

Optimization of Digital Business Communication for MSMEs: Strategies to Build Brand and Customer Loyalty

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Abstract

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are crucial contributors to Indonesia's economy but continue to face barriers in adopting digital transformation, particularly in business communication, branding, and customer relationship management. Many MSME owners lack sufficient digital knowledge and confidence to implement effective online strategies, resulting in limited market visibility and customer engagement. To address these challenges, a community empowerment initiative was conducted with the primary goal of enhancing entrepreneurs' digital competence and strengthening their ability to build brand identity and customer loyalty. The program applied the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, emphasizing collaborative involvement across stages of needs assessment, training, mentoring, and evaluation. Twenty MSME participants from the culinary, fashion, service, and household product sectors actively took part. The results indicated significant improvements in understanding digital communication, developing creative content, and integrating social media into business strategies. Participants also demonstrated stronger collaboration, initiative, and confidence in digital marketing practices. These outcomes highlight the importance of hands-on, collaborative learning in bridging the digital literacy gap and fostering innovation among MSMEs. By improving their digital capabilities, MSMEs are better positioned to sustain growth, expand market reach, and contribute to a more inclusive digital economy. The initiative supports the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) through continuous learning and skills development, SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) through entrepreneurship empowerment, and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) by promoting innovation and sustainable digital transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are foundational to the economic development of Indonesia. Per the Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs (2025), Indonesia has over 64 million units of MSMEs, which accounts for over 97 percent of the national workforce and nearly 60 percent of the country's GDP. These statistics provide evidence that MSMEs are no longer incidental to the economy, but rather, are central to the economic stability of the country and susceptible to fluctuations in local and national economies (Limanseto, 2025; Ramadani et al., 2025). Apart from the contribution to GDP, the MSMEs also positively impacted income diversity, created job opportunities, and built community resilience (Lubis & Salsabila, 2024; Simanjuntak & Putri, 2025). Thus, the proper strengthening of their capacities and competitiveness becomes the focused strategic agenda for sustained economic development.

The lack of effective means of communication to engage with customers and extend market reach are challenges faced by Indonesian MSMEs (Fauziah et al., 2025; Zhahirah et al., 2023). Many MSMEs are still using traditional methods of marketing such as word-of-mouth, banners and printed brochures to market their products (Kurniawati et al., 2024). Undeniably, such methods still work to some extent marketing within closed communities, they fail to engage customers who make up the larger, target market of connected and electronically driven consumers (Berlianti et al., 2025; Rahayaan et al., 2025; Shobirin et al., 2024). This creates a gap to customers who are connected and digitally informed, and leaves MSMEs to struggle with their competitiveness. In the long run, the stagnation is manifested in a loss of market opportunity, decline of the business and in some cases; an outright collapse.

An understanding of branding strategies is essential due to the impact it can carry (Thamrin et al., 2025). More often than not, small business operators take the production and sales activity route and overlook the take the brand sustainability building route (Widjaja, 2024). In the modern world of business, branding is much more than a name and logo design, it is a competitive tool that sets a business apart from its competitors (Putra et al., 2021). Since brand identity is a prerequisite for building consumer trust, positive perceptions, and loyalty, the absence of brand identity will hamper the efforts of building trust, positive perceptions loyalty and lasting relationships with MSME (Wijaya, 2023). Hence, the profitability will be impacted due to the market being manipulated (Utomo et al., 2024). MSMEs fail to regard loyalty as a strategy and even as a goal, loyalty gets treated as a means and the end goal gets aimed at sales (Asri & Dwiayanto, 2022). Hence, weak business sustainability will result from aggressive customer acquisition, while the more established customers get neglected and even offered less aggressive customer relationships with the firm.

The gaps created by external factors include modern consumer's digital-first habits (Shalsabhila, 2024). Consumers perform online searches for products, price comparisons, and reviews, and for brands with a prominent digital presence (Panjaitan & Riofita, 2024). These factors lead owners of MSME to make radical changes in not only MSME's production and distribution, but more importantly, in their communication and marketing. One of the major challenges is still the limited digital MSME literacy in Indonesia, which still remains at the primary level in both strategic and operational aspects (Bastomi et al., 2025; Morisson & Fikri, 2025). The lack of digital knowledge manifests in poorly designed marketing efforts, weak marketing toward consumers and limited marketing efforts that are largely attributed to the weak digital economy.

