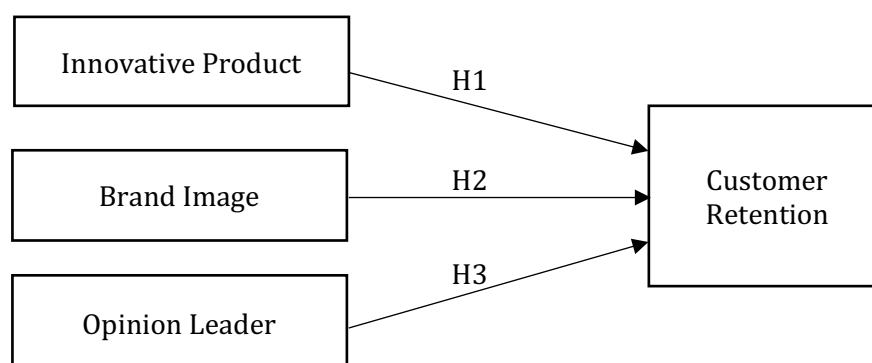


Figure 1. Conceptual Research Framework

Path analysis is an extension of regression analysis, making regression analysis a specific type of path analysis. Therefore, prior to delving into path analysis, a thorough understanding of the fundamental principles of regression and correlation analysis is essential. Researchers employ path analysis techniques as a means to elucidate and examine models that depict cause-and-effect relationships between variables, rather than interactive or reciprocal relationships. Consequently, within the framework of these variable relationships, there exist independent variables, referred to as exogenous variables, and dependent variables, known as endogenous variables. Through the utilization of path analysis, the most suitable and direct route from an independent variable to the final dependent variable can be determined (Ghozali, 2016). On the other hand, regression analysis is employed to forecast the extent to which the value of the dependent variable changes when the value of the independent variable is manipulated, altered, increased, or decreased (Sugiyono, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As shown in Figure 2, customers who already know and buy products by stating that Garudafood has many products submitted by customers who have made purchases for more than 10 years to less than 5 years ago. This is different from the statement that Garudafood has several products (approximately 10 types of products). 45% stated customers who had purchased products for more than 10 years, and 21% of customers who had purchased less than 5 years. This is different from the statement that Garuda Food produces only 3-5 types of products, most of which, or 40%, were conveyed by customers who bought less than 5 years ago. Likewise, customer statements said they did not know exactly how many types of products were issued by PT Garudafood.

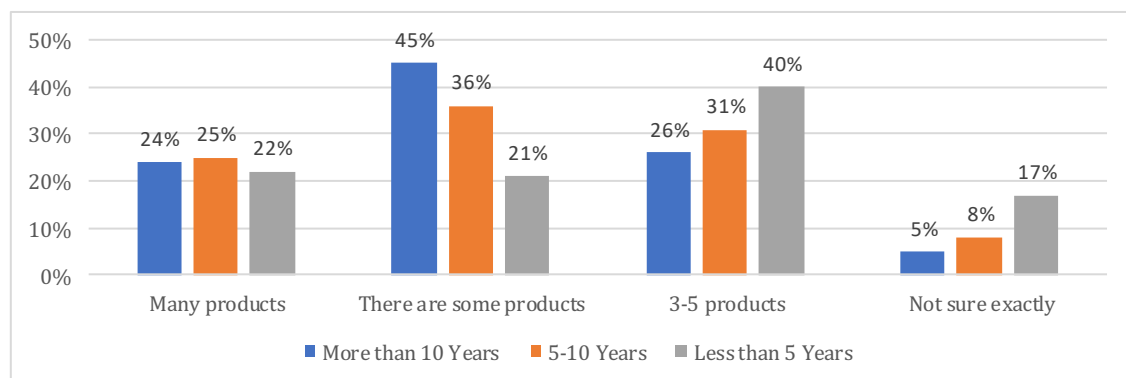


Figure 2. The Period of Time Getting to Know and Buying Garudafood products

Figure 3 provides an overview of the reasons for purchasing in terms of the time they have known and consumed Garudafood products, of which 17% of customers have known the product for more than 10 years because they are interested in taste compatibility, can be consumed with many people. Then 15% of customers buy because the price is cheap and 12% of customers are attracted by the

packaging. Customers who have consumed products between 5-10 years 15% gave reasons their products can be consumed by many people, 14% of customers said Garudafood products can be enjoyed in various situations and families like them. Then customers who are classified as familiar with the product for less than 5 years 16% reasoned that Garudafood products are easy to find in various stores, 14% reasoned that these products are still suitable for serving guests or social activities, and the price is cheap.

