



Strategic Market Positioning and Differentiation of Ilaji Resort in Nigeria's Hospitality Sector

¹Oyebola K. Oyelami, & ²Olumuyiwa A. Akande

^{1&2} Tourism and Development Programme, Department of Sustainability Studies, Faculty of Multi-Disciplinary Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

¹<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9614-0365>

²<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2791-5097>

*Corresponding Author: oyelamimojiroye@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Background: Nigeria's hospitality industry is rapidly expanding, compelling resorts and hotels to adopt innovative strategies to remain competitive, relevant, and profitable. Within this dynamic environment, Ilaji Resort, located in Akanran, Ibadan, Oyo State, stands out as a regional multi-purpose establishment integrating leisure, sports, religion, and culture. Its unique approach to service design and destination experience offers a valuable case for examining strategic market positioning and differentiation in an emerging economy context.

Objective: This study examined the strategic market positioning and differentiation strategies employed by Ilaji Resort in Nigeria's hospitality sector. It explored how the resort defines its market space, develops distinctive service offerings, and applies these strategies to enhance its performance and customer engagement.

Method: Adopting a qualitative research design, the study utilised secondary data obtained from institutional reports, media publications, and online hospitality reviews. Data were analyzed thematically using thematic content analysis to identify the resort's competitive advantages within the regional market.

Results: Findings revealed that Ilaji Resort's differentiation is anchored on its blend of sports tourism, religious amenities, wellness experiences, and cultural branding. Its well-defined market positioning has contributed to improved brand visibility, stronger customer loyalty, and a sustainable competitive edge. However, the study also noted challenges such as limited digital visibility and the need for broader strategic alliances.

Conclusion:

The study establishes that Ilaji Resort's success lies in its ability to merge multiple hospitality dimensions into a unified brand experience. Its model demonstrates how a hybrid service structure can drive market differentiation and enhance destination competitiveness within Nigeria's hospitality landscape.

Unique Contribution: This study provides fresh insights into how indigenous hospitality enterprises can achieve brand differentiation through strategic integration of sports, culture, and wellness. It extends existing literature on hospitality marketing and the understanding of how local resorts in Nigeria can use strategic planning to compete.

Key Recommendation: Hospitality firms should develop strategic plans that strengthen customer service, digital branding, and alliance formation with eco-tourism and leisure establishments to sustain competitive advantage in Nigeria's growing hospitality industry.

Keywords: Market Positioning, Differentiation, Hospitality Strategy, Ilaji Resort, Branding, Tourism, Nigeria



INTRODUCTION

The hospitality sector in Nigeria has experienced remarkable growth over the past decade, with increasing investment in hotels, resorts, and recreational facilities aimed at attracting both domestic and international tourists. As this evolution continues, competition has intensified, compelling hospitality brands to adopt more strategic approaches to remain relevant and profitable. One such approach is the combined use of strategic market positioning and differentiation, which enable organisations to define their market space and distinguish themselves from competitors.

Positioning refers to the image a brand occupies in the minds of its target audience, while differentiation relates to the unique attributes or experiences that set a business apart from others (Phillips & Moutinho, 2014). In the hospitality industry, particularly within emerging markets like Nigeria, effective positioning is no longer defined merely by price or location but by the creation of a compelling brand identity that aligns with customer values and expectations (Olsen & Roper, 1998). Differentiation requires a deep understanding of customer behaviour and a conscious effort to deliver distinctive experiences, whether through culture, innovation, or service quality (Sabourin, 2021; Oginyi, et al., 2023).

Ilaji Resort, located in Akanran, on the outskirts of Ibadan in Oyo State, offers a unique case study of a regional hospitality enterprise that integrates leisure, religion, wellness, and sports tourism. The resort has rapidly grown in visibility and appeal, positioning itself as both a recreational and cultural destination. However, despite its expansion and popularity, there is limited academic attention on how Ilaji Resort strategically positions itself within Nigeria's broader hospitality market and what specific tactics it employs to achieve differentiation from competing resorts and hotels.

