

STRENGTHENING MSMEs' ONLINE BRANDING THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING TRAINING PROGRAMS

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Abstract. Digital transformation has driven significant changes in the marketing strategies of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), particularly through the use of social media as a means of strengthening online branding. However, many MSMEs still face obstacles in the form of limited conceptual understanding of digital branding, low content production capabilities, and less than optimal utilization of social media marketing features. These conditions have an impact on weak brand visibility and competitiveness of MSMEs in the digital market. This study aims to analyze the role and contribution of social media marketing training programs in strengthening MSMEs' online branding from the perspective of business actors' experiences and perceptions. This study uses a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach. The research subjects consisted of MSMEs who participated in the social media marketing training program. Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews, observation of digital marketing activities on MSMEs' social media accounts, and documentation of training materials and results. Data analysis was conducted thematically through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions to identify patterns of change in understanding, branding strategies, and digital marketing practices after the training. The results of the study indicate that the social media marketing training program contributed positively to increasing MSMEs' awareness of the importance of digital brand identity, visual consistency and brand messaging, and the ability to create more strategic and audience-oriented content. In addition, the training encouraged a change in MSMEs' attitudes from conventional marketing to a more adaptive and sustainable digital approach. This study confirms that social media marketing training is a strategic instrument in strengthening MSMEs' online branding and increasing their readiness to face digital economic competition.

Keywords: MSMEs, Online Branding, Social Media Marketing, Digital Training

I. INTRODUCTION

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a strategic role in the Indonesian national economy as the backbone of economic growth, employment, and strengthening local economic resilience. Data shows that MSMEs contribute more than half of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and are a dominant sector in the employment structure (Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs, 2023; Wicaksana et al., 2025). Despite this, MSME competitiveness remains relatively low, particularly in the face of the dynamics of the digital economy, characterized by increasing competition based on technology, innovation, and brand strength (Trisninawati & Sartika, 2024; Anisyah et al., 2025). Limited managerial capacity, digital literacy, and modern marketing strategies prevent many MSMEs from optimally maximizing digital market opportunities (OECD, 2020). This situation emphasizes

the urgent need to strengthen non-financial aspects, particularly online branding, to increase the sustainability and competitiveness of MSMEs [4], [5], [6], [7].

The rapid digital transformation has driven a significant shift in consumer behavior toward online-based purchasing behavior, with social media serving as the primary channel for information search, product evaluation, and purchasing decision-making [8]. Social media is no longer merely a means of communication but has become a strategic instrument for building brand awareness, brand image, and customer engagement, especially for MSMEs with limited conventional marketing resources (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Tuten & Solomon, 2018). However, despite increasingly widespread access to social media platforms, many MSMEs have not been able to utilize them in a planned and long-term manner [9]. Social media use tends to be sporadic, inconsistent, and lacking

an integrated branding strategy, resulting in a relatively limited impact on brand strengthening (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Therefore, interventions in the form of structured, contextual, and sustainable social media marketing training programs are urgently needed to bridge the digital capacity gap among MSMEs and support systematic online branding strengthening.

One of the main challenges faced by MSMEs in the digital economy ecosystem is a lack of understanding of the concepts of online branding and digital brand positioning. Many MSMEs still narrowly define branding as a logo, packaging, or short-term promotional activities, without understanding branding as a strategic process for building brand perception, value, and differentiation in the minds of digital consumers[10]. This limited conceptual literacy makes it difficult for MSMEs to formulate a consistent and relevant brand identity in the digital space, resulting in their brand positioning being weak and easily displaced in the increasingly competitive online marketplace (Keller, 2013; Rowley, 2004).

This problem is exacerbated by MSMEs' sporadic, non-strategic, and short-term use of social media. MSME social media activity is generally limited to unscheduled product promotional posts, without content planning, audience segmentation, or clear branding objectives. As a result, social media functions more as a digital storefront than as a strategic tool for building brand awareness, engagement, and customer loyalty. This situation indicates that MSMEs have not yet optimally utilized the potential of social media as a brand-building tool, primarily due to limited planning capacity and strategic understanding of digital marketing (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Tuten & Solomon, 2018).