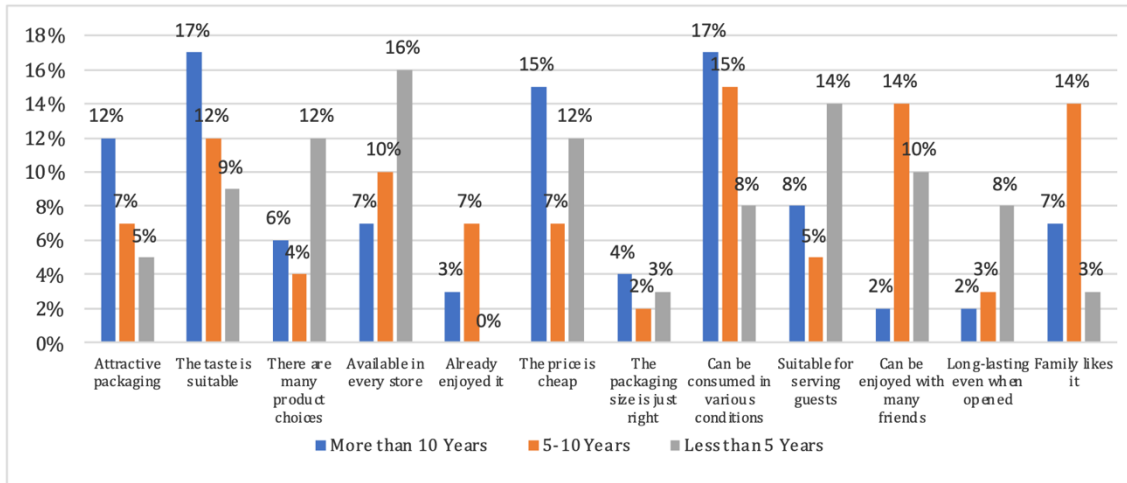


Figure 3. Reasons for Purchase with the Period of Knowing the Product

Figure 4 shows that customers who frequently buy Garudafood products give reasons for buying, 62% imitate because many friends consume them, 51% say they buy because the seller offers them, 44% buy because they are used to it, and 43% because they follow friends' suggestions. It can be said that friends or community are the main reference for customers to make purchases with frequent intensity. Then, customers who buy rarely (between 5-10 times a month) 54% stated that Garuda Food products are widely served in various social events, and 42% because of the habit of consuming and following friends' suggestions, and 37% were offered by sellers and many friends who consumed.