Previous studies on market positioning in Nigeria's hospitality sector have largely focused on urban hotels in Lagos and Abuja (Etim et al., 2021; Uboegbulam & Ajao, 2021), often emphasizing customer satisfaction and service quality rather than strategic branding and market differentiation. Similarly, most research adopts quantitative approaches, leaving a gap in qualitative studies that provide contextual insights into how indigenous hospitality enterprises apply strategic concepts in practice. Furthermore, existing literature concentrates on large hotel chains and international franchises, overlooking mid-sized and locally owned resorts that are critical to Nigeria's growing tourism economy. This study fills that gap by focusing on Ilaji Resort, which represents a hybrid model of local innovation and strategic hospitality management.

In an industry where customers' choices are increasingly driven by perceived value, emotional connection, and brand uniqueness (Etim et al., 2021), Ilaji Resort's success depends on more than operational excellence it requires deliberate market positioning and consistent differentiation. The study, therefore, examined how Ilaji Resort defines its brand identity and market niche, how it distinguishes itself through unique service offerings, and how these strategies contribute to its competitiveness in the Nigerian hospitality landscape.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the current position of Ilaji Resort within Nigeria's hospitality market?
2. What differentiation strategies has Ilaji Resort adopted to stand out from competitors?
3. What competitive advantages have resulted from these strategies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study applied Porter's Generic Strategies Theory, with emphasis on differentiation and strategic positioning. Porter (1985) proposes three primary approaches through which businesses can achieve competitive advantage: cost leadership, differentiation, and focus. Cost leadership involves minimizing operational costs to appeal to price-sensitive customers. Differentiation refers to offering unique products or services that provide added value for a specific customer segment. The focus strategy targets a narrowly defined market, either through cost focus; offering lower-priced services to a niche or differentiation focus providing specialized, high-value services tailored to that group.

Within Nigeria's hospitality industry, and particularly at Ilaji Resort, differentiation provides a useful lens for understanding how a resort can stand out in an increasingly competitive, experience-driven market. Unlike many conventional city-center hotels that offer similar amenities and experiences, Ilaji Resort integrates hospitality with sports, wellness, culture, and natural attractions. This combination creates a distinctive identity that is difficult for competitors to replicate, attracting guests seeking memorable and diverse experiences and encouraging repeat visits.

Strategic positioning complements differentiation by determining how these unique attributes are communicated and how they shape public perception. As Chepkwei (2021) notes, a positioning strategy is effective only when it aligns both with market expectations and the organisation's capacity to consistently deliver on its promises. Strategic market positioning is the deliberate efforts by a hospitality brand to occupy a distinct place in the minds of customers relative to competitors (Uboegbulam & Ajao, 2021). Differentiation strategy as used in this study, on the other hand is the unique attributes, services, or experiences a business uses to stand apart from competitors in a saturated market (Sabourin, 2021). Customer retention is the ability of a hospitality brand to maintain ongoing relationships with its clients by providing satisfaction and value; while Brand identity has to do with the visible and emotional elements of a brand that create recognition and loyalty in the consumer's mind (Etim et al., 2021).



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design that focused on gathering and analyzing information from already existing sources to explore how Ilaji Resort positions itself in Nigeria's hospitality market and what makes it different from other resorts.

Study Area

Ilaji Resort is located in Oloyo Village, Off Ona-Ara Local Government Secretariat, in Akanran, on the outskirts of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. Positioned away from the noise and congestion of the city, the resort spans a vast and serene estate that integrates hospitality, sports, religion, wellness, and leisure experiences in one environment. Its semi-rural location offers a quiet atmosphere conducive for relaxation, retreats, and group events, while still being accessible to visitors from within and outside Ibadan. The facility features a combination of hotel accommodations, sports infrastructure including a football academy, event halls, recreational areas, and religious spaces.

Figure 1: Ilaji Resort



From *Ilaji Resort grounds* [Photograph], by Ilaji Resort, 2025. Retrieved September 11, 2025, from <https://ilajiresort.ng/>

Data Sources

Data for this study were drawn exclusively from secondary sources. These sources fall into two broad categories: Academic Literature and Publicly Available Information on Ilaji Resort



Method of Analysis

A thematic content analysis approach was used to analyze the data. This method was selected because it allows for the identification and interpretation of patterns across the sources of data collected especially those that are text-based and narrative in nature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ilaji Resort's Market Position in Nigeria's Hospitality Sector

Ilaji Resort has increasingly positioned itself as a unique and self-contained hospitality destination in Nigeria's tourism landscape. Located in the peaceful village of Akanran, Ibadan, it offers more than just a traditional hotel experience. The resort is often described as a "city within a resort," and for good reason. With a combination of upscale accommodations, extensive sports and recreational infrastructure, spiritual spaces, and family-friendly attractions, Ilaji appears to cater to a diverse set of visitors including leisure seekers, families, corporate clients, cultural tourists, and even wellness travelers.