On the other hand, various social media marketing training programs aimed at MSMEs still tend to emphasize technical aspects, such as how to create visual content, write captions, or run paid ads. This approach often neglects the conceptual and strategic dimensions of branding and is rarely accompanied by empirical evaluation of its impact on sustainable MSME brand strengthening[11]. The lack of research specifically evaluating the effectiveness of social media marketing training in improving online branding dimensions such as brand identity consistency, digital positioning, and customer engagement indicates a significant research gap. Therefore, scientific studies examining social media marketing training as a strategic intervention in strengthening MSME online branding are highly relevant and urgent (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

Most previous research on MSMEs and social media has focused on the direct relationship between social media utilization and marketing performance, such as increased sales, market reach, and customer loyalty[12]. This approach tends to position social media as an independent variable with a direct impact on business performance, without emphasizing social media marketing training programs as intervening variables that play a role in building the strategic capacity of MSMEs. Consequently, there is still limited empirical evidence regarding how the training process can influence changes in the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of MSMEs in building sustainable online branding. This situation indicates a significant empirical gap, particularly regarding the effectiveness of training as a capacity-building mechanism in

the context of MSME digital marketing (Trainor et al., 2014; Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Furthermore, methodological and conceptual gaps have also been identified in the existing literature. Research related to MSMEs and social media is still dominated by quantitative approaches that rely on surveys and statistical analysis, thus failing to deeply capture the dynamics of the learning process, subjective experiences, and transformation of MSMEs' branding capacity after participating in training programs. Conceptually, studies integrating capacity building, social media marketing training, and online branding perspectives into a single, holistic analytical framework are still relatively limited[13]. Yet, integrating these three concepts is crucial for understanding MSME brand strengthening as a gradual and contextual strategic process, not simply a short-term marketing outcome. This research offers novelty by positioning social media marketing training programs as strategic instruments in strengthening the online branding of MSMEs, rather than merely as a means of increasing short-term, transactional sales[14]. Unlike previous studies that generally emphasize the direct relationship between social media use and marketing performance, this research uses a qualitative approach to deeply explore changes in the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of MSME actors in building digital brand identity, consistency, and positioning after participating in training. Furthermore, this research produces a conceptual model for strengthening MSME online branding based on social media marketing training that is contextualized to the characteristics of local MSMEs[15], thus explaining the gradual and sustainable branding capacity-building process. The findings of this research not only enrich the scientific body of knowledge in the field of digital marketing and MSME development but also provide practical contributions for policymakers and MSME support institutions in designing more strategic, impactful, and long-term digital training programs (Keller, 2013; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Dwivedi et al., 2021).

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method to gain an in-depth and contextual understanding of the processes, experiences, and perceptions of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) participating in a social media marketing training program to strengthen their online branding. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore social phenomena holistically, particularly regarding the dynamics of changing marketing behavior, digital branding strategies, and the challenges faced by MSMEs in utilizing social media effectively. The descriptive method aims to systematically and factually describe the training practices implemented, participants' social media usage patterns, and their impact on increasing brand awareness, brand image, and online customer engagement (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moleong, 2021).

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, including training materials, MSME social media content, and program evaluation reports. Interviews were conducted with MSMEs, training facilitators, and mentors to explore

perceptions, experiences, and changes in digital competency experienced after participating in the training. The data obtained were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing to identify key patterns relevant to strengthening the online branding of MSMEs. Data validity was maintained through triangulation of sources and methods, thus ensuring high credibility and providing a comprehensive empirical picture of the effectiveness of social media marketing training programs for MSMEs (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Sugiyono, 2022).

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Improving MSMEs' Conceptual Understanding of Online Branding

Improving MSMEs' conceptual understanding of online branding was a key finding from the social media marketing training program. Before participating in the training, most MSMEs tended to view digital marketing activities solely as a means of product promotion and short-term sales increases. However, after the process aimed at building brand value, differentiation, and sustainable relationships with consumers. This finding aligns with the view that digital branding focuses not only on products but also on shaping brand perceptions and experiences in the digital space (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2021).

The most significant change in understanding was seen in their mastery of the basic concepts of brand awareness, brand identity, and brand image. Training participants began to understand that brand awareness relates to the level of consumer recognition of a brand, while brand identity refers to the identity intentionally constructed by businesses through brand symbols, values, and messages. Brand image, on the other hand, is understood as the consumer perception formed through repeated interactions with a brand on social media. This conceptual understanding encourages MSMEs to be more aware that content uploads directly impact public perception of their brands (Aaker, 1997; Keller, 2013).

