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Product Variety as a Basis for Differentiation and Its Managerial Implications in Wholesalin

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Abstract: *This literature study examines product variety as a differentiation strategy in the wholesale market, focusing on how variety configuration creates competitive advantage and its managerial implications. The analysis reveals that successful differentiation requires balancing breadth and depth of product lines according to target segment characteristics. Product variety generates value when it simplifies buyer procurement processes, builds trust through consistent quality, and enhances shopping experience. Managerial implications encompass two critical areas: customer relationship strengthening through reliable stock availability and transaction convenience, and operational efficiency through process standardization and integrated information systems. The study contributes theoretically by extending differentiation literature to the wholesale sector, an area previously dominated by retail and manufacturing perspectives. Practically, it provides a conceptual framework for wholesale managers to design product portfolios that balance differentiation goals with operational capabilities. Future empirical research is recommended to quantitatively test relationships between variety dimensions and business performance across different wholesale contexts.*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary business landscape, the wholesale market confronts extraordinary competitive pressures. The emergence of digital platforms and shifts in buyer behavior have blurred the traditional boundaries among wholesalers, distributors, and retailers (Pamisetty, 2025). Evolving social trends exert significant influence on consumer behavior (Putri & Darmawan, 2025). Business actors at the wholesale level can no longer function merely as passive intermediaries. They are compelled to create additional value to survive and grow. Failure to respond to these dynamics can precipitate market share erosion and displacement by more innovative competitors (Ralyk & Mironov, 2023). This situation forces every wholesale business owner to reassess their position in the eyes of customers. They begin questioning what motivates buyers to remain loyal. The answer often proves less straightforward than price, residing instead in the capacity to provide solutions unavailable elsewhere.

Differentiation efforts have become a keyword for wholesale traders seeking to build competitive advantage (Petlenko, 2024). Beyond differentiation, product excellence is supported by organizations integrating technical, managerial, and conceptual expertise (Darmawan, 2024). Differentiation does not invariably necessitate creating revolutionary new products. In practice, numerous wholesale market actors discover differentiation opportunities through their methods of assembling and offering products (Wang, 2024). They observe that wholesale buyers, such as retailers or small business owners, possess highly diverse needs. Effective research activities assist organizations in observing and assessing market potential (Darmawan, 2025). In marketing, ensuring that customer value genuinely delivers perceived benefits remains crucial (Alamin *et al*., 2021). Some seek products with economical packaging, others require size variations, and still others desire comprehensive product types available in a single location. This diversity of needs constitutes an opportunity for wholesalers to develop customer-centric strategies (Grynko & Hviniashvili, 2023).

Product variety consequently emerges not merely as an inventory tactic but as a foundation for powerful differentiation strategy (Ding, 2023). A wholesaler capable of presenting thousands of product variations across numerous brands and categories creates ecosystem value for buyers. Brand image plays a role in shaping consumer perceptions and trust (Safira *et al*., 2025). Buyers need no longer move from one supplier to another to fulfill their shopping lists. The time and logistics cost efficiencies gained by buyers become substantial added value (Grynko & Hviniashvili, 2023). This phenomenon demonstrates that product variety can transform the wholesaler function from mere seller to business partner. This reasoning encourages entrepreneurs to consciously design their product mixes to be not only diverse but also relevant to the market segments they serve.

However, implementing product variety as a differentiation strategy is not without complexity. A balance must be managed between breadth of variation and operational efficiency (Chen & Kudriavtseva, 2025). Insufficient variation renders wholesalers easily imitable, whereas excessive variation without quality control can confuse buyers and increase storage costs (Rykhtikova *et al*., 2023). Wholesale market managers must astutely interpret market signals. They need to understand which products require depth of variation and which suffice as complements. These decisions demand profound understanding of buyer behavior and market trends, which unfortunately remains not always available to traditional business actors (Grynko & Hviniashvili, 2023). Every decision made can impact organizational performance (Darmawan, 2013). The tension between the desire for differentiation and the demands of efficiency constitutes the core dynamic of this strategy.

The study of product variety within the wholesale market context becomes relevant for systematic examination. Wholesale markets possess unique characteristics distinguishing them from retail, such as large sales volumes and economically rational buyers. Strategies successful in retail may not prove applicable in wholesale (Grynko & Hviniashvili, 2023). Therefore, an investigation specifically dissecting how product variety can be formulated and managed to create unique market positioning is required. This study is expected to provide a roadmap for academics and practitioners to further understand differentiation mechanisms in the wholesale sector, a sector that has long served as the backbone of goods distribution across various economies.

