

LEVERAGING DIGITAL MARKETING TO ENHANCE THE COMPETITIVENESS OF CULINARY MICROENTERPRISES: A CASE STUDY FROM RURAL INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

In the face of growing competition in the culinary sector, micro and small enterprises (MSEs) in developing countries face a dual imperative: digital transformation and market competitiveness. This study explores how digital marketing strategies can enhance the market performance of rural culinary MSEs, with a focused case study on Mr. Leman's Goat Satay stall in Central Java, Indonesia. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through direct observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation of digital activities. The findings reveal that while social media platforms—such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok—serve as effective tools for market expansion and consumer engagement, major constraints include limited digital literacy, inconsistent content management, and a lack of financial capital for sustained promotion. Despite these barriers, the presence of value-based communication, customer-centered content, and ethical marketing practices contributes significantly to brand loyalty and business resilience. This research contributes to the discourse on digital entrepreneurship by contextualizing digital strategy within Islamic ethical

business frameworks, emphasizing the need for inclusive, adaptive, and socially responsible marketing approaches for rural MSEs.

Kata kunci: digital marketing; microenterprises; culinary business; social media strategy; Islamic business ethics; rural entrepreneurship; case study.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the global business environment has experienced a significant digital shift, affecting not only large corporations but also micro and small enterprises (MSEs). The proliferation of mobile technology, social media platforms, and e-commerce infrastructures has redefined how businesses communicate with consumers, manage supply chains, and scale operations (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Bharadwaj et al., 2022). In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the urgency for digital adaptation has escalated, particularly among small businesses that were disproportionately impacted by movement restrictions and declining physical customer traffic (Maritz et al., 2020).

Digital marketing has emerged as a key strategy for MSEs to enhance visibility, improve customer relationships, and boost competitiveness, especially in the culinary sector where customer engagement is central to value creation (Eller et al., 2020; Martínez-Climent et al., 2021). Recent research suggests that even small-scale food businesses can increase their market share by adopting personalized digital communication, content-based branding, and online customer service tools (Kraus et al., 2022). Social media platforms—such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook—have proven particularly influential for microenterprises, due to their low operational cost, broad user base, and ease of access (Al-Omoush et al., 2021; Mahmood et al., 2022).

Despite these global trends, many MSEs in developing regions still struggle to keep pace with digital adoption. In Indonesia, micro and small enterprises make up over 99% of the business population, yet only a small fraction utilize digital marketing systematically or strategically (World Bank, 2022; Hapsari et al., 2023). The disparity between digital potential and actual implementation is even more pronounced in rural areas, where technological infrastructure, human resource capabilities, and digital literacy remain limited (Susilawati et al., 2021). For culinary MSEs in such contexts, the challenge lies not only in adopting digital tools but in integrating them meaningfully into business strategies that reflect both market logic and local values.

Thus, understanding how MSEs—particularly culinary enterprises—engage with digital marketing under real-world constraints is a pressing concern for both scholars and practitioners. This study contributes to this conversation by examining the digital strategy of a rural Indonesian culinary microenterprise, situating it within broader theoretical frameworks and ethical marketing practices.

Indonesia, as the largest economy in Southeast Asia, hosts a vibrant micro and small enterprise (MSE) sector that accounts for over 97% of total employment and more than 60% of GDP contributions (World Bank, 2022). However, a significant digital divide persists between urban-based and rural-based MSEs.

While urban enterprises increasingly adopt digital tools to reach wider markets, their rural counterparts—particularly those in the informal culinary sector—continue to rely on traditional face-to-face transactions and word-of-mouth promotions (Susilawati et al., 2021). These microenterprises face critical limitations in accessing digital infrastructure, mastering digital tools, and allocating capital for consistent marketing activities. Furthermore, cultural and generational barriers often hinder business owners from adopting innovative technologies, particularly in regions where digital education is limited (Kusumawardhani et al., 2023; Hapsari et al., 2023).

