IMPROVING RELATIONSHIPS TO ENHANCE CUSTOMER LOYALTY AT WARUNK BARBARKU RESTAURANT

Check for updates

1*Norman Adi Syahputra, 2Berlintina Permatasari

*1,2Program Studi Manajemen, Fakultas Ekonomi dan Bisnis,
Universitas Teknokrat Indonesia - Indonesia*

e-mail :
1*normanadisyahputra@gmail.com *(corresponding author)*
2berlintina@teknokrat.ac.id

ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to assess the significance of trust in customer relationships in determining customer satisfaction and to gauge the level of success of Warunk Barbarku Restaurant in fostering customer loyalty. Subsequently, further research is conducted to examine the enhancement of the relationship towards loyalty among the customers of Warunk Barbarku Restaurant. This qualitative research employs an in-depth interview method with purposive sampling, involving a total of 10 carefully selected customers based on strict criteria as respondents, and focuses on a relationship-based approach. Finally, the results of the interviews show that customers perceive comfort in the relationship, trust, and satisfaction as key factors influencing their loyalty to Warunk Barbarku Restaurant.

Keywords: *Customer Relationship; Marketing; Customer Intimacy; Loyalty; Restaurant*

INTRODUCTION

Marketing plays a crucial role in navigating the intense competition in the culinary industry (Rahardjo & Purnomo, 2023). One key approach is relationship marketing, which focuses on maintaining, attracting, and strengthening the relationship between service providers and customers (Wibowo S, 2006). Based on its time-oriented approach, relationship marketing operates over the long term, focusing on building customer loyalty (Gummesson, 2000; Keevaney et al., 1995). Unlike short-term promotions such as discounts, relationship marketing emphasizes continuous interaction with customers. Furthermore, restaurants need to implement professional management to build strong relationships with loyal customers, enabling them to survive amid the increasingly competitive culinary market, where Customer Relationship Marketing (CRM) is seen as a strategic solution to ensure service sustainability in the future (Pudjiharjo, 2004).

However, the steps taken in a marketing activity should have value, whether in the form of a buying and selling process or a transaction that ensures continuity for both buyers and sellers (Ginting, 2020). The restaurant (seller) must be able to maintain relationships with customers. Every practitioner and researcher quickly realizes the importance of a marketing relationship in increasing customers. This forms the basis for the further development of the relationship marketing concept (Gronroos, 1997). This research focuses on the restaurant business Warunk Barbarku, located in Bandar Lampung, which provides personalized services to customers to deliver high-quality service and fulfill each customer's satisfaction and trust in the services offered.

This study aims to develop and improve Warunk Barbarku as a case study, focusing on the dynamics of customer relationships and loyalty. The research is particularly relevant for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (UMKM), especially food businesses targeting student markets around university areas. Instead of applying large-scale corporate marketing theories, this study emphasizes practical and localized relationship strategies that are more suitable for the operational characteristics of UMKM in the culinary sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Ali-Alsaadi et al. (2025) highlights that service quality and relational benefits significantly enhance customer loyalty through satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth in fast-food restaurant contexts. Furthermore, customer intimacy is understood as a corporate strategy in which organizations adapt their products and services to fit specific customer needs, prioritizing long-term relationship value. It is recognized as a pivotal relationship-marketing strategy that fosters deep and personalized connections between customers and service providers, significantly strengthening relationship quality and loyalty (Liu, Chan, & Chimhundu, 2024). Indeed, customer loyalty increases significantly with high levels of customer satisfaction, when combined with customer trust, strongly influences loyalty behaviors such as repeat purchases and positive word-of-mouth (Ali, 2022).

Darmayasa and Yasa (2021) demonstrated that relationship marketing has a positive effect on customer loyalty, with customer satisfaction serving as a mediating variable at Livingstone Café & Bakery in Seminyak, Bali. Similarly, Rozi (2014) found that trust, commitment, and customer satisfaction significantly affect customer loyalty at Rumah Makan Bebek 88, although customer intimacy has no significant impact. Furthermore, Doğan (2023) identified four main themes in relationship marketing within the food service industry, including customer relationship management and

loyalty-based marketing strategies. Unlike previous studies, this research uses a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews with selected customers of a micro-scale food business to explore how trust and satisfaction influence loyalty in the context of relationship marketing at Warunk Barbarku.

