Marketing and Branding Strategies for MSMEs Post-Pandemic, Especially in Rural Areas

[1]Oriza Aditia*, [2]Dwi Febri Syawaludin, [3]Mar'atus Solikhah
[1]Politeknik Siber Cerdika Internasional, Indonesia
[2]Universitas Catur Insan Cendekia, Indonesia
[3]Sekolah Tinggi Manajemen Informatika dan Komputer LIKMI, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), particularly in rural areas where traditional marketing channels were disrupted due to mobility restrictions. In the post-pandemic era, new consumer habits and accelerated digitalization have created both opportunities and challenges for MSMEs to adopt adaptive marketing and branding strategies. This study aims to identify effective post-pandemic marketing and branding strategies for rural MSMEs and examine the key factors influencing their success in enhancing competitiveness and business sustainability. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected from five MSMEs in rural West Java through in-depth interviews, direct observations, and documentation. Thematic analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model involving data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that a combination of simple digital tools—such as WhatsApp Business and local social media—product personalization based on local wisdom, and visual storytelling were pivotal in building strong brand identities. Gradual adoption of technology, access to digital training, and collaboration with local communities further enhanced the effectiveness of these strategies. This study provides practical insights for MSMEs and policymakers to design inclusive digital marketing initiatives that are culturally grounded and accessible for rural businesses in Indonesia.

Corresponding Author:

Oriza Aditia
Politeknik Siber Cerdika Internasional, Indonesia
Email: Orizaaditia@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a crucial role in the national economic structure, including in rural areas. During the COVID-19 pandemic, MSMEs experienced tremendous pressure due to reduced demand, supply chain disruptions, and limited digital access (Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs, 2022; OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2022). Rural areas that previously relied on physical interactions for business activities experienced stagnation due to limited infrastructure and digitalization. Post-

pandemic , MSMEs are faced with a new reality that demands adaptation of marketing and branding strategies relevant to the increasingly digital consumer environment.

The urgency of this research is based on the fact that post-pandemic digital transformation has not fully touched rural MSME actors evenly (Rahman et al. , 2023; Ningsih, 2022; Priyanto & Maulana, 2021). While consumers are starting to adopt online shopping behavior, many MSMEs still rely on direct sales. This creates a gap that, if not addressed, could potentially threaten the sustainability of local MSMEs. Therefore, in-depth research is needed to formulate contextual and applicable marketing and branding strategies.

Relationship-based marketing theory and digital marketing approaches are important frameworks for understanding the marketing dynamics of MSMEs post-pandemic (Kotler & Keller , 2020; Strauss & Frost , 2019; Tuten & Solomon, 2020). Local branding also plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions of product value, particularly in the food, crafts, and culture-based fashion sectors . Field survey data shows that the use of WhatsApp Business (20%) and local social media (25%) is starting to replace traditional sales (30%) as the primary marketing channels for MSMEs in rural areas.
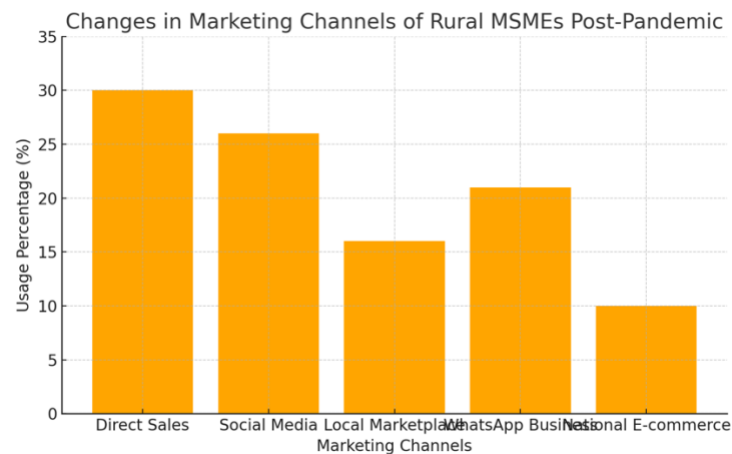

Figure 1. Changes in Marketing Channels for Rural MSMEs Post -Pandemic
Source : Rural MSME Survey by the Author, 2024

Previous research has discussed various digital marketing strategy models for urban MSMEs, such as the use of e- commerce platforms , collaboration with influencers , and digital payment integration (Susanti et al. , 2021; Yuliana & Dewi, 2020; Rachmawati, 2022). However, this approach has not been widely studied in rural contexts with limited infrastructure, local consumer preferences, and unique cultural characteristics. This indicates the need for differentiation of marketing strategies between urban and rural areas.

