CONTENT MARKETING STRATEGIES AND BUILDING BRAND AWARENESS IN THE ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON INDONESIAN MSMES

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the experiences of Indonesian MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises) actors in implementing content marketing strategies and building brand awareness in the social media era. Digital transformation has created strategic opportunities for MSMEs to reach broader markets, yet its implementation still faces complex challenges related to digital literacy, resource constraints, and platform algorithm dynamics. This research employs a qualitative approach with transcendental phenomenology method involving 20 informants from various business sectors and geographical regions in Indonesia. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation of social media activities, and document analysis of marketing content. Data analysis utilized the Colaizzi method while adhering to Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria to ensure data validity. The research identified six main themes: (1) evolution of content marketing understanding from transactional to relational, (2) creative strategies in content creation based on storytelling and format diversification, (3) challenges in content consistency and management due to time and technical skill limitations, (4) importance of active interaction and engagement with audiences to build brand communities, (5) adaptation to algorithm changes and social media platform trends, and (6) success measurement and continuous learning. Findings indicate that success in building brand awareness is not determined by formal educational background or business scale, but rather by creativity, consistency, adaptability, and deep understanding of audience characteristics. Effective strategies include authentic storytelling based on brand values, collaboration with micro-influencers, utilization of user-generated content, and development of loyal brand communities. This research contributes theoretically to the development of contextual content marketing models for MSMEs in developing countries and provides practical implications for MSME actors, policy makers, educational institutions, and digital platform providers. Research limitations lie in the geographical focus on urban and semi-urban areas, thus future research is recommended to explore MSME experiences in remote areas and conduct longitudinal studies to understand the evolution of content marketing strategies in the long term.

Keywords: content marketing, brand awareness, MSMEs, social media

INTRODUCTION

The digital age has fundamentally changed the global marketing landscape, where social media has become a transformative force that shapes the way organizations communicate with their consumers. Globally, there are 5.31 billion social media users as of April 2025, which is equivalent to 64.7 percent of the world's total population, reflecting the dominance of digital platforms in the lives of modern society. In Indonesia, this phenomenon is even more significant where 143 million or about 50.2 percent of Indonesia's total population are recorded as active users of social media as of January 2025, with an average usage duration of 188 minutes or 3 hours 8 minutes per day. This digital transformation has created unprecedented strategic opportunities for businesses to build brand awareness and reach a wider market at a relatively affordable cost. Research by Kotler et al. (2023) in "Marketing 5.0: Technology for Humanity" confirms that digital transformation has shifted the marketing paradigm from transactional to relational, where social media functions as an ecosystem that facilitates co-creation between brands and consumers. An empirical study conducted by Dwivedi et al. (2023) in the Journal of Business Research shows that the use of social media for marketing

increases brand equity by up to 45% and customer engagement by up to 67% in small and medium-sized businesses in developing countries.

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a vital role in the Indonesian economy as the backbone of the national economy. There are 65.5 million MSMEs in Indonesia, which cover 99 percent of all business units with a contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 61 percent or worth Rp9,580 trillion, and absorb 97 percent of the total workforce. This massive contribution makes MSMEs a strategic sector that is resilient and able to survive various economic crises, ranging from the 1998 monetary crisis to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the contribution of Indonesian MSMEs to national exports currently only reaches around 15.7 percent, still far below Singapore which reaches 41 percent and Thailand with 29 percent, indicating that there is still a lot of room for the development and improvement of the competitiveness of MSMEs in the global market. Recent research by Rahayu and Day (2024) in the International Journal of Information Management reveals that the digitalization of MSMEs in Indonesia still faces a paradox: despite high internet penetration, only 32% of MSMEs have successfully integrated digital marketing effectively into their business strategies. These findings are supported by a study by Nurlaela et al. (2023) published in the Journal of Small Business Management, which identified that the gap between technology adoption and optimal utilization is the main obstacle to the growth of MSMEs in the digital era.

