

THE MEANING OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS A COMMUNICATION AND PROMOTION TOOL BY MSMEs WITH A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

Digital transformation has changed the way micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) communicate and promote their products. Social media is not only a means of sharing information but also serves as a relatively inexpensive and effective interactive promotional tool. This study aims to understand the meaning of social media as a communication and promotional tool from the perspective of MSMEs in North Cikarang. The research method used is qualitative with a phenomenological approach. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation of eight MSMEs selected using purposive sampling. Data analysis was conducted thematically with an emphasis on interpreting the subjective experiences of informants. The results of the study indicate that MSMEs interpret social media in four main dimensions: (1) as a two-way communication tool that strengthens interactions with consumers, (2) as a product promotion showcase through visual content, short videos, and live selling, (3) as a business identity space that builds consumer image and trust, and (4) as a learning platform through digital trends and consumer feedback. The main obstacles faced include limited digital literacy, limited resources, and the dynamics of platform algorithms. Social commerce phenomena such as TikTok Shop are seen as opening up new market opportunities, although they also pose a risk of platform dependence. This study emphasizes the importance of increasing digital literacy, diversifying promotional strategies, and ecosystem support from the government and related institutions so that MSMEs are more adaptive to digital change. These findings provide theoretical contributions to the phenomenology-based digital marketing literature and practical implications for the sustainability of MSMEs in the era of a social media-based economy.

Keywords: MSMEs, Social Media, Marketing Communications, Digital Promotion, Phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a strategic role in the Indonesian economy because they absorb labor, reduce unemployment, and serve as the backbone of national economic growth. However, the challenges faced by MSMEs are increasingly complex with the digital transformation and changes in consumer behavior, which tend to prefer online-based transactions. Increasing business competition requires MSMEs to find effective strategies to maintain business sustainability, one of which is through the use of social media as a means of communication and promotion (Meske & Stieglitz, 2013) .

With the increasing penetration of the internet and digital devices, social media has emerged as a dominant marketing platform. Utilizing social media not only facilitates product promotion but also enables two-way communication between businesses and consumers. This provides added value in the form of increased customer loyalty, expanded market reach, and relatively low promotional costs compared to traditional media (Nurali et al., 2020) .

Social media also serves as a platform for MSMEs to build a more personalized brand image through interactive and creative content. With a digital communication approach, MSMEs can tailor their promotional strategies based on their target audience's preferences. Promotional content packaged in visual and audio-visual formats has been shown to be more engaging for consumers and encourage purchasing decisions (Soelaiman & Ekawati, 2021) .

On the other hand, the effectiveness of social media as a promotional tool is determined by the extent to which MSMEs are able to utilize it optimally. Several studies have shown that the main obstacles for MSMEs in using social media include low digital literacy, limited resources, and a lack of understanding of sustainable digital marketing strategies (Paendong et al., 2023) . Therefore, training and mentoring are essential for MSMEs to be more adaptive to digital change.

Global phenomena demonstrate that social media is no longer just a communication tool but has transformed into a new marketplace. Manyanga et al. (2024) emphasize that social commerce offers significant opportunities for MSMEs to increase competitiveness through the integration of promotion, communication, and transactions within a single digital ecosystem. This makes social media a key instrument in driving the growth of small and medium businesses in the digital era.

Research by Rusdana et al. (2022) found that the use of social media can enhance the presence of MSMEs while strengthening emotional connections with consumers. Digital marketing strategies enable MSMEs to reach a wider audience without geographical limitations. Thus, social media serves a dual function as a promotional tool and a bridge for intensive communication with consumers.

Furthermore, Ani et al. (2025) emphasized that social media is effective in building customer engagement , which in turn impacts increased purchasing decisions. Consumer interaction through comments, messages, and live streaming is a key factor in strengthening business relationships. Meanwhile, Santoso et al. (2025) highlighted the importance of integrating digital marketing strategies with local market characteristics to make MSME promotion more contextual and sustainable.

In the context of the digital supply chain, Nurali et al., (2025), through their research on Digi Supply Transformation, explained that digitalization enables MSMEs to be more efficient in distributing products while increasing the transparency of business processes.