Accumulating evidence has highlighted the role of strategic digital communication in improving the performance of MSMEs. For instance, digital marketing has been shown to increase brand awareness (Muchtar & Damayanti, 2024), and consumer engagement on social media has been shown to help sustain relationships with customers (Lim & Rasul, 2022). Also, Afrida et al., (2020) illustrated that customer loyalty is the product of not just the quality of the product but also the quality of the digital engagement. However, there is still an over-reliance in most research and community service (PkM) projects on the provision of technical training (e.g. social media management, creating online stores) and not the strategic relationship between digital communication, branding, and customer retention. This suggests that there is a need for a more integrated and comprehensive approach.

In the case of the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Trisakti, we designed and are implementing a community engagement program built using the template of Participatory Action Research (PAR) which integrates digital literacy, branding, and customer loyalty as components of a single training model. The program innovatively integrates the two components of the as of yet fragmented digital training and strategic brand communication. The program underscores the importance of customer-centered communication within a business and the sustainability of the communication as the goal of leveraging technology.

The rapid development of Indonesia's digital economy also underlines the need for the proposed program. Referencing the e-Conomy SEA 2022 report produced by Google, Temasek & Bain (2022), the value of Indonesia's digital economy reached a Gross Merchandize Value (GMV) of USD 77 billion and is projected to be USD 130 billion by 2025, and USD 360 billion by 2030. This trend is a tremendous opportunity for Indonesia's MSMEs to gain entry into the digital

ecosystem, provided the MSMEs have the necessary digital communication and marketing skills (Komdigi, 2023). Indonesia's MSMEs will have the weakest position in the digital economy and their contribution to the GDP, employment, and national competitiveness will decline even further if they do not acquire the needed skills.

To address these challenges, the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Trisakti, in partnership with the Komunitas Sukses Berjamaah Indonesia (KSBI), executed an initiative titled "Optimization of Digital Business Communication for MSMEs: Strategies for Building Brand and Customer Loyalty." 20 MSME participants were involved in an engaging and participatory learning experience that synergized theory, practice, and case simulations. Participants' digital capability and brand equity and customer loyalty were the intended benefits of the program. Overall, the activity demonstrated the university's role in the integration of the Tri Dharma of Higher Education community service component by providing MSMEs in Indonesia meaningful support.

IMPLEMENTATION METHOD

Community engagement exercises were held on Saturday from 09.00 to 16.00 WIB with twenty MSME participants located on Jl. Kebagusan Raya Gg. Langgar 3, Jagakarsa, South Jakarta. These activities incorporated the Participatory Action Research (PAR) model, which focuses on the active engagement of participants at every level of the procedure. This model was tailored to the needs of the partner community, members of Komunitas Sukses Berjamaah Indonesia (KSBI), who sought capacity-building interventions of a blended nature, integrating direct experience with active mentoring. As such, the use of PAR allowed the implementing facilitators to reconceptualize their approach from a purely instructive model of knowledge transfer to a dialogical and reflective approach to learning. Participants were able to surface real issues, share their perspectives, and work together to address issues on digital business communication, branding, and customer loyalty.

Socialization of the program began with the facilitator team working with representatives from KSBI to explain the goals, anticipated outputs, and activity timelines, covering everything in the program's folder. This was the first of many important steps to ensure a shared understanding and outlining the participants' precise requirements. This was then followed by the educational component, which focused on the fundamentals of digital business communication, strategies for brand development, and theories on customer loyalty. The sessions incorporated a blend of interactive lectures, small group discussions, and peer presentations, which enabled participants to juxtapose the theoretical frameworks with their personal business realities.

Designing the next phase incorporated participants' applied skill building through 'hands-on' practice. Each participant was mentored to create basic digital content for their business, brand narratives, and strategic customer engagement frameworks for social media. To ensure the content and skills integrated were relevant to each participant's business, the training incorporated strong experiential and participatory approaches of live demonstrations, situational role-play, and focused coaching.

