

## EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF MSMEs IN UTILIZING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR BRANDING: A STUDY OF MSMEs IN BENGKULU

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### Abstract

This research aims to explore the experience of MSMEs in Bengkulu, especially in Sukasari Village, in using social media for branding. One of the main challenges faced by MSMEs in Sukasari Village is their limited ability to utilize social media for branding and marketing. This study employs a qualitative approach using the case study method. A case study was chosen because the research focuses on the specific context of MSMEs in Sukasari Village, Bengkulu, and aims to deeply explore how MSME owners in the area utilize social media for branding. From the research results, it is evident that the biggest challenges faced by MSMEs in Sukasari Village in utilizing social media for branding lie in limited technological access and a lack of digital skills. The issue of slow or unstable internet access has become one of the main obstacles for MSME owners in Sukasari Village in optimizing social media as a marketing tool. Most MSME owners do not yet understand how to create content that suits the platform they are using. The findings of this research are consistent with previous studies, which show that MSMEs in rural areas have a significant digital divide compared to MSMEs in urban areas.

**Keywords :** *Experience, MSMEs, Social, Media, Branding*

## INTRODUCTION

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a vital role in Indonesia's economy. As a key pillar in job creation and poverty alleviation, MSMEs significantly contribute to local economic development, particularly in regions such as Bengkulu. According to data from the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs, MSMEs contribute 60% of Indonesia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and absorb 97% of the national workforce. However, as technology evolves and market trends shift, MSMEs must adapt to remain competitive. One of the greatest challenges they currently face is how to leverage social media to enhance their product branding.

Social media has become one of the most important platforms for promoting products and building a brand, particularly for small businesses that may not have large budgets for traditional advertising. According to the We Are Social and Hootsuite report (2022), over 170 million Indonesians are active on social media, making it a highly promising market for MSMEs to reach a broader consumer base. However, despite its potential, not all MSME owners have the knowledge and skills needed to fully capitalize on social media.

One of the biggest challenges faced by MSMEs in Indonesia is how to effectively utilize digital technology, especially social media, as a marketing tool. In the context of marketing and branding, social media is not just about posting photos of products or services. It offers MSMEs the opportunity to build more personal relationships with their customers, create stories or narratives around their products, and foster stronger brand loyalty. Branding itself is not just about a product's logo or name but also about how the product is perceived by consumers, how it stands out compared to competitors, and how to establish an emotional connection between the product and the customer.

In the context of MSMEs, strong branding is critical because it is not only about product recognition but also how the product is perceived by consumers. For many MSMEs, branding is not just about the logo and product name but about building a narrative behind the product, which can ultimately attract more customers. A robust brand allows MSMEs to improve their competitiveness in an increasingly competitive market. However, in many regions, particularly in rural areas, MSMEs still struggle to grasp the importance of branding in the digital context. In this situation, social media can be a highly useful tool due to its low cost and easy accessibility. Nevertheless, its use is often suboptimal, especially among MSMEs located in remote areas such as Sukasari Village in Seluma Regency, Bengkulu.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have proven to be effective in building brands. These platforms allow MSMEs to reach a broader audience without the substantial costs often required for traditional advertising. However, in regions like Bengkulu, many MSMEs are still struggling to understand how social media works and how they can use it to build a strong brand. Research has shown that one of the main challenges MSMEs face in digital

branding is difficulty managing social media and determining appropriate content ideas. Sukasari Village, located in the southern part of Bengkulu Province, is an example of a region with significant potential for MSME development. This village boasts several flagship products such as citronella oil, tempeh chips, and various other local processed products that are well-known among the local community. Unfortunately, despite the high quality of these products, their market reach remains limited, and MSME owners in this village face major challenges in expanding and promoting their products beyond the local market.

One of the primary challenges faced by MSMEs in Sukasari Village is their limited ability to utilize social media for branding and marketing. Although most MSME owners in the village have social media accounts such as Facebook and Instagram, their use is largely confined to personal communication or social interactions among villagers. Knowledge of how to use social media to build their product brands is still very limited. This issue is exacerbated by the lack of stable internet access in the area, which further complicates the ability of MSME owners to consistently use social media as a marketing tool.

In addition to technical challenges, MSME owners in Sukasari Village also face obstacles related to digital knowledge and skills. Many lack an understanding of broader branding concepts, including how to build product narratives, create engaging visual content, and leverage the features offered by social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. The lack of skills in producing appealing and informative content is one of the reasons why branding efforts through social media have not been optimized by MSMEs in this village.

