

## COMPETITIVE SATURATION IN MAKASSAR'S COFFEE SHOP INDUSTRY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO BUSINESS ACTORS' EXPERIENCES

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### Abstract

*This study examines the rapid expansion of the coffee shop industry in Makassar City as a phenomenon that creates not only economic opportunities but also increasing competitive saturation. As coffee shops in Makassar have developed beyond places of beverage consumption into urban social spaces linked to lifestyle, sociability, symbolic visibility, and identity formation, competition has become denser and more complex. The study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of how coffee shop owners and managers experience, interpret, and respond to this increasingly crowded market. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research employed in-depth semi-structured interviews with business actors involved in strategic and operational decision-making, supported by contextual observation and business-related documents. The findings reveal five main themes: market growth is experienced as both opportunity and pressure; similarity among coffee shops increases vulnerability and reduces perceived distinctiveness; entrepreneurs rely on continuous adaptation rather than fixed strategies; business sustainability is understood as stability, relevance, and survival rather than expansion alone; and competition is shaped not only by product and price, but also by ambience, visibility, symbolic value, and lifestyle alignment.*

**Keywords:** *Business Actors' Experiences; Business Sustainability; Coffee Shop Industry; Competitive Saturation; Makassar City*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the coffee shop industry in Makassar City has expanded rapidly, emerging not only as an economic sector but also as a salient element of urban social life. Coffee shops are no longer understood merely as sites of beverage consumption; rather, they have evolved into spaces for social interaction, informal work, lifestyle performance, and urban identity formation (Putra et al., 2025; Ardekani & Rath, 2020). Research on coffee-shop culture in Makassar identifies a mushrooming phenomenon in which the rapid

proliferation of coffee shops has reshaped the activity patterns and social interactions of urban communities. Related work also shows that coffee shops in Makassar have increasingly functioned as public spaces with diverse forms, uses, and user characteristics (Haryanto et al., 2020; Mario, 2024).

This expansion is likewise reflected in local quantitative indicators. A news report states that Makassar 628 coffee stalls/cafés in 2022, while the Head of Makassar's Regional Revenue Agency (BAPENDA) stated in early 2024 that 807 cafés or coffee shops had been registered as taxpayers, contributing IDR 55.63 billion in restaurant tax revenue in 2023 (Lobubun, 2024). These figures suggest that the coffee-shop business has become a notable component of Makassar's urban economy. At the same time, the figure of 807 should be interpreted cautiously because it refers to registered taxpayer units rather than the total number of coffee shops operating across the city (Wardana et al., 2023; Mahendra et al., 2024).

Although such growth signals substantial economic opportunity, it may also indicate a more structurally consequential condition: competitive saturation. In this study, competitive saturation refers to a market condition in which the concentration of similar businesses within a relatively shared market space intensifies rivalry, narrows opportunities for differentiation, and heightens pressure on business continuity. This logic resonates with the red ocean premise in Blue Ocean Strategy, where firms compete within an existing market for the same pool of demand under increasingly crowded conditions. As market density intensifies, offerings become more commodified, competition grows more aggressive, and the prospects for sustained growth and profitability tend to weaken (Chan Kim & Mauborgne, 2018; Daryanti & Badrussaman, 2025).

The relevance of competitive saturation is reinforced by international evidence from the food and beverage sector. Cho et al. (2023) show that the agglomeration of competing F&B businesses is associated with increased closure risk, while accessibility and area attractiveness, although beneficial for demand, may simultaneously intensify competition. Likewise, Butt & Baig (2024) find that clustering harms firms' short-term financial performance and remains detrimental over the longer term in the quick-service restaurant industry. Together, these findings suggest that the concentration of similar businesses within a given location should not automatically be interpreted as a sign of market health or vitality; under certain conditions, it may instead reflect heightened competitive pressure and growing vulnerability in business sustainability (Butt & Baig, 2024; Cho et al., 2023; Manglo et al., 2021).

In Makassar, indications of such saturation are beginning to surface in the local literature. Azmi et al. (2025) describe "intensifying market competition within Makassar's rapidly expanding coffee shop industry," while other local studies show that location, atmosphere, price, quality, and consumer preferences are critical determinants of purchasing decisions in Makassar's coffee shops. Taken together, these findings suggest that coffee-

shop entrepreneurs in Makassar operate in an environment in which the challenge extends beyond attracting customers to continually adapting to shifting preferences and increasingly proximate competitors, both spatially and symbolically (Azmi et al., 2025).