Many business actors in wholesale markets still perceive product variety merely as a matter of quantity (Ardi & Baihaqi, 2025). They race to increase item counts without critical evaluation of each item's contribution to business positioning. Consequently, warehouses become filled with slow-moving goods, while working capital becomes trapped in unproductive inventory. Buyers visiting may observe numerous items but do not necessarily experience strong differentiation value due to the absence of depth or distinctiveness within specific categories (Marzolf *et al*., 2023). This practice creates situations where wholesalers become difficult to identify. They become general players offering merchandise similar to competitors across the street. Competition consequently reverts to price wars that erode profit margins. Appropriate pricing can increase interest in reusing services (Rahayu & Darmawan, 2025). The fundamental problem is the inability to distinguish between defensive variety and strategically differentiated variety.

Furthermore, wholesalers frequently encounter difficulties aligning product variety with constantly evolving buyer preferences. They rely on intuition or long-standing habits to determine which goods to sell, rather than on systematic understanding of the market segments they serve. When wholesale buyers, comprising modern retailers, traditional stalls, or food service providers, seek specific solutions, the absence of appropriate products can sever loyalty (Qamaruddin *et al*., 2022). Buyers will seek other suppliers who better understand their needs. Information flow between buyers and sellers in traditional wholesale markets often remains unstructured, causing opportunities to adjust product assortment to latest trends to be missed. The accumulation of these problems results in weak wholesaler bargaining power vis-à-vis customers and supply chains, rendering them vulnerable to market fluctuations and pressure from large suppliers.

The changing structure of increasingly fragmented retail demands that the wholesaler role evolve (Kuzman *et al*., 2017). The emergence of modern convenience stores, franchise systems, and online retailers requiring diverse goods from a single source creates new demand. These buyers seek wholesale partners capable of providing complete solutions with consistent quality. Efforts to prioritize consumer interests can be realized through providing products with good quality (Ali *et al*., 2024). They are no longer satisfied with suppliers offering only a few commodities. This demand renders product variety a determining factor in supplier selection (Grynko & Hviniashvili, 2023). If wholesalers fail to respond by strategically organizing their product variety, they will lose significant market share to the new generation of buyers. This study is important for understanding how product variety can be organized to align with modern market segment needs while maintaining traditional customer bases. This understanding will assist wholesalers in remaining relevant amid changing retail business models.

Technological advancements provide opportunities for wholesalers to better manage sales data and customer preferences (Aithal *et al*., 2023). Technological development brings changes across various fields (Mardikaningsih & Werdoyo, 2024). With accurate data, a wholesaler can identify purchasing patterns, complementary products, and potential new categories capable of creating differentiation. However, without a clear conceptual framework regarding how product variety relates to differentiation, such data will yield limited meaning. Data analysis will merely produce stacks of numbers without strategic direction. Examination of this topic will provide foundations for wholesale managers not only to collect data but also to interpret it into strategic decisions about product mix. This will foster the creation of smarter, more adaptive wholesale markets capable of competing not only with fellow wholesalers but also with aggressive digital distribution platforms. Transparent and accountable digital systems support the stability of economic activities (Negara & Darmawan, 2023).

This study aims to conceptually elaborate the role of product variety as a differentiation instrument within the wholesale market environment. The first objective is to analyze how elements of variety such as breadth, depth, and product consistency can be synergistically configured to build market uniqueness difficult for competitors to imitate. This analysis will explore various approaches to constructing product portfolios that are not only rich in quantity but also relevant to the specific needs of wholesale buyers. The second objective is to identify and discuss the strategic implications of implementing product variety on two vital aspects of wholesale management, namely strengthening customer relationships and achieving operational efficiency. The theoretical contribution of this study is to enrich the marketing management literature, particularly in the realm of differentiation strategy within the distribution sector, which remains relatively underexplored. Practically, the findings of this study can serve as a reference framework for wholesale managers and business owners in formulating procurement policies and managing product assortment to attain sustainable competitive advantage.

METODE PENELITIAN

This study is designed as a pure library research project relying on the tracing and analysis of relevant written sources. The approach employed is qualitative, aiming to construct systematic conceptual understanding. In practice, library research demands that researchers do not merely summarize reading materials but rather conduct critical synthesis of various ideas scattered across diverse literature. As emphasized by Creswell (2009), this process involves identifying, evaluating, and interpreting findings from previous research to develop a coherent framework of thought. The author traced various academic sources discussing topics in marketing management, industrial buyer behavior, differentiation strategy, and product and retail management. The tracing process was conducted gradually, commencing with the identification of key terms such as product assortment, differentiation strategy, wholesale marketing, and buyer behavior to obtain broad literature coverage.