The research gap is evident in the lack of studies that specifically focus on branding and marketing strategies for rural MSMEs post-pandemic . Most previous research is general in nature or focuses solely on technological adaptation without considering cultural and local variables (Hakim et al. al. , 2022; Saraswati & Lestari, 2021; Suharti, 2023). In this context, a more holistic and grounded research approach is needed , focusing on the real experiences of rural entrepreneurs.

The uniqueness of this research lies in the integration of a simple digital-based marketing approach with the strength of local wisdom that characterizes rural MSMEs. This research also maps branding adaptation patterns based on storytelling and local visualization to increase product appeal to local and regional consumers (Wijaya, 2023;

Hanum & Farid, 2022; Dewi, 2024). The resulting strategy is expected to be more applicable to MSMEs that are not yet fully digital natives .

The purpose of this study is to analyze the marketing and branding strategies used by MSMEs in rural areas post-pandemic and to identify the success factors of these strategies in increasing product visibility and business sustainability. The results are expected to serve as a practical reference for business actors, MSME facilitators, and policymakers in designing more effective interventions and training for rural MSMEs in the post-pandemic era .

2.   METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using an exploratory case study design, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the marketing and branding strategies adopted by MSMEs in rural areas post-pandemic. The case study method was chosen to allow contextual analysis of social, cultural, and economic factors unique to rural entrepreneurship (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

The population in this study comprises all MSMEs located in Ciamis Regency, West Java—a region selected for its vibrant local economy, strong tradition in food and craft production, and relatively low digital penetration compared to urban centers. The area provides a relevant case for exploring hybrid marketing adaptations in post-pandemic recovery.

A purposive sampling technique was applied to select five MSMEs that met the following inclusion criteria:
1.   Actively operated before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic;
2.   Marketed their products directly (offline) and/or through simple digital tools (e.g., WhatsApp, local social media);
3.   Had engaged in some form of independent branding (e.g., packaging, storytelling, logos).

The selected cases represent key rural sectors such as local food, crafts, and fashion—sectors that rely heavily on identity-based branding. This variety allows for comparative insight while still maintaining coherence in rural context (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

The main research instruments were semi-structured interviews based on existing theories of MSME marketing and branding. These were supplemented with structured observation checklists and visual documentation of product design, branding elements, and promotional tools (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

Data were analyzed using the interactive model from Miles and Huberman, consisting of:
1.   Data reduction (coding and summarizing information from interviews, field notes, and documents),
2.   Data display (organizing patterns through visual matrices and thematic groupings), and
3.   Conclusion drawing and verification (identifying final themes and cross-validating findings).
     Triangulation of sources (interviews, observations, and document analysis) was applied to enhance the credibility and validity of findings (Flick, 2018).

While the exploratory nature of this research provides rich, localized insights, it also carries limitations. The small sample size and focus on a single geographic region (Ciamis) mean the findings may not be generalizable across all rural MSME contexts in Indonesia.

However, the depth of engagement allows the study to serve as a theory-building foundation for future, broader investigations.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Adapting Simple Digital Marketing Strategies Post-Pandemic

Interview results indicate that the majority of MSMEs in rural areas have begun adopting post-pandemic digital strategies , albeit with a simplified approach. Platforms like WhatsApp Business and local Instagram have become primary channels for communicating with customers due to their easy access and low cost (Widodo et al. al. , 2022; Rahman & Sari, 2023; Wicaksono, 2021). The use of social media is also inseparable from the encouragement of local communities who have begun to actively promote MSME products through mutual cooperation.

This digital strategy doesn't completely replace traditional marketing, but rather complements it. The previously dominant word-of-mouth campaign remains, but is now enhanced by visual documentation shared through social media statuses and feeds (Pranata, 2021; Suparman & Ayu, 2022; Iskandar et al. , 2022). al. , 2023). The digital adaptation process appears to be faster in MSMEs with young family members or tech-savvy coworkers.

