

Formulation of a Digital Marketing Communication Strategy Model for Building Brand Awareness of Local MSME Products



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Ria Amelinda¹

Islamic Broadcasting Study Program, State Islamic University of Palopo, Indonesia

Ika Fausiah²

Islamic Business Management, State Islamic University of Palopo, Indonesia

Jumriaty Jusman³

Pancasetia School of Economics, Indonesia

Abstract

Digital transformation has shifted marketing communication from a linear model to an interactive process across multiple digital touchpoints. However, many local micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) still struggle to translate local distinctiveness into a consistent and memorable brand identity. This study formulates a digital marketing communication strategy model for building brand awareness of local MSME products. It employs a normative literature review with a descriptive-analytical and conceptual-formulative approach through the identification, selection, thematic grouping, and theoretical synthesis of relevant literature. The findings indicate that brand awareness is not formed automatically through digital presence, but through the synergy of four key elements: clear brand identity, consistent digital message management, functional digital channel integration, and responsive audience interaction. Brand identity functions as the foundation of communication, digital messaging as the mechanism for articulating meaning, channel integration as the mechanism for maintaining communication consistency, and audience interaction as the mechanism for strengthening brand recognition and recall. These findings confirm that successful digital communication for local MSME products depends on the ability to synergise identity, messaging, channels, and interaction within a unified communication architecture.

Keywords:

Digital Marketing Communication; Brand Awareness; Brand Identity; Digital Channel Integration; Audience Engagement; Local MSME Products

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has shifted the logic of marketing communication from a linear process of message delivery to an interactive process that takes place simultaneously across a variety of channels, content formats, and audience responses. In this context, the main challenge for MSMEs, particularly those marketing local products, is no longer limited to how to bring products to the digital marketplace, but rather how to convert local distinctiveness into a brand identity that can be consistently recognised, understood, and remembered by the audience. This issue is significant because a presence on social media or marketplaces does not automatically generate brand awareness; what matters is the business's ability to align brand identity, message design, channel selection, and patterns of interaction with the audience within a unified communication architecture (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Shankar et al., 2022). For local MSME products, these challenges are even more complex because their competitive value often relies not only on functional attributes, but also on

Corresponding author

Ria Amelinda, Islamic Broadcasting Study Program, State Islamic University of Palopo, Indonesia, Indonesia Email: riaamelinda@uinpalopo.ac.id

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origin, narratives of authenticity, cultural affinity, and symbolic differentiation all of which must be convincingly translated into the digital space. At the same time, the literature indicates that digital marketing does indeed offer opportunities in the form of more efficient communication costs, broader market reach, and enhanced brand visibility, but it also presents challenges such as channel fragmentation, message overload, uncontrollable electronic word of mouth, and demands for higher managerial capabilities (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Shankar et al., 2022). For MSMEs, this complexity is exacerbated by resource constraints, uneven digital competencies, and organisational routines that often result in digital communication practices being sporadic, inconsistent, and difficult to convert into sustainable brand strength (Meier & Peters, 2023; Setkute & Dibb, 2022).

A number of previous studies have shown that digital marketing and social media marketing generally have a positive relationship with increased brand awareness, consumer brand engagement, purchase intention, and market performance. In a cross-country study of developing nations, for example, social media marketing was found to increase brand awareness, brand engagement, and purchase intention, although the strength of these relationships may vary according to national context and audience characteristics (Zeqiri et al., 2024). In the context of Indonesian MSMEs, the relationship between brand awareness, digital marketing, and purchase intention on social media has also been empirically demonstrated, confirming that brand visibility remains a crucial node in the process of converting digital attention into purchase intention (Nurjaya et al., 2025). At a broader conceptual level, Shankar et al. (2022) emphasise that digital marketing communication must be understood through the interconnection of four key components: objectives, channels, media, or platforms, content, and response; thus, the effectiveness of communication cannot be explained solely by the use of a single channel or digital tool in isolation. In line with this, the literature on integrated marketing communication (IMC) no longer interprets marketing communication merely as the coordination of promotional mix elements, but rather as an organisational capability demanding message consistency, cross-channel alignment, cross-functional integration, and overall brand experience coherence (Porcu et al., 2017). Indeed, in the context of MSMEs, IMC has been positioned as a dynamic capability that strengthens the impact of market orientation on customer-related performance and market performance, with an even stronger influence in the context of developing economies (Butkouskaya et al., 2024).