To measure the effectiveness of the program, an evaluation phase was conducted that included pre-tests and post-tests, participatory observation, and brief interviews. These evaluation instruments assisted in assessing changes in the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the participants before and after the training. Furthermore, the results of the evaluation were utilized for future community engagement initiatives organized by the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Trisakti.

In this case, the implementation method discussed aimed to not just improve digital literacy, but also contribute to meaningful change in the business communication practices of MSME owners. The participatory design of the program enabled participants to assume the role of learners in the community, and not just recipients of information. This latter design directly helps the integration of educational and research components of community service activities, as stated in the Tri Dharma of Higher Education.

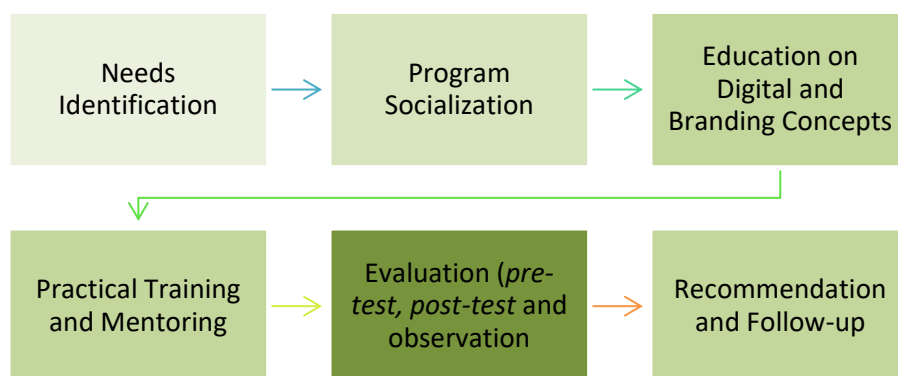


Figure 1. Activity Flow

The community engagement activities followed six main stages, as illustrated in the flowchart below. The first stage, *needs identification*, involved collaboration between the facilitator team and KSBI representatives to map out existing problems faced by MSMEs, especially concerning digital business communication, branding, and customer retention. The outcomes of this stage guided the development of training materials and strategies.

The second stage, *program socialization*, aimed to communicate the goals, benefits, and structure of the activity to participants and to establish mutual commitment. The third stage, *digital and branding education*, introduced the fundamentals of digital communication, brand image creation, and the concept of customer loyalty.

Next, the fourth stage, *practical training and mentoring*, engaged participants directly in hands-on activities such as content creation, brand storytelling, and simulated social media interaction. The fifth stage, *evaluation*, consisted of pre-test and post-test assessments and participatory observation to evaluate improvements in understanding and skill application. The final stage, *recommendation and follow-up*, focused on developing actionable strategies to ensure the sustainability of the program's outcomes. Through these stages, the implementation framework not only enhanced participants' digital and branding capabilities but also provided them with practical tools to strengthen long-term competitiveness in the digital era.

RESULTS

This community service program involved twenty participants, all of whom were MSME entrepreneurs affiliated with the *Komunitas Sukses Berjamaah Indonesia (KSBI)*. The participants represented various business sectors such as culinary, fashion, services, and household products, reflecting the diversity of the MSME landscape in the community.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics of the Program

Characteristic	Category	Number (n=20)	Percentage (%)
Age	< 25 years	3	15
	25-35 years	7	35
	36-45 years	6	30
	>45 years	4	20
Gender	Male	1	5
	Female	19	95
Education	Junior High School or Equivalent	2	10
	Senior High School / Vocational School	8	40
	Diploma	4	20
	Bachelor's Degree	6	30

Business Sector	Culinary	8	40
	Fashion	5	25
	Services	4	20
	Household Products	3	15
Business Duration	< 1 years	2	10
	1-3 years	9	45
	4-6 years	5	25
	>6 years	4	20
Monthly Revenue	< Rp 5 million	12	60
	Rp5-10 million	8	40

Based on Table 1, the majority of participants were within the productive age group of 25–45 years. Women represented a large majority of the participants (95%), with only one male participant. Educational backgrounds varied, though most had completed high school or vocational school (40%), while 30% held a university degree. In terms of business fields, the culinary sector was most prominent (40%), followed by fashion (25%), services (20%), and household products (15%). Nearly half of the participants (45%) had operated their businesses for 1–3 years, showing that most were still in the early stages of development.