The first thing that sets Ilaji apart is its scale and scope. It is not situated in a bustling city center, yet its offerings rival and, in some aspects, surpass those of urban hospitality hubs. The entire property is designed to blend luxury with nature, with carefully landscaped gardens, well-labeled trees, and green spaces intended to enhance relaxation. This peaceful environment is core to its identity, and it is reinforced by their emphasis on creating "a stress-reliever through the provision of standard sporting facilities and recreational animals whose sight instantly refresh your entire being" (ilajiresort.ng/about-us).

The accommodation offerings are broad and clearly structured to serve a range of budgets and guest expectations. As the lowest room called the Standard Silver Room priced at ₦27,000 per night to Ilaji Apartments which go up to ₦100,000 per night, the resort offers flexible price points. All categories come with key amenities such as complimentary breakfast, free Wi-Fi, air conditioning, satellite TV, water heaters, and access to the resort's full range of facilities. These include the gym, sports courts, swimming pools, and open leisure spaces. This wide offering indicates that the resort is trying to reach both middle-income earners and guests with premium tastes (nzepro.com/ilaji-resort-ibadan).

However, Ilaji's appeal does not end with hospitality services. Its sports complex is one of the most extensive in the country. Visitors have access to football pitches, basketball courts, tennis and handball courts, a mini-stadium, and even a mini golf course. The resort also features indoor games like scrabble, ludo, and billiards, creating an environment where both casual play and professional training can occur side by side. The presence of a football academy and the Ilaji Stadium shows not only a recreational purpose but also a broader vision of youth development and talent nurturing (ilajiresort.ng/best-hotel-in-nigeria/).



In addition, Ilaji's growing cultural significance plays a key role in its market identity. The resort is increasingly recognized as a space where Yoruba culture is not just preserved but celebrated. The visit of notable diaspora figures such as Aremu Olosha, a Brazilian of Yoruba heritage who speaks the language fluently, presents the resort's status as a cultural and ancestral reconnecting ground. During his visit, Aremu emphasized that Ilaji was more than a resort; it was a spiritual and cultural sanctuary that helped bridge the gap between Yoruba descendants in the diaspora and their roots in Nigeria (nationalinsightnews.com/ilaji-resort-a-beacon-of-yoruba-culture-heritage-and-tourism-excellence/).

The resort's facilities houses both a church and mosque, ensuring inclusivity for guests with diverse religious backgrounds. An art gallery on-site displays African historical and cultural pieces, adding an educational layer to the guest experience. The presence of a mini zoo with donkeys, ostriches, camels, monkeys, and other animals adds to the resort's appeal for families and school excursions, making it an ideal destination for both relaxation and discovery (ilajiresort.ng/best-hotel-in-nigeria/).

Ilaji also caters to events and group functions. The resort boasts spacious and well-equipped halls for weddings, seminars, corporate retreats, and concerts. This positions it strongly within the meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE) segment, especially in South-West Nigeria where such multifunctional venues remain limited. From business meetings to children's product launches, the resort's infrastructure supports a wide range of experiences.

Food and beverage options are equally diverse. Guests can choose between fine dining and local delicacies. The resort's restaurants include both premium and budget options such as the African Kitchen for affordable per-plate meals, the VIP Pool Bar, the Bush Bar for a more relaxed setting, and the Canopy Bar for social nightlife experiences. This diversity in food offerings enhances the inclusive nature of the resort and allows it to serve varying guest preferences without compromising on atmosphere or quality (ilajiresort.ng/best-hotel-in-nigeria/).

Lastly, it is worth noting that the resort's presence has had broader economic ripple effects in the area. Nearby land development and real estate investments have surged, with platforms promoting land sales in close proximity to the resort, emphasizing the opportunity to benefit from Ilaji's rising popularity. This tells how the resort has not only placed itself on the hospitality map but is also influencing broader trends in local development and regional tourism (nzepro.com/ilaji-resort-ibadan).

