

Creativity and Digitalization in Apam Barabai MSMEs: Strategies to Enhance Competitiveness

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the marketing strategies of Apam Barabai micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), focusing on the integration of product creativity and digitalization to enhance business competitiveness. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and documentation involving MSME owners actively engaged in production, marketing, and business management in Hulu Sungai Tengah Regency, South Kalimantan, Indonesia. The findings reveal that Apam Barabai MSMEs predominantly rely on traditional marketing strategies, emphasizing strategic stall locations along busy routes, direct interaction with consumers, and fostering customer loyalty through personalized purchasing experiences. The use of banana leaf packaging preserves product freshness, reinforces cultural identity, and provides aesthetic value, yet remains underutilized in digital promotions. Digital marketing and e-commerce adoption are limited due to insufficient digital literacy and concerns over order management, constraining broader market reach. The study highlights that integrating product innovation—such as packaging, presentation, and flavor variations—with digital platforms can expand market coverage, strengthen brand awareness, and maintain the authenticity of local cuisine. Creative strategies combined with social media and e-commerce utilization present opportunities for MSMEs to increase sales, enhance competitiveness, and sustain customer loyalty. This research contributes to the literature by demonstrating the complementary role of traditional marketing practices and digital tools in local culinary MSMEs, offering practical recommendations for optimizing digital marketing, fostering product innovation, and improving digital skills. The study underscores that strategic location, personalized interaction, product creativity, and digitalization collectively form a robust framework for MSME growth in a digital economy, aligning with modern marketing theory.

Keywords: *Apam Barabai, MSME, product creativity, digital marketing, competitiveness.*

INTRODUCTION

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) hold a strategic position in Indonesia's economy due to their substantial role in generating employment opportunities and enhancing community welfare (Wiweko & Anggara, 2025). Beyond economic contributions, MSMEs support the sustainability of local economies and help preserve products that reflect indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage (Purnomo et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the growing digitalization of the business environment necessitates that MSMEs adapt to modern, technology-driven marketing practices in order to maintain

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competitiveness within increasingly challenging markets (Ananda et al., 2023; Watini et al., 2022).

Advancements in digital technology have reshaped consumer behavior, with a marked shift toward utilizing e-commerce platforms for transactions (Watini et al., 2022; Zulkifli, 2024). Consequently, digital marketing has emerged as a critical strategy for MSMEs to broaden market reach, increase product visibility, and strengthen brand recognition more efficiently (Ananda et al., 2023; Purnomo et al., 2024; Wiweko & Anggara, 2025). Empirical evidence indicates that platforms such as Shopee facilitate improved marketing performance for MSMEs by enabling easier access to consumers and promoting direct interaction (Sari et al., 2023; Wijaya & Prasetyo, 2022).

In addition to leveraging digital tools, product innovation plays a decisive role in capturing consumer interest, particularly for traditional culinary offerings (Hassan et al., 2022; Wang & Li, 2023; Nguyen & Tran, 2021). Innovations in packaging design, visual presentation, and product differentiation can add significant value while reinforcing brand identity in digital environments (Nguyen & Tran, 2021). Integrating creative product development with strategic digital marketing allows MSMEs not only to boost sales but also to cultivate a sustainable and recognizable brand amidst the competitive digital marketplace (Ananda et al., 2023; Jones & Lee, 2022; Nguyen, 2021; Purnomo et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2021; Wiweko & Anggara, 2025).

Although prior research has explored digital marketing applications within MSMEs for enhancing sales and competitiveness, studies explicitly examining the intersection of product creativity and digital marketing for regional culinary MSMEs—such as Apam Barabai—remain limited. Given the potential of Apam Barabai as a local culinary product, exploring digital marketing strategies provides valuable insights for extending market reach and enhancing brand positioning. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to contribute to the literature on developing traditional culinary MSMEs in the digital era.