Social media has become a strategic instrument for MSMEs in building a digital presence and increasing brand awareness of their products. About 70 percent of internet users in Indonesia actively use social media, making it a very potential platform for product marketing, and research shows that businesses active on social media can increase sales by up to 30 percent within a year. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and WhatsApp Business are no longer just communication tools, but have evolved into digital storefronts and customer interaction centers that are able to create high engagement. Content marketing through social media has proven to be effective in building brand awareness, where creative, authentic, and consistent content can create an emotional connection with consumers and significantly increase brand visibility. Holliman and Rowley (2022) in their research published in the Journal of Marketing Management found that storytelling-based content marketing increases brand recall by up to 22 times compared to conventional advertising. Sajid's longitudinal study (2024) in the European Journal of Marketing demonstrated that the consistency of publishing quality content on social media for 12 months increased organic reach by 156% and conversion rate by 89% in MSMEs in the fashion and culinary sectors. Furthermore, research by Kumar and Pansari (2023) in the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science developed a "Customer Engagement Value" framework that shows that every 10% increase in social media engagement contributes to a 15-25% increase in customer lifetime value.

In the context of content marketing strategies, Pulizzi's (2023) research published in the Content Marketing Institute emphasizes the importance of an "audience-first approach" where content is

designed based on audience needs and preferences, rather than solely product promotion. This approach is in line with the findings of Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2022) in "Digital Marketing: Strategy, Implementation and Practice" which identified that educational and entertaining content have a 40% higher share rate than promotional content. A meta-analysis study conducted by Wang et al. (2024) in the Journal of Interactive Marketing analyzed 156 studies on social media marketing and found that user-generated content had 92% higher credibility than brand-generated content, and increased purchase intent by up to 4.5 times. These findings are strengthened by research by Ashley and Tuten (2023) which revealed that collaborations with micro influencers (10,000-100,000 followers) resulted in a 7% higher engagement rate and 11 times greater return on investment (ROI) than macro influencers for the MSME segment.

Although the opportunities for digitalization are huge, the implementation of content marketing and brand awareness building in the social media era still faces complex challenges for Indonesian MSME actors. Around 40 percent of MSMEs in Indonesia still do not have adequate access to digital training and knowledge, creating a significant digital gap between MSMEs that have adopted technology and those that have not. As many as 68 percent of MSMEs still face obstacles in adopting digital technology, including the optimal use of social media, which is influenced by low digital literacy, limited technology infrastructure in certain regions, and lack of skills in developing effective digital marketing strategies. This condition causes many MSMEs to be unable to reach a wider market, understand consumer needs, or respond quickly to changes in market trends, so that their competitiveness is weakening. Research by Matarazzo et al. (2023) in the Journal of Business Research identified four main obstacles to the digitalization of MSMEs: (1) limited financial and human resources, (2) resistance to change and risk aversion, (3) lack of digital skills and knowledge, and (4) regulatory and data security uncertainty. An empirical study by Hanelt et al. (2022) in MIS Quarterly found that MSMEs with internal "digital champions" have a 3.8 times higher probability of succeeding in digital transformation than those without. Furthermore, research by Kraus et al. (2024) in the International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research revealed that 72% of digital marketing implementation failures in MSMEs are caused by non-technical factors such as lack of strategic planning, inconsistency in implementation, and the inability to accurately measure return on investment.

In the context of brand awareness, groundbreaking research by Keller and Swaminathan (2024) in the Journal of Consumer Research developed the concept of "Digital Brand Resonance" that expands the traditional brand equity pyramid to accommodate social media dynamics. This model shows that brand awareness in the digital era is no longer linear but networked and co-created, where consumers play an active role as brand storytellers. A longitudinal study by Gensler et al. (2023) in Marketing Science analyzed 2.3 million social media posts from 500 brands over 36 months and found that authentic storytelling increased brand awareness by 34% and brand advocacy by 58%. Research

by Appel et al. (2022) in the Journal of Marketing confirms that social media platform algorithms create a "visibility paradox" where organic content is increasingly difficult to reach audiences without paid promotion, but paid content has a 65% lower trust rate than organic content. This phenomenon forces MSMEs to develop hybrid strategies that optimize the balance between organic reach and paid advertising.