Key Differentiation Strategies Adopted by Ilaji Resort

Ilaji's first differentiation strategy is its "city-within-a-resort" model. Visitors are offered accommodation integrated with the ecosystem. Within its gates, guests can enjoy luxury lodging, farm visits, recreational sports, art appreciation, and even religious worship. The decision to fuse modern architecture with the preservation of natural ambience allows Ilaji to stand out in a sector often driven by either one or the other—not both. According to the resort's official vision, this



deliberate fusion is meant to provide guests with “a unique blend of class and bliss” that lingers well beyond their departure (ilajiresort.ng/about-us).

Another core pillar of Ilaji’s strategic distinction lies in its focus on youth engagement through employment, skill-building, and talent discovery. This is not treated as corporate social responsibility in the usual sense but is woven directly into the operational structure of the business. Through its affiliated arms, Ilaji Hotels, Ilaji Sports Resort, Ilaji Farms, Ilaji Travels and Tours, and the ongoing Ilaji Running School making the resort become a living platform for youth inclusion. Young people find roles not only as hotel or catering staff, but as athletes, agribusiness trainees, media professionals, and fitness experts. For many, these roles become long-term pathways to self-sufficiency (ogbomosoinsonline.com.ng, 2025).

Ilaji’s is also committed to sports and talent development. Where most resorts might offer fitness centers as an added amenity, Ilaji has included sport into its core identity. The resort hosts a fully equipped sports complex, featuring a mini-stadium, football pitches, basketball and tennis courts, indoor games, and a 24/7 gym. Moreover, its future-oriented Ilaji Running School which is currently under development is set to groom future athletes with access to professional coaching, physiotherapy, and international exposure. Few hospitality brands in the country have approached sports development with this level of seriousness.

This sports-driven strategy not only supports health and recreation but also contributes to Ilaji’s nation-building agenda, offering hope to thousands of unemployed or under-engaged youth in Oyo State and beyond. Events held at the resort like tournaments and training camps create jobs and visibility for budding talents. It becomes a destination not just for rest, but for discovery and opportunities.

Ilaji has also differentiates itself through deep-rooted cultural promotion. The resort does not shy away from embracing its Yoruba heritage instead, it celebrates it. Through its art gallery, local cuisine, and recent high-profile visits from Yoruba descendants in the diaspora such as Aremu Olosha, a Brazilian Yoruba speaker, Ilaji has transformed into a cultural homecoming site. Visitors are not only entertained but educated, making the resort a bridge between tradition and modern tourism (nzepro.com/ilaji-resort-ibadan/).

The resort’s has also integrated health and media initiatives, including the under-construction Ilaji Clinic and the fully operational Ilaji FM radio station. The clinic, once completed, will improve healthcare access for the surrounding community. Meanwhile, the radio station will also act as both an employer and a platform for youth voices, reinforcing the brand’s social use beyond hospitality

Ilaji also engage in agricultural practices which adds another layer of distinction. With their modern techniques in poultry, fishery, and crop production, the farm is not just a business, it is a youth training ground and a contributor to food sustainability. Guests can explore this side of



Ilaji just as easily as they explore the swimming pools or restaurants, making the entire experience both interactive and meaningful.

Competitive Advantages Resulting from Ilaji Resort's Strategic Approaches

In Nigeria's rapidly evolving hospitality industry, competitive advantage is not merely about offering services, it is about establishing a defensible position in the market that others cannot easily replicate. Ilaji Resort, through a layered and integrative strategy, has not only differentiated itself but also converted those efforts into concrete competitive advantages that set it apart from peers across the region.

One of the clearest competitive advantages Ilaji holds is their brand diversification. While most resorts operate within narrowly defined hospitality boundaries, Ilaji has included multiple sectors such as agriculture (Ilaji Farms), sports (Ilaji Sports Resort), media (Ilaji FM), and soon healthcare (Ilaji Clinic). This integration offers varieties as guests aren't just visiting a hotel, they're engaging with a brand that offers education, recreation, fitness, media engagement, and even spiritual and cultural experiences. This model offers diverse strength that is even if one arm of the business faces seasonal or economic downturns, others continue to provide value, allowing the resort to remain competitive when others might falter.

Another advantage lies in resource control and community empowerment. Because Ilaji Resort operates in a semi-rural area where it also serves as a major employer, its influence extends well beyond customer service. The resort commands loyalty not just from guests, but from a surrounding population whose livelihoods often depend directly or indirectly on its activities. This boost employment rate, easier talent acquisition, and strong public relation.