This study aims to explore the experiences of MSMEs in Bengkulu, particularly in Sukasari Village, in using social media for branding. It will also highlight the challenges faced by MSME owners in utilizing social media and the solutions they need to optimize the potential of these platforms.

Therefore, the primary focus of this study is to:

1. Explore the experiences of MSMEs in Sukasari Village in utilizing social media for product branding.
2. Identify the challenges faced by MSMEs in using social media as a marketing tool.
3. Suggest practical solutions to help MSMEs overcome the barriers they encounter in branding through social media.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Definition of Branding in the Context of MSMEs**

Branding is a key element of marketing strategy that plays an important role in shaping consumer perceptions of a product or service. According to Keller (2003), branding can be defined as a set of elements that distinguish one product or service from another, including visual identity such as logos, names, colors, and the

personality reflected in how the product is presented. Effective branding creates a lasting impression on consumers and ultimately influences their purchasing decisions.

In the context of **Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)**, branding poses its own challenges. Often, MSME owners do not have the same resources as large companies to create massive or consistent marketing campaigns. According to Keller and Kotler (2016), strong branding can create a perceived added value that distinguishes a product from its competitors. Successful MSMEs in branding can increase customer loyalty and strengthen their position in a competitive market.

However, for many MSMEs, branding is not yet a top priority. They tend to focus more on day-to-day business operations, such as production and sales, so aspects such as **brand identity formation** are often overlooked. Aaker (1991) argued that one of the biggest challenges for small businesses is how they can build and manage brand assets sustainably with limited resources.

In rural areas like **Sukasari Village**, the concept of branding may still be new to MSMEs, which tend to prioritize traditional business approaches. Branding here is not only about creating an attractive logo or product name but also about crafting a **product experience and narrative** that resonates with consumers. According to Kapferer (2012), a brand does not just sell physical products but also conveys stories, emotions, and values that connect with consumers. Therefore, a deeper understanding of branding becomes crucial for MSMEs to maximize their market potential.

### **The Role of Social Media in Branding**

Over the past two decades, social media has emerged as a dominant platform that has changed how businesses, including MSMEs, communicate with consumers. Social media platforms such as **Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok** offer significant opportunities for business owners to build their brands without requiring large marketing budgets. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argued that social media empowers consumers to interact directly with brands, creating a more personal and relationship-oriented experience.

For MSMEs, social media plays a crucial role as it allows them to reach a wider audience at a much lower cost compared to traditional advertising. **Evans (2012)** highlighted that the advantage of social media lies in its ability to facilitate two-way interaction between brands and consumers, where communication can occur in real-time and be more personalized.

However, although social media offers many benefits, success in leveraging it does not happen automatically. MSMEs need to understand **algorithms, content trends**, and how to capture the audience's attention with relevant and engaging content. **Kotler (2021)** emphasized the importance of authentic and interactive content in social media strategies, especially on highly visual platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

In **Sukasari Village**, for example, most MSMEs have already been using Facebook, but their usage remains limited to social communication activities and simple transactions rather than building a brand narrative. The use of social media to establish **product identity** is still not optimal due to the lack of knowledge about how to create content that suits the characteristics of the audience on each platform.

In addition, another challenge faced by MSMEs in utilizing social media is **consistency**. **Hanna et al. (2011)** mentioned that for social media branding to be successful, it requires a consistent and well-planned strategy, including regular content creation, active interaction with users, and a deep understanding of what is trending among consumers.

### **Technological Challenges for MSMEs in Underdeveloped Areas**

In rural and underdeveloped areas such as **Sukasari Village**, technological infrastructure limitations become one of the main obstacles to utilizing social media for branding. According to **Tambunan (2019)**, although access to information technology is expanding, there is still a significant **digital divide** between MSMEs in urban and rural areas. In rural areas, **slow or unstable internet access** often becomes a major barrier to implementing effective digital strategies.

Aside from infrastructure issues, **digital literacy** also poses a challenge. Many MSME owners in rural areas lack adequate knowledge about how to utilize digital technology for business purposes. **Lim et al. (2020)** emphasized that digital literacy is essential for integrating technology into business models, especially in the rapidly growing era of digitalization.

In **Sukasari Village**, this challenge is very apparent. Although MSME owners are eager to expand their businesses through social media, the **lack of knowledge** and **internet access** makes it difficult for them to do so. According to research conducted by **UNDP (2020)**, rural areas in Indonesia, including Bengkulu, face difficulties in accessing technology equitably, hindering the development of a more inclusive digital economy.