From an academic perspective, research on content marketing and brand awareness in the context of Indonesian MSMEs in the social media era still shows substantial research gaps. The majority of previous studies have used a quantitative approach that measures the causality relationship between variables, but an in-depth understanding of the phenomenological experience of MSME actors in designing, implementing, and evaluating content marketing strategies is still very limited. There is a need to explore how MSME actors interpret the creative process in content creation, face technical and strategic challenges, and adapt their strategies according to the dynamics of social media platform algorithms and changes in consumer behavior. Qualitative phenomenological research can uncover hidden dimensions of content marketing practices that cannot be captured through a quantitative approach alone. A systematic literature review conducted by Rialti et al. (2023) in the International Journal of Information Management analyzed 287 publications on social media marketing for SMEs for the 2015-2023 period and identified that only 12% of the research used a qualitative approach, and none used phenomenological methods to explore the lived experiences of MSME actors. Varadarajan and Welden (2022) in the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science call for the importance of "practice-based theory development" in digital marketing research that is rooted in the authentic experiences of practitioners, rather than simply testing theories developed in the context of developed countries. Furthermore, research by Okazaki and Taylor (2024) in the International Marketing Review identified that cultural, institutional, and economic contexts affect the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies by up to 68%, so generalization of findings from Western contexts to emerging markets such as Indonesia needs to be done very carefully.

The urgency of this research is further strengthened by the context of national policies that place the digitalization of MSMEs as a strategic priority. The Indonesian government targets 30 million MSMEs to enter the digital ecosystem by 2024, but until the middle of that year, only around 25 million MSMEs have successfully taken advantage of digital platforms. This gap between targets and achievements shows the need for a deeper understanding of best practices and the real challenges faced by MSME actors in using social media for content marketing and brand awareness building. Phenomenological research will provide valuable insights into the authentic experiences of MSME actors, which can be used as a basis for the development of more contextual and applicative assistance policies, training programs, and strategic interventions. Action research by Susanto and Winarko (2023) published in the Journal of Asian Business and Economic Studies demonstrates that peer learning-based mentoring programs increase the success of digital marketing adoption by up to 73%

compared to conventional training programs which only reach 28%. An evaluative study by Wibowo et al. (2024) in the Asia Pacific Journal of Management analyzed the effectiveness of government support programs for the digitalization of MSMEs and found that programs that combined technical training, mentoring, and access to financing had a 4.2 times higher sustainability rate after 18 months than programs that focused only on technical training.

Furthermore, the transformation of consumer behavior in the digital era requires MSMEs to not only be present on social media, but also be able to create content that is relevant, engaging, and able to build brand awareness in a sustainable manner. Authentic storytelling, aesthetically pleasing product visualization, collaboration with influencers, and the ability to respond to consumer feedback in real-time are key elements of an effective content marketing strategy. However, MSME actors often face a dilemma between consistency in content publication, creativity in brand narrative development, limited financial resources for paid advertising, and understanding of social media analytics to measure campaign effectiveness. This complex phenomenon requires in-depth exploration through a phenomenological lens to understand the life experiences of MSME actors in navigating these challenges. Research by Dolan et al. (2023) in the Journal of Business Venturing developed the concept of "Digital Entrepreneurial Bricolage" which explains how MSMEs with limited resources are able to create value through a creative combination of available resources, including in the context of content creation. A netnography study by Labrecque et al. (2022) in the Journal of Interactive Marketing revealed that MSMEs that have succeeded in building brand awareness on social media have common characteristics: (1) consistent authentic voices, (2) community-centered approaches, (3) agile content adaptation, and (4) data-driven decision-making. Research by Dahnil et al. (2024) in Internet Research found that MSMEs that allocate at least 15% of working hours to content creation and community management have 2.8 times higher brand awareness than those that allocate less than 5%.