Following the collection of library materials, the subsequent step involved conducting content analysis using a thematic approach. This technique enabled the author to categorize various findings and ideas into principal themes relevant to the research questions. According to Walliman (2021), content analysis in qualitative research permits researchers to draw valid conclusions from texts by attending to the contexts in which they appear. The author critically read each source, recorded key arguments, and compared perspectives across sources to identify common threads or even contradictions that enrich the analysis. The sources utilized encompassed standard textbooks, reputable academic journal articles, and seminar proceedings addressing strategic issues in marketing. This approach ensures that every statement within the discussion possesses a strong academic foundation. Through this method, the study is anticipated to generate a synthesis of knowledge that is not merely descriptive but also analytical and relevant for both theoretical development and practical application in the field.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Indicators for Measuring Product Variety as a Basis for Differentiation and Their Managerial Implications for Wholesale Businesses

Within the competitive wholesale industry, the capacity to offer broad and deep product variety constitutes one of the primary pillars of differentiation strategy. Wholesale traders function as critical intermediaries between producers and retailers, and the value they provide is often measured by their ability to furnish choices that meet the needs of diverse market segments.

End consumers, through retailers, demand variation; consequently, wholesalers capable of effectively managing and presenting product variety will secure the loyalty of their business customers. Understanding the indicators and managerial implications of product variety is key to building sustainable competitive advantage in this sector.

A foundational theory elucidating the measurement indicators of product variety originates from the operations and marketing management concepts advanced by Jay Heizer and Barry Render (2017). Within the operations management perspective, product variety is understood as the firm's capability to provide various different product choices within a single category to satisfy diverse consumer needs. This variety encompasses variations in design, size, features, and product specifications offered in the marketplace. For wholesalers, this capability translates into the ability to serve retailers with different specializations, ranging from fashion boutiques seeking unique designs to hardware stores requiring various specification sizes.

Tabel. 1 Indicators of Product Variety

No	Indicator	Description	Measurement Focus
1	Product Type Variation	The diversity of product categories offered within a product line.	Number of product types available
2	Design Variation	Differences in product models, styles, colors, or shapes offered to consumers.	Variety of product designs or models
3	Size / Specification Variation	Availability of different sizes, capacities, or technical specifications.	Range of sizes or specifications offered
4	Feature Variation	Differences in product attributes or functional characteristics that distinguish one product from another.	Number and diversity of product features
5	Product Choice Availability	The extent to which consumers have multiple alternatives within the same product category.	Breadth of options available to consumers

According to Heizer and Render, product variety constitutes one of the important strategies for enhancing market appeal and expanding consumer segmentation. Firms capable of offering diverse product choices tend to possess greater opportunities to satisfy varying consumer preferences. However, increasing product variety must also be managed carefully as it can affect production process complexity, operational costs, and supply chain management. Within the wholesale context, the managerial implications are particularly pronounced, as warehouses must be managed with sophisticated systems, logistics must operate with timeliness, and working capital must be allocated efficiently amidst the numerous item variations stored.

Within this framework, product variety can be measured through several primary indicators. The first indicator is product type variation, namely the number of categories or product types offered by the firm within a single product line. The greater the number of product types available, the higher the level of product variety possessed by the firm. Product type variation enables consumers to select products most aligned with their needs and preferences. For wholesalers, this indicator constitutes the foundation for retailers to engage in one-stop shopping, a principal selling point that reduces their search costs.

The second indicator is design variation. Design variation reflects differences in form, model, color, or style possessed by products within a single category. Diverse design provides aesthetic value while simultaneously offering product differentiation in the market, thereby increasing appeal for consumers with varying tastes. Wholesalers operating in fashion or home decoration must astutely interpret trends and provide this design variation, as it directly impacts the competitiveness of the retailers they serve.

The third indicator is size or specification variation. Firms frequently offer products in various sizes, capacities, or technical specifications to accommodate differing consumer needs. This size or specification variation enables products to be utilized by various market segments with heterogeneous requirements. In wholesale businesses, for instance regarding electronic components or industrial supplies, this specification variation constitutes not merely an option but rather a necessity to meet customer technical standards.

The fourth indicator is feature variation. Product features encompass additional functions or special characteristics distinguishing one product from others within the same line. The addition of specific features can enhance product utility while providing broader choices for consumers. At the wholesale level, understanding these features is important for assisting retailers in providing appropriate recommendations to end consumers, thereby creating value throughout the distribution chain.

The final indicator is product choice availability. This indicator describes the extent to which consumers possess sufficient product alternatives when making purchases. The more alternatives available within a single product category, the higher the level of product variety offered by the firm. For wholesalers, this choice availability must be balanced with superior inventory management to avoid stockouts that can disappoint retailers and damage long-term business relationships.

Overall, the theory advanced by Heizer and Render emphasizes that product variety constitutes an important strategy for creating consumer value through the provision of various different product choices. By measuring product variety through indicators such as product type variation, design variation, size or specification variation, feature variation, and product choice availability, firms can evaluate the extent to which their implemented product differentiation strategy effectively meets market needs. Ultimately, for wholesale management, superior product variety management will create strong positioning, wherein they are perceived not merely as distributors but rather as strategic partners providing market solutions through appropriate and diverse product curation.