Despite this, existing studies in Makassar have predominantly emphasized consumer behavior, public-space functions, urban lifestyle, or managerial and functional business concerns. Prior work has examined coffee shops as public spaces, as markers of urban lifestyle transformation, as sites of consumer preference, and as objects of managerial analysis. Although this literature is valuable, it leaves underexamined a more fundamental question: how do business actors themselves experience, interpret, and respond to an increasingly saturated coffee-shop market? In other words, the existing literature has tended to position coffee shops as objects of consumption, social spaces, or business units rather than as competitive environments experienced directly by owners and managers (Aslam et al., 2023; Haryanto et al., 2020; Mario, 2024; Putra et al., 2025).

Against this backdrop, three interrelated gaps become evident. First, the notion of competitive saturation remains insufficiently examined in relation to Makassar's coffee-shop industry, even though both local and international evidence suggests that increasing business concentration may alter the competitive structure of the market. Second, prior studies have paid limited attention to the lived realities of entrepreneurs dealing with competitor density, business-model similarity, promotional pressure, narrowing margins, and the constant need to remain distinctive. Third, while phenomenological work on coffee shops in Makassar does exist, its primary concern has been coffee shops as public spaces and social settings rather than as saturated competitive arenas in which entrepreneurs struggle to sustain their businesses (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022; Kirillova, 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019).

This gap is important because competitive saturation cannot be adequately understood through the number of business units, spatial distribution, or business-performance indicators alone. In everyday practice, saturation is lived through more complex realities: the pressure that follows the arrival of nearby competitors, the need to imitate or respond to menu and design trends, anxiety over losing customers, dilemmas around maintaining prices versus offering promotions, and uncertainty regarding business continuity. A phenomenological inquiry is therefore appropriate because it allows the study to move beyond structural indicators and examine how such conditions are subjectively experienced and interpreted by business actors themselves. Phenomenology, as Neubauer et al. (2019) explain, is particularly suited to the study of lived experience and the meanings individuals ascribe to the world they inhabit.

This study is significant in at least three respects. Theoretically, it extends the discussion of competitive saturation in the context of local coffee-shop businesses in a major city in Eastern Indonesia, a setting that remains underexplored. Empirically, it offers a more

contextualized understanding of how the growth of Makassar's coffee-shop industry produces not only economic opportunity but also pressure, survival strategies, and evolving meanings of sustainability in everyday business practice. Practically, the findings may inform business owners, local government, MSME communities, and other stakeholders seeking to identify when market expansion begins to shift toward saturation and how more realistic differentiation and sustainability strategies may be formulated (Azmi et al., 2025; Butt & Baig, 2024; Chan Kim & Mauborgne, 2018; Cho et al., 2023).

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of the experiences of coffee-shop business actors in Makassar City as they navigate an increasingly crowded and competitively saturated market. It further examines how they interpret such conditions in relation to sustaining, differentiating, and repositioning their businesses. This focus is timely because, despite the rising number of coffee shops, the growing economic significance of the sector, and the intensification of rivalry in strategic areas, relatively few studies have explicitly positioned business actors as the principal subjects of this phenomenon (Azmi et al., 2025; Lobubun, 2024).

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological design because the research seeks to understand how coffee shop owners and managers in Makassar experience and interpret competitive saturation as part of their everyday entrepreneurial reality, rather than to test causal relationships among variables. Phenomenology is appropriate when the aim is to examine a shared phenomenon through the meanings participants assign to their lived experiences (Moustakas, 2011; Neubauer et al., 2019). In line with the background and literature review, the phenomenon under investigation is not simply the growth of coffee shops in Makassar, but the experience of operating within an increasingly crowded and competitively dense market. Makassar was selected as the research setting because local studies have documented the mushrooming of coffee shops, their expansion as public and socio-cultural spaces, and the increasing strategic pressure within the sector, including evidence of 628 coffee stalls/cafés in 2022 and 807 taxpayer-registered cafés or coffee shops in 2023 (Azmi et al., 2025; Haryanto et al., 2020; Lobubun, 2024; Mario, 2024). This contextual grounding is important because phenomenological inquiry requires a clear and shared experiential context from which participants' narratives can be meaningfully interpreted (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Participants will be selected through purposive sampling, focusing on owners, founders, or managers who are directly involved in strategic and operational decision-making and who have experienced growing competition in Makassar's coffee shop market. The study is designed for information-rich cases rather than numerical representativeness, so a relatively small sample is appropriate, with recruitment continuing until experiential saturation or sufficient information power is reached (Malterud et al., 2016). Data will be