In the implementation of customer intimacy, customer trust, and the development of relationships, customer loyalty is naturally formed, in line with the commitment-trust theory which posits that successful relationship marketing is built on trust and commitment (Hasnin, 2025). An example of this is the approach taken by the management of Warunk Barbarku. Furthermore, to understand the importance of customer intimacy, customer trust, and satisfaction, as well as to assess the success of Warunk Barbarku, this paper investigates the improvement of relationships in enhancing customer loyalty at the restaurant. The results show that customer relationships influence the improvement of trust variables and that satisfaction has a significant impact on loyalty (Ali-Alsaadi et al., 2025).

Research Framework

Building on this conceptual framework, each relational variable is explored qualitatively based on recurring themes identified in the interview transcripts. For example, customer intimacy was represented through narratives involving personal attention, recognition, and comfort, while trust was conveyed in how customers expressed confidence in the consistency and integrity of the restaurant's services. Satisfaction emerged from evaluative reflections on food quality, pricing, and service interactions. These coded insights were mapped into thematic clusters corresponding to the four key constructs, revealing how the relational dynamics influence loyalty behaviors such as returning visits and verbal recommendations. Thus, the framework is grounded in real customer experiences that validate the theoretical model.
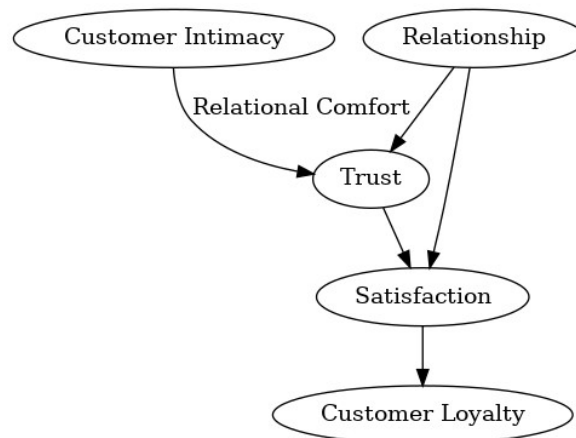
Source : Constructed by authors for this study (2025)

Figure 1
Research Framework

The relationships illustrated are not derived from statistical modeling, but rather conceptualized based on recurring themes identified through in-depth interviews with ten purposively selected respondents. These respondents were active and engaged customers of Warunk Barbarku who had repeated interactions with the restaurant's services. Their narratives revealed consistent patterns of perceived intimacy, trust, satisfaction, and loyalty, which were then thematically organized into the conceptual pathway shown.

METHOD

The research method used is a customer loyalty proximity study, which aims to explain the relationship between customers and the restaurant. Additionally, a customer proximity study is conducted to build a theoretical relationship between variables based on empirical data through direct field testing. This study employs a qualitative proximity approach, using in-depth interviews to explore how customer intimacy, trust, and satisfaction shape loyalty in a restaurant context. Such qualitative methods are recommended in the hospitality literature to gain deeper, context-specific insights into customer–restaurant relationships (Purnami & Nurcaya, 2025).

Data collection for this research involved interviews, followed by direct questioning of 10 closest customers at Warunk Barbarku. The type of data analyzed is primary data, obtained directly from sources and collected firsthand from the researched problem. Meanwhile, the primary data in this study specifically consists of responses from interview questions directed at the owner and founder of Warunk Barbarku, as well as its customers. The interview questions focused on aspects such as customer perceptions of trust, intimacy, satisfaction, emotional closeness with the restaurant, their willingness to recommend Warunk Barbarku to others, as well as key service elements including taste, pricing, service experience, and ambience.

The data imputation method employed was survey sampling, specifically confirmatory research, utilizing interview results comprising measurement questions on customer satisfaction, represented as variables used in this research method. The data were collected from respondents who were present at the location during interview sessions while conducting transactions at Warunk Barbarku Restaurant, with priority given to member customers. This study employed a confirmatory thematic analysis approach for data analysis, which is a qualitative method used to validate predefined themes based on theoretical constructs, such as customer intimacy, trust, and satisfaction, by examining interview responses in depth (Ahmed et al., 2025).