Configuring Product Variety in Building Wholesale Market Differentiation

Within the competitive wholesale market, the capacity to distinguish oneself constitutes a primary determinant of success. One of the most powerful strategies for achieving this is through carefully designed product variety configuration. Product variety configuration in wholesale business requires understanding two interrelated principal dimensions, namely product breadth and product depth. Breadth refers to the number of categories or product lines offered, while depth indicates the variation within each category, such as size, brand, or model. A wholesaler seeking to build differentiation must be capable of balancing these two dimensions according to the characteristics of the market served. Excessive focus on breadth without attention to depth will cause the wholesaler to appear as a general goods provider offering many items but excelling in none. Conversely, excessive depth within narrow categories may result in the wholesaler being known only as a specialist, which actually limits appeal for buyers seeking completeness. Appropriate balance creates value perception in buyers' minds that the wholesaler is capable of meeting diverse needs without compromising choices within each category. Thus, strategic decisions regarding product breadth and depth constitute the initial foundation for building a wholesaler image that is distinct and superior in customers' perception (Auliyah & Darmawan, 2025).

Understanding customer needs is key to creating relevant and valuable product configuration (Cadeaux & Yee, 2013). Wholesale buyers, who are generally retailers or business owners, possess rational considerations for selecting suppliers. They seek efficiency in goods procurement to minimize transportation costs and time wasted moving from one supplier to another. When a wholesaler is capable of providing complementary products in a single location, the perceived added value for buyers increases significantly (Eriksson *et al*., 2013). For instance, a restaurant owner requires rice, cooking oil, prepared spices, and simple kitchen equipment. If all these needs are available at one wholesaler with consistent quality, then that wholesaler has created functional differentiation. This type of differentiation depends on the capacity to simplify the buyer's supply chain, not solely on price (Haitao, 2022). Price indeed constitutes a consideration, but efficiency and completeness often take precedence (Putri & Darmawan, 2023). Ultimately, product configuration designed to create synergy among categories becomes a robust source of competitive advantage because it directly addresses customers' rational needs for efficiency.

An effective differentiation strategy must always be grounded in a profound understanding of diverse customers (Petlenko, 2024). Differentiation through product variety is also closely linked to the comprehension of market segmentation. A wholesaler cannot possibly be everything to everyone, thus necessitating strategic decisions regarding which segments will constitute the primary focus. Wholesale buyers can be categorized based on business size, industry type, or even geographical preferences. By way of illustration, a wholesaler serving traditional market traders will require a different product configuration compared to a wholesaler serving modern stores or hotels. Traditional market traders may prioritize the availability of goods in small packaging with low unit prices, whereas hotels require products in large packaging with specific specifications. The capacity to discern these differences and translate them into decisions regarding which goods should be available constitutes a form of differentiation based on customer knowledge. This knowledge becomes an intangible asset difficult for competitors to imitate, as it is constructed from interactions and accumulated experience, which subsequently ensures that the product variety offered remains precisely targeted.

Once product variety has been established, maintaining quality becomes a crucial differentiating factor (Rohman *et al*., 2023). Consistency in product quality amidst extensive variety also constitutes a critical factor determining differentiation success. Wholesale buyers develop trust in suppliers when they are confident that every time they purchase a specific product, its quality will remain consistent. The level of trust becomes an important factor in determining choices (Hidayat & Darmawan, 2025). If a wholesaler offers numerous brands for the same category but quality fluctuates, buyers will actually become confused and tend to seek more reliable suppliers. Therefore, product variety management must be accompanied by a stringent supplier selection system. Wholesalers need to build a reputation as curators who only sell goods meeting certain quality standards. This reputation will cultivate loyalty, as buyers feel secure and need not conduct repeated quality checks with each transaction. Over the long term, this trust constitutes the foundation of enduring business relationships and fundamentally distinguishes such wholesalers from competitors who may rely solely on low prices.

Differentiation concerns not only what is sold but also how the product is presented to customers (Cahyani, 2024). The utilization of physical and virtual space to present product variety also contributes to differentiation perception. In traditional wholesale markets, the physical layout of warehouses or display cases influences buyer ease in locating goods. The grouping of products into logical categories, the placement of complementary items in proximity, and ease of access create a superior shopping experience. This positive experience becomes added value embedded in buyers' perceptions. Meanwhile, for wholesalers who have expanded into digital platforms, interfaces facilitating product search and comparison also become part of differentiation. The capacity to present thousands of items in a well-structured digital catalog, complete with specification information and real-time stock availability, provides convenience that manual wholesalers cannot offer. Product variety configuration thus concerns both what is sold and how those products are presented to customers, thereby creating a superior and memorable shopping experience.