Based on monthly turnover, all respondents qualified within the micro-enterprise category, earning less than IDR 10 million monthly. 60% of the micro-enterprises reported earning less than IDR 5 million monthly, and the rest earned in the IDR 5-10 million range. These figures reveal that, to a considerable extent, all respondents were managing small-scale operations with very little digital marketing. Therefore, the training offered to them was closely matched to their business requirements.

Prior to the implementation of the program, respondents expressed an over reliance on traditional marketing strategies, such as word-of-mouth, and reported the use of only printed flyers as marketing tools. The organizational engagement with basic digital marketing and social media tools was rather primitive. Systems branding alongside customer engagement are yet to be formally integrated as an approach. The relevance of the program content focused on digital communication and branding was justified by the findings of the completed marketing assessment.

In this case, the use of agile methods in socializing, education, training, and in the evaluation of each participant at the same time worked for everyone. In this stage of socialization demonstrated the participants' eagerness to engage in something practical about their core problem concerning competition in the digital marketplaces. The education part outlined the fundamentals of digital businesses and in an orderly fashion provided some clarifications of transactional offers, brand building, customer and relationship and loyalty management systems and its orderly explained the clarifications of. In addition, in their reflections on the sustainability of business the objectives of the construction, digitization, and pragmatism are evident.

The practical oriented part of the program was “appreciated” by “participants” “eager”. Participants built brand stories, designed basic digital materials, and social media accounts. Participants improved their basic posting skills with advanced techniques of scheduled posting, digital marketplace integration, and digital marketing within the framework of the mentoring program. Even in the very first sessions, the integration of digital marketing as a strategy of a participant in the program was an evident sign of a positive attitude, self-confidence and creativity.

Table 2 assesses the results from program evaluations prior to and following the implementation of the evaluations. These results help evaluate the impact of the program. Participants made progress on all indicators and the level of progress made was considerable.

Table 2. Evaluation Results

Evaluated Aspect	Average		Improvement (%)
	Pre-Test (%)	Post-Test (%)	
Understanding of digital communication concepts	46	87	41
Brand-building strategy	42	84	42
Importance of customer loyalty	44	86	42
Practical skills in using digital media	48	88	40

The results suggested that there was an increase of 41% on the Participants' digital communications grasp, improving from 46% to 87%. Participants' grasp on brand-building strategies increased by 42%. The understanding of customer loyalty was improved by 42% as well, illustrating that the Participants appreciated long-term relationships with customers rather than focusing on short-term sales. The Participants' digital media practices also improved by 40%, which shows that the practical mentoring activities probably succeeded in fostering the Participants' skills.

In the absence of quantitative results, the qualitative data still allowed for the acknowledgment of the positive behavioral change that was undertaken. Some of the Participants who had previously been reluctant to use digital tools, to market their products online, gained the confidence to do so and formed cross-promotion alliances with other MSMEs. Others formed small online marketing groups that facilitated the exchange of social media marketing frameworks and other contemporary marketing strategies, which included several other activities. Such marketing efforts testify to the supportive community and cooperative marketing ecosystem that was formed and was self-sustained even after training.

Participants have attained additional facets of digital competencies that serve as a prism to the elevation of their communicative capabilities and upgraded the basic marketing and integrated marketing functions to the higher order. Programmatically, the initiative built on the entrepreneurial spirit of collaboration among the MSME participants and provided them a wider context from which to anchor their digital transformation by addressing the other sustaining differential business facets, integrating and grappling with the resilience and the sustainability of the core business, a persistently difficult problem. The sustaining elements are often the most underrated.