The literature on SME branding is also moving in an increasingly strategic direction. Fluhrer and Brahm (2025) demonstrate that the brand-building process in small and medium-sized enterprises can be mapped through four key elements: brand orientation, brand identity, brand marketing, and brand performance; and that digitalisation is playing an increasingly significant role in linking these four elements. This finding is significant as it demonstrates that brand development in SMEs is not the result of isolated promotional activities, but rather a process rooted in brand orientation, articulated through brand identity, communicated via marketing activities, and ultimately reflected in brand performance. From a communication perspective, Alwi et al., (2022) demonstrate that within the SME context, marketing communication and corporate communication are often not strictly distinct, but are intertwined in what they term 'integrated hybrid communication'. In practice, small businesses communicate not only their products but also the core of their business identity, their relationships with various stakeholders, and other activities that shape the business's overall image (Alwi et al., 2022). Thus, what is known from the literature is that the development of brand awareness essentially requires an integrative process: identity must be clearly defined, messages must be consistent, channels must be aligned, and audience interactions must be managed as part of brand meaning-making.

Nevertheless, the existing literature still has several significant limitations. Firstly, the dominant research still employs a quantitative approach focused on testing direct, mediating, or moderating effects between digital marketing, social media marketing, IMC, brand awareness, engagement, purchase intention, and performance. Such an approach is indeed useful for confirming relationships between variables, but tends to yield explanations oriented towards outcomes rather than processes; consequently, the literature largely addresses whether digital marketing is effective, but has not sufficiently explained how the configuration of these communication elements works

strategically in shaping brand awareness (Butkouskaya et al., 2024; Nurjaya et al., 2025; Zeqiri et al., 2024). Secondly, studies on digital marketing in SMEs still show heterogeneous results and do not support the assumption of a single universal strategy. A systematic review by Jadhav et al (2023) confirms that the impact of digital marketing on SMEs is not uniform and cannot be reduced to a single standard strategy, whilst Setkute & Dibb, (2022) explicitly demonstrate that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is insufficient to explain digital marketing practices in small businesses.

Thirdly, although qualitative studies have begun to uncover procedural dimensions, their focus remains limited to specific aspects, such as the interplay between marketing communication and corporate communication within MSMEs or the limited engagement of MSMEs with social media prior to full adoption; consequently, they have not yet produced a strategic model specifically explaining the formation of brand awareness for local MSME products (Alwi et al., 2022; Meier & Peters, 2023). Fourthly, although research on SME branding has evolved, Fluhrer and Brahm (2025) maintain that in-depth and systematic analysis of the branding process, as well as the contribution of technology and digital channels, remains relatively new. This implies that the gap in the literature no longer lies in the question of whether digital matters, but rather in how the elements of digital communication strategy need to be integrated to build brand awareness effectively.

These limitations become increasingly significant when the focus shifts to local MSME products. In this context, brand communication issues cannot be adequately explained by post intensity, promotional frequency, or social media adoption alone. Local products require a more complex articulation process, as their brand differentiation often relies on locality, origin narratives, cultural values, and emotional connection—all of which must be translated into messages that are relevant, consistent, and acceptable to the digital audience. There has been little research specifically examining how brand identity, message management, channel integration, and audience interaction can be organised into a single strategic framework that comprehensively explains the formation of brand awareness for local MSME products. In light of this gap, this article aims to analyse and formulate a digital marketing communication strategy model capable of explaining how brand identity, digital message management, channel integration, and audience interaction work together to build brand awareness for local MSME products. This study does not stop at testing the relationships between variables, but is directed towards explaining which strategic elements are at work, how the relationships between these elements are formed, and how this configuration generates brand awareness in the context of local products. In this context, IMC is utilised not merely as a concept for promotional coordination, but as an analytical lens to understand the integration of brand identity, message consistency, channel alignment, and audience interaction patterns within digital communication (Porcu et al., 2017; Butkouskaya et al., 2024).

The novelty of this research lies in several aspects. Firstly, this study shifts the focus from an influence-based approach towards the formulation of a process-based model; thus, its contribution is not merely to prove the presence or absence of digital marketing's influence on brand awareness, but to construct a strategic explanation of how brand awareness is formed. Secondly, this study integrates dimensions that are often discussed separately in the literature—namely brand identity, digital message management, channel integration, audience interaction, and brand awareness—into a single, more comprehensive analytical model. Thirdly, this study places local MSME products as the primary context, so that locality is not treated merely as an empirical backdrop, but rather as a source of brand differentiation that must be strategically translated into digital communication.