The population of this study consists of all individuals registered as customers of Warunk Barbarku Restaurant. We applied purposive sampling, selecting ten participants who met two inclusion criteria, first, having a history of at least two transactions, and second, being registered as active members of the catering program organized by the restaurant. Purposive sampling allows us to choose respondents based on their specific experience and insight into the phenomena under study, such as trust, satisfaction, and loyalty, ensuring the collection of high-quality, relevant data (Campbell et al., 2020). Additionally, we focused exclusively on registered customers because their repeated and structured engagement guarantees richer, more consistent narratives. However, unregistered customers might lack sufficient interaction to inform the research objectives meaningfully (Imkome, 2025).

The interview materials consisted of a semi-structured question guide focusing on core dimensions of relationship marketing: customer intimacy, trust, satisfaction, and

loyalty. These questions were designed to capture respondents' subjective experiences and perceptions, such as how they evaluate the service quality, emotional connection, and overall experience with Warunk Barbarku. Each interview began with general inquiries and progressed into deeper, theory-driven topics. The recorded responses were then transcribed verbatim and analyzed using confirmatory thematic analysis. This analytical approach is used to validate theoretically anticipated themes by systematically coding the data and mapping them against pre-established constructs. Such methods are increasingly recognized in qualitative research for enhancing the rigor and theoretical alignment of interview data (Ahmed et al., 2025; Imkome, 2025).

The five questions focused on customer intimacy, emotional engagement, service consistency, and trust:

1. Do you prefer to dine at a restaurant that feels like family or one that is cheaper but less familiar?
2. Does being a member of Warunk Barbarku's catering program make you more likely to recommend the restaurant to your friends?
3. Would a change in food quality affect your loyalty, even if you feel emotionally connected as a regular customer?
4. What type of restaurant makes you want to visit daily?
5. Do impolite or unprofessional staff reduce your closeness to Warunk Barbarku, even if you are already a loyal member?

The interviews were conducted face-to-face over informal conversations during customer visits. As the owner and researcher, the interviewer documented responses and grouped them according to recurring relational themes. For example, one customer noted, "For me, taste comes second. The first reason I keep coming back is because I feel comfortable here, it feels like eating at home." This type of response reflects the strong role of emotional intimacy over mere product evaluation, reinforcing the importance of relational bonds in customer loyalty. The narratives were then thematically categorized to validate the conceptual framework and illustrate the lived experience of loyal customers in a micro-business setting.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings presented in this section are derived from in-depth interviews conducted with 10 selected customers of Warunk Barbarku Restaurant, aiming to explore their perceptions on customer intimacy, trust, satisfaction, and loyalty. The collected data were then analyzed using confirmatory thematic analysis, which allowed the researchers to organize the interview results clearly and connect them with relevant such as customer intimacy (Liu et al., 2024), trust & commitment (Hasnin, 2025), relational benefit & loyalty (Ali-Alsaadi et al., 2025), analisis data (Ahmed et al., 2025). In qualitative research, trustworthiness and credibility of the findings are prioritized over statistical validity.

To ensure this, the interview responses were evaluated through confirmatory thematic analysis, which emphasizes the consistency between the data and pre-established theoretical constructs. This method allows us to systematically identify, organize, and interpret themes based on the depth and relevance of participants' narratives (Ahmed et al., 2025).

The Influence of Customer Intimacy on Loyalty
The results of the customer interviews revealed that, out of ten participants, two responses expressed themes strongly aligned with the construct of customer intimacy. related to the customer intimacy variable. This reflects the role of relational marketing strategies, which serve as the foundational basis for establishing customer relationships. The research findings indicate that customers are less interested in restaurants that solely offer food products; instead, they seek emotional engagement, which contributes significantly to their overall satisfaction. It is confirmed by the literatures, For instance, Liu et al. (2024) highlight how digital customer intimacy enables firms to personalize offerings and strengthen emotional bonds with their customers, ultimately improving service satisfaction. Similarly, Hasnin (2025) emphasizes that customer intimacy fosters trust and long-term engagement, which are pivotal to customer loyalty in service-oriented sectors.