Flexibility becomes key to ensuring product variety remains relevant in dynamic markets (Kenning *et al*., 2011). Responsible marketing practices play a role in shaping future sustainability (Arifin & Darmawan, 2021). Furthermore, the dynamics of seasonal demand or ephemeral trends demand flexibility in product variety configuration. Wholesalers capable of rapidly adjusting their product assortment to changing market needs will possess advantages over slower competitors (Ding, 2023). For instance, approaching specific holidays, there occurs a surge in demand for particular products such as cookies or decorative materials. If a wholesaler consistently provides relevant seasonal products, buyers will make them the primary destination when such moments arrive. This flexibility requires a responsive procurement system and the capacity to predict trends. Thus, differentiation through product variety is dynamic and continuously evolves over time. Wholesalers succeeding in this regard will be perceived not merely as sellers but as reliable business partners who understand the rhythms and seasonal needs of their customers.

To strengthen their unique market position, wholesalers can progress further by offering something competitors do not possess (Cadeaux & Yee, 2013). Another approach that can be pursued involves creating exclusive products or house brands within the offered portfolio. Although wholesalers generally do not manufacture goods themselves, they can collaborate with producers to create products with special specifications sold exclusively at their establishments. Such products become powerful differentiators because they cannot be found at competitors. Buyers requiring these products are compelled to patronize the relevant wholesaler. The presence of house brands also enables wholesalers to control profit margins more effectively. From the buyer's perspective, the availability of exclusive products enhances appeal because they can offer something unique to their own customers. This initiative creates positive ripple effects throughout the distribution chain and cultivates deep-seated loyalty.

However, the ambition to present product variety must always be balanced with prudent business considerations (Amine & Cadenat, 2003). Nevertheless, building differentiation through product variety cannot be divorced from the reality of costs. The diversity of choices can influence an individual's decision-making process, yet it also carries implications for operational burden (Margareta & Darmawan, 2025). Every additional item in inventory absorbs working capital, requires storage space, and adds to management complexity. Wholesalers must carefully calculate the trade-off between differentiation benefits and the cost burden incurred. Regular analysis of margin contribution for each product or category needs to be conducted. Slow-moving products necessary for completing a category may still be retained for differentiation purposes, albeit with more efficient inventory management. Meanwhile, products contributing nothing to positioning should ideally be eliminated. Such decisions require courage, as wholesale owners are often reluctant to discontinue long-standing products despite poor performance. This discipline in product portfolio management distinguishes wholesalers genuinely and consciously executing differentiation strategies from those merely following habit, thereby ensuring business sustainability.

In the digital era, data becomes a valuable asset for refining product configuration strategy. The development of information technology provides opportunities for wholesalers to analyze sales patterns more accurately in determining product configuration. Accumulated transaction data can be processed to identify which products are frequently purchased together by customers. This information proves invaluable for designing bundles or determining potential new categories. For instance, if data indicates that detergent buyers also tend to purchase fabric softener, these two products can be grouped in joint promotions or placed in proximity. Appropriate promotions can enhance attention and interest (Nahar *et al*., 2025). Such data-driven approaches enable product configuration decisions to become more objective and measurable. Wholesalers capable of effectively utilizing data will excel in responding to market needs with precision, compared to competitors still relying on intuition alone. Thus, differentiation concerns not only products but also the intelligence to manage information in creating unique added value.

Superior human resources constitute the key to realizing the full potential of product variety. Another aspect requiring consideration is the role of human resources in actualizing differentiation through product variety. Sales personnel or warehouse staff possessing product knowledge substantially assist buyers in selecting appropriate goods. Worker dedication cultivated through knowledge management reinforces organizational and product excellence (Eddine *et al*., 2023). When product variety is high, the potential for buyer confusion also increases. Herein lies the crucial role of competent staff. They can act as consultants recommending products according to needs, explaining differences among variants, or providing information about stock availability. These positive human interactions create emotional bonds difficult for competitors to replicate, even with similar products but poor service. Investment in staff training to thoroughly understand the product portfolio constitutes an inseparable component of differentiation strategy. The combination of strategically designed product variety and superior service quality yields an exceptionally powerful value proposition, wherein ease of access and expert advice converge to enhance customer inclination to return repeatedly (Fahriza & Darmawan, 2025).

Competitive advantage can also be built through robust networks and strong partnerships with suppliers. Furthermore, collaboration with suppliers can constitute a source of differentiation not easily imitated. When a wholesaler establishes close relationships with specific manufacturers, they can gain early access to new products or limited editions before competitors obtain them (Farouk & Zainab, 2025). This temporal advantage proves exceedingly valuable, particularly for products in high market demand. Buyers who recognize that a particular wholesaler consistently sells new items first will tend to remain loyal. Collaboration can also encompass joint training, promotional support, or even custom product development. Such relationships require time and commitment to cultivate, rendering them difficult to replicate in the short term. Wholesalers succeeding in strategically managing supplier relationships will possess product portfolios that are not only diverse but also endowed with uniqueness and added value derived from such exclusive partnerships.