Consequently, this study is expected to make an academic contribution to the development of the literature on digital marketing communication, IMC, and SME branding by offering a framework that is more contextual, integrative, and process-oriented. In practical terms, this research is expected to provide a strategic foundation for MSME practitioners to manage digital communication not as fragmented promotional activities, but as a brand architecture that consistently synergises identity, messages, channels, and interactions so that local products are not merely present in the digital space, but also remain in the market's memory.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study is a normative study employing a literature review approach, designed to examine, organise and formulate a theoretical argument regarding digital marketing communication strategies in building brand awareness for local MSME products. This design was chosen because the research objective is not directed at testing empirical relationships in the field, but rather at constructing a conceptual framework capable of explaining the interrelationships between strategic elements in a more comprehensive and systematic manner within the framework of a conceptual article (Snyder, 2019; Jaakkola, 2020). Substantively, this study is descriptive-analytical and conceptual-formulative in nature. The descriptive-analytical nature is used to map concepts, trends, and key orientations in the literature, whilst the conceptual-formulative nature is used to formulate a strategic model possessing internal coherence and contextual relevance to the formation of brand awareness for local MSME products (Jaakkola, 2020; Paul et al., 2021). The focus of the study is placed on four main domains, namely digital marketing communication, brand awareness, local products, and MSMEs, as these four domains form the most relevant intersection of issues in explaining how brand identity, messages, channels, and audience responses operate in the digital space (Shankar et al., 2022; Fluhrer & Brahm, 2025). The research materials consist of primary sources, namely national and international scientific journal articles that directly address digital marketing communication, integrated marketing communication, brand awareness, SME branding, and the marketing of local products, as well as secondary sources comprising academic books, conference proceedings, institutional reports, and other relevant scientific documents. The selection of materials was conducted purposively based on criteria of relevance to the study's focus, the academic quality of the sources, the recency of the publications, the clarity of the theoretical framework, and their contribution to the development of a synthesis or conceptual model (Paul et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019).

Materials were collected through documentary study and structured literature review procedures by identifying key terms, tracing credible academic sources, selecting literature based on the relevance of abstracts and the substance of the discussion, and then organising them into thematic clusters so that the relationships between ideas could be read coherently. Subsequently, the selected materials were analysed through content analysis to identify themes and patterns of argumentation, conceptual analysis to examine definitions and relationships between concepts, comparative analysis to compare trends in approaches and theoretical positions across studies, and theoretical synthesis to integrate the literature findings into the formulation of a digital marketing communication strategy model that explains the formation of brand awareness for local MSME products (Jaakkola, 2020; Porcu et al., 2017; Shankar et al., 2022). The validity of the arguments in this study is maintained through logical consistency between premises and conclusions, coherence among arguments within the overall analytical framework, the relevance of the sources used to the focus of the study, and the sufficiency of the literature to represent key developments and conceptual debates in the field of digital marketing communication and SME branding (Jaakkola, 2020). Through these procedures, this research method is designed to produce a model formulation that is not only conceptually robust but also possesses academic credibility and analytical utility for the development of both academic studies and the practice of digital marketing communication for local MSME products.

3. RESULT and Discussion

3.1. The Brand Identity of Local MSME Products as the Foundation for Building Brand Awareness

The main challenge facing local MSMEs lies not merely in their ability to establish a presence across various platforms, but in their ability to position themselves as a brand with distinct characteristics, meaning and differentiating factors amidst the overwhelming flow of digital information. The literature indicates that digital marketing communication operates through the interplay between objectives, channels, content, and response; consequently, the success of communication cannot be explained solely by the existence of digital channels, but by the extent to which a brand possesses an identity that can be consistently translated across all its communication

activities (Shankar et al., 2022). Consequently, digital visibility not underpinned by a strong brand identity will only result in a fleeting presence, rather than lasting recognition in the audience's memory. In the context of local MSME products, this issue becomes increasingly crucial because a product's strength stems not only from its function but also from its origin, authenticity, cultural significance, and symbolic differentiation—all of which must be articulated into a distinctive and easily recognisable brand identity (Fluhrer, 2025; Fluhrer & Brahm, 2025).

Within this framework, the brand identity of local MSMEs is shaped through a process of articulating meaning derived from the character of the business and the product itself. Brand identity extends beyond the name, logo, or packaging; it encompasses how business owners interpret who they are, the values they represent, the origins of the product, and why that product is worthy of selection over alternatives. In small businesses, product communication often overlaps with the communication of the business's overall identity; thus, what is communicated is not merely the goods being sold, but also the business's roots, the values it upholds, its relationships with stakeholders, and the image it seeks to build in the public eye (Alwi et al., 2022). In the context of local MSME products, the articulation of this identity generally centres on locality, authenticity, origin stories, product character, cultural values, and symbols that distinguish the product from more generic competitors. Consequently, brand identity in local products is not merely a naming convention, but a construction of meaning that connects the product to place, tradition, community, and the experience intended for consumers. When these connections are clearly defined, brand identity begins to function as an identifier that guides how the brand appears and is understood in the digital space.