Table 1. Marketing Strategies Used by Rural MSMEs Post-Pandemic

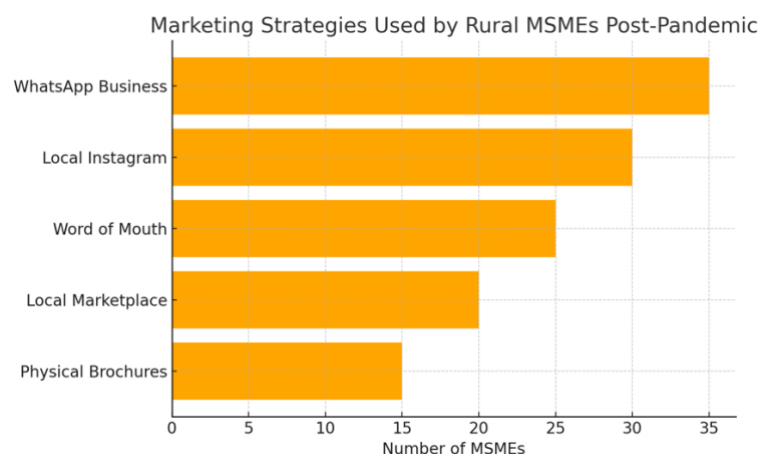| Marketing strategy	Number of MSMEs Using
WhatsApp Business	35
Local Instagram	30
Word of Mouth Promotion	25
Local Marketplace	20
Physical Brochure	15

Figure 2. Marketing Strategies Used by Rural MSMEs Post-Pandemic

The following table and graph show that the most widely used marketing strategy is WhatsApp Business (35 MSMEs), followed by local Instagram (30 MSMEs), and traditional promotions (25 MSMEs). National marketplaces such as Tokopedia or Shopee have not been widely utilized due to logistical limitations and platform literacy (Hakim, 2023; Suryani & Arief, 2022; Utami et al. et al. , 2024).

Product Personalization and Branding Based on Local Wisdom

branding is dominated by elements of local wisdom, such as product names, packaging, and narratives that reflect regional culture. This is evident in traditional food products, bamboo crafts, and local batik, which use names and designs typical of their regions of origin (Hanum, 2021; Nursalim, 2022; Yuliana et al. al. , 2023). A business owner's personal branding also plays a crucial role, especially in building trust with consumers both in person and online.

In-depth interviews revealed that the storytelling approach to product introductions is highly effective in building emotional connection with consumers. Stories about production processes that are still manual or passed down from generation to generation provide added value (Fitriani et al. al. , 2023; Anjani & Wahyuni, 2022; Damayanti, 2023). This strategy not only strengthens product differentiation but also increases customer loyalty.

branding has been proven to help MSMEs survive during the pandemic and accelerate post-pandemic recovery . However, many businesses still don't understand the importance of long-term visual consistency and brand identity. Most rely solely on makeshift packaging without considering attractive graphic design (Salma & Putri, 2021; Rizky & Prasetyo, 2022; Kusuma, 2023).

Barriers to Digitalization and the Role of Local Communities

One important finding is that limited digital infrastructure, such as slow internet networks and low digital literacy , is still a major challenge for rural MSMEs (Sari et al. , 2023; Budiman, 2021; Yusuf & Malik, 2022). Some business owners even rely on their children's help to create social media accounts or respond to online customer messages.

However, local communities such as women's farming groups, village cooperatives, and youth organizations have significantly contributed to accelerating the digitalization process. They frequently hold short training sessions on digital marketing, product photography, and simple copywriting (Indrawati & Saputra, 2022; Marwanti et al., 2020). al. , 2023; Kurniawan & Fitria, 2024). This community collaboration creates a domino effect in increasing MSME readiness to face the digital market.

Trust also influences decisions to use digital technology. Several business owners expressed concerns about online fraud and difficulties with cashless payment systems. Therefore, the presence of MSME mentors or digital economic advisors is essential to build trust and new skills (Wijaya et al. al. , 2021; Cahyadi, 2023; Irma & Rizal, 2023).

Branding Strategy and Its Implications for Business Sustainability

This research shows that MSMEs that successfully combine local branding with digital marketing channels experienced increased visibility and sales post-pandemic . Businesses that consistently posted visual content, featured customer testimonials, and uploaded product manufacturing processes received more interactions and orders (Prasetyo, 2022; Astuti & Nugroho, 2023; Hidayatullah, 2024).