Combining the strengths of specialization with the convenience of generalism frequently proves to be the most successful approach. In practice, differentiation through product variety is often manifested in the form of specialization within particular categories while still providing complementary products from other categories (Grant, 2024). This model enables wholesalers to be recognized as experts in specific domains, thereby attracting buyers seeking that expertise, yet they remain capable of retaining buyers desiring one-stop convenience. For instance, a building materials wholesaler might possess thousands of paint variations, adhesives, and application tools, while also providing safety equipment or project uniforms. In this manner, they become the primary destination for contractors requiring building materials, simultaneously fulfilling secondary needs that may arise. This hybrid approach often proves more sustainable compared to attempting to become either a pure generalist or an extreme specialist. This is because the customer base developed is broader yet maintains a clear identity as both the expert and the comprehensive solution provider.

Differentiation constitutes a continuous process requiring constant evaluation and adaptation. The success of product variety configuration in building differentiation is substantially determined by the wholesaler's capacity to consistently evaluate and adjust their portfolio (Ralyk & Mironov, 2023). Markets change, buyer tastes shift, and competitors continuously innovate. Wholesalers who become complacent with identical product configurations over many years will fall behind. Regular feedback mechanisms are required, both from direct buyers and from sales data analysis, to ensure that the variety offered remains relevant. This evaluation process must involve various parties within the organization, ranging from procurement and marketing to customer service departments. Through a systemic and adaptive approach, product variety becomes not merely a temporary differentiation tool but rather an evolving organizational capability that continuously provides long-term competitive advantage amidst wholesale market dynamics.

Managerial Implications of Product Variety Strategy for Customer Relationships and Operational Efficiency in Wholesale Businesses

The implementation of product variety strategy carries direct consequences for how wholesalers interact with their customer base (Ding, 2023). When a wholesaler expands the range of goods offered, they automatically attract the attention of broader buyer segments. Buyers who previously came only to purchase one or two types of goods, upon observing the available completeness, tend to expand their shopping lists. Consumer trends determine the direction and pace of industry development (Gani *et al*., 2021). This behavior creates opportunities for wholesalers to build more intensive relationships. Each transactional interaction becomes a moment for deeper understanding of customer preferences. Sales personnel can record which products are commonly purchased together, which brands are most sought after, and seasonal purchasing patterns. This information, if properly managed, will become the foundation for future service personalization. The more data accumulated, the more precise the recommendations that can be provided, thereby making customers feel understood and valued.

Customer trust in wholesalers thrives in environments where product availability is reliable (Rykhtikova *et al*., 2023). Product variety strategy implemented without inventory management discipline can actually damage this trust. Buyers disappointed by frequent stockouts will begin seeking alternative suppliers. Therefore, the first managerial implication is the necessity for accurate, real-time inventory control systems. Wholesalers must be capable of monitoring stock movement for every item, determining optimal reorder points, and identifying slow-moving products. Such systems enable wholesalers to maintain high availability levels without excessive stock accumulation. With guaranteed availability, buyers can plan their businesses with greater certainty. They know that whenever they come, their needs will be fulfilled. This certainty constitutes added value that reinforces long-term loyalty.

Customer relationships are also influenced by transaction convenience amidst high product variety (Kumar *et al*., 2024). Complicated purchasing processes, long queues, or difficulty in calculating total purchases can erode the benefits of variety itself. Wholesale managers need to design payment and logistics systems capable of handling large transaction volumes efficiently. Implementation of modern cashier technology, separation of lanes for wholesale and retail buyers, or delivery services can provide solutions. This convenience creates positive shopping experiences, encouraging buyers to return. Moreover, satisfied buyers tend to recommend the wholesaler to their business associates. Thus, investment in operational convenience not only retains existing customers but also attracts new ones through effective, low-cost word-of-mouth promotion. Word of mouth can constitute an effective and low-cost promotional strategy (Yusuf *et al*., 2025).

The next managerial implication pertains to pricing policy amidst product variety. Wholesalers offering thousands of items must possess coherent pricing strategies to avoid confusing buyers (Qamaruddin *et al*., 2022). Excessively varied prices for similar products can raise questions about consistency. Conversely, excessively uniform prices can eliminate competitiveness for certain products that are indeed price-sensitive. Managers need to segment products based on price elasticity and competitive positioning. Staple products with high demand may be sold with thin margins to attract buyers, while complementary or specialty products can carry higher margins. This strategy, often termed loss leadership, leverages product variety to direct purchasing behavior. Buyers come due to low prices on certain items but ultimately purchase other goods more profitable for the wholesaler.