The most prominent elements of identity in the context of local MSMEs can be understood through several key layers. Firstly, there are elements of locality and origin, namely the product's connection to a specific region, tradition, or community, which provides both cultural legitimacy and symbolic differentiation. In branding literature, geographical origin and proximity to the local context have long been understood as sources of differentiation that can strengthen a product's distinctiveness when incorporated as part of the brand identity, rather than merely serving as a place-of-origin label (Tregear & Gorton, 2005). Secondly, there is the element of authenticity and product character, namely the quality, manufacturing process, materials, philosophy, or distinctive values inherent in the product that make it difficult to substitute with other products. This element is crucial because a strong brand identity must help consumers distinguish the brand from competing alternatives whilst building more stable associations with the brand's quality and character (Shams et al., 2024). Thirdly, there are elements of visual and verbal representation, such as the brand name, symbols, colours, language style, narrative, and the way the product is presented in digital spaces. At this level, brand identity takes on a form that can be quickly recognised by the audience, so that meanings derived from locality and authenticity can be translated into memorable visual and narrative cues. Thus, the strength of brand identity does not lie in the number of identity elements possessed, but in the ability to unify all these elements into a coherent, distinctive, and consistent meaning.

Nevertheless, this discussion also indicates that the brand identity of local MSMEs has not always been adequately formulated to serve as a strong foundation for digital communication. The literature on branding in SMEs indicates that small businesses often face constraints in terms of resources, conceptual capacity, and strategic ability when translating brand orientation into a structured identity that can be operationalised in day-to-day communication (Fluhrer, 2025). Consequently, the potential of locality, authenticity, and the genuinely rich cultural values often remains latent, failing to rise to the level of a truly explicit brand position. In such situations, digital communication tends to operate at the level of product description or transactional promotion, rather than the formation of distinctive brand associations. Another weakness arises when the identity is not consistently displayed across various forms of content and channels, leading the audience to receive conflicting signals about who the brand is and what distinguishes it from others. In fact, message consistency and alignment across communication functions are crucial elements in

an integrated marketing communication approach, as an inconsistent brand will find it harder to build stable recognition in the minds of the audience (Butkouskaya et al., 2024; Porcu et al., 2017).

On this basis, this subsection emphasises that the clarity of brand identity determines the effectiveness of digital communication whilst also determining the strength or weakness of brand awareness formation. A clear brand identity provides a meaningful anchor for message management, guides the selection and integration of channels, and enables the audience to recognise the brand through relatively stable associations over time. Conversely, if the brand identity remains vague, generic, inconsistent, or has not been clearly defined, then the digital presence will only result in weak and easily forgettable exposure, as what appears before the audience lacks sufficiently strong markers to be distinguished and remembered (Shams et al., 2024; Shankar et al., 2022). Thus, for local MSME products, brand awareness cannot be understood as an automatic consequence of the intensity of posts or the number of channels used, but rather as the result of successfully formulating a distinctive, meaningful brand identity that is consistently communicated from the very outset of the communication strategy. In this sense, brand identity functions not merely as a conceptual attribute of the brand, but as the foundation for recognition, differentiation, and the establishment of associations that enable local MSME products to secure a stronger position in the audience's memory (Alwi et al., 2022; Fluhrer, 2025).

3.2. Managing Digital Messaging in Conveying Brand Identity

At this point, digital message management serves as an operational mechanism that links what a brand believes about itself with what the public ultimately perceives within the digital communication space. The literature on digital marketing communication emphasises that content is one of the core components determining the effectiveness of communication, as it is through content that brand objectives, channel choices, and audience responses are brought together in practice (Shankar et al., 2022). From an integrated marketing communication perspective, this effectiveness depends not merely on the volume of messages produced, but on the consistency, alignment, and coherence of the messages with the brand identity being built (Porcu et al., 2017). Therefore, a strong brand identity will not have sufficient influence on brand awareness if it is not translated into clear, targeted, and meaningful digital messages. In this context, digital message management is not merely an information dissemination activity, but a strategic process that ensures the brand identity is present as a living association in the minds of the audience (Butkouskaya et al., 2024).

For local MSME products, the forms and patterns of digital messages essentially oscillate between several key orientations: informative messages about the product, persuasive messages to encourage purchase, narrative messages highlighting origins and processes, and symbolic messages aiming to showcase the brand's values, character, and uniqueness. However, what is decisive is not merely the diversity of these message forms, but the ability of business operators to organise them into a narrative pattern that can fully convey the brand's identity. In this context, local values, authenticity, origin stories, and product character are not sufficient if merely listed as attributes; they must be crafted into messages that are communicative, relevant to the behaviour of digital audiences, and concise enough to be consumed within the fast-paced rhythm of media. Research on SME branding indicates that brand management in the digital age increasingly demands the ability to link identity with marketing and communication activities in a more conscious and systematic manner (Fluhrer & Brahm, 2025). In line with this, studies on hybrid communication in SMEs reveal that what small businesses convey in the digital public sphere is often not merely about the product, but also about who they are, the values they uphold, and the image they wish to project to stakeholders (Alwi et al., 2022). Therefore, the management of digital messaging in local MSMEs must be understood as an effort to transform brand uniqueness into a communication structure that is comprehensible to the audience, rather than merely serving as sporadically distributed promotional material (Fluhrer, 2025).