With the support of digital technology, social media can function as both an information channel and a distribution channel, supporting smooth logistics.

The growth of online shopping through social commerce further reinforces the urgency of utilizing social media by MSMEs. One example is the emergence of TikTok Shop, which has become a cost-effective shopping alternative and an interactive promotional channel for small businesses. TikTok Shop not only presents entertainment content but also integrates product promotion features directly to consumers through live streaming and short videos. This presents a significant opportunity for MSMEs to expand their market reach while reducing marketing costs, thus enabling social media to be increasingly understood not merely as a means of communication but also as a potential marketplace for business sustainability (Wijoyo, 2023) .

Considering the above phenomena, research into the meaning of social media by MSMEs is crucial. This research seeks to understand how MSMEs interpret social media as a communication and promotional tool in running their businesses. This understanding is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of digital marketing literature, while also providing practical benefits for MSMEs in optimizing their promotional strategies in the digital economy era.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social media has evolved into an interactive platform based on user-generated content that enables two-way communication between businesses and consumers. Kaplan and Haenlein explain that social media is built on the foundations of Web 2.0, enabling the active creation and exchange of content by users. This interactivity fosters the creation of added value through participation, dialogue, and collaboration between producers and consumers. Therefore, social media is no longer understood as a one-way medium but rather as a dynamic socio-economic space within modern marketing activities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Ju, Chocarro, & Martín Martín, 2021).

In the context of digital marketing, the concept of customer engagement is a key element in explaining the success of social media promotional strategies. Customer engagement refers to the level of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement of consumers with a brand through digital interactions. Various studies have shown that visual and audiovisual content, such as product photos, short videos, and live streaming, significantly increases consumer engagement, ultimately impacting trust and purchasing decisions (Brodie et al., 2011; Tatisari et al., 2025). This confirms that the effectiveness of digital promotions is determined not only by the frequency of posts, but also by the quality of the interactions created

For MSMEs, social media plays a strategic role as a relatively inexpensive, flexible, and easily accessible promotional tool. Research in Indonesia shows that MSMEs utilize social media to expand market reach, build business image, and maintain customer relationships. However, the success of social media utilization is greatly influenced by the digital literacy of MSMEs and their ability to manage content consistently and relevantly for their audiences (Paendong et al., 2023; Santoso et al., 2025).

The social commerce phenomenon is strengthening the role of social media in transaction activities, one example of which is through the TikTok Shop platform. TikTok

Shop integrates entertainment content, live interaction, and transaction features within a single digital ecosystem. Studies show that live selling on TikTok Shop can increase engagement and impulsive buying through real-time interactions and social proof. However, on the other hand, MSMEs' dependence on platform policies and government regulations poses risks to business sustainability, especially when there are changes in rules or system algorithms (Ardiansah, Azizah, & Sadida, 2024; Anggraeny et al., 2024).

From a phenomenological perspective, social media utilization is not merely understood as a technical activity, but as a subjective experience that shapes the meaning and actions of business actors. Schutz asserts that the meaning individuals construct about a phenomenon will influence how they act in social life. In this context, MSMEs who interpret social media as a "customer space" tend to be more proactive in responding to consumers, innovating content, and maintaining long-term relationships. This relationship between meaning and action enriches digital marketing studies with an interpretive approach that places the experiences of business actors at the center of analysis (Schutz, 1967; Creswell, 2014).

RESEARCH METHOD

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach. This approach was chosen because the study aimed to explore the meanings directly experienced by MSMEs in utilizing social media as a means of communication and promotion. According to Lexy. J. Moleong (2007), qualitative research seeks to understand the phenomena experienced by research subjects holistically and in-depth, with verbal descriptions in a natural context. Similarly, Creswell (2013) explains that phenomenology is used to explore and understand the meaning of an individual's life experiences regarding a particular phenomenon. Thus, this design is relevant for uncovering the subjective meanings of MSMEs in the context of digital marketing.