Culinary microenterprises, especially those operating in rural settings, must also confront increasing competition from mobile vendors and online food delivery startups that have embraced digital platforms. Yet many rural food businesses still lack basic delivery systems, customer engagement protocols, and even digital menus (Irawan et al., 2022). The absence of structured digital strategies not only restricts growth but also undermines resilience in a volatile economy. Moreover, the overreliance on social media without analytical tools or platform-specific content planning often results in inconsistent branding and low customer retention (Santosa & Prasetyo, 2021). These conditions necessitate a deeper investigation into how rural MSEs—like Mr. Leman's Goat Satay—can navigate such challenges and leverage digital marketing in a way that is context-sensitive, value-aligned, and sustainably competitive.

A growing body of research highlights the strategic value of digital marketing in enhancing the performance and sustainability of microenterprises. Digital tools not only facilitate broader market access but also enable small businesses to build stronger customer relationships through real-time communication, content personalization, and engagement analytics (Bharadwaj et al., 2022; Al-Omoush et al., 2021). Several studies emphasize the role of social media marketing in creating community-based branding, especially for consumer-facing sectors such as food and beverage (Mahmood et al., 2022; Kraus et al., 2022). Martínez-Climent et al. (2021), for instance, observed that even low-budget digital strategies can yield high returns in terms of customer acquisition and loyalty, provided they are executed consistently.

Despite this, empirical studies on the effectiveness of digital marketing in rural microenterprises remain limited. Existing research largely centers on urban case studies or generalized data across sectors without capturing the specific dynamics of culinary MSEs in non-metropolitan areas (Irawan et al., 2022). Furthermore, few studies incorporate ethical considerations—such as transparency, honesty, and social benefit—which are central to Islamic economic values. This creates a critical research gap. While digital transformation is widely promoted, there is insufficient exploration of how such strategies can be aligned with local

values and cultural frameworks, particularly in Muslim-majority contexts. Moreover, most studies do not provide in-depth qualitative insights into how rural entrepreneurs perceive and practice digital marketing on a day-to-day basis. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to explore the digital marketing practices of a rural Indonesian culinary microenterprise through an interpretive lens that integrates both strategic theory and Islamic ethical perspectives.

Grounded in the need to bridge the gap between digital opportunity and rural business practice, this study aims to explore how digital marketing strategies are adopted, adapted, and perceived by rural culinary microenterprises in Indonesia. Specifically, it seeks to analyze the mechanisms through which social media and other digital tools are utilized to improve market competitiveness, customer engagement, and business sustainability. By focusing on a real-world case—Mr. Leman's Goat Satay—this study captures the lived experiences of rural entrepreneurs navigating digital transformation under resource constraints and cultural particularities.

This research makes three core contributions. First, it extends the literature on digital entrepreneurship by providing an in-depth, context-sensitive understanding of digital strategy implementation in rural MSEs. Second, it enriches discussions of ethical marketing by integrating Islamic economic values—such as transparency (*ṣidq*), trust (*amānah*), and public benefit (*maslahah*)—into the analysis of digital business practices. Third, it offers practical guidance for MSE stakeholders, policymakers, and development agencies in designing inclusive digital support systems tailored to rural microenterprises. By combining theoretical rigor with ethical sensitivity and practical applicability, this study aims to support the sustainable digital transformation of grassroots economies in Muslim-majority societies.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore how digital marketing strategies are utilized by rural culinary microenterprises to enhance competitiveness. The case of Mr. Leman's Goat Satay—a microenterprise located in Majalangu Village, Pemalang Regency, Central Java—was purposefully selected due to its active yet informal use of digital platforms for business promotion. This design allowed the researchers to generate rich, context-sensitive insights into the social, economic, and technological dynamics influencing digital marketing adoption at the grassroots level.

Data collection was conducted through triangulated qualitative techniques, including semi-structured interviews with the business owner, non-participant observation of daily business activities, and documentation analysis of the enterprise's digital presence (e.g., social media content, customer engagement

metrics, and transaction records). Interviews were conducted in the local language, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analytical rigor. Field observations focused on customer interaction patterns, marketing behavior, and technological usage in situ. Document analysis helped corroborate claims and identify patterns in digital engagement.