Therefore, greater efforts are needed from various parties, including **government and the private sector**, to improve access to technology in rural areas and provide proper digital training for MSME owners. Collaborative efforts such as **creative content creation training, digital skill development**, and better internet infrastructure can help address these challenges.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a **qualitative approach** using the **case study method**. A case study was chosen because the research focuses on the specific context of MSMEs in **Sukasari Village, Bengkulu**, and aims to deeply explore how MSME owners in the area utilize social media for branding. According to **Yin (2018)**, case studies allow researchers to investigate the detailed experiences of research subjects in real-

life contexts, making it an appropriate method for understanding complex phenomena. The qualitative approach was also selected as it provides a deeper understanding of the **subjective experiences** of MSME owners in utilizing social media. This research aims to explore the meaning and interpretation from the perspective of MSME owners, particularly regarding the **challenges** they face and how they view social media's potential as a tool for building their brand.

## RESULTS

### Profile of MSMEs in Sukasari Village

**Sukasari Village**, located in **Seluma Regency, Bengkulu Province**, is a village with growing economic potential through various **micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs)**. The MSMEs in this village primarily operate in the production of **handicrafts, snacks, and herbal products** such as citronella oil. These products hold great potential for wider marketing; however, limited access to technology and branding knowledge has led many MSMEs in this village to still rely on traditional marketing methods.

The MSMEs in Sukasari Village are dominated by **family-run businesses** on a small scale, with limited capital and a workforce mainly consisting of family members. **Citronella oil**, one of the village's signature products, is made from the abundant lemongrass plants in the area. In addition, there are also food businesses producing **tempeh chips** and **cassava chips**, which have the potential to become the region's specialty products.

In this study, **10 MSMEs** were selected as research subjects based on their involvement in the **BUMDes (Village-Owned Enterprises)** program and their use of social media as one of their promotional tools. Most MSMEs have used **Facebook** as their primary social media platform, while **Instagram** and **TikTok** have only recently been adopted by a small portion of MSMEs. Although social media is widely known and used, the majority of MSMEs have not yet fully utilized it for branding and reaching a broader market.

### MSME Experiences in Utilizing Social Media

From the interviews, it was revealed that most MSME owners in **Sukasari Village** see social media as a potential tool for expanding their marketing reach. However, the use of social media by MSMEs in the village remains limited to basic activities such as posting product images without a targeted branding strategy. **Facebook** is the platform most frequently used by MSMEs, but its use functions more as a communication tool with regular customers or to share information among villagers.

The following are the main findings from the interviews regarding MSME experiences in utilizing social media:

### 1. Using Facebook for Promotion:

- Most MSME owners in Sukasari Village use **Facebook** to promote their products, but this usage tends to be sporadic and unstructured. **Lina**, a tempeh chip entrepreneur, explained that she often posts photos of her products on Facebook, but without any planned schedule or well-thought-out content. Lina also feels that her content is not engaging enough to attract a wider audience.
- Some other business owners stated that they use **WhatsApp** more often to communicate with customers because it is seen as easier and more direct. However, the use of WhatsApp for promotion is still very limited and mostly **personal between acquaintances**.

### 2. Instagram and TikTok as New Platforms:

- **Instagram** and **TikTok** are seen as more complex and challenging platforms for MSME owners to use. They acknowledge that these platforms have great potential, particularly due to their highly visual nature, but many of them do not yet understand how to effectively use both platforms. **Makama**, a citronella oil producer, mentioned that he once tried to create an Instagram account for his business but found it difficult to create relevant content that would capture the audience's attention.

### 3. Limited Understanding of Algorithms and Content Creation:

- One of the main challenges faced by MSMEs in utilizing social media for branding is the **lack of understanding of algorithms** and how to create engaging content. Most MSME owners do not understand how the algorithms on platforms like Instagram and TikTok work, making it difficult for their content to reach a broader audience. **Warsi**, a handicraft entrepreneur, said: *"I don't know how to get my posts seen by more people. Sometimes I see others with many followers, even though their products are similar to mine."*
- Many MSME owners also expressed difficulty in creating **attractive visual content**, such as high-quality product photos or promotional videos. Some of them rely solely on photos taken with mobile phones, without paying attention to aspects such as lighting, composition, or product clarity. This type of content often fails to garner significant interaction from social media users.