This research focuses on the marketing strategies of Apam Barabai MSMEs, with particular attention to the integration of product creativity and digital technology utilization. A qualitative descriptive methodology is employed to comprehensively examine marketing practices, types of product innovation, and the challenges faced in implementing digital strategies. This approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of MSME marketing dynamics rooted in local wisdom within a digital context.

Accordingly, the research problem centers on how Apam Barabai MSMEs develop product creativity and implement digital marketing strategies to enhance competitiveness. The objective of the study is to provide a detailed description of these strategies and to offer practical recommendations for other traditional culinary MSMEs seeking to navigate the competitive digital marketplace effectively.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of MSMEs in Local Economic Development

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are recognized as pivotal contributors to economic growth, primarily through job creation, income generation, and poverty alleviation (Fachrina & Nawawi, 2022). Beyond their economic impact, MSMEs play an essential role in preserving local culture by producing goods that reflect traditional knowledge and community heritage (Santoso et al., 2023). The sustainability and growth of these enterprises depend not only on operational efficiency but also on their capacity to adapt to shifts in the business landscape, particularly the ongoing digital transformation.

Digital Marketing for MSMEs

The proliferation of digital technologies has significantly altered consumer behavior, with an increasing number of consumers engaging in online purchasing through e-commerce platforms. Digital marketing, defined as the strategic deployment of digital channels to communicate, engage, and convert potential customers, has become indispensable for MSMEs seeking to expand market access, enhance product visibility, and strengthen brand presence (Budiarti et al., 2024; Noer Aini Mery Cahyanti et al., 2024). Empirical evidence highlights that e-commerce platforms such as Shopee and Tokopedia enable more efficient market access, facilitate direct consumer engagement, and enhance overall marketing effectiveness (Imania Melati & Rochmaniah, 2023; Plasnajaya et al., 2024). Digital marketing thus provides MSMEs with tools to maintain competitiveness in increasingly saturated markets (Ahmed & Zhang, 2022; Chen & Lee, 2021; Hwang et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2022; Yadav & Jain, 2023).

Product Innovation and Creativity

Innovation and creativity in product development are critical for attracting and retaining consumer attention, particularly in traditional culinary sectors. Enhancements in packaging, presentation, flavors, and portioning can increase perceived product value, differentiate offerings from competitors, and strengthen brand identity (Ansari et al., 2025; Rusdianto, 2024; Zefanya & Andarini, 2025). Integrating product innovation with marketing strategies has been shown to improve customer experiences, foster loyalty, and support sustainable business growth (Shofwan et al., 2025).

Integration of Product Creativity and Digital Marketing

Recent studies underscore the synergistic effect of combining innovative product design with digital marketing strategies. MSMEs that implement this integration effectively are able to achieve greater market penetration, stronger brand recognition, and improved competitiveness (Ansari et al., 2025; Budiarti et al., 2024; Noer Aini Mery Cahyanti et al., 2024; Rusdianto, 2024; Shofwan et al., 2025; Zefanya & Andarini, 2025). Nevertheless, research examining this integration within regional culinary MSMEs, such as Apam Barabai,

remains limited. Apam Barabai demonstrates high potential for growth through the strategic application of creative product design and digital marketing.