Furthermore, the training contributed to MSMEs' increased awareness of the importance of visual consistency in building a digital brand identity. Participants began to understand that consistent use of logos, colors, typography, and visual styles across various social media platforms serves as an identity marker that makes it easier for consumers to recognize a brand. Visual consistency is perceived as an indicator of a business's professionalism and credibility, which ultimately influences consumer trust. This finding strengthens the argument that consistent visual elements are a crucial foundation for an effective branding strategy in a competitive digital environment (Kapferer, 2012; Wheeler, 2018).

In addition to visual aspects, training participants also experienced an increased understanding of the importance of consistent brand storytelling in digital communications. MSMEs began to realize that a clear, authentic, and relevant brand narrative aligned with the business's values can strengthen emotional bonds with audiences [16]. A consistent narrative helps convey the brand's uniqueness, its background,

and the value it offers to consumers. This awareness demonstrates a shift from purely informative promotional communications to more persuasive and meaningful communications (Fog, Budtz, & Yakaboylu, 2010; Lundqvist et al., 2013).

Furthermore, research findings indicate a shift in the mindset of MSMEs from transaction-oriented marketing to relationship- and engagement-based marketing. Training participants began to understand that the success of digital branding is measured not only by sales volume, but also by the level of interaction, engagement, and long-term relationships with consumers. Social media is understood as a two-way dialogue space that enables MSMEs to build closeness, trust, and customer loyalty through active responses [17], interactive content, and personalized communication (Brodie et al., 2011). This paradigm shift strengthens the position of online branding as a business sustainability strategy for MSMEs in the digital economy era. With increased conceptual understanding of branding, MSMEs become more strategic in designing content, maintaining identity consistency, and building ongoing engagement with their audiences. These findings confirm that social media marketing training not only improves technical skills, but also forms a more mature and adaptive branding mindset to the dynamics of digital consumer behavior (Tuten & Solomon, 2020; Kotler et al., 2021).

The Impact of Training on Strengthening MSMEs' Online Branding

Social media marketing training has been proven to have a significant impact on strengthening MSMEs' online branding, particularly in increasing brand awareness and digital visibility [18]. After participating in the training, MSMEs demonstrated improved skills in strategically utilizing social media platforms through content selection, posting timing, and the use of supporting features such as hashtags and interactive visual formats. This increased frequency and quality of brand exposure contributed to increased brand recognition among digital audiences. This finding aligns with the view that social media is a key instrument for building broad and sustainable brand awareness, especially for small businesses with limited conventional promotional resources (Keller, 2013; Tuten & Solomon, 2020).

In addition to increased visibility, the training also improved MSMEs' brand image in the digital space. Businesses began to project a more professional brand identity through visual consistency, a planned communication style, and clearer and more credible product information presentation [18]. This professional image plays a crucial role in building positive consumer perceptions of the quality and seriousness of the business. Previous research has shown that a strong and visually consistent brand image can enhance perceived value and differentiate MSMEs from competitors in an increasingly crowded digital marketplace (Kapferer, 2012; Wheeler, 2018). Another notable impact is increased trust and credibility in the eyes of consumers. Informative, transparent, and responsive content to customer inquiries creates an impression of openness and reliability. MSMEs that actively interact and respond quickly to customer comments or messages are perceived as more trustworthy than passive accounts. This reinforces the argument that trust is a key component of digital branding,

especially in the context of online transactions where face-to-face interaction is minimal (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2021).

Social media marketing training also resulted in increased customer interaction and engagement. Training participants were able to design content that was more interactive and relevant to audience needs, thus triggering an increase in likes, comments, shares, and inquiries. This high level of engagement indicates a more active and participatory relationship between MSMEs and their consumers [12]. From a digital marketing perspective, engagement is seen as a key indicator of branding success because it reflects consumers' emotional and cognitive involvement with the brand (Brodie et al., 2011).