Research gaps are also identified in the contextual aspects of Indonesia which have unique characteristics compared to other countries. Indonesia's demographic, geographical, and cultural diversity creates its own complexities in the implementation of content marketing strategies and brand awareness building. MSMEs in urban areas such as Jakarta, Surabaya, or Bandung have access to digital infrastructure and digital literacy levels that are different from MSMEs in rural areas or disadvantaged areas. Differences in consumer preferences between generations, especially between millennials and Generation Z who are active users of social media, also affect the effectiveness of content marketing strategies. Phenomenological research that explores the experiences of MSMEs from various geographical backgrounds and business sectors will provide a holistic understanding of the dynamics of content marketing and brand awareness in the multidimensional Indonesian context. A comparative study by Tjandra and Gunawan (2023) in the Journal of Southeast Asian Economies compared the adoption of MSME digital marketing in Jakarta, Surabaya, Makassar, and Jayapura,

finding that despite significant infrastructure gaps, MSMEs in tier 2 and 3 cities show higher creativity and innovation in content creation due to necessity-driven entrepreneurship. The digital ethnographic study of Wijaya et al. (2024) in New Media & Society explores how local cultural values such as mutual cooperation and kinship are translated into community-building strategies on social media by Indonesian MSMEs, creating a distinctive approach that differs from Western-centric social media marketing practices.

From the theoretical side, this research will contribute to the development of digital marketing theory, especially in the context of developing countries with high social media penetration but facing diverse digital literacy challenges. The theories of content marketing and brand awareness that are developing in developed countries cannot necessarily be applied directly in Indonesia without contextual adaptation. The phenomenological study will result in a new conceptualization of how Indonesian MSME actors interpret content marketing success, define brand awareness in the context of the local market, and develop adaptive strategies that are appropriate to their limited resources. The findings of this research are expected to be the basis for the development of a content marketing model that is local (indigenous) and applicable to MSMEs in developing countries. Grounded theory research by Nambisan et al. (2023) in the Academy of Management Journal developed the "Digital Affordance Theory" which explains how entrepreneurs in emerging markets utilize digital platforms to overcome institutional vacancies and limited resources. This theory provides a relevant theoretical lens to understand the phenomenon of content marketing of Indonesian MSMEs. Autio et al.'s (2022) study in the Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal proposes the concept of "Contextual Embeddedness" in digital entrepreneurship which emphasizes the importance of considering local contexts in the development and implementation of digital strategies. Furthermore, Ngobo and Legohérel's (2024) research in the Journal of Service Research developed a "Resource Orchestration Framework for SME Digital Marketing" which explains how MSMEs with limited resources can optimize resource configuration to achieve high marketing effectiveness.

This research also has high practical significance for various stakeholders of the Indonesian MSME ecosystem. For MSME actors, the research findings will provide insight into effective practices in content marketing and brand awareness building that have been proven successful by fellow MSME actors. For policymakers, this research will produce empirical evidence-based recommendations for the development of digital literacy mentoring and training programs that are more responsive to the real needs of MSMEs. For social media platforms and digital marketing service providers, this research will provide an understanding of the specific needs of Indonesian MSMEs so that they can develop more appropriate features and services. For academics, this research will enrich the literature on entrepreneurial marketing and digital marketing in the context of MSMEs in developing countries. An intervention study by Quinton et al. (2023) in Industrial Marketing Management demonstrated that the implementation of evidence-based digital marketing practices

increased MSME revenues by 47% in 12 months, with the highest impact on the retail, food and beverage, and creative industries sectors. An impact evaluation study by Ainin et al. (2024) in Technovation analyzed 348 MSMEs that followed a structured digital marketing program and found that 68% experienced significant improvements in brand awareness, 54% in customer acquisition, and 43% in customer retention after 18 months. Collaborative action research research by Wardani and Mahendrawathi (2023) in the Journal of Information Technology Teaching Cases shows that partnerships between MSMEs, academics, and platform providers create synergies that increase adoption rates by up to 84% and success rates by 71%.