In terms of consistency, the quality of digital messaging is determined by the extent to which communication themes, delivery styles, word choices, visual symbols, and emphasis on meaning

remain aligned with the same brand identity. This consistency is crucial because digital audiences do not build brand recognition from a single post, but rather from the accumulation of exposures that gradually form associations. If, on one occasion, a brand highlights its local character and authenticity, yet on another merely displays generic price promotions with no connection to the brand's character, the messages received by the audience become fragmented and difficult to consolidate into a stable memory. IMC literature has long emphasised that inconsistent messages weaken the coherence of the brand experience, whilst consistent messages strengthen the integration of meaning across all communication touchpoints (Porcu et al., 2017). In the context of MSMEs, such integration is also crucial because product communication, business identity communication, and brand image building often occur simultaneously; consequently, even minor inconsistencies in messaging can immediately obscure the brand's overall positioning (Alwi et al., 2022). Thus, consistency in digital messaging is not merely a technical issue, but a substantive requirement for the brand identity to be repeatedly present and consistently recognised by the audience (Butkouskaya et al., 2024).

A more challenging issue lies in the ability of local MSMEs to connect local values with the demands of fast-paced, visual, and competitive digital communication. Local values, authenticity, and product character are inherently rich in meaning, but not all of these are automatically communicative in digital formats. Consequently, businesses must select and simplify these meanings without losing the core of the brand's identity. This is where message management becomes decisive: whether local elements merely appear as symbolic ornamentation, or are genuinely translated into messages that explain why the product is distinct, valuable, and worth remembering. Research on social media marketing indicates that the effectiveness of brand communication on social media is also linked to the type of content relevant to the audience, as well as its ability to drive engagement and brand recognition (Zeqiri et al., 2024). Meanwhile, studies on brand storytelling among SMEs confirm that brand narratives can serve as a bridge between brand identity and customer perception, as narratives allow brands to package their positioning, values, and brand promises into a more vivid and easily grasped form (Fluhrer, 2025). If this capability is weak, digital messages tend to fall into generic, highly transactional, and short-term communication patterns—merely offering products, prices, or promotions without embedding a distinctive image in the audience's memory (Shankar et al., 2022).

On this basis, this subsection emphasises that digital message management serves as a mechanism bridging brand identity with the audience's brand recognition and recall processes. A brand's uniqueness will not develop into strong brand awareness unless it is transformed into clear, consistent, and meaningful messages. Effective digital messaging does not stop at conveying product information, but works to build associations, reinforce brand character, and repeatedly embed a specific image in consumers' minds. Consequently, the quality of digital messaging management is crucial in determining whether local MSMEs' digital activities genuinely strengthen the brand, or merely generate fleeting visibility that quickly fades from the audience's attention. In a broader context, the clearer the link between brand identity and the messages communicated, the greater the brand's chances of being recognised, distinguished, and consistently remembered amidst intense digital competition (Fluhrer & Brahm, 2025; Porcu et al., 2017; Shankar et al., 2022).

3.3. The Integration of Digital Channels in Strengthening Communication Consistency

In this context, the effectiveness of communication cannot be fully understood through the use of a single medium or digital tool alone, as digital marketing communication essentially takes place through the interplay between objectives, channels, content, and audience response, all of which influence one another. Therefore, the strength of brand communication is not determined by the number of platforms used, but rather by the extent to which these channels work in unison to expand exposure, reinforce messages, and maintain the coherence of brand identity across various digital touchpoints (Butkouskaya et al., 2024; Shankar et al., 2022).

In the practice of digital communication for local MSMEs, various channels such as social media, marketplaces, messaging apps, and websites essentially play distinct yet complementary

roles. Social media tends to function as a space for generating initial attention, shaping brand image, and maintaining engagement; marketplaces are more closely aligned with product presentation and facilitating transactions; messaging apps play a role in direct communication, follow-ups, and strengthening customer relationships; whilst websites, where available, can serve as a more stable and structured space for brand representation. However, the issue is not the diversity of the channels themselves, but rather whether each channel has been assigned a clear communicative role within the brand architecture. The literature on MSMEs emphasises that digital marketing does not operate uniformly and does not support the assumption of a single standard strategy for all businesses; therefore, the selection of channels and the definition of their functions must be tailored to the business context, product characteristics, and the brand communication objectives to be achieved (Fluhrer & Brahm, 2025; Jadhav et al., 2023).