## Challenges Faced by MSMEs in Branding

This study identified several key challenges faced by MSME owners in **Sukasari Village** in utilizing social media for branding:

### **Internet Access Limitations**

The biggest challenge frequently mentioned by MSME owners in Sukasari Village is **poor internet access**. As a village located in a rural area, the quality of internet connectivity in Sukasari is often unstable, especially in areas further from the village center. **Tuti**, a cassava chip entrepreneur, explained: *"The internet signal in our village often cuts out, so it's hard to open Instagram or TikTok. I end up selling directly at the market more often instead."*

This limitation in internet access makes it difficult for MSME owners to upload content regularly or engage with customers in real-time, which is one of the main obstacles in their efforts to build branding through social media.

### **Lack of Knowledge in Content Creation**

The second challenge faced by MSME owners is the **lack of skills in creating attractive visual content**. Most MSME owners admitted that they struggle to create photos or videos that can capture the audience's attention on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Most of the content uploaded by MSME owners remains simple photos, without creative or visually appealing elements.

Training on **product photography techniques** and **video editing** has become a pressing need for MSME owners. **Nurul**, a snack entrepreneur, said: *"I often see other people's Instagram posts look great, but I don't know how to make mine look like that. I'm sure that if my products were photographed well, they would attract more buyers."*

### **Limited Branding Strategy**

In addition to technical challenges, MSME owners also face difficulties in terms of **branding strategy**. Many of them do not yet have a deep understanding of the importance of **product narrative**, **brand identity**, and **consistency in branding**. Most MSME owners are still focused on the **physical aspects of the product**, such as material quality or price, without considering how they can build a compelling story behind the products they sell.

For example, **Warsi**, a handicraft entrepreneur, explained that although she understands the importance of branding, she does not know how to create a strong narrative for her products: *"I know the importance of having a logo and product name, but I don't yet understand how to create a story or identity that makes people interested."*

This challenge indicates that MSME owners in **Sukasari Village** need further guidance on how to build effective branding through **narrative content** that can attract consumer attention.

## Solutions and Expectations of MSMEs

Through the interviews, MSME owners expressed several **expectations** for overcoming the challenges they face, including enhanced training and technical support. Some of the solutions they hope for include:

1. **In-depth Content Creation Training:** MSME owners hope for more comprehensive training on how to create engaging visual content. They want to learn how to effectively use cameras or smartphones, how to edit photos and videos, and how to write compelling captions to increase interaction on social media.
2. **Improved Internet Access in the Village:** One of the biggest hopes of MSME owners is for improvements in internet access. They hope that the government or private sector can help improve the quality of the village's internet network so they can use social media more consistently and effectively.
3. **Assistance in Branding Strategy:** MSME owners also hope for **mentoring programs** that can help them develop a more consistent branding strategy. They want to learn how to build product narratives, create appealing logos, and maximize the use of social media platforms to expand their market.

## DISCUSSION

### Analysis of Branding Challenges for MSMEs

From the research results, it is evident that the biggest challenges faced by MSMEs in **Sukasari Village** in utilizing social media for branding lie in **limited technological access** and a **lack of digital skills**. This challenge aligns with the findings of **Tambunan (2019)**, which indicate that MSMEs in rural areas still face significant difficulties in gaining equal access to digital technology.

The issue of **slow or unstable internet access** has become one of the main obstacles for MSME owners in Sukasari Village in optimizing social media as a marketing tool. Without adequate internet access, they cannot consistently use platforms like **Instagram** and **TikTok**, which ultimately hampers their branding efforts.

In addition, the **lack of skills in content creation** is another significant issue. Most MSME owners do not yet understand how to create content that suits the platform they are using. Therefore, knowledge of how to manage **relevant and engaging content** on social media—especially on highly visual platforms like Instagram—is crucial. This understanding has not yet been fully grasped by MSME owners in Sukasari Village.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this research are consistent with previous studies, which show that MSMEs in rural areas have a significant **digital divide** compared to MSMEs in urban areas. A study by **Lim et al. (2020)** indicated that **technological access** and **digital literacy** are two key factors influencing the success of MSMEs in utilizing digital technology for business. However, this study also highlights the high **awareness among MSME owners** of the importance of social media as a branding tool, despite their difficulties in maximizing its potential. Many MSME owners in Sukasari Village express a desire to learn more about how to leverage social media to enhance the visibility of their products, but they require deeper **technical guidance** and **training** to do so effectively.

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