Data analysis followed the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which includes three key steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Coding was conducted using thematic analysis, guided by two conceptual frameworks: Chaffey's digital marketing strategy model and Islamic business ethics principles. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed methodological triangulation and member checking. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to fieldwork, and informed consent was secured from all participants involved in the research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Digital Practices at Mr. Leman's Goat Satay

Mr. Leman's Goat Satay is a rural microenterprise located in Majalangu Village, Watukumpul District, Pemalang Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. Established in 2020, the business offers a variety of traditional menu items, including grilled goat satay, goat curry, chicken satay, and roasted village chicken, all at affordable prices. The stall's location—nestled between mountain ridges and rice fields—provides a scenic backdrop that appeals to both local and regional visitors. Despite operating in a rural context, Mr. Leman has gradually introduced digital tools to support his business, reflecting an emerging trend of informal digitalization among microenterprises in the Indonesian countryside.

The enterprise primarily relies on social media platforms—namely Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok—as its core marketing channels. These platforms are used to share images of daily menus, customer testimonials, and short video clips showcasing food preparation or the surrounding landscape. Observations and documentation reveal that posts are published irregularly, typically during weekends or on public holidays when customer traffic is expected to rise. Visual content is generated using a standard smartphone, without advanced editing tools or content planning software. Most captions are descriptive and emotional rather than strategic, often including religious or local cultural phrases intended to connect with the community.

Despite the lack of formal digital marketing training, the stall's owner demonstrates a basic understanding of audience engagement. For example, some posts feature customer reviews and group photos of visitors, which are effective in fostering informal virality through shares and comments. However, the absence of

features such as online ordering systems, digital menus, or QR-code payment options indicates that the enterprise remains at an early stage of digital adoption. No analytics or insights tools are used to evaluate post performance or customer demographics. Still, the use of hashtags like #satekambingpedesaan and geotags related to Pemalang district suggests a nascent awareness of location-based visibility, even though such practices are not yet consistently applied. These initial digital efforts reflect both the aspirations and limitations of rural microenterprises navigating the path toward digital competitiveness.

Patterns of Digital Engagement

The interviews with the business owner of Mr. Leman's Goat Satay revealed that the motivation for adopting social media stemmed from both necessity and inspiration. Following a notable decline in foot traffic during the COVID-19 pandemic, the owner observed that several nearby food vendors began using Instagram and Facebook to attract customers. This inspired him to do the same, though without any formal training or strategic planning. His primary motivation, as he stated, was "so that people who pass by the road can see our food from their phones first." This reflects a practical understanding that digital presence functions as a virtual storefront, especially for spontaneous visitors or returning tourists. In essence, the use of social media is seen not as an advanced branding tool, but as an accessible channel for visibility and customer attraction.

Regarding engagement metrics, the stall's Instagram posts typically receive between 15 to 40 likes, with occasional spikes reaching 70–90 likes during festive seasons or when the content involves group photos of families dining at the stall. Facebook engagement tends to be lower in terms of likes but slightly more interactive in the comments section, as customers often leave direct feedback or tag others. TikTok videos—though posted less frequently—have shown potential virality, with one short clip of satay being grilled reaching over 1,000 views and 120+ likes. These data points suggest that while the audience base is modest, the right type of content—especially visually rich and process-focused—tends to perform better in attracting attention and fostering interaction.

Regular customers, particularly locals who dine weekly or bi-weekly, play a key role in sustaining engagement. Interviews indicate that some of them actively follow the stall's posts and share them through WhatsApp groups or Instagram stories, serving as informal brand ambassadors. In contrast, new customers—mostly weekend visitors or tourists—often discover the business via hashtags or geotags, underscoring the importance of visibility strategies even in rural markets. These digital newcomers occasionally comment with expressions of interest before their visit, indicating the growing relevance of social proof and pre-engagement in driving offline consumption.

Content effectiveness, however, varies widely. Posts that feature behind-the-scenes cooking processes, close-up shots of grilled satay, or photos with large family groups consistently generate more interactions. In contrast, generic menu photos without storytelling or emotional appeal receive minimal response. The absence of a content calendar or thematic planning results in irregular posting, which weakens audience consistency. Furthermore, most content lacks visual quality due to poor lighting, low-resolution camera use, and lack of editing—issues acknowledged by the owner, who admitted: “I just take pictures quickly; I don't know how to edit them or make videos properly.”