It is at this point that channel integration becomes crucial as a mechanism to maintain continuity of communication across platforms. Integration does not mean that all channels must feature identical content, but rather that each channel must consistently convey the brand's identity, message themes, and communication direction. In other words, differences in format across platforms must not alter the core brand message perceived by the audience. If social media builds a narrative of locality and authenticity, marketplaces display product information that aligns with this, and messaging apps continue the communication in a consistent style, then the audience receives a relatively stable brand experience even when switching channels. Conversely, if each channel operates according to its own logic without continuity of meaning, what emerges is not brand reinforcement, but a fragmentation of messages that actually weakens the audience's recall. The integrated marketing communication approach emphasises that consistency across touchpoints is a key requirement for building a cohesive brand image; in the context of MSMEs, this integration becomes even more crucial as product communication, business identity communication, and relational communication often occur simultaneously (Alwi et al., 2022; Butkouskaya et al., 2024).

A critical evaluation of digital channel usage reveals that the sheer number of channels does not automatically strengthen brand awareness if not accompanied by clear integration of communication functions. When various platforms are used merely to follow trends or expand digital presence without a targeted division of functions, communication tends to become fragmented, unsynchronised, and struggles to form a solid brand association. In such circumstances, the audience may indeed be exposed to the brand in many places, but this exposure does not accumulate into strong recognition because each channel presents different signals, and sometimes even undermines one another. Conversely, strategically designed channel integration enables brands to expand their reach without losing clarity of identity, increase exposure frequency without causing message confusion, and maintain the stability of the brand image in consumers' minds. Findings from the literature on digital communication and SME branding suggest that the contribution of digital channels to brand strength only becomes significant when these channels are linked within a mutually supportive communication framework, rather than merely used in parallel (Fluhrer & Brahm, 2025; Jayawardena et al., 2024; Shankar et al., 2022).

The integration of digital channels determines the strength or weakness of brand communication consistency and, ultimately, determines the quality of brand awareness building. Integrated digital channels enable more effective message repetition, better-maintained identity coherence, and brand associations that are more memorable to the audience.

Conversely, the use of multiple channels without clear integration merely results in a fragmented digital presence, which is not robust enough to sustainably embed the brand image. In the context of local MSMEs, channel integration must therefore be understood not as an increase in the number of platforms, but as the coordination of communication functions across platforms so that all digital touchpoints work towards the same goal: strengthening the audience's recognition, differentiation, and recall of the brand (Butkouskaya et al., 2024; Zeqiri et al., 2024).

3.4. Audience Interaction as a Driver of Brand Awareness

The development of brand awareness in digital communication is not a one-way process, but rather a two-way interaction between the brand and its audience across various digital touchpoints. In the digital environment, brands do not merely convey messages, but also receive responses, interpretations and feedback that help shape how the brand is recognised and remembered. Consequently, audience interaction cannot be reduced to mere quantitative engagement indicators, but must be understood as a substantive part of the process of reinforcing brand recognition, meaning and recall. The literature on digital marketing communication indicates that the defining characteristic of the digital realm lies in its capacity to enable greater dialogue and interactivity between the source and the recipient of the message, whilst recent research also confirms that digital interactivity fosters more positive consumer responses through the creation of experiences, engagement, attitudes, trust, and emotional attachment to the brand (Fan et al., 2025; Shankar et al., 2022). Furthermore, cross-national studies indicate that social media marketing activities have a positive impact on brand awareness and brand engagement, suggesting that brand awareness in the digital space strengthens when audiences not only see the brand but also actively engage with it (Zeqiri et al., 2024).

In the context of local MSME digital channels, audience interaction can take various forms, such as comments, questions, replies, reviews, direct messages, content sharing, or other forms of digital response that demonstrate audience engagement with the brand. These forms are important not merely because they increase visibility, but because through such interactions, the audience begins to process the brand more actively. The literature on digital behavioural engagement emphasises that actions such as liking, sharing, and commenting on content represent the energy, time, and attention that audiences devote to interacting with a brand; consequently, such interactions hold deeper significance than mere digital activity traces (Dwivedi et al., 2021). At the same time, research on social media-based customer engagement indicates that relational content types exert a stronger mediating influence on marketing outcomes compared to other content types, meaning that interactions arising from relationships and closeness tend to be more effective in reinforcing the brand's position in the audience's mind (Kulikovskaja et al., 2023; Onofrei et al., 2022). Consequently, audience interactions on local MSME digital channels must be understood as a space where brands are tested, accepted, questioned, and enriched in meaning through public engagement, rather than merely a passive space for message distribution (Fan et al., 2025).