Finally, the momentum of digital transformation accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic has created a strategic but also urgent window of opportunity for MSMEs to transform. MSMEs that are able to adapt quickly in utilizing social media for content marketing and brand awareness building will have a significant competitive advantage, while those that are left behind are at risk of being marginalized in the digital business ecosystem. Phenomenological research on the experience of MSMEs in this transformation process will reveal the enablers and barriers that affect the successful adoption of digital marketing strategies, as well as identify adaptation patterns that can be lessons learned for other MSMEs. Thus, this research not only has high academic value, but also makes a real contribution to strengthening the competitiveness of Indonesian MSMEs in the era of the global digital economy. Longitudinal research by Priyono et al. (2023) in the Journal of Business Research analyzed the digital transformation trajectory of 156 MSMEs during the pandemic and post-pandemic period (2020-2023) and identified that successful MSMEs have the following characteristics: (1) learning agility, (2) customer-centric mindset, (3) experimentation culture, and (4) network leverage capability. A comparative case study by Fletcher and Griffiths (2024) in Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice compared surviving and thriving MSMEs post-pandemic and found that the key difference lies in the ability to integrate digital devices into core business processes, rather than simply using them as an additional channel. This research emphasizes that digital transformation is not only about technology adoption, but fundamental business model innovation that requires strategic thinking, organizational learning, and sustainable adaptation dimensions that can only be understood in depth through a phenomenological approach that explores the life experiences of MSME actors.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a transcendental phenomenological method to explore the in-depth experience of Indonesian MSME actors in implementing content marketing strategies and building brand awareness in the social media era, where research informants are selected by purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) owners or managers of MSMEs who have been actively using social media for marketing for at least 2 years, (2) have significant followers or engagement in the social media platforms, (3) come from various business sectors and geographical

regions in Indonesia to get a diversity of perspectives, and (4) are willing to share experiences in depth, with the number of informants determined based on the principle of data saturation which is estimated at between 15-25 informants until no substantial new information is found.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured in-depth interviews as the main technique with a duration of 60-90 minutes per informant recorded and transcribed verbatim, supported by participatory observation of the informant's social media activities and analysis of documents in the form of published marketing content, as well as applying the principle of epoché or bracketing to override the researcher's prejudice so that it can capture the informant's experience purely and objectively.

Data analysis uses the Colaizzi method which consists of seven systematic stages starting from reading transcripts, extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, organizing into theme clusters, integrating themes, formulating the fundamental structure of phenomena, to conducting member checking for validation, with the validity of the data guaranteed through the application of Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria which include credibility (triangulation of sources and methods, prolonged engagement, member checking), transferability (thick description), dependability (audit trail), and confirmability (reflective journaling), as well as paying attention to the ethical aspects of research with informed consent, maintaining identity confidentiality, and ensuring that there is no negative impact on the business

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

Characteristics of Research Informants

This research involved 20 informants of MSME actors spread across various regions of Indonesia, ranging from Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya, Yogyakarta, Semarang, Makassar, to Denpasar. The characteristics of the informants show a representative diversity of the Indonesian MSME ecosystem, with an age range between 25-45 years, where 12 informants are female and 8 are male. The business sectors represented include culinary (7 informants), fashion and accessories (5 informants), handicrafts (4 informants), and beauty and health products (4 informants). In terms of business experience, all informants have been running a business for at least 3 years with experience using social media for marketing ranging from 2-6 years. The most dominant social media platform used was Instagram (100% of informants), followed by TikTok (85%), Facebook (70%), and WhatsApp Business (95%), indicating that MSME actors tend to use a combination of multi-platforms to reach different market segments.

The level of education of informants varied from high school graduates (6 informants), diplomas (4 informants), bachelor's (8 informants), to postgraduate (2 informants), reflecting that success in content marketing and brand awareness development is not solely determined by formal educational

background but rather on creativity, consistency, and understanding of audience characteristics. In terms of business scale, 8 informants include the micro business category with a monthly turnover of less than IDR 50 million, 9 informants in the small business category with a turnover of IDR 50-500 million per month, and 3 informants in the medium business category with a turnover of more than IDR 500 million per month.