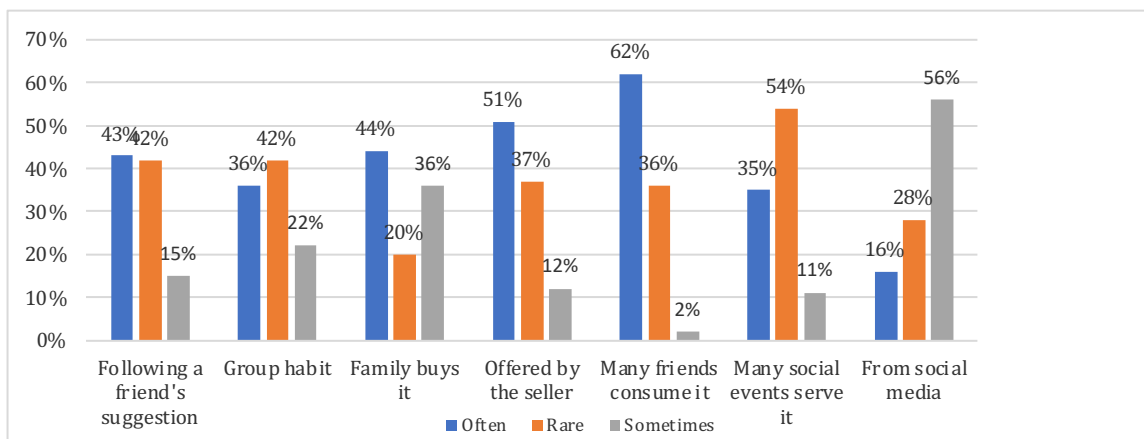


Figure 4. Opinion Drives Buying and Buying Frequency

Figure 5 provides an overview of opinion leaders conveyed by research subjects about the background of Garudafood consumers regarding references to purchasing Garudafood products, of which 45% in the entrepreneurial group bought because they read testimonials from social media, and 41% because they learned from the social community that part of their community, and 38% buy after seeing promotional media in stores. In the group of students and students, 34% bought because of referrals from friends, and 31% bought because they learned from the social community. Then, 32% of employee consumers make purchases because of family references, or family members often buy Garuda Food products. From this description it can be seen that opinion leaders who are relatively dominant are from family members, references from friends.

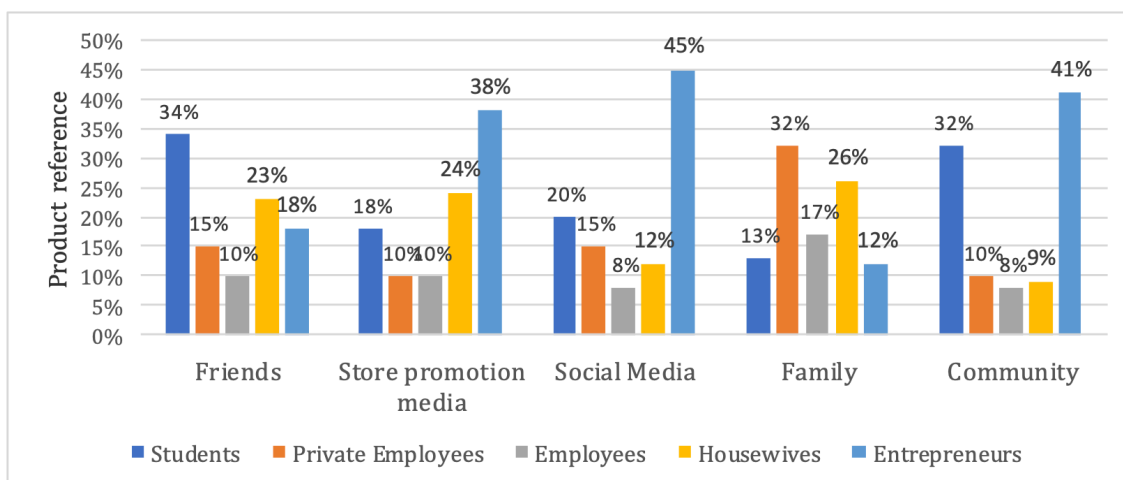


Figure 5. Buying Opinions are Reviewed from Opinion Sources

The data was collected and several tabulation and data reduction processes were carried out, which were then tested for validity with the validity and reliability coefficient values, all of which met the requirements for analysis tests. The results of the validity and reliability tests can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Validity and Reliability Test Results

	Coefficient RXY	Cronbach's
Innovative product	0.613– 0.672	0.828
Brand image	0.327– 0.526	0.837
Opinion leader	0.202– 0.254	0.832
Customer retention	0.341– 0.650	0.834

Furthermore, it can be seen the difference in the empirical mean (empirical mean) with the theoretical average (hypothetical mean) in each aspect in the customer retention variable which is used as a reference or phenomenon as follows (see Table 2).

Table 2. Average Test on Customer Retention Variables

Aspects of customer retention	MH	ME	Category
Register passive consumers	3.58	3.62	Moderate
Retract consumers	4.42	4.23	High
Give the best service	3.74	4.24	High

The difference between the empirical mean and the hypothetical mean shows that

the aspect of returning customers has the highest average compared to other aspects, which means that relatively more efforts are made to return customers who leave. The ME value is lower than MH indicating that the practical efforts made by marketers are greater than the standard expectation of Garuda food management in taking back its customers. The average value in the customer data recording aspect carried out by Garudafood marketers for customers (agents and retailers) is classified as moderate with $MH < ME$, which means that the expected work standards still do not meet targets in the field. Furthermore, from the verified data, path analysis is carried out as a hypothetical decision-making process as shown in Figure 6.