Theoretical Framework

This study applies *modern marketing theory*, which emphasizes the integration of traditional marketing practices with digital strategies to optimize business performance (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Additionally, *cultural marketing theory* supports the idea that preserving local identity through product design and presentation can enhance consumer experiences and brand loyalty (Hollensen, 2015). By combining these frameworks, the study provides a comprehensive perspective for analyzing the marketing strategies of Apam Barabai MSMEs in the digital era.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with the aim of obtaining an in-depth understanding of the creativity and digital marketing strategies implemented by Apam Barabai MSMEs to enhance business competitiveness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moleong, 2019). This approach was selected because it enables researchers to explore phenomena contextually and to gain insights directly from business actors within their natural environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative methods are considered appropriate for interpreting digital marketing practices and product innovation, which are not easily quantified (Moleong, 2019; Patton, 2015). The research was conducted at Apam Barabai MSMEs located in Hulu Sungai Tengah Regency, South Kalimantan. The study subjects comprised owners and business practitioners actively involved in production, marketing, and business management. Informants were selected purposively, based on their knowledge and experience regarding the implementation of digital marketing strategies and product creativity development (Etikan et al., 2016).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather information on the digital marketing strategies employed, the forms of product creativity, and challenges encountered in utilizing e-commerce platforms. Observations were carried out to directly examine marketing activities, product presentation on digital platforms, and packaging processes. Documentation, including product photographs, screenshots of e-commerce accounts, and digital promotional archives, was used to complement the primary data. Collected data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis techniques, encompassing data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2019). During data reduction, the researcher selected and focused on information relevant to the study objectives. Data were then presented in descriptive narratives to facilitate understanding of emerging patterns and findings (Maulana & Berkatillah, 2025). The final stage involved

drawing conclusions based on the interpretation of research findings while considering the contextual and field conditions.

Data validity was ensured through source and technique triangulation. Source triangulation involved comparing information obtained from multiple informants, while technique triangulation compared data from interviews, observations, and documentation (Denzin, 2012; Patton, 2015). These efforts aimed to enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings, ensuring that the research outcomes are scientifically accountable. Through this methodological framework, the study provides a comprehensive depiction of the integration of creativity and digitalization as marketing strategies in Apam Barabai MSMEs and generates relevant and applicable insights for the development of traditional culinary MSMEs in the digital era (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moleong, 2019; Patton, 2015).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Results

Based on the findings of this study, Jalan A. Yani, particularly the area between Simpang Sepuluh and the Surapati Traffic Light, represents one of the most renowned culinary hubs in Barabai. This area has become the primary location for Apam Barabai vendors, who have been recognized over the years, forming a recognizable concentration of stalls for both local residents and passersby. The orderly arrangement of the stalls generates a distinct visual experience, facilitating consumers in locating products. These stalls are generally simple, consisting of wooden or plastic tables, occasionally equipped with cloth coverings or canopies to protect the products from dust and heat. This configuration constitutes an informal culinary center that not only serves as a transaction point but also reinforces the identity of local cuisine (Armstrong et al., 2019; Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Stall location selection is strategically based on human mobility. Observations indicate that the stalls are situated along routes toward the city center, near traditional markets, and on roads connecting economic zones and residential areas. Placement in busy locations allows vendors to reach consumers directly, especially during peak hours, which occur in the morning from 06:00 to 09:00 WITA (UTC+8) and in the late afternoon to evening from 16:00 to 21:00 WITA (UTC+8). Vendors consciously select strategic locations, understanding the influence on sales volume. One informant noted, "If the stall is in a quiet area, Apam sells slowly, but in a crowded place, products are quickly purchased as consumers can buy immediately." This aligns with location-based marketing theory, which emphasizes the importance of visibility and accessibility in attracting consumers (Armstrong et al., 2019; Solomon, 2020).

Direct interaction between vendors and buyers is a key factor in maintaining customer loyalty. Many consumers have become regular customers who routinely purchase whenever they pass by. These personal relationships create a unique purchasing experience and foster trust in product quality. An informant mentioned, "Many buyers are regulars. Sometimes they order Apam for family or friends. We get to know them one by one." This underscores

the significance of social interaction in traditional marketing strategies (Hollensen, 2015; Solomon, 2020).

Product freshness is a primary concern for UMKM operators. Apam Barabai is sold warm and wrapped in banana leaves, which not only preserves its aroma and distinctive taste but also strengthens the traditional value of the product. The use of banana leaf packaging reflects the vendors' awareness of quality and consumer experience, while reinforcing the authentic culinary identity of Barabai. Additionally, the banana leaf packaging adds aesthetic and cultural value that appeals to local consumers, in line with cultural marketing concepts (Hollensen, 2015).