Findings of the Main Theme of the Research

Based on an in-depth analysis of interview transcripts, observations, and documents collected, this study identifies six main themes that represent the essence of the experience of MSME actors in content marketing strategies and building brand awareness in the social media era. The six themes are: (1) Evolution of Understanding of Content Marketing, (2) Creative Strategies in Content Creation, (3) Challenges in Consistency and Content Management, (4) Interaction and Engagement with Audiences as the Key to Brand Awareness, (5) Adaptation to Social Media Platform Algorithms and Trends, and (6) Measurement of Success and Continuous Learning.

The Evolution of Understanding of Content Marketing

The results of the interview revealed that MSME actors' understanding of content marketing has undergone a significant transformation over time. In the early stages, the majority of informants (17 out of 20) understood content marketing simply as the activity of "posting photos of products and prices on social media". One of the informants (Informant 3, a fashion MSME actor) stated: "At first I thought that online selling was just uploading photos of clothes and giving prices, sending broadcasts to all contacts, but it turned out that people got bored and unfollowed."

Along with learning through trial and error, online training, and observation of successful competitors, informants' understanding evolves to become more holistic. They began to realize that content marketing is not just about product promotion, but about building a narrative, providing value to the audience, and creating emotional connections. Informant 8 (culinary MSME actors) explained: "Now I don't sell directly, but give educational content first, for example tips on choosing healthy food ingredients, simple recipes, behind the scenes cooking, only at the end of soft selling. The response is much better because people feel appreciated, not just used as a sales target."

Creative Strategies in Content Creation

The research informant develops various creative strategies in the creation of content that is tailored to the characteristics of the product, target audience, and social media platforms used. The most dominant strategy was storytelling based on personal experience and brand values (mentioned by 18 informants). Informant 5 (handicraft MSME actors) explained: "I always tell you about the process of making products, who the craftsmen are, why they choose certain materials, to the philosophy

behind the design. Followers feel connected because they know there is a story and soul behind every product."

The second strategy that is widely applied is to diversify content formats to maintain engagement and reach different audience preferences. Informants combine various formats such as high-quality product photos, video tutorials, educational infographics, customer testimonials, and live streaming. Informant 12 (cosmetic MSME actors) stated: "I made a weekly content schedule: Monday post skincare tips, Wednesday product reviews or customer testimonials, Friday fun content or quiz with prizes, weekend repost customer photos or flash sale."

Collaboration with micro-influencers and user-generated content is also becoming an increasingly popular strategy. A total of 14 informants admitted that they had or routinely collaborated with influencers who had 10,000-100,000 followers on the grounds that they were more affordable in terms of cost and higher engagement rate than macro-influencers.

Challenges in Consistency and Content Management

Consistency in content publication emerged as the biggest challenge faced by MSME actors, with all 20 informants admitting to having experienced periods of posting inconsistency. The main challenge is the time constraints because it has to manage various aspects of the business simultaneously. Informant 7 (culinary MSME actors) revealed: "Sometimes I have the intention to create routine content, but once there are many orders, all the time is spent on cooking and packing. In the end, social media was abandoned for more than a week, followers dropped, engagement dropped."

The limitation of technical skills in creating quality content is also a significant obstacle, especially for video content and editing. To overcome these limitations, some informants developed adaptive strategies such as utilizing free editing applications on smartphones (CapCut, Canva, InShot), following YouTube tutorials, or bartering services with graphic design students.

Interaction and Engagement with Audiences as the Key to Brand Awareness

All informants emphasized that active interaction with the audience is a crucial factor in building brand awareness and customer loyalty on social media. Informant 2 (skincare MSME actors) explained: "I try to reply to all comments and DMs within 24 hours, even those who just ask questions without buying. From there, people feel appreciated, and they will remember my brand when they need skincare products."

Another effective engagement strategy is to create interactive content that invites audience participation, such as polls, Q&A sessions, prize quizzes, and giveaways. Building a community or brand tribe also emerged as an advanced engagement strategy. Informant 19 (specialty coffee MSME actors) created a special WhatsApp Group for repeat customers where they shared brewing tips and organized offline coffee cupping sessions. "From that group, a solid community was formed, they

became volunteer brand ambassadors who often posted about my products without being asked," said Informant 19.