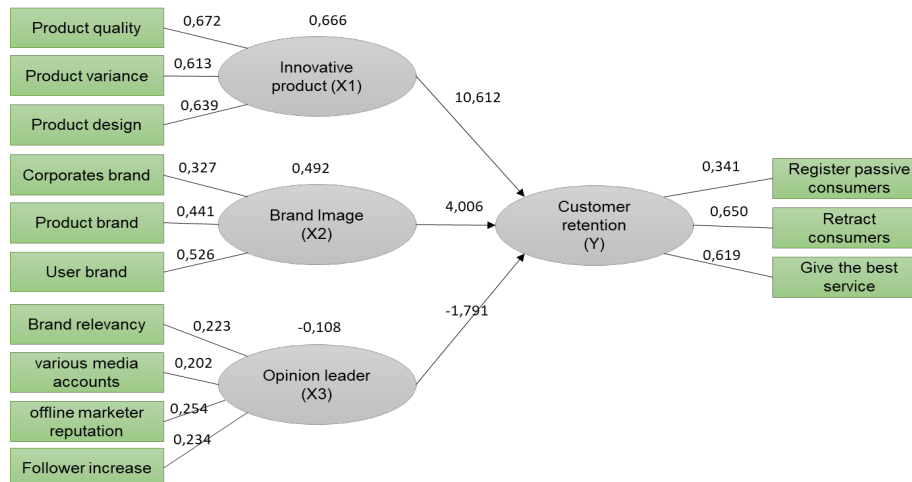


Figure 6. Results of Path Analysis

The path analysis in Figure 6 shows the contribution of each variable to construct independent variables, such as product quality indicators contributing 67.2%, product variety indicators contributing 61.3%, and product design indicators contributing 63.9% to innovative product. It can be said that each aspect which is an indicator of product innovation is classified as relevant and fulfils the requirements as a variable that can be used as a factor to predict customer retention efforts. The figure also shows that innovative products have a correlation coefficient with customer retention of 0.666, which means that there is a relatively high correlation between innovative products and customer retention.

In the brand image variable, the company name indicator contributed 32.7%, the product brand indicator contributed 44.1%, and the brand user (customer) indicator contributed 52.6% to brand image. This illustrates that each indicator that constructs the brand image variable is not good enough as a factor used to achieve customer retention. The brand image variable has a correlation with customer retention of 0.492 which means that brand image is still related to customer retention at a sufficient level.

The opinion leader variable with its four indicators shows that the brand relevance indicator contributed 22.3%, various media account indicators contributed 20.2%, the reputation indicator of offline marketers contributed 25.4%, and the number of subscribers indicator those who follow information accounts contribute 23.4% to Opinion leaders. The contribution of each indicator to the Opinion Leader is relatively small to construct the Opinion Leader variable as a factor that can affect customer retention. Opinion leader obtains a correlation

value of -0.108 which indicates no correlation. Furthermore, the results of testing the hypothesis as the path diagram can be explained as the results of the following data analysis (see Table 3).

Table 3. Hypothesis Testing

	β value	R	R2	T test	Sign.
X1. Innovative products	0.592	0.666	0.394	10,612	0.000
X2. Brand image	0.112	0.492	0.055	4,006	0.036
X3. Opinion leader	-0.078	-0.108	0.008	-1,791	0.074
Correlation coefficient		0.676	0.458		0.000

Source: Processed Data SPSS, 2024

The results of hypothesis testing show a t value of 10.394 with a probability of 0.000 ($p < 0.01$) indicating that innovative products have a very significant positive effect on customer retention. The coefficient of determination shows that innovative products make an effective contribution to customer retention by 39.4%. The results of the hypothesis test also show a t value of 4.006 with a probability of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$), which means that brand image has a significant positive correlation to customer retention. The value of the determinant coefficient shows that brand image is able to provide an effective contribution of 5.5% to customer retention. The results of the hypothesis test analysis also show that the opinion leader has a t-value of -1.791 with a probability of 0.074 ($p > 0.05$).