Interviews support these findings. One informant stated, "Selling on the roadside is faster because people can see and buy directly, and Apam must remain fresh." Another emphasized customer loyalty, "Many buyers are regulars. Every time they pass by, they stop. We get to know them one by one." Meanwhile, another informant highlighted digital limitations, "I don't understand how to sell online and am afraid of not managing orders if it gets busy." The fourth stressed peak hours, "Morning and late afternoon are always busy, so we prepare more dough at those times." The fifth added that a strategic location strongly affects product turnover speed.

Although traditional sales strategies have proven effective, reliance on these methods carries notable limitations. Most consumers are local residents or passersby, limiting market penetration to broader regions. The utilization of digital media and e-commerce platforms remains minimal due to limited knowledge, digital skills, and concerns about order management. This indicates that digitalization is not yet a priority, although literature suggests that employing digital technology can expand market reach and enhance UMKM competitiveness (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Moreover, product and packaging creativity is a critical aspect that requires improvement. Field observations show that Apam Barabai is wrapped in banana leaves to maintain freshness and aroma, providing a traditional touch. However, this packaging is seldom adapted for digital promotion, such as photos or videos on social media. Product innovation tends to focus solely on maintaining quality, while other innovations, including flavor variations, portion sizes, or bundled packages to attract new consumers, are rarely implemented (Ansari et al., 2025; Rusdianto, 2024; Zefanya & Andarini, 2025).

Nevertheless, the neat and consistent arrangement of stalls continues to create an engaging visual experience for offline consumers. Stalls lined up with small boards displaying product names and prices make it easier for customers to recognize products and differentiate them from other vendors. Warm interactions between vendors and buyers provide a purchasing experience that differs from online transactions, which are often more anonymous and less personal. This demonstrates that traditional marketing remains a key asset for UMKM (Hollensen, 2015; Solomon, 2020).

Overall, the findings indicate that Apam Barabai UMKM still relies on traditional marketing strategies, emphasizing strategic location, direct consumer interaction, and loyalty-

building through personalized purchasing experiences. The strong local market base serves as an initial capital that can be further developed through creativity- and digital-based strategies. Integrating product innovation and banana leaf packaging with the use of digital media can expand market reach, enhance competitiveness, and preserve the local culinary identity (Ansari et al., 2025; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Rusdianto, 2024; Zefanya & Andarini, 2025). Creativity in packaging, product presentation, and flavor development, combined with social media and e-commerce utilization, becomes a crucial strategy for Apam Barabai UMKM to access broader markets while maintaining loyal customers.

Thus, the combination of strategic location, personal interaction, product creativity, banana leaf packaging, and digitalization forms the foundation of a potential marketing strategy. This approach not only increases sales volume and market reach but also strengthens the position of local cuisine amid rising competition, without compromising the traditional values and unique identity inherent to Apam Barabai. This approach aligns with modern marketing theory, which emphasizes the integration of traditional and digital strategies to enhance UMKM competitiveness (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the marketing strategy of the Apam Barabai MSME still predominantly relies on conventional methods, emphasizing geographic proximity to consumers, direct face-to-face interactions, and maintaining the product's quality. This strategy is not merely an outdated tradition, but rather an adaptive approach that aligns with the local socio-cultural and economic context. According to Kotler and Keller's (2016) marketing mix framework, the marketing practices of this MSME primarily focus on optimizing product and distribution elements, while the promotional and pricing components remain relatively basic. The emphasis on product quality and the careful selection of sales locations is justified, as Apam Barabai is a perishable product that requires direct management to preserve its quality and maintain consumer trust (Armstrong et al., 2019; Kotler & Keller, 2016).