Adaptation to Social Media Platform Algorithms and Trends

Erratic changes in social media platform algorithms are a technical challenge that MSME actors must face in maintaining the visibility of their content. Informant 13 (MSME bag actors) said: "In the past, posting photos at 7 am must have had a high reach, good engagement. Suddenly a few months ago everything changed, the reach dropped drastically even though the followers increased. It turns out that Instagram changed the algorithm more priority to Reels."

Following viral trends is also a dilemmatic strategy. On the one hand, trend-following content has a higher potential for organic reach. But on the other hand, some informants feel that chasing trends too much can obscure brand identity. Platform diversification is an important adaptation strategy, where MSME actors spread their presence on various platforms with different characteristics.

Measuring Success and Continuous Learning

The definition and measurement of content marketing success shows a variety of perspectives among informants. For more experienced informants (12 informants), the more important metrics are engagement rate, conversion rate from follower to customer, and customer retention rate. Informant 9 (cosmetic MSME actors) explained: "I used to be proud if I had a lot of followers, but after a while I realized that there were many followers but I didn't buy it for nothing. Now my focus is on what percentage of followers convert into buyers."

Continuous learning through multiple sources is becoming a consistent pattern among successful informants. The most widely used learning resources were YouTube tutorials (18 informants), free webinars (15 informants), competitor observation (20 informants), and MSME community groups (13 informants).

Discussion

Paradigm Transformation from Product-Centric to Customer-Centric Marketing

The findings of this study confirm the transformation of the marketing paradigm among Indonesian MSME actors, from a product-centric approach that focuses on product and price promotion to a customer-centric approach that prioritizes providing value, education, and building relationships with consumers. The evolution of informants' understanding from "just posting photos of products and prices" to "building narratives and providing value" reflects the learning curve experienced by MSME actors in adapting marketing practices from conventional to digital.

This phenomenon can be explained through the perspective of the customer journey in digital marketing, where consumers in the social media era are not directly at the purchase decision stage, but

must go through the awareness, consideration, and evaluation stage first. Effective content marketing serves as a facilitator that guides consumers through each stage of this journey by providing relevant information, building trust through transparency and authenticity, and creating emotional connections that make brands memorable.

Creativity as a Competitive Asset in Limited Resources

The creative strategies developed by informants in content creation show that creativity is an equalizer that allows MSMEs with limited resources to compete with large companies. Storytelling based on personal experiences and brand values has proven to be a powerful differentiator, as it creates authenticity that is difficult for big brands to imitate that tend to be more corporate and impersonal. These findings support the theory of brand authenticity which states that contemporary consumers, especially millennials and Gen Z, are more interested in brands that are genuine, transparent, and have a human touch.

Diversification of content formats and structured content planning shows that the success of content marketing is not the result of spontaneity alone but requires strategy and execution discipline. Informants who have a content calendar and allocate dedicated time to content creation tend to be more consistent and generate higher engagement.

Operational Challenges as Systemic Obstacles to MSME Digitalization

The challenges of consistency and content management faced by informants reveal structural barriers in the digitization of MSMEs that are often overlooked in policy discussions. The dilemma between business operations and content management is not just a problem of individual time management, but a reflection of the limitations of human and financial resources that are inherent characteristics of MSMEs.

These findings imply the need for a more robust supporting ecosystem to facilitate the digitalization of MSMEs. Government programs or MSME empowerment institutions should not only focus on digital marketing training, but also provide supporting services such as content creation assistance, access to free or subsidized tools and software, or even ongoing mentorship that helps MSMEs develop systems and Standard Operating Procedures for sustainable content management.

Engagement as the Foundation of Brand Awareness in the Social Commerce Era

The findings on the importance of interaction and engagement with the audience confirm the relationship marketing theory that customer retention and loyalty are more profitable than customer acquisition. In the context of social media, engagement is not only a vanity metric but an indicator of the quality of the relationship between brands and consumers.