Then it is also known that the simultaneous correlation coefficient is 0.676 with a probability of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$) which means that innovative product, brand image, and opinion leader together have an effect on customer retention. The coefficient of determination shows that simultaneously innovative product, brand image, and opinion leader are able to make an effective contribution to customer retention by 45.8%.

The results of the analysis of hypothesis testing through path analysis tests prove that the innovative product probability value is 0.000 ($p < 0.05$); and brand image has a probability value of 0.036 ($p < 0.05$), which means that innovative products and brand image have a significant correlation with customer retention. It is proven that the results of the analysis of hypothesis testing about a relationship between innovative products and customer retention are in accordance with several previous studies, as stated by Al-Jundi et al. (2019), which proves that product innovation steps have a strong impact and relationship to intention. customers to repurchase the product. Likewise the research of (Krisnanto et al., 2020),

The proven relationship between innovative products and customer retention illustrates that a marketing strategy that is oriented towards retaining customers is not easy, because companies must be able to carry out various innovations. Loyal customers generally keep buying products because the company also makes its products more varied and developed so that various offers from competitors tend to be rejected. This was also carried out by PT. Garudafood which proves that customers have become disloyal because in several years the products have not changed and customers see that there are various types of similar products from competing companies (Ahidin, 2020).

In addition to product innovation, efforts to accompany the marketing process and the ongoing marketing of innovative products are to increase brand image. This

is also proven from the results of the analysis which shows a probability value of less than five percent, that brand image has a significant relationship with customer retention. The acceptance of the hypothesis which proves that there is a relationship between brand image and customer retention in this study supports several previous studies, such as that stated by Nandya & Permana (2021), which proves that brand image has a fairly important and significant role in improving marketing performance to maintain customer loyalty (Tamara et al., 2021) research results.

Upamannyu and Sankpal (2014) provides an explanation that company efforts to increase customer retention are important because there are several factors that can be considered, namely the efficiency and effectiveness of marketing strategies, especially those related to financing. Lompoliuw et al., (2019), argued that a brand that has high customer loyalty can reduce marketing operational costs incurred by the company. Then the theory of Kotler & Armstrong (2016), as well as the research report of (Prasetyo Tejo & Tambunan, 2021; Simanjuntak et al., 2020), explain that companies can reduce the bargaining power of agents and distributors to remain in a lower position than producers, so that agents and retailers or distributors relatively obey and continue to make sales. Apart from that, in an implementative manner, the research reported by Ascarza et al. (2017), that customer retention carried out by PT. Garudafood is also focused on increasing its ability to acquire customers. This is done with the consideration that customers have high loyalty to the brand image, so there is a tendency for behavior to influence others through word of mouth because customers have become defenders of the Garudafood brand. This is what simultaneously innovative product, brand image and opinion leader have a significant correlation with customer retention. Garudafood is also focused on increasing its ability to acquire customers.

The research reported by Ahidin (2020); Ascarza et al. (2017), provides an almost similar picture, that PT. Garudafood views that brand image and innovative products have the effect of forming a high level of loyalty and high tolerance for new brands in the form of product variants. This means that customers will also give a high tolerance for all threats from competitors. Customer behavior in this case illustrates that the opinion of someone who is seen as an alphas (group leader) has no effect on customer retention.

The results of this study also cannot prove that opinion leaders have a correlation with customer retention, with a probability value of more than five percent. The rejection of the hypothesis about the relationship between opinion leaders and customer retention is not in accordance with several previous studies, as stated by Simanjuntak et al. (2020), which states that in the practical implications of customer relationship management, the efforts of marketers or companies are completely maximal, who don't rely on a multilevel model in marketing that takes community segments. This means that in efforts to increase customers or maintain customer loyalty, marketers do not really depend on opinion leaders, even though there are relatively few of them (Ascarza et al., 2017).