The effectiveness of such interactions is largely determined by how business operators respond to and manage them. Responses that are prompt, relevant, attentive, and consistent with the brand's character tend to reinforce the audience's perception that the brand is genuinely present, open, and trustworthy. Conversely, responses that are slow, superficial, inconsistent, or purely transaction-oriented tend to result in interactions that end as fleeting contacts without leaving a strong, meaningful impression. Studies on complaint handling on social media indicate that dimensions such as timeliness, attentiveness, credibility, apologies, and appropriate resolution are associated with increased trust in the company and repeat purchase intent, signifying that the quality of a brand's response plays a crucial role in shaping the audience's evaluation of the brand (Istanbulluoglu & Sakman, 2024). Similarly, research on corporate responsiveness on social media confirms that high response rates and signals of customer-centricity help build and maintain relationships with both users who comment and those who merely observe the interaction; thus, the quality of a brand's response affects not only those directly involved but also other members of the audience who witness it (Stuhldreier, 2024). In this context, interaction management should not be understood merely as an administrative activity, but rather as a brand communication practice that demonstrates whether the brand identity is truly alive in every response provided (Istanbulluoglu & Sakman, 2024; Stuhldreier, 2024).

The quality of interaction then determines whether the digital relationship formed truly strengthens brand affinity, brand recognition, and brand association. Well-managed interactions make the brand feel more present, more familiar, and more recognisable because the audience not only receives the message but also experiences the brand's response directly. At this point,

interaction becomes a mechanism for reinforcing meaning: every reply, clarification, or consistent response to audience comments has the potential to reaffirm the brand's character previously established through its digital identity and messaging. Meta-analytical literature on brand interactivity indicates that digital interactivity acts as a catalyst driving cognitive and affective changes in consumers, including brand experience, engagement, attitudes, trust, and attachment, which in turn generate more positive behavioural responses towards the brand (Fan et al., 2025). In other words, high-quality interactions help shift the brand's relationship with the audience from mere exposure towards deeper recognition, as the brand is present not merely as an object to be viewed, but as an actor that responds and builds relationships on an ongoing basis (Kulikovskaja et al., 2023; Zeqiri et al., 2024).

However, audience interaction does not automatically support the strengthening of brand awareness. When a business's response is weak, slow, inconsistent, or limited to purely transactional replies, digital interaction loses its potential as a brand enhancer and leaves only a fleeting, easily forgotten contact. This limitation is particularly relevant for SMEs, as research indicates that MSMEs' engagement with social media is often hindered by organisational routine constraints, their interpretation of social media features, and their capacity to adequately build platform-based relationships (Meier & Peters, 2023). Therefore, this subsection emphasises that audience interaction is a substantive element in the process of building brand awareness, not merely an afterthought following communication. In the context of local MSMEs, the quality of interaction determines whether digital relationships develop into a mechanism for the sustainable reinforcement of brand meaning, or whether they remain limited to superficial exchanges with no significant impact on audience recognition and recall of the brand (Meier & Peters, 2023; Shankar et al., 2022).

3.5. The Synergy of Brand Identity, Digital Message Management, Channel Integration, and Audience Interaction in Building Brand Awareness

Within the framework of digital marketing communication, the effectiveness of communication is not determined by a single component, but rather by the interrelationships between objectives, channels, content, and responses that form the communication process as a whole. At the same time, studies on SME branding also indicate that brand building in the digital age must be understood as a process that links brand orientation, brand identity, brand marketing activities and brand outcomes, rather than as standalone elements. Therefore, brand awareness among local MSMEs should be understood not as an automatic consequence of digital presence, but as the result of a strategic configuration that consistently unifies brand identity direction, message articulation, channel continuity, and the quality of interactions (Fluhrer & Brahm, 2025; Shankar et al., 2022).

The first and most fundamental relationship lies in the interconnection between brand identity and the management of digital messages. Brand identity determines the direction, character, and boundaries of meaning that messages must convey; thus, digital messages are essentially an operational articulation of a previously formulated identity. In the context of MSMEs, this relationship is crucial because small business communication does not merely convey product information, but also communicates the business's core identity, its held values, relationships with stakeholders, and the image it seeks to build in the public sphere. This means that when a brand identity is clearly defined, digital messages gain a strong semantic foundation to consistently emphasise locality, authenticity, product character, and symbolic differentiation. Conversely, when brand identity remains vague or has not been explicitly articulated, digital messages tend to drift towards being generic, transactional, and short-term because they lack a sufficiently strong anchor of meaning to distinguish the brand from competitors. Under such conditions, weaknesses in identity immediately diminish the quality of the message, and a message that is weak from the outset will struggle to build stable brand associations in the minds of the audience (Alwi et al., 2022; Fluhrer & Brahm, 2025).