These challenges highlight a critical bottleneck in the stall's digital engagement strategy: the lack of systematic content management. There is no fixed schedule for uploading posts, nor is there any effort to align content with local events, religious holidays, or customer behavior cycles. As a result, the digital presence, while existent, remains fragmented and opportunistic rather than strategic. The case of Mr. Leman's Goat Satay illustrates that even modest microenterprises can generate meaningful digital interactions—but only if supported by basic digital skills, visual storytelling techniques, and content planning practices suited to their socio-cultural context.

Constraints in Strategy Implementation

While the adoption of social media platforms by Mr. Leman's Goat Satay indicates a growing awareness of digital potential, the implementation of strategic digital marketing remains severely limited by multiple interrelated constraints. Chief among these is the low level of digital literacy, which is a widespread issue among microenterprise operators in rural Southeast Asia (Hapsari et al., 2023; Kusumawardhani et al., 2023). The business owner lacks the capacity to interpret platform analytics, schedule content strategically, or differentiate between content types in terms of engagement value. This mirrors findings by Alam et al. (2020), who observed that the absence of technical knowledge often leads rural entrepreneurs to treat social media as a passive display tool rather than an interactive marketing medium.

Equally important is the absence of dedicated financial resources for digital promotion. Microenterprises often operate on thin margins, prioritizing operational survival over investment in digital assets such as paid advertising, visual branding, or outsourcing digital talent (Martínez-Climent et al., 2021; Bharadwaj et al., 2022). In Mr. Leman's case, attempts to boost visibility rely solely on organic reach. While this is commendable, it limits scalability and exposure beyond immediate circles, which, according to Kraus et al. (2022), is a key barrier to digital maturity in MSEs. Without funding for even modest advertising experiments, the business struggles to translate digital presence into measurable sales growth.

Another salient challenge lies in the technological and infrastructural ecosystem. Internet instability in rural Indonesia is a well-documented obstacle to digital commerce (Susilawati et al., 2021; World Bank, 2022). The unreliability of connections in Majalangu Village constrains timely content posting, hinders customer interactions, and discourages sustained digital experimentation. Furthermore, the business has not yet adopted key digital functions such as QR code payments, online ordering systems, or delivery integration with third-party platforms. This lag is consistent with findings by Al-Omoush et al. (2021), who argue that digital competitiveness is not only about content visibility but also transactional convenience and customer responsiveness.

Finally, the absence of data-driven decision-making further undermines the potential of digital marketing. There is no tracking of customer feedback, seasonal demand patterns, or content engagement statistics, resulting in stagnant learning loops. This is problematic, as scholars emphasize the role of data analytics in enabling agile micro-marketing and customer segmentation even in low-resource environments (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Nambisan et al., 2019). As noted by Mahmood et al. (2022), the failure to utilize even basic metrics often leads to repetition of ineffective strategies, resulting in digital fatigue and resource inefficiency.

Taken together, these findings reaffirm that without foundational training, institutional support, and infrastructural readiness, digital tools alone cannot guarantee competitiveness. Digital transformation in microenterprises is a systemic endeavor—one that demands alignment between capacity, capital, and context (Rachinger et al., 2019; Beliaeva et al., 2020).

Alignment with Digital Marketing Theory

The empirical findings from Mr. Leman's Goat Satay reflect partial but significant alignment with established digital marketing theories. Chaffey's Digital Marketing Strategy Framework outlines five essential components for effective digital presence: situation analysis, objective setting, strategy development, tactics, and control (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). While the enterprise does engage in rudimentary tactics—such as content uploads on Instagram and Facebook—it lacks defined objectives, strategy coherence, and any form of performance control or review. There is no structured content plan, segmentation analysis, or performance tracking, which limits the stall's ability to optimize digital campaigns over time. This absence mirrors similar findings among rural SMEs in developing regions where digital efforts are fragmented and heavily reliant on individual effort (Bharadwaj et al., 2022; Alam et al., 2020).