Customer loyalty, as derived from the interview analysis, indicated a partially positive impact on the service transaction proc.ss. While some respondents expressed satisfaction with the food and services provided by Warunk Barbarku, others highlighted the absence of personalized engagement as a limiting factor. When the relationship is solely based on transactional loyalty between the seller and the buyer, without efforts to adapt or personalize the experience, it results in a lack of harmony. This disharmony reduces customers' willingness to recommend the restaurant, thus creating hesitation in making future purchases.

The Influence of Customer Trust on Loyalty
In this study, customer loyalty was assessed based on the trust variable, with a coefficient derived from ten interview responses. Among them, two responses showed a relatively positive direction toward trust in the customer. Customer trust is the belief held in the minds of individual customers, which significantly impacts the level of loyalty and is further associated with the quality of the customer–business relationship. Trust plays a critical role in reducing uncertainty and fostering long-term relational exchanges between customers and service providers (Liu et al., 2024; Hasnin, 2025).

At this stage, customers are likely to place full trust in Warunk Barbarku Restaurant by recommending its food products to friends, colleagues, or other social connections. Such recommendations contribute positively to the restaurant's reputation, attracting new customers who may also develop loyalty, thereby generating greater benefits and profitability for the business. Therefore, consumer trust is essential in enhancing customer loyalty, as it fosters the development of strong customer relationships with Warunk Barbarku Restaurant.

The Influence of Relationship on Customer Loyalty
Based on thematic analysis, four out of ten respondents emphasized that their emotional bond with the restaurant influenced their loyalty behavior. This emotional closeness, or perceived "family-like" experience, supports the idea that relational intimacy enhances customer retention and advocacy (Ali-Alsaadi et al., 2025). Such loyal customers become informal brand ambassadors who personally identify with the restaurant. The consistent appearance of such narratives across several interviews illustrates the significant impact of relationship-building strategies in enhancing loyalty.

Customer Satisfaction Toward Loyalty

It is identified in two out of ten interview responses regarding the customer satisfcation. Satisfaction in this context is a subjective evaluation of whether the restaurant meets personal needs in a pleasant way (Purnami & Nurcaya, 2025). Based on our findings, customers reported their feeling satisfied after dining at Warunk Barbarku Restaurant, because their needs were met, leading to feelings of happiness and fulfillment. This satisfaction indeed has created a good perception into the restaurant service, enhancing their dining experience in overall.

For future research, a key factor influencing customer loyalty is the fulfillment of personal pleasure, whereby customers derive a unique sense of satisfaction from the services provided by Warunk Barbarku Restaurant. With the effort to further optimize the relationship factor, starting from organizing events, then offering promotions, and also applying personalized approaches, Warunk Barbarku Restaurant finally can enhance customer loyalty. Such efforts cultivate a sense of joy and positive perception among loyal customers, encouraging them to provide valuable feedback to the restaurant in the future.

This qualitative study has offered an in-depth exploration of how relational marketing strategies influence customer loyalty at Warunk Barbarku Restaurant. To further enhance understanding, future qualitative research could adopt advanced techniques such as grounded theory or narrative inquiry to capture deeper customer experiences and relational patterns (Ahmed et al., 2025; Purnami & Nurcaya, 2025). Furthermore, integrating constructs such as Special Benefits, defined as the perceived value customers gain from personalized attention, and Special Treatment Benefits, such as priority service or exclusive offers, can be explored thematically to understand their role in sustaining customer loyalty (Liu et al., 2024; Hasnin, 2025). These qualitative approaches provide nuanced insights that are well-suited for the evolving dynamics of customer–brand relationships in the micro-culinary business context.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This paper has examined the concept of customer loyalty in the context of Warunk Barbarku Restaurant. Customer intimacy showed varying degrees of influence on loyalty across the ten interviewees, reflecting that not all customers prioritize emotional closeness in their dining experience. Nonetheless, narratives from several respondents indicated that when customer intimacy is present, such as feeling welcomed and recognized, it substantially contributes to their loyalty. Trust, on the other hand, emerged as a consistently strong factor, with multiple participants expressing confidence in the consistency and integrity of Warunk Barbarku's service. This trust fostered a deeper emotional connection and encouraged repeat visits and word-of-mouth advocacy. These conclusions are drawn from thematic patterns in customer narratives, confirming that relational quality—not merely the transaction, plays a critical role in customer retention.