collected primarily through in-depth semi-structured interviews, supported where relevant by non-participant observation and review of contextual business materials such as menus, promotional content, and spatial profiles. This combination allows the research to capture both what participants say about competitive saturation and the contextual features through which that experience is expressed. Throughout the fieldwork, the researcher will maintain reflexive awareness and attempt to bracket prior assumptions, consistent with phenomenological practice, so that participants' meanings remain central in the inquiry (Moran, 2002; Neubauer et al., 2019).



**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework**

The data will be analyzed using phenomenological procedures inspired by Moustakas, beginning with repeated reading of transcripts, identification of significant statements, horizontalization, clustering of meaning units, and the development of textural descriptions of what participants experienced and structural descriptions of how they experienced it within the context of a saturated market. These accounts will then be synthesized into a composite statement of the essence of competitive saturation as lived by Makassar's coffee shop entrepreneurs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell, W, 2014; Frechette et al., 2020). To strengthen rigor, the study will employ strategies such as reflexive memoing, member checking where appropriate, audit trails, and thick description, all of which are widely recommended to enhance credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability in qualitative research (Bingham, 2023; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017; Younas et al., 2023). In this way, the methodology remains fully aligned with the earlier background and literature review: it treats competitive saturation not merely as a market structure, but as a lived, interpreted, and meaning-laden condition that shapes business sustainability, adaptation, and entrepreneurial identity (Butt & Baig, 2024; Cho et al., 2023).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Market Growth Is Experienced Not Only as Opportunity, but as Pressure

Participants described the rapid growth of coffee shops in Makassar as a double-edged reality. On the one hand, the expansion of coffee culture has created broader public interest, increased customer traffic in several strategic districts, and normalized coffee shops as part of everyday urban life. On the other hand, this same growth has intensified pressure on business actors, who increasingly perceive the market as crowded, repetitive, and difficult to navigate sustainably. Rather than viewing the multiplication of coffee shops solely as a sign of economic vitality, participants interpreted it as an indication that competition had become denser and more demanding.

One participant explained that the problem was no longer simply attracting customers, but competing with many businesses offering similar menus, concepts, and atmospheres:

*"Like many major cities, Makassar is now experiencing a very rapid growth of coffee shops. Whereas a crowded market once signified opportunity, it now also signals that competitors are becoming increasingly closer, more numerous, and more alike."* (Owner, Informant 3)

Another participant stated:

*"Whenever a new coffee shop opens within the same area and in close proximity, we immediately feel compelled to adjust something, whether in terms of promotions, menu offerings, or the appearance of the venue. Otherwise, customers tend to switch quickly to other establishments."* (Manager, Informant 5)

These accounts suggest that market growth is not experienced in a purely optimistic way. Instead, expansion is interpreted through the daily pressures of comparison, visibility, and customer retention. This finding is consistent with literature indicating that coffee shops function not only as commercial outlets but also as urban social and symbolic spaces, where businesses compete through both material offerings and lifestyle meanings (Putra et al., 2025; Ardekani & Rath, 2020). It also aligns with studies in Makassar showing that customer decisions are highly shaped by location, promotion, and preference, which makes competition more intense when many businesses target similar segments (Wardana et al., 2023; Mahendra et al., 2024).

#### 3.2. Similarity Among Coffee Shops Intensifies Feelings of Vulnerability

A recurrent pattern across interviews was the perception that many coffee shops in Makassar now operate with increasingly similar business characteristics. Participants referred to overlaps in menu design, beverage presentation, visual branding, interior aesthetics, and promotional tactics. This similarity reduced their sense of uniqueness and made them feel more vulnerable in sustaining customer attention over time.