Additionally, Ilaji benefits from what might be called a first-mover advantage in integrated resort development in South-West Nigeria. Its physical scale, breadth of services, and long-term infrastructural commitments such as the upcoming running school and clinic give it a head start over would-be imitators. By the time other resorts attempt to replicate its business model, Ilaji will likely have evolved further, cementing its reputation and retaining customer loyalty. The advantage here is not simply being first, but in establishing a model that continues to adapt ahead of the market.

Moreover, Ilaji's emphasis on functional and emotional brand loyalty offers a durable edge. Functionally, the resort delivers affordability, comfort, and access to diverse amenities. Emotionally, it captures the imagination of locals and diaspora populations alike particularly through its emphasis on Yoruba cultural identity and heritage promotion. Guests don't just return for rooms or recreational facilities; they return for the experience, the values, and the sense of connection.



Ilaji also enjoys a geographic competitive advantage. Its location in Akanran, Oyo State, while initially remote, has transformed into a strength. Free from the saturation of more commercial hospitality zones, the resort benefits from expansive land, tranquility, and the flexibility to build large-scale infrastructure. This also saves it from competition that it would have faced if it was in a more urban setting.

CONCLUSION

This research set out to critically examine the strategic market positioning and differentiation of Ilaji Resort within Nigeria's hospitality sector, using only secondary data. Through a close review of its operational structure, market strategies, and the resulting competitive advantages, it has become evident that Ilaji Resort does not merely function as a hospitality facility, it takes on a broader socio-economic and cultural movement in South-West Nigeria.

Ilaji's strength lies not in just one area but in the *integration* of many such as its innovative accommodation pricing model, its strategic development of recreational and religious facilities, the resort succeeds by offering diverse attractive services and offers. The differentiation strategies employed especially the inclusion of local culture, provision of sports infrastructure, and the development of complementary businesses such as Ilaji Farms and Ilaji FM have positioned it far beyond the traditional role of a resort. These strategies have contributed to Ilaji's popularity and also to its market resilience in a sector frequently threatened by poor infrastructure, competition, and inconsistent customer loyalty.

Perhaps most compelling is Ilaji Resort's clear sense of vision and direction. It is not operating as an isolated business but as a tool for youth engagement, economic empowerment, and cultural preservation. Its commitment to socio-economic development is visible in its creation of jobs across agriculture, media, sports, hospitality, and tourism. The ripple effects of this ecosystem are seen in the lives it touches and the local economy it helps to stimulate (Ogbomoso Insight, 2025).

Furthermore, by situating itself in a less saturated environment like Akanran and not shying away from long-term infrastructural investments, Ilaji Resort has demonstrated that location, when paired with purpose and planning, can become a powerful advantage. Its connection to the community and deliberate support for local heritage gives it an emotional advantage that many brands struggle to replicate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and critical observations of this study, the following recommendations are made for Ilaji Resort and similar hospitality enterprises:

1. Ilaji's strategic use of Yoruba cultural identity in its branding has helped it stand out. It is recommended that this be further deepened [perhaps through regular cultural events, indigenous food festivals, or historical tours that actively involve local artisans and performers. This will



enhance guest experience while strengthening the brand's position as a cultural tourism destination.

2. As the resort expands into new areas like healthcare and education (e.g., Ilaji Clinic and Running School), continuous professional development for staff becomes even more important. Formal training partnerships with institutions in tourism, hospitality, and sports management can help standardize quality and sustain service excellence.

3. Ilaji Resort should consider forming alliances with other eco-tourism sites, universities, and travel operators both within and outside Nigeria. These partnerships could help in creating joint tourism packages, academic exchanges, or cross-promotion, boosting both visibility and guest traffic.

Ethical Clearance

This study was conducted using publicly available secondary data, institutional publications, and scholarly references. No primary data collection involving human or animal subjects was carried out. Therefore, ethical clearance was not required. However, the research adhered to academic integrity principles, ensuring proper citation and acknowledgment of all sources used.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest that could have influenced the conduct or outcomes of this research.

Author's Contributions

The author and the co-author was solely responsible for the conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and writing of this paper All authors participated in the discussion of results, read and approved the final version of the manuscript, and agree to its submission for publication. They collectively confer the rights to the corresponding author to handle all correspondence with the



journal's editorial team, make any required modifications, and act as guarantor for the integrity of the manuscript on their behalf.

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