In managing customer relationships, effective communication about product variety becomes critically important. Many wholesalers neglect this aspect, assuming that buyers will find the goods they seek on their own. Yet, amidst thousands of items, buyers frequently miss products they actually need because they are unaware of their existence. Wholesale managers need to actively communicate available product variety through various channels. Signage within warehouses, periodic printed catalogs, or instant messaging groups with loyal customers can serve as effective media. Good communication ensures that the value of product variety is genuinely perceived by customers. The more customers know about the wholesaler's completeness, the greater the likelihood they will make that wholesaler their primary shopping destination.

Product variety strategy also impacts human resource management practices within the wholesale environment. The existing workforce must possess the capacity to handle high inventory complexity. Warehouse staff need detailed understanding of storage layouts to enable rapid item retrieval. Sales staff must master product knowledge to effectively answer buyer questions. The implication is that managers need to provide continuous training and create incentive systems encouraging employees to continuously learn. Competent employees will feel more confident in their work, while buyers receive satisfying service. The relationships between employees and customers cultivated through daily positive interactions become social adhesives difficult for competitors to replicate. Thus, investment in employee development constitutes an inseparable component of product variety strategy.

From the perspective of operational efficiency, the complexity engendered by product variety must be managed through process standardization. Every additional new item should ideally undergo clear procedures, ranging from feasibility evaluation, item code assignment, to storage location determination. Without standardization, chaos will ensue and efficiency will actually decline. Wholesale managers need to design structured workflows for goods receiving, storage, and dispatching. The implementation of computerized warehouse management systems can prove highly beneficial in this regard. Such systems are capable of tracking the movement of every item, optimizing product placement based on movement frequency, and providing early warnings when stock levels run low. With standardized processes, the risk of human error can be minimized and labor productivity significantly increased.

Nevertheless, standardization must not diminish the flexibility required to respond to customer needs (Cabri & Fioretti, 2022). Wholesalers that become excessively rigid in their procedures may lose business opportunities due to slowness in accommodating special requests. The balance between efficiency and responsiveness constitutes a genuine managerial challenge. One approach that can be pursued involves implementing a tiered inventory management system. Products with stable demand and high volume are managed through highly standardized and automated procedures. Meanwhile, special products with unpredictable demand are managed more flexibly, involving direct discussion between managers and customers. This approach enables wholesalers to remain efficient in most of their operations while retaining agility to serve specific needs that constitute sources of differentiation.

Another implication that emerges is the need for integrated information systems connecting sales, procurement, and finance departments. Sales data must be directly accessible to the procurement department for determining reorder timing. Customer accounts receivable data must be available to the sales department for deciding whether to extend further credit services. When product variety is high, stalled information flow can lead to erroneous decisions. Risk perception can influence an individual's inclination to make decisions (Cahyani & Darmawan, 2025). For instance, the procurement department might order goods already abundant in stock due to unawareness of current sales data. Consequently, capital is wasted and the risk of obsolete inventory increases. Investment in integrated business management software becomes highly relevant in this scenario. A robust system will unify all functions within a single platform, enabling full visibility over all operational aspects and facilitating more intelligent decision-making.

Product variety strategy also affects the wholesaler's relationships with suppliers or manufacturers (Gao *et al*., 2015). The more diverse the products sold, the greater the number of suppliers that must be managed. Each supplier possesses their own policies regarding pricing, minimum orders, delivery, and product returns. Managing dozens or even hundreds of these relationships requires substantial organizational capacity. Wholesale managers need to categorize suppliers based on priority and contribution to the business. Core suppliers providing essential products require strategic partnerships, including long-term negotiations and planning information exchange. Complementary suppliers can be managed through a more transactional approach. Through this categorization, limited managerial resources can be optimally allocated. Strong relationships with core suppliers can also unlock opportunities for securing special terms not offered to competitors.

High product variety potentially increases the risk of obsolete or expired goods, particularly for products with limited shelf life. The managerial implication is the need for disciplined stock rotation systems, with the first-in first-out principle applied consistently. Products approaching expiration must be promptly identified and promoted to ensure rapid sale. Failing this, losses from damaged goods will erode profit margins. Managers need clear policies regarding handling of near-expiry goods, including discount mechanisms or collaboration with specific customers willing to purchase at special prices. Appropriate policies can generate positive impacts for various parties (Musyafak & Darmawan, 2025). This risk management requires daily attention and meticulousness, thus constituting an operational burden that must be factored into feasibility analyses of product variety strategies.