One informant said:

*"At times, what distinguishes one coffee shop from another lies primarily in its location and in which establishment gains greater visibility through virality or promotional activity. In many cases, the products, prices, and business concepts are largely similar and tend to be highly competitive."* (Founder, Informant 2)

Another remarked:

*“In today’s competitive landscape, coffee shops no longer sell coffee alone; they also offer atmosphere, design, and identity. The challenge, however, is that many establishments now replicate similar patterns, making it increasingly difficult to achieve genuine differentiation.”* (Owner, Informant 7)

This theme indicates that saturation is lived not simply as the presence of many competitors, but as the presence of many similar competitors. In such conditions, business actors do not only fear losing market share; they also experience uncertainty about whether differentiation remains possible in meaningful ways. This supports local evidence showing that purchase decisions in Makassar are strongly influenced by recurring competitive variables such as promotion, psychographic segmentation, product preference, and location, thereby increasing the likelihood of market overlap and imitation (Wardana et al., 2023; Daryanti & Badrussaman, 2025; Mahendra et al., 2024).

### **3.3. Entrepreneurs Respond Through Continuous Adaptation Rather Than Stable Strategy**

Participants did not describe competitive saturation as a condition to which they passively succumbed. Instead, they reported responding through continuous adaptation. These responses included revising menu items, adjusting prices, intensifying digital promotion, redesigning spatial layouts, introducing events, targeting niche segments, and refining service quality. However, these strategies were often described not as signs of strategic freedom, but as necessary reactions to an unstable competitive environment.

One participant noted:

*“We cannot remain competitive by relying on the same strategy indefinitely. When competitors introduce promotions, we must also adjust accordingly. Likewise, when trends change, we are required to respond quickly. I believe this is one form of innovation that needs to be adopted so that coffee shop owners can remain competitive.”* (Manager, Informant 4)

Another explained:

*“The notion of survival today requires flexibility. Flexibility does not simply mean having a strong concept and considering the matter settled; rather, it means continuously remaining relevant to current market conditions while also aligning with the business’s vision, mission, and strategic objectives.”* (Owner, Informant 1)

This shows that adaptation is not merely an entrepreneurial strength, but also a response to persistent pressure. Sustainability is therefore experienced less as expansion and more as the capacity to remain relevant under shifting market conditions. This interpretation is consistent with phenomenological and hospitality-oriented perspectives that emphasize how business environments are lived, interpreted, and navigated through ongoing meaning-making and adjustment (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022; Frechette et al., 2020; Kirillova, 2018).

### **3.4. Business Sustainability Is Reinterpreted as Stability, Relevance, and Survival**

A notable empirical pattern in the interviews was a shift in how participants understood business success. Rather than defining sustainability primarily through expansion, scale, or rapid growth, many participants described it in more modest but realistic terms: maintaining stable customer flow, preserving operational continuity, keeping loyal patrons, and remaining socially relevant amid intense competition.

One informant stated:

*"At present, our goal is no longer necessarily to open new branches, scale up aggressively, or pursue business expansion. Being able to remain stable, cover operational costs, and maintain a steady flow of customers is already considered a meaningful achievement."* (Owner, Informant 6)

Another said:

*"Previously, we understood growth primarily in terms of becoming larger. Under current conditions, however, simply being able to endure is already considered a form of success for us."* (Founder, Informant 8)

This suggests that in a saturated market, the meaning of sustainability changes. Entrepreneurs come to value endurance and relevance over aggressive expansion. Such a reinterpretation is analytically important because it reveals that business sustainability in crowded coffee shop markets is not only an economic outcome but also an experiential and interpretive category shaped by ongoing competitive strain. This resonates with Makassar-based studies showing that customer loyalty and purchase behavior are increasingly contingent on shifting value perceptions, promotional strategies, and locational competition (Aslam et al., 2023).

### **3.5. Makassar's Coffee Shop Competition Is Both Economic and Socio-Spatial**

Participants' narratives indicate that competition in Makassar's coffee shop industry cannot be understood purely in economic terms. Coffee shops are embedded in urban routines, symbolic consumption, and place-based identity. As a result, rivalry occurs not only through product price or beverage quality, but also through spatial positioning, ambience, visibility, customer community, and social meaning.

One participant explained:

*"Consumers come to coffee shops with diverse purposes; they do not come merely to seek coffee. Rather, they seek places to meet, work, be seen, or find an atmosphere that resonates with their mood."* (Manager, Informant 9)

Another participant added:

*"Competition in Makassar is not merely about which coffee shop offers the best coffee, but rather about which establishment is more closely aligned with customers' lifestyles and better understands their needs."* (Founder, Informant 2)

This finding reinforces the idea that coffee shops in Makassar should be treated as socio-spatial business environments. Competitive saturation is therefore intensified by the fact that businesses operate not only in a shared product market, but also in a shared symbolic

and urban-cultural arena. This is consistent with scholarship showing that coffee spaces are deeply connected to urban sociability and identity formation (Ardekani, 2016), and with local evidence that Makassar's culinary and consumption spaces are increasingly shaped by authenticity, place, and urban cultural value (Putra et al., 2025).