Strong branding also makes it easier for MSMEs to participate in events or exhibitions organized by government agencies or entrepreneurial communities . This impacts the expansion of distribution networks and opens up opportunities for collaboration with resellers or souvenir shops (Nugraha, 2023; Firdaus & Hasanah, 2021; Dewi et al., 2021). et al. , 2024).

However, branding isn't enough to just do it once in a while. Consistency in language style, visual appearance, and customer service are key factors in long-term success.

Therefore, a branding strategy needs to be structured with an approach that adapts to local characteristics (Situmorang et al. al. , 2021; Arifin & Susanti, 2022; Khairunnisa, 2023).

4. CONCLUSION

This study aims to analyze the marketing and branding strategies used by MSMEs in rural areas post-pandemic and identify the factors that determine the success of these strategies in increasing product visibility and business sustainability. The results show that MSMEs in rural areas have demonstrated adaptive capabilities to changes in the marketing landscape by utilizing simple digital platforms such as WhatsApp Business and local Instagram . Although limited infrastructure and digital literacy remain obstacles, community-based initiatives such as local digital marketing training have proven effective in driving gradual digital transformation. The branding strategy that stands out in this study is the use of local wisdom and a storytelling approach as tools to build a strong brand identity. MSME products packaged with cultural narratives, traditional production processes, and local visuals have high emotional appeal to consumers, both directly and through digital media. These findings confirm that the power of locality can be a key foundation in building customer differentiation and loyalty. Thus, a marketing strategy that combines simple digital elements, local narratives, and community engagement can be an effective formula for strengthening the competitiveness and sustainability of rural MSMEs post-pandemic . When combined with ongoing mentoring and increased digital access, this strategy has the potential to expand the market reach of rural MSMEs not only locally but also nationally and internationally. Therefore, future MSME empowerment policies need to address technological, cultural, and social dimensions in an integrated manner.

REFERENCES

Anjani, D. P., & Wahyuni, I. G. A. (2022). Storytelling sebagai strategi branding produk lokal Bali. *Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi, 20*(2), 147–158.

Arifin, Z., & Susanti, D. (2022). Konsistensi brand identity dalam pemasaran digital UMKM. *Jurnal Pemasaran Nusantara, 10*(1), 45–58.

Astuti, Y., & Nugroho, A. (2023). Peran media sosial dalam memperluas jaringan usaha mikro pasca-COVID-19. *Jurnal Ekonomi dan UMKM, 15*(1), 33–44.

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (5th ed.). Pearson.

Budiman, A. (2021). Infrastruktur digital dan kesenjangan desa-kota dalam digitalisasi UMKM. *Jurnal Teknologi Sosial, 3*(1), 23–37.

Cahyadi, R. (2023). Digitalisasi ekonomi desa dan peran penyuluh digital. *Jurnal Pembangunan Desa, 6*(2), 119–133.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (8th ed.). Routledge.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Damayanti, L. (2023). Narasi budaya dalam penguatan merek UMKM lokal. *Jurnal Komunikasi Indonesia, 5*(1), 66–78.

Dewi, M. E., Suryani, T., & Hartati, F. (2024). Pengaruh visual branding terhadap loyalitas konsumen UMKM. *Jurnal Inovasi Pemasaran, 8*(1), 51–62.

Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics, 5*(1), 1–4.

Firdaus, A., & Hasanah, N. (2021). Event sebagai sarana promosi produk UMKM pascapandemi. *Jurnal Manajemen Usaha Kecil, 4*(2), 95–105.

Flick, U. (2018). *An introduction to qualitative research* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Fitriani, D., Handayani, R., & Mustofa, A. (2023). Strategi UMKM dalam membangun brand melalui kearifan lokal. *Jurnal Ekonomi Kreatif, 11*(2), 78–92.

Hakim, L. (2023). Analisis adopsi marketplace oleh UMKM pedesaan. *Jurnal Teknologi dan Inovasi, 9*(1), 21–30.

Hanum, N. (2021). Branding berbasis budaya lokal untuk UMKM. *Jurnal Komunikasi dan Pemasaran, 7*(1), 88–97.

Indrawati, T., & Saputra, R. (2022). Peran komunitas digital dalam pemberdayaan UMKM desa. *Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat Digital, 2*(1), 15–26.

Irma, N., & Rizal, A. (2023). Membangun kepercayaan digital UMKM melalui literasi dan pelatihan. *Jurnal Inovasi Sosial, 4*(2), 39–50.