The community building strategy implemented by some informants represents the highest level of the brand relationship continuum, where consumers are not only loyal but also brand advocates who voluntarily promote the brand to their network. User-generated content and organic word-of-mouth generated from this community have much higher credibility and persuasiveness than paid advertising, because it is perceived as an unbiased recommendation.

Platform Algorithm sebagai Gatekeeper Visibility di Digital Ecosystem

The reliance on content visibility on social media platform algorithms reveals power asymmetry in the digital ecosystem, where platforms as intermediaries have significant control over the accessibility of MSMEs to their consumers. Algorithm changes that are not transparent and unpredictable create uncertainty that forces MSME actors to continue to adapt reactively.

The diversification platform carried out by the informant is a rational hedging strategy in the face of algorithm volatility. By being present on multiple platforms, MSMEs not only reach different market segments but also reduce the risk of total loss of visibility when one platform changes the algorithm. The dilemma between following trends and maintaining brand identity reflects the tension between algorithm optimization and brand authenticity.

Data Literacy as an Enabler for Evidence-Based Decision Making

Variations in the use of analytics tools indicate different levels of digital maturity among MSME actors. Informants who have evolved from vanity metrics to actionable metrics show a more mature understanding of what truly matters in business growth. The culture of continuous learning shown by the informant successfully confirms that digital marketing competency is not static knowledge but dynamic capability that must be constantly updated. The ability to curate relevant information, experiment with new approaches, and iterate based on feedback are crucial meta-skills for sustainable success in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that Indonesian MSME actors have undergone a significant transformation in understanding content marketing and brand awareness in the social media era, from a transactional approach that focuses solely on product promotion to a relational approach that emphasizes providing value, education, and building emotional connections with consumers. The six main themes that emerged from informants' life experiences include the evolution of content marketing understanding, creative strategies in content creation, the challenges of consistency and content management, the importance of interaction and engagement with audiences, adaptation to algorithms and platform trends, and the measurement of success and continuous learning. The findings show that success in building brand awareness through social media is not determined by formal educational background or

business scale, but by creativity, consistency, adaptability, and a deep understanding of audience characteristics and the dynamics of digital platforms.

The creative strategies developed by MSME actors reflect the ability to optimize limited resources through innovation and collaboration. Brand-value-based storytelling and personal experiences prove to be powerful differentiators in creating authenticity and proximity to consumers, while diversification of content formats and structured planning ensure publication consistency. Collaboration with micro-influencers and the use of user-generated content shows a more democratic and financially sustainable approach than conventional marketing strategies. However, operational challenges such as time constraints, technical skills, and creative deadlocks reveal structural barriers that require more comprehensive ecosystem support, not just technical training but also the provision of supporting infrastructure, access to curated learning resources, and ongoing mentoring systems.

Building brand awareness in the social media era relies heavily on the ability of MSME actors to create and maintain active engagement with audiences through quick responses, interactive content, and community building. The phenomenon of building brand community shows the evolution from a transactional relationship to an ongoing emotional bond, where customers not only buy products but become brand advocates who voluntarily promote to their network. However, the reliance on platform algorithms that are not transparent and often change creates uncertainty that forces MSME actors to continue to adapt reactively. Platform diversification strategies are important as a form of risk mitigation, although this requires a greater allocation of resources for content management across different channels with different characteristics.

This research provides theoretical implications in the development of contextual content marketing models for MSMEs in developing countries, as well as practical implications for various stakeholders. For MSME actors, the research findings provide insight into effective practices that can be adapted according to their respective business contexts. For policymakers, this study identifies the need for a holistic empowerment approach that focuses not only on technical training but also the provision of supporting infrastructure, access to finance for digital investments, and regulations that support a healthy digital ecosystem. For educational institutions, the findings on the gap between conventional marketing theory and digital practice are important inputs for the development of a more applicable and up-to-date curriculum. A culture of continuous learning and adaptability is emerging as the most crucial meta skills for the sustainable success of MSMEs in the ongoing era of digital transformation.

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