This is in accordance with the research put forward by Hartini and Hanafi, (2021), that consumers tend to repurchase and retain a trusted brand and have provided satisfaction with purchasing manufactured products except for food products. Opinion leaders are not significant as references by communities in cyberspace and the real world if what consumers buy are culinary or food products,

because product innovation changes with high intensity every time. Almohaimmeed (2019), also concluded that customer retention and customer loyalty are formed by vicarious experience, namely the consumer directly experiences the product purchased, provides satisfaction and there is a guarantee for the product he purchased. Customer satisfaction which is the way of retention has no relationship with the opinion leader,

Research reported by Butarbutar et al. (2020), explains that measurement of brand image, innovative products and various factors, especially customer satisfaction, needs to be carried out continuously. This is important because at any time during a period of change, especially during the new normal period during this pandemic, consumer behavior related to the intensity of product purchases, the percentage of purchases, and the number of brands that consumers buy for one particular product tends to change easily due to the desire to try the same product. from competing companies. This indicates that the measurement of customer retention and the number of interactions and communications related to the brand and built from the customer relationship strategy is always carried out by PT. Garudafood.

The customer retention marketing strategy carried out by PT. Garudafood to form loyalty over the past eight years has been carried out through relationship marketing (Ahidin, 2020). Through a customer relationship management strategy, supported by innovative products and brand image improvements, PT. Garudafood to develop the ability to survive during the Covid Pandemic by taking care of customers from suspects - prospects - first time - repeat - clients - advocates which then make customers (especially agents and retailers) as company partners. Implementing a customer retention strategy is clearly one of the steps to create loyalty and it is needed to survive with competitors and uncertain socio-economic conditions during the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine the impact of innovative products, brand image, and opinion leaders on customer retention in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The main focus is to understand how these factors contribute to a company's ability to retain customers, specifically through a case study on agents and retailers of Garudafood products in East Java.

The results show that innovative products and brand image have a significant positive influence on customer retention, while the influence of opinion leaders is not as strong as the other two factors. The findings confirm the importance of product innovation and building a strong brand image as key strategies in retaining customers, especially during the pandemic. From these findings, there are several managerial implications that can be drawn. First, companies should continue to invest in innovative product development to meet changing customer needs and preferences. Second, building and maintaining a positive brand image should be a priority, as this directly influences consumer purchasing decisions. Finally, although the influence of opinion leaders is not as strong as other factors, companies should not ignore their role in marketing strategy, especially in building brand awareness

and credibility. For future research, it is recommended to examine more deeply the role of opinion leaders in different contexts or with different methodologies, given their insignificant influence in this study. In addition, future research could also explore the role of opinion leaders in marketing strategy.

This study has a number of limitations that should be taken into account. Firstly, it is important to note that the sample used in this study was drawn from agents and retailers of Garudafood products in the East Java marketing area only. Therefore, the findings may not be representative of other areas or sectors. Secondly, the study relied on a quantitative approach with data collection through questionnaires. While this method has its strengths, it may not fully capture the intricacies and complexities of customer perceptions and experiences. Thirdly, the study focused on innovative products, brand image, and opinion leaders as the main factors influencing customer retention. However, there may be other factors that were not considered in this study, such as service quality or customer satisfaction, which could also have a significant impact on customer retention.

Additionally, the study did not delve deeply into how the interaction between innovative products, brand image, and opinion leaders collectively affect customer retention, which could have provided further insights into the dynamics of customer retention. Lastly, the study may have been limited by the validity and reliability of the measurement instruments used, despite conducting validity and reliability tests. Given these limitations, it is recommended that future research expands the scope of the study, employs diverse methodologies for a more comprehensive understanding, and considers other factors that may influence customer retention. It is also suggested that company management enhances their marketing relationship management capabilities, both at an individual and community level, and strengthens their relationships with retailers and agents who are also consumers. Furthermore, retailers and agents are encouraged to take a proactive approach in establishing communication for business development, which can be achieved through effective management of PT Garudafood as a form of relational marketing. Lastly, marketing researchers are advised to examine each indicator of the customer satisfaction variable as a moderating factor for brand image and product innovation on customer retention.

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