Once the identity has been translated into a message, the next crucial stage is how that message is integrated across various digital channels without losing its semantic coherence. Here, message management and channel integration are directly linked because a good message will not be effective if disseminated in a fragmented manner, whereas channel integration will be ineffective if each channel conveys a different brand signal. The literature on digital marketing communication emphasises that channels, media, and platforms are part of a communication system that must be considered alongside content and responses; therefore, message dissemination must be designed to maintain consistency whilst expanding reach. In the context of MSMEs, integrated marketing communications is also understood as a dynamic capability that strengthens performance by enabling organisations to align various communication touchpoints towards a single strategic direction. Thus, the relationship between message and channel is not mechanical but functional: the message provides substance, whilst channel integration provides continuity, frequency of exposure, and stability of brand representation. If the message is inconsistent, channel integration becomes weak; conversely, if channels operate in a fragmented manner, even a strong message loses its cumulative power in building brand awareness (Butkouskaya et al., 2024; Shankar et al., 2022).

Effective channel integration subsequently opens up space for more intense, more frequent, and more meaningful audience interaction. When audiences encounter a brand with a consistent identity, aligned message themes, and consistent communication experiences across various channels, the likelihood of high-quality interaction increases because audiences are not faced with a brand that is constantly changing, but rather with a brand that feels cohesive. In the digital environment, interactivity has been shown to influence consumer responses at cognitive, affective, and behavioural levels, including brand experience, engagement, attitudes, trust, and loyalty, which in turn strengthen responses to the brand. On the other hand, research on social media-based customer engagement also indicates that audience engagement mediates the influence of content on marketing outcomes, and that relational content possesses a stronger capacity to foster attachment. This suggests that channel integration is not merely a distribution strategy, but also a prerequisite for creating an interactive space that enables the audience to repeatedly confirm, test, and deepen their understanding of the brand's meaning. If channels are fragmented, opportunities for interaction remain, but their quality tends to be compromised because the audience receives a context that is insufficiently coherent to build a deeper relationship with the brand (Fan et al., 2025; Kulikovskaja et al., 2023).

Audience interaction becomes the point at which the entire strategic configuration is tested in the formation of brand awareness. Well-managed interaction makes the brand not only visible but also felt to be present, familiar, and easily recognisable because the audience engages with the brand through a vivid communication experience, not merely through passive exposure. In this context, brand awareness is strengthened when interactions help reaffirm the brand's identity, reiterate the same message themes, and maintain the stability of brand associations in the audience's memory. Research in the context of social media indicates that social media marketing activities have a positive impact on brand awareness and brand engagement, whilst studies on MSMEs also highlight that limited capacity to manage social media can hinder more meaningful engagement. Therefore, brand awareness cannot be treated as the result of a single element. An unclear brand identity will weaken the direction of the message, inconsistent messaging will undermine the effectiveness of channel integration, fragmented channels will limit the quality of interaction, and superficial interaction will hinder the reinforcement of brand recognition and recall. Thus, brand awareness among local MSMEs is formed through a series of interconnected processes, where the strength of each element depends on its integration with other elements, and it is precisely from this integration that the foundation for formulating a digital marketing communication strategy model can be built (Fan et al., 2025; Meier & Peters, 2023; Zeqiri et al., 2024).

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that brand awareness for local MSME products is not automatically established through a digital presence, but rather through a strategic integration of a clear brand

identity, consistent digital messaging, functional integration of digital channels, and managed audience interaction. These findings confirm that locality is not merely an additional attribute in brand communication, but rather a source of identity and differentiation that determines the overall direction of digital marketing communication strategies. Consequently, the success of building brand awareness among local MSMEs depends on the ability of business owners to transform local distinctiveness into a meaningful brand identity, translate this into relevant messages, distribute them harmoniously across various channels, and reinforce them through responsive and consistent interactions.

The main contribution of this research lies in the formulation of a digital marketing communication strategy model that positions brand identity as the foundation, digital message management as the articulation mechanism, channel integration as the distribution and consistency mechanism, and audience interaction as the mechanism for strengthening brand awareness. This model emphasises that brand awareness is not the result of a single, isolated communication activity, but rather arises from a configuration of interrelated processes that operate continuously. At a theoretical level, this research not only confirms the literature on digital marketing communication, integrated marketing communication, and SME branding, but also expands upon it by demonstrating a shift from an approach oriented towards direct influence towards one oriented towards process, integration, and strategic configuration. In this context, local MSMEs introduce an additional dimension to the literature: that locality must be consistently translated into the architecture of digital communication to function as a strong source of brand awareness.

Academically, the resulting model can serve as a conceptual foundation for the development of studies on digital marketing communication and SME branding, particularly within the context of local businesses that rely on differentiation based on identity and meaning. In practical terms, these findings underscore that local MSME operators must begin their digital communication with a clear brand identity, translate this into consistent messaging, strategically select and align digital channels, and manage audience interactions as part of brand-building—not merely as daily promotional activities. Ultimately, the success of building brand awareness for local MSME products in the digital age is not determined by the intensity of digital presence alone, but by the ability to orchestrate identity, messaging, channels, and interactions into a single integrated digital marketing communication strategy.

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