Customer relationship management should be prioritized to foster a sense of community around Warunk Barbarku Restaurant, which in the long term may lead to significant business growth and development. Customer comfort significantly influences customer loyalty toward the service quality of Warunk Barbarku Restaurant, particularly in terms of service accuracy and promptness, which in turn enhances customer satisfaction. For future research, it is recommended to explore additional relational variables such as emotional attachment, perceived fairness, and service personalization. These variables may provide deeper insights into the psychological

drivers of loyalty that were only indirectly surfaced in this study. Emotional attachment, for example, can reveal the long-term bond a customer feels toward a brand beyond satisfaction. Investigating these factors qualitatively can help researchers and practitioners design more tailored relationship strategies that further strengthen customer retention in small-scale food service businesses.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, S. K., et al. (2025). Using thematic analysis in qualitative research. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

Ali, M. A. B. (2022). The effect of firm's brand reputation on customer loyalty and customer word of mouth: The mediating role of customer satisfaction and customer trust. *International Business Research, 15*(6), 1–12.

Ali-Alsaadi, A. A., Cabeza-Ramírez, L. J., Santos-Roldán, L., & González-Mohíno, M. (2025). *Understanding customer loyalty in fast-food restaurants: Exploring the moderating effect of relational benefits in the United Arab Emirates*. SAGE Open.

Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., Bywaters, D., & Walker, K. (2020). Purposive sampling: Complex or simple? Research case examples. *Journal of Research in Nursing, 25*(8), 652–661.

Darmayasa, G. N. A. R., & Yasa, N. N. K. (2021). The influence of relationship marketing on customer loyalty: Customer satisfaction as a mediation variable. *International Research Journal of Management, IT & Social Sciences*, 8(6), 648–660. https://doi.org/10.21744/irjmis.v8n6.1963

Doğan, M. (2023). The effect of relationship marketing practices on customer loyalty in the food service industry: A qualitative study on senior sales and marketing professionals. *Journal of Tourism and Gastronomy Studies, 11*(2), 1516–1536. https://jotags.net/index.php/jotags/article/view/1664

Ginting, S. T. U. A. (2020). Pengaruh pemasaran industri UMKM di era digital terhadap tingkat pembelian konsumen. *Jurnal Ekonomi, Sosial & Humaniora, 2*(4), 124–

Grönroos, C. (1997). Keynote paper From marketing mix to relationship marketing: Towards a paradigm shift in marketing. Management Decision, 35(4), 322–339. https://doi.org/10.1108/00251749710169729

Gummesson, E. (2000). *Total relationship marketing* (2nd ed.). Woburn, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann, Elsevier Science.

Hasnin, E. A. H. (2025). The impact of online apps hotels, customer wellbeing and customer citizenship behavior: A mediating role of customer intimacy. *Journal of Ecohumanism, 4*(2), 156–177.

Imkome, E.-U. (2025). The double burden of stressful life events among professional nurses: Public mass shootings during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being, 20*(1), Article 2504477.

Keevaney, W. J., Moriarty, S. E., & Duncan, T. R. (1995). *Marketing* (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.

Liu, Q., Chan, K.-C., & Chimhundu, R. (2024). From customer intimacy to digital customer intimacy. *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research, 19*(4), 3386–3411.

Purnami, N. M., & Nurcaya, I. N. (2025). Exploring the drivers of customer loyalty in the restaurant industry: A systematic literature review and future research agenda. *Jurnal Ilmiah Manajemen dan Bisnis*, *10*(1).

Pudjiharjo, W. J. (2004). Customer relationship marketing (CRM) sebagai solusi ekstensi industri pelayanan kesehatan di masa depan. Makalah disajikan pada Seminar

Fakultas Kesehatan Masyarakat, Universitas Airlangga.

Rahardjo, E., & Purnomo, Y. (2024). Culinary success: Leveraging digital marketing to transform the food industry. European Journal of Cultural Studies, 20(2), 15–22.

Rozi, A. F., Sularso, R. A., & Dimyati, M. (2014). Dampak elemen customer relationship marketing terhadap loyalitas pelanggan Rumah Makan Bebek 88. *Jurnal Ilmiah*

Wibowo, S. (2006). Implementasi relationship marketing pada industri hospitality. Jurnal Utilitas, 14(2), 178–196.