2. Population and Sample

The population in this study was all MSMEs that use social media for communication and promotion in the North Cikarang area. The sample was selected using purposive sampling, a sampling technique based on specific criteria deemed most relevant. Sugiyono (2017) stated that purposive sampling is used when researchers have specific considerations regarding the selected informants, as they are considered to have the best understanding of the required information.

The informant criteria in this study include: (1) business actors classified as MSMEs according to Law No. 20 of 2008; (2) actively using at least one social media platform (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, or WhatsApp Business); (3) having run a business for at least one year in the North Cikarang area; and (4) willing to be a resource person. Based on these criteria, four MSME actors were selected from the culinary, fashion, printing services, and beauty sectors.

3. Data Collection Techniques and Development Instruments

Data collection was conducted using several methods. First, in-depth interviews using semi-structured interview guidelines. Kvale (2007) emphasized that in-depth interviews are the primary method for exploring individual understanding and experiences on a more

personal level. Second, participant observation was used to directly observe MSME promotional activities through social media, including interactions with consumers. Third, documentation was conducted in the form of photos, screenshots, online sales archives, and supporting literature.

The research instruments consisted of open-ended interview guidelines, observation sheets, and documentation tools (voice recorder, camera, computer). The interview instrument outline was compiled based on research indicators, namely: social media as a communication tool, social media as a promotional tool, user experience, supporting and inhibiting factors, and subjective interpretation.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. Braun & Clarke (2006) explain that thematic analysis is used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (*themes*) in data, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The stages of analysis include: (1) data reduction by selecting relevant information; (2) categorizing data into themes such as communication, promotion, experience, supporting factors, and inhibiting factors; (3) presenting data in the form of narratives and thematic tables; and (4) drawing conclusions based on the interpretation of meaning.

To ensure data validity, source and method triangulation techniques were used. Miles & Huberman (1994) state that triangulation is a technique for checking data validity by utilizing other sources or methods as comparisons to the primary data. Thus, the results of this study can be scientifically justified.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In-depth interviews with eight MSMEs in North Cikarang revealed that informants perceive social media as a multifunctional space: a means of interpersonal communication with consumers, a product promotion channel, and a space for marketing experimentation (platforms, content formats, and interactions). All informants stated that social media—especially Instagram and TikTok—has transformed the way they communicate with customers, both in conveying product information and responding to complaints and orders in real time. This finding aligns with studies that state that social media serves a dual function as a communication channel and a digital marketing instrument (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Social Media as a Two-Way Communication Space

Many informants emphasized the interactivity aspect of social media. Rani (culinary business) stated: "Through comments and DMs, I know what customers want; sometimes new product ideas emerge from comments." This statement demonstrates that social media facilitates fast and contextual two-way communication, enabling MSMEs to adapt products/services responsively. This finding correlates with literature that emphasizes the value of interaction and *customer engagement* as pillars of digital marketing success (Ani et al., 2025; Braun & Clarke, 2006) .

Theoretically, this kind of communication function can be analyzed using an interactive marketing communication perspective—where messages are not only delivered one way, but are continuously processed through consumer feedback, thus forming new meanings for business actors and brands (Lupiyoadi, 2008) . The phenomenological

approach emphasizes that the meanings formed by MSME actors emerge from their direct experiences in these interactions (Creswell, 2013).

Promotion Practices: Content, Frequency, and Format

Thematic analysis revealed a variety of content strategies: high-quality product photos (visuals), short videos (reels/shorts), customer testimonials, and live selling. Andi (fashion business) and Arif (accessories business) confirmed that short videos and live selling increased purchase intention: "When it's live, buyers feel closer — they ask questions directly and often complete the transaction immediately." This aligns with empirical evidence that audiovisual formats and live streams increase sales conversions in *social commerce*. (Manyanga et al., 2024; Wijoyo, 2023).

Post frequency also emerged as an indicator of promotional practices. Informants who regularly post (at least twice a week) tend to report higher engagement, in line with the marketing communications principle that message consistency and frequency increase exposure and recall (Kotler, 2012). However, some MSMEs expressed challenges in maintaining content quality when frequency is required—this indicates a trade-off between quantity and quality that needs to be managed.