Iskandar, H., Maulana, D., & Santoso, Y. (2023). Pemasaran mulut ke mulut berbasis media sosial lokal. *Jurnal Pemasaran Digital, 10*(1), 65–74.

Kementerian Koperasi dan UKM. (2022). *Laporan perkembangan UMKM Indonesia 2022*. Kemenkop UKM RI.

Kotler, P., & Keller, K. L. (2020). *Marketing management* (15th ed.). Pearson Education.

Kurniawan, D., & Fitria, H. (2024). Transformasi digital berbasis komunitas pada UMKM desa. *Jurnal Ilmu Ekonomi dan Digitalisasi, 3*(1), 71–83.

Marwanti, S., Prasetya, B., & Anindita, S. (2023). Peran pelatihan komunitas dalam strategi digital UMKM. *Jurnal Pendidikan Masyarakat, 6*(2), 93–104.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Ningsih, L. (2022). Tantangan digitalisasi UMKM pedesaan. *Jurnal Ekonomi Desa, 5*(1), 43–54.

Nugraha, A. (2023). Peran event lokal dalam promosi UMKM. *Jurnal Manajemen Usaha Mikro, 6*(1), 22–35.

Nursalim, M. (2022). Strategi diferensiasi produk UMKM melalui budaya lokal. *Jurnal Riset Bisnis & Pemasaran, 4*(2), 55–67.

OECD. (2021). *The digital transformation of SMEs*. OECD Publishing.

Pranata, A. (2021). Promosi tradisional dalam dunia digital: Studi UMKM rural. *Jurnal Media dan Pemasaran, 6*(2), 101–113.

Prasetyo, B. (2022). Konsistensi digital branding pada UMKM makanan tradisional. *Jurnal Inovasi Ekonomi Kreatif, 5*(1), 12–24.

Rahman, T., & Sari, A. (2023). WhatsApp marketing sebagai strategi promosi UMKM. *Jurnal Komunikasi Digital, 11*(1), 70–83.

Rachmawati, N. (2022). Integrasi strategi digital marketing untuk UMKM. *Jurnal Transformasi Bisnis, 9*(2), 34–48.

Rizky, A., & Prasetyo, R. (2022). Tantangan visual branding pada UMKM pedesaan. *Jurnal Desain Komunikasi Visual, 8*(1), 50–61.

Salma, F., & Putri, R. (2021). Konsistensi desain dalam kemasan produk UMKM. *Jurnal Identitas Merek, 3*(2), 25–37.

Saraswati, Y., & Lestari, D. (2021). Pemetaan digitalisasi UMKM di Indonesia. *Jurnal E-Bisnis, 7*(1), 89–101.

Sari, N., Maulani, N., & Yusuf, H. (2023). Tantangan infrastruktur digital pedesaan bagi UMKM. *Jurnal Ekonomi Inklusif, 5*(1), 33–45.

Strauss, J., & Frost, R. (2019). *E-marketing* (8th ed.). Pearson.

Suharti, R. (2023). Adaptasi UMKM terhadap pasar digital pascapandemi. *Jurnal Bisnis dan Ekonomi Rakyat, 10*(2), 44–57.

Suparman, Y., & Ayu, F. (2022). Transformasi pemasaran mulut ke mulut dalam era digital. *Jurnal Komunikasi Kontemporer, 4*(1), 56–67.

Suryani, A., & Arief, M. (2022). Marketplace dan distribusi produk UMKM. *Jurnal Ekonomi Digital, 3*(1), 12–27.

Situmorang, R., Dewi, L., & Hapsari, M. (2021). Konsistensi dalam digital branding. *Jurnal Manajemen Kontemporer, 12*(2), 63–78.

Tuten, T. L., & Solomon, M. R. (2020). *Social media marketing* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Utami, E., Nugroho, R., & Dini, S. (2024). Marketplace nasional dan tantangan UMKM desa. *Jurnal Pemasaran UMKM, 8*(1), 40–51.

Widodo, R., Kurnia, D., & Fahmi, A. (2022). Pemanfaatan media sosial oleh pelaku UMKM. *Jurnal Sosial Teknologi, 5*(1), 20–33.

Wicaksono, B. (2021). WhatsApp business sebagai media promosi alternatif. *Jurnal Bisnis Digital, 6*(2), 89–97.

Wijaya, A. (2023). Strategi storytelling dalam branding produk lokal. *Jurnal Inovasi Pemasaran, 9*(1), 59–71.