From a financial perspective, the impact of product variety on working capital cannot be overlooked. Every additional item in inventory represents capital tied up and unavailable for other purposes. Wholesalers must maintain careful cash flow projections to ensure that product assortment expansion does not impair business liquidity. In practice, many wholesalers experiencing financial difficulties actually do so because of excessive enthusiasm in adding items without accounting for capital capacity. Managers need to establish limits on total inventory value that can be accommodated, as well as conduct periodic evaluations of stock turnover for each category. Slow-moving products require reassessment of their viability. Such products might be retained for strategic reasons, but with smaller stock quantities or reduced ordering frequency. This discipline in working capital management constitutes a primary determinant of long-term wholesale financial health.

Every business organization requires quality services to support its operations (Oluwatoyin & Mardikaningsih, 2024). Operational efficiency related to product variety is also reflected in the wholesaler's ability to leverage economies of scale in procurement. With large purchase volumes from various suppliers, wholesalers should be capable of negotiating lower purchase prices. However, this can only materialize if the procurement function is managed professionally and coordinately. Fragmented purchasing across departments or without careful planning will actually forfeit potential savings. Managers need to establish centralized procurement systems that monitor all requirements, conduct aggregate negotiations, and schedule deliveries efficiently. Economies of scale can also be achieved in distribution, where shipments from various suppliers can be consolidated to reduce transportation costs. Efficient logistics management will reduce operational costs, which can ultimately be translated into more competitive prices or larger margins.

The most fundamental managerial implication is the mindset shift from mere trader to product portfolio manager. Change management depends on managerial capability to control dynamics (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2022). Wholesalers successful in product variety strategy view every item as an asset that must contribute, whether financially or strategically. They do not hesitate to add promising new items, yet they are equally unafraid to discontinue items that have become irrelevant. These decisions are made based on data and analysis, not sentiment or habit. A corporate culture supporting measured experimentation and learning from mistakes is essential within this mindset. Managers need to encourage teams to continuously seek new opportunities, test market responses, and evaluate outcomes objectively. These improvement efforts can enhance performance quality (Hariani *et al.*, 2025). With such a culture, wholesalers are not only capable of managing product variety complexity but also of making it a sustainable growth engine. Sustainability management has become a strategic imperative for organizations

(Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2021).

Customer relationships and operational efficiency are essentially two sides of the same coin within product variety strategy. Proficient management of one aspect will support the other. Operational efficiency enables wholesalers to offer competitive prices and guaranteed product availability, which in turn strengthens customer relationships. Conversely, close customer relationships provide valuable information for enhancing efficiency, for instance through more accurate demand forecasting thereby reducing overstock risk. Therefore, wholesale managers need to view these two aspects integratively, not as trade-offs. Synergy between them will create a virtuous circle that reinforces the wholesaler's competitive position over time. The capacity to build and maintain this synergy distinguishes ordinary wholesalers from those that are truly superior.

CONCLUSION

Product variety constitutes a strategic instrument that can be configured to build differentiation in wholesale markets, rather than merely an inventory tactic. Appropriate configuration requires balance between category breadth and variation depth, tailored to the characteristics of the market segments served. Differentiation materializes when product variety is capable of creating efficiency value for buyers, building trust through quality consistency, and generating superior shopping experiences. On the other hand, implementation of this strategy carries significant managerial implications for two principal aspects. First, strengthening customer relationships requires systems guaranteeing product availability, transaction convenience, and effective communication regarding the range of products offered. Second, operational efficiency demands process standardization, disciplined inventory management, and integrated information systems to manage arising complexity. The success of product variety strategy depends heavily on managers' ability to align product mix decisions with organizational capacity to simultaneously manage customer relationships and operational efficiency.

The findings of this study offer theoretical implications for the development of marketing management literature, particularly in extending understanding of differentiation strategy within the distribution sector, which has hitherto been examined more extensively from manufacturer or retail perspectives. Practically, wholesale market managers need to develop data-based inventory management systems to support more accurate product configuration decisions. Investment in employee training becomes imperative so that sales personnel can function as consultants assisting buyers in navigating product variety. Procurement policies must also be directed toward building strategic partnerships with core suppliers to secure access to exclusive products or special terms. Operationally, the implementation of information technology integrating sales, procurement, and financial data is essential for maintaining efficiency amidst high inventory complexity.

Future research is recommended to conduct quantitative empirical studies to test relationships between product variety dimensions and wholesale business performance in a more measurable manner. Comparative studies between traditional and modern wholesale markets could also provide insights into contextual factors influencing the effectiveness of this strategy. Practitioners are advised to commence product variety strategy implementation by first mapping primary customer segments, then designing appropriate product portfolios. Periodic evaluation of stock turnover and margin contribution for each category should be conducted to ensure that the variety offered remains relevant and profitable. Wholesale trade associations can facilitate knowledge-sharing forums among members regarding best practices in product variety management, including utilization of simple, affordable technology for small enterprises. Collaboration with higher education institutions through community service programs can also serve as a vehicle for knowledge transfer regarding inventory management and marketing strategies for medium-scale wholesalers.

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