Consumer Engagement and Trust

Feedback in the form of comments, private messages, and testimonials serves as social capital that strengthens a business's credibility. Yuni (beauty service) uses before-and-after content and customer testimonials to build trust: "Testimonials sell more than my own claims." This finding supports the literature showing a positive relationship between *customer engagement* and purchasing decisions (Ani et al., 2025; Manyanga et al., 2024)

Conceptually, this engagement influences consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) — where positive interactions on social media become a source of value for MSME brands (Kotler & Keller, 2012). In a phenomenological context, this engagement also becomes an element that gives meaning to the experiences of business actors: not just a transaction process, but a social relationship that defines the existence of the business.

Barriers: Digital Literacy, Resources, and Algorithms

Despite the significant potential, field findings highlight real barriers. Some informants (e.g., Riko, printing services) complained about limited digital literacy—for example, the ability to create video content, understand insights/analytics, or optimize the use of paid advertising features. This is consistent with a study (Paendong et al., 2023) that identified digital literacy and resources as barriers to social media adoption by MSMEs.

Furthermore, changes in platform algorithms and reliance on organic visibility pose strategic challenges: some informants experienced a decline in organic reach, leading them to consider paid ads. This issue is relevant to studies on cost-effective digital promotion strategies (Pentina et al., 2012; Sutrisno et al., 2024). From a practical perspective, this problem requires intervention in the form of technical training and access to resources (time, energy, costs).

The Role of Social Commerce (Case Study: TikTok Shop)

The TikTok Shop phenomenon we discussed earlier also emerged reflectively in interviews: Andi and Budi stated that the integration of buy-sell features into the platform simplifies the purchasing process and encourages impulse buying, especially during live events. However, informants also acknowledged the risks of relying on platform policies—closures or policy changes could disrupt marketing flows (Wijoyo, 2023).

Analytical, social commerce combines elements of entertainment, algorithmic recommendations, and ease of transaction—an ecosystem that, when leveraged appropriately, can lower marketing costs and accelerate market penetration (Paendong et al., 2023). However, reliance on external platforms underscores the need for diversification of promotional channels and building an independent customer base (e.g., customer lists via WhatsApp/Email).

Subjective Interpretation of Social Media by MSMEs

From a phenomenological perspective, the meaning of social media by MSME actors is multifaceted: (1) as a communication tool enabling dialogue with consumers; (2) as a promotional tool encompassing product presentations and sales campaigns; (3) as an identity space a place to demonstrate business values and brand style; and (4) as a learning space, a medium for observing trends and competitors. Sinta (crafts)'s statement: "Social media is like a living showcase, we show products, stories, and the response is immediate," summarizes this meaning.

This meaning shapes actions: MSMEs who interpret social media as a “customer space” will tend to be more proactive in terms of response, content innovation, and maintaining relationships, a finding that enriches the literature on the meaning-action relationship in digital marketing (Munadiyan & Pranggono, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of a phenomenological study of eight MSMEs in North Cikarang, it can be concluded that social media has been understood and utilized not only as a promotional tool but also as a communication and interaction space that creates new meaning in business activities. Informants stated that social media facilitates two-way communication with consumers, accelerates the dissemination of product information, and creates a learning space from trends and competitors. This finding aligns with the view of Tajvidi et al., (2021) that social media is an interactive platform based on user content, capable of encouraging the creation of added value through interaction.

Promotional strategies employed by MSMEs include the use of visual, audiovisual, and live selling content. The success of this strategy lies in customer engagement, which has been shown to increase trust and purchasing decisions, as stated by (Tatasari et al., 2025) . However, this effectiveness depends on the consistency and quality of content, which remains a challenge due to limited digital literacy and resources. This finding supports research by Paendong et al., (2023), which emphasized technical barriers as the main obstacle to MSME digitalization.

Furthermore, the social commerce phenomenon through TikTok Shop presents new opportunities for interactive promotion, while simultaneously posing the risk of dependence on platform policies (Ardiansah et al., 2024) . Thus, the meaning of social media by MSMEs can be understood across four main dimensions: as a communication tool, a promotional tool, an identity space, and a learning space. These meanings shape MSMEs' concrete actions in managing consumer relationships and business sustainability strategies.

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