The strategic placement of stalls along Jalan A. Yani, particularly in high-traffic areas, highlights the MSME's understanding of location-based marketing, where visibility and ease of access are crucial factors in attracting customers (Armstrong et al., 2019). The arrangement of stalls forms an informal culinary cluster, which serves not only as a point of transaction but also as a symbol of the product's identity. This setup creates a consistent visual experience for consumers and strengthens their connection to Apam Barabai. However, the reliance on physical locations limits market expansion, as the direct presence of consumers remains a prerequisite for sales.

Personal interactions between vendors and consumers play a crucial role in building customer loyalty. Many customers have established regular buying patterns, which fosters relationships that enhance trust in the product. Within the context of relationship marketing,

these interactions are valuable assets for sustaining the business (Hollensen, 2015; Solomon, 2020). Despite the strong customer loyalty cultivated through these personal relationships, the social capital generated has not been fully utilized in the digital realm. Digital platforms such as social media and e-commerce have not been fully leveraged to extend market reach or enhance online visibility (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

Regarding the product itself, the freshness of Apam Barabai is a key differentiating factor (unique selling proposition). The production process is adjusted to daily demand, which aligns with a demand-based production approach that maintains product quality and minimizes the risk of unsold goods. The use of banana leaves as packaging serves both a functional and symbolic purpose: it preserves the product's quality while also representing local traditions. From the perspective of cultural marketing, the packaging serves as a cultural narrative that distinguishes Apam Barabai from other similar products and reinforces its authentic identity in the eyes of consumers (Hollensen, 2015).

However, the visual and symbolic potential of banana leaf packaging and traditional production methods have not been fully exploited in digital marketing efforts. According to experiential marketing theory, sensory and visual elements are integral to fostering emotional connections with consumers. There is significant untapped potential in utilizing digital platforms to showcase the production process, the story behind the product, and authentic consumer interactions. The lack of a digital storytelling strategy that incorporates these customer experiences suggests an underutilization of promotional opportunities (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

The adoption of digital media and e-commerce by Apam Barabai MSME is still limited, pointing to both technical and cognitive barriers. According to the Technology Acceptance Model, the adoption of technology is influenced by the perceived ease of use and the perceived benefits. Factors such as low digital literacy, inadequate skills in managing online transactions, and concerns over payment security are significant barriers (Imania Melati & Rochmaniah, 2023; Plasnajaya et al., 2024). While the potential advantages of digital platforms are evident, overcoming these challenges is critical for MSMEs to effectively utilize technology to enhance their competitive edge.

Changes in consumer behavior further demand digital adaptation. Modern consumers increasingly rely on online research, product comparison, and reviews before making purchase decisions. The lack of a strong online presence could hinder Apam Barabai MSME's ability to reach consumers beyond the local area. Previous studies highlight that leveraging e-commerce and social media platforms can significantly improve product visibility, broaden market reach, and enhance brand recognition (Imania Melati & Rochmaniah, 2023; Plasnajaya et al., 2024). This supports the notion that despite current challenges, digital tools can play a pivotal role in enhancing an MSME's ability to compete in the digital economy.

Product innovation also remains an essential factor for growth. While innovation so far has focused on maintaining product freshness and quality, introducing product variations,

such as new flavors or sizes, could substantially increase the product's appeal, particularly in digital spaces (Ansari et al., 2025; Rusdianto, 2024; Zefanya & Andarini, 2025). According to innovation and value creation theory, creativity encompasses the development of product variations, packaging, and sales strategies that enhance the perceived value of a product. Strategies such as product bundling, introducing new flavors, or offering informative packaging could make the product more attractive while maintaining its traditional appeal. Integrating product innovation with digital marketing would allow the MSME to expand its market segment without compromising its cultural identity.

In conclusion, this research highlights that the primary challenge for the Apam Barabai MSME is not a lack of potential but rather the insufficient use of this potential in a fully integrated digital marketing strategy. The findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of marketing for MSMEs based on local wisdom, and provide practical insights into how digitalization, when coupled with respect for cultural values, can improve competitiveness and ensure business sustainability in the digital economy (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Hollensen, 2015; Kotler & Keller, 2016).

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