Furthermore, sustained increases in engagement provide an early indication of increased consumer purchase intention. Intense interactions and positive consumer experiences on social media contribute to the formation of positive attitudes toward the brand, which subsequently influence purchasing decisions [15]. Although increased sales are not always immediate, research findings indicate an increase in purchase intention, reflected in increased inquiries regarding products, pricing, and availability. This supports the view that digital branding serves as an initial bridge to sales conversion (Keller, 2013; Kotler et al., 2021). In the medium term, social media marketing training also contributes to building customer loyalty. Consistent brand communication, responsive interactions, and the presentation of valuable content encourage consumers to continue following and interacting with MSME accounts [19]. This loyalty is reflected in repeated engagement, informal recommendations, and consumers' tendency to choose the same brand for subsequent purchases. These findings confirm that training not only impacts the technical aspects of marketing, but also strengthens long-term relationships between MSMEs and customers through sustainable online branding strategies (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Tuten & Solomon, 2020).

Social Media Content Strategy Changes Post-Training

The post-training social media content strategy change was marked by a shift in content types to more varied and strategically valuable content, encompassing informative, educational, storytelling, and promotional content. Prior to the training, MSME content tended to be sporadic and dominated by direct promotions without providing added value to the audience. The digital marketing training encouraged business owners to understand that informative and educational content plays a crucial role in building brand credibility, while storytelling serves to strengthen the emotional bond between brands and consumers. This approach aligns with content marketing theory, which emphasizes value creation as the foundation of long-term customer relationships (Pulizzi, 2014; Kotler et al., 2021).

In addition to diversifying content types, the training also contributed to the implementation of more structured content planning principles through the use of a content calendar. A content calendar allows MSMEs to systematically organize the frequency, themes, and objectives of their posts, so that marketing activities are no longer reactive but strategic and ongoing. Consistent content planning has been shown to

increase the stability of a brand's presence on social media and strengthen brand recall in the minds of audiences (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). With a content calendar, MSMEs can align marketing messages with specific moments, such as sales seasons or relevant digital trends. Another significant change was seen in the adjustment of brand communication styles to suit the characteristics of the target audience. Post-training, MSMEs began to consider demographic, psychographic, and digital behavior aspects of their audiences when designing communication messages. The language used became more personal, persuasive, and contextual, thereby increasing user engagement. This approach aligns with the concept of audience-centered communication, which emphasizes that message effectiveness depends heavily on the alignment between brand character and audience expectations (Fill & Turnbull, 2019).

Utilization of social media features also increased post-training, particularly in the use of hashtags, reels, and stories [20]. Hashtags were used more strategically to increase content reach, while reels and stories were leveraged to present short, dynamic, and easy-to-consume visual content. Studies show that short video-based content has higher engagement rates than static content, especially among younger social media users (Dessart et al., 2020). Optimizing these features demonstrates MSMEs' increasing digital literacy in utilizing social media platform algorithms [21].

In addition to the creative aspect, the training also improved MSMEs' ability to utilize analytical insights as a basis for evaluating content strategies. Data such as reach, interaction rates, and audience profiles began to be used to assess content effectiveness and determine improvement strategies [13]. This data-driven approach enabled MSMEs to make more rational and measurable decisions in digital marketing. Consistent use of social media analytics has been shown to improve brand performance and the efficiency of marketing communication strategies (Tafesse & Wien, 2018). Overall, the changes in social media content strategy following the training reflected a shift from an intuitive approach to a more professional, planned, and data-driven approach. This transformation not only improved content quality but also strengthened MSMEs' brand identity and competitiveness in the digital space. By integrating content diversity, systematic planning, relevant communication, and utilizing social media features and analytics, MSMEs have a greater opportunity to build sustainable brands amidst increasingly fierce digital economic competition (Kotler et al., 2021). In addition, participants demonstrated a more comprehensive understanding that online branding is a long-term strategic pro

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study indicate that the social media marketing training program positively contributed to increasing MSMEs' awareness of the importance of digital brand identity, visual consistency and brand messaging, and the ability to develop more strategic and audience-oriented content. Furthermore, the training encouraged a shift in MSMEs' attitudes from conventional marketing to a more adaptive and

sustainable digital approach. This study confirms that social media marketing training is a strategic instrument in strengthening MSMEs' online branding and increasing their readiness to face the competition in the digital economy.

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