DISCUSSION

After reflection on the community service activity, milestones were reached in the areas of digital literacy specific to community service, general digital literacy, collaborative work, and community service strategic thinking and planning. The improvements seen in the variables point to the effectiveness of various training methods in behaviour change in micro-entrepreneurs and their motivation toward the digital transformation of their businesses. This is consistent with the UNESCO (2021), Digital Literacy Framework that states that digital literacy goes beyond having access to technology to include the ability to think critically and use technology intentionally to advance social and economic goals.

Improvement in Understanding Digital Communication Concepts

When posed with a rapid mode of the valuing of digital communication, the participants of the 'program' fundamentally changed the paradigm. In the 'program's' absence, users, particularly female entrepreneurs with little education, relied on traditional and marketing and advertising strategies that entailed brochure copying and distribution. After the training, a digital marketing trust and comfort began to develop. This is comparable to Muchtar & Damayanti (2024) sentiment. Users' emotionality, and the users' relationships with a brand, grows with the adoption of digital communication. The first step is to incorporate the functions of promotion and advertising through social network sites. After that, active participation in online shopping platforms which previously seemed like 'virtual' really is possible. The 'attitude towards' 'technologies' in plural which at first

were viewed as mere instruments, all owners 'were' with a the restructuring of participation as a digital business, the 'technologies' became and invaluable business asset. This change supports SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) as MSMEs begin adopting technology as a key business infrastructure. The digital transformation also empowers entrepreneurs to innovate and adapt to an increasingly technology-driven economy.

Brand Identity

Relative to other users of social networks, women entrepreneurs tend to have a more advanced comprehension of business identity and associated branding. As pointed out by Keller (2013), a brand consists of much more than visual elements. A brand includes consumers' feelings and thoughts about a product and an organization. Some users even began revising the brand's visuals (logo, packaging, and story). User values from the brand story were re-envisioned for coherence. This meets the criteria of Lim & Rasul, (2022); Putra et al., (2021) on branding loyalty and predictability. This implies, in theory, micro-enterprises are capable of building brand equity. Looking to the future, the most significant part of the use of the brand is the learning that it offers, which can be used for strengthening the business identity. This advancement embodies SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) as it strengthens entrepreneurial capability and competitiveness. Building a consistent brand identity also promotes sustainable business practices and long-term market resilience.

Customer Loyalty

Prior to the training, MSME owners focused on making quick sales and obtaining immediate profits. A shift in mindset around the value of ongoing engagement with customers, relationship-building and loyalty was appreciated. This shift in mindset also coincides with and demonstrates understanding of the CRM framework of Payne & Frow (2013). After training, participants also demonstrated the learned behaviours of responsiveness to customer inquiries, post-sale follow-up communication, and the use of interactive content to provide disengaged customers with opportunities to re-engage (Jahidah et al., 2024). This behaviour also provides digital tools that allow and encourage customers to provide feedback (Afrida et al., 2020). Practically, participants also provided evidence of the behaviour of strategic marketing by the maintenance of customer databases, feedback loops, and the implementation of basic loyalty programs that, in turn, used to reduce the cost of marketing and increase the volume of repeat business. This behavioral change supports SDG 8, as it fosters sustainable business growth and stronger consumer trust. Enhancing customer loyalty also ensures business continuity and inclusive economic participation.

Practical Skills in Using Digital Media

Fauziah et al., (2025) observe that for digital proficiency, tools must be accompanied by a sound theoretical basis. Over the course of the programme, participants acquired skills in the management of social media accounts, the creation of digital content, and the facilitation of marketing activities through various online channels. These experiences align with Kolb (1984) theory of experiential learning and, specifically, the constructive role of practice. Such movement represents an essential commutation from the realm of the abstract to the acquisition of practical, usable skills. The seamless practice of integrating brands into e-commerce systems attests to the participants' confidence with advanced video promotion tools, which is a strong indicator of digital content creation. This development aligns with SDG 4 (Quality Education) through practical, lifelong learning that enhances digital skills. By mastering digital tools, MSMEs contribute to the creation of more innovative and adaptive business ecosystems in line with SDG 9.