Taken together, the findings show that competitive saturation in Makassar's coffee shop industry is experienced as a multidimensional condition involving market crowding, strategic similarity, constant adaptation, and revised meanings of sustainability. The study extends existing local research, which has largely focused on consumer preference, promotion, loyalty, and purchase decisions, by repositioning business actors as the principal subjects of analysis (Aslam et al., 2023; Daryanti & Badrussaman, 2025; Mahendra et al., 2024).

The findings also suggest that saturation is not reducible to the number of coffee shops alone. What matters equally is the density of symbolic and strategic similarity across businesses. The more businesses converge around comparable products, aesthetics, locations, and promotional styles, the more difficult it becomes for entrepreneurs to sustain distinctiveness. In this sense, the saturated market is lived as a condition of compression: compressed visibility, compressed differentiation, and compressed certainty about the future.

From a phenomenological standpoint, these findings are important because they reveal how entrepreneurs make sense of a market that is both expanding and constraining at the same time. Growth is interpreted not simply as opportunity, but as a source of anxiety and obligation to keep adjusting. Thus, competitive saturation emerges not merely as an economic structure, but as a lived condition shaping entrepreneurial identity, everyday decision-making, and practical definitions of survival.

Practically, the findings imply that entrepreneurs, MSME communities, and local policymakers should not evaluate the health of the coffee shop industry only through business counts or tax contribution. A growing number of outlets may coexist with rising strain on smaller or less differentiated operators. More realistic sustainability strategies may therefore require stronger support for niche development, concept differentiation, localized branding, and adaptive business capability rather than celebrating expansion in purely numerical terms.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the rapid expansion of the coffee shop industry in Makassar has generated not only economic opportunity but also an increasingly dense competitive environment that may be understood as competitive saturation. In this context, the proliferation of coffee shops is no longer simply a sign of market growth; rather, it also reflects the emergence of a crowded business landscape characterized by similarity, intensified rivalry, narrowing differentiation, and growing pressure on business continuity.

The Makassar case demonstrates that coffee shops have developed as both economic units and socio-cultural urban spaces, making competition in this sector more complex than conventional market rivalry alone.

From a phenomenological perspective, the study highlights that competitive saturation is experienced by business actors as a lived and interpreted condition. Entrepreneurs do not encounter market density only through objective indicators such as the number of cafés or changes in revenue, but through everyday experiences of nearby competitors, imitation, promotional pressure, customer volatility, and uncertainty regarding long-term survival. These conditions shape how business actors understand competition, sustainability, and distinctiveness. Thus, the meaning of business sustainability in a saturated market shifts from expansion-oriented growth toward endurance, adaptability, relevance, and the ability to maintain a meaningful position within an increasingly crowded market.

The study also shows that business actors are not passive recipients of competitive pressure. Instead, they respond through adaptive practices such as repositioning, service refinement, niche differentiation, and the cultivation of customer loyalty and place-based identity. These responses indicate that sustainability in a dense urban coffee shop market depends not only on operational or financial performance but also on entrepreneurial meaning-making and the capacity to reinterpret pressure as a basis for strategic adjustment. In this respect, the study extends the discussion of red ocean competition by framing it more contextually as competitive saturation and by demonstrating that the effects of market density must be understood through the lived experiences of entrepreneurs.

The distinctive contribution of this research lies in the Makassar context, where coffee shops function simultaneously as public spaces, lifestyle arenas, and business ventures. This dual character makes competitive saturation in Makassar especially significant, because entrepreneurs compete not only for customers, but also for symbolic relevance, social visibility, and spatial legitimacy within the urban landscape. Accordingly, this study contributes theoretically by integrating competitive saturation, agglomeration, and phenomenological entrepreneurship into a single framework; empirically by providing a contextual understanding of coffee shop competition in Makassar; and practically by offering insight for entrepreneurs and policymakers to move beyond celebrating numerical growth toward fostering durability, meaningful differentiation, and a healthier entrepreneurial ecosystem.

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