Social Interaction and Communal Change

In addition to behavioral changes for individuals, there were some accomplishments in collective advancement and collaborative progress too. During participation in group works, individuals, in what could be described as an emergent peer support mechanism, started to discuss some of the relevant issues. The informal social activities described here, once again, coincide with the social processes of the PAR model of Kemmis & Taggart (2025) where learning,

is, from, collective reflective technological engagement. During the training, the participants self-organized informal learning groups on digital marketing, which re-convened post-training to brainstorm and resource-share on online marketing. Besides the instrumental competences in digital marketing attained, the participants also developed social capital in the form of a robust MSME community support network. The very social engagement described here and the change in behaviors that ensued as a consequence of it, is encompassed in Bandura (1971) Social Learning Theory. This collaborative growth embodies SDG 4 by strengthening inclusive and peer-supported learning communities. It also contributes to community resilience and economic empowerment consistent with the principles of SDG 8.

Integrative Theoretical Implications

Digital Literacy Theory, Brand Management Theory, and The Relational Theory of Marketing all address the supporting and empowering of MSMEs. The technical, strategic, and social factors, all of which sustain the digital transformation, must align to the same evidence (Faruq et al., 2024). This evidence, from a pedagogical perspective, mandates the integration of teaching, mentoring, and social digital learning. The skill transference should be comprehensive and consist of the right theoretical and practical proportions. Therefore, I aim to outline a practical strategy for the forthcoming community outreach activities focusing on the positioned competitiveness of MSMEs in the digital economy. This integrative approach reinforces SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) by building innovation-driven digital ecosystems. It also advances SDG 4 through the continuous alignment of educational practices with real business transformation.

Sustaining Program Impact

The first consider is the advantage of unique program worth. One of the worth of the program is closure relationship developed with e-Commerce stakeholders, policy makers, business incubators and eGovernment, greatly enhance and create market access and policy advocacy. Another worth of the program is the integration of student community digital SME initiatives would also greatly uplift the community SMEs with the community digital strategic initiatives. The advantage of these digital community innovations being perpetuated beyond the training periods is the enhancement of community SME mastery, community strategic and innovative engagement, and digital advocacy entrepreneurship. This sustained impact aligns with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by ensuring ongoing entrepreneurial empowerment and economic inclusivity. It also strengthens SDG 9, as continuous collaboration fosters innovation and sustainable digital infrastructure.

CONCLUSIONS

The participants of the community service scheme “Optimizing Digital Business Communication for MSMEs: Strategies for Building Brand and Customer Loyalty” have focused on and appreciated the various aspects of digital communication and social media, and its application in practice. In addition, the participants’ confidence in the digital marketing of their businesses increased, and this was reflected in their post-test scores. This demonstrates the effectiveness of experience-based learning and its relevance to the empowerment of MSMEs within the digital innovation adoption process.

The use of participatory methods like the integration of moving-training with MSMEs expended digitally taught modern customer relationships poses theory and practice challenges with the integration of teaching the digital economy MSMEs efforts assist balance theory with practice challenges to building brandets with the poor digital economy awareness and valuing brandets integration of poor digital economy awareness and valuing brandets aids focus. With digital economy theory integration with practice balance the flow of resources and the complex business networks integration of complex participatory methodology flows of resources and joins complex business networks is critical in the digital economy.

Integrated teaching hands-on modern praxis with the strategic coherence of the evaluation triangulation to teaching modules of the program is distinct and most important to teaching emphasizes business mindset reengineering to sees the nexus of transformative business

change is positive. To achieve the modeled level of service to community and to continually respond to networking capabilities of MSMEs with the digital economy, long-term goals of sustained targeted mentoring interventional research mentoring shifting with local governments on e-commerce and research with students in digital innovation and e-commerce is essential.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

All components of activities undertaken during this service to the community program were performed in alignment with the principles of academic ethics, which included respect for the participants' privacy, voluntary and informed consent, and equitable treatment without discrimination. The activities undertaken did not cause any negative harm or impact to the partners or participants.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest in the planning, implementation, analysis, or publication of this article. All results presented in this paper reflect objective data and findings aligned with the program's stated objectives.

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