In terms of the Marketing Mix 4.0—product, price, place, and promotion adapted to digital environments (Kotler et al., 2021)—the stall demonstrates partial

digitalization. The “product” component is emphasized visually through food photography and video posts, although quality and consistency are lacking. “Price” remains fixed and offline, with no visible promotional pricing or bundling for digital audiences. The “place” element is enhanced through geotags and Google Maps visibility, albeit unsystematically. Most notably, the “promotion” aspect is underutilized, as there is no integration of scheduling tools, thematic content series, or customer feedback loops—features considered foundational in digital-era marketing (Martínez-Climent et al., 2021).

The use of social media also relates to Social Media Engagement Theory, which emphasizes interaction, intimacy, and influence (Barger et al., 2016). Content that includes group dining photos or behind-the-scenes preparation videos demonstrates potential to foster emotional connection and social proof. However, the stall does not capitalize on these through two-way engagement strategies such as comments, polls, or user-generated content. The relationship remains largely unidirectional—post and wait—rather than dialogical, which weakens potential for customer co-creation and long-term loyalty (Mahmood et al., 2022; Hajli, 2020).

Nevertheless, the informal use of hashtags, geolocation, and religious-cultural phrases suggests a localized adaptation of engagement strategies. This supports the idea that digital marketing among microenterprises must not only follow theoretical ideals but also be tailored to sociocultural realities (Al-Omouh et al., 2021). While the business falls short of executing comprehensive digital strategies, its emergent practices signal a form of “grassroots digital entrepreneurship”—adaptive, situated, and evolving—consistent with the bottom-up innovation model in resource-constrained settings (Nambisan et al., 2019).

Ethical Considerations and Islamic Business Values

Although Mr. Leman’s digital marketing efforts are modest and largely unstructured, they demonstrate a strong alignment with fundamental values in Islamic business ethics. The content shared on social media emphasizes honesty (*ṣidq*) and trustworthiness (*amānah*), which are among the core principles of Islamic commerce (Dusuki & Abdullah, 2007). For instance, the visual representations of food are accurate, unfiltered, and devoid of exaggeration—a notable contrast to many urban marketing strategies that often rely on aesthetic manipulation. This reflects a commitment to truthful representation (*bayān ṣādiq*), which ensures that customer expectations align with the actual experience, thereby fulfilling the ethical obligation of transparency in transactions (*mu‘āmalah*) (Ali & Al-Aali, 2015).

Moreover, customer service at the stall, as observed and confirmed during interviews, places strong emphasis on hospitality (*karāmah*), personalization, and community connection. These values are not only culturally rooted but are also

embedded in the Islamic concept of *ta'āwun* (mutual support), wherein economic exchange is not merely transactional but relational and socially embedded. Mr. Leman stated, “Our goal is not just to sell, but to serve well—people will return if we make them feel welcomed.” This approach is consistent with the ethical imperative to create *maslahah* (public benefit) through business, which is considered one of the objectives of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* in commercial life (Chapra, 2008; Kamla et al., 2006).

However, the digital divide and lack of institutional support raise concerns related to justice (*'adl*) and inclusion, which are also essential components of Islamic economic justice. The inability to access digital infrastructure, develop design content, or utilize online payments places microenterprises like Mr. Leman's at a structural disadvantage. From a *maqāṣid* perspective, such conditions challenge the realization of *ḥifẓ al-māl* (protection of wealth) and *ḥifẓ al-'irdh* (protection of dignity), as digital exclusion may limit economic agency and competitiveness (Hasan, 2016). The absence of fair access to digital ecosystems is therefore not merely a technological issue but an ethical one—calling for intervention through value-based digital literacy programs and *shariah-compliant* microfinancing schemes.

In sum, while the enterprise lacks technical marketing sophistication, it embodies many of the virtues emphasized in Islamic economic teachings. The practice of value-oriented digital marketing, even in its informal form, can serve as a model for ethical branding—particularly in Muslim-majority societies—where authenticity, trust, and relational ethics are not only desirable but normative. As digital marketing continues to influence the structure of local economies, grounding these practices in Islamic ethical frameworks becomes not just a moral imperative but a strategic advantage in building loyal and value-aligned consumer communities.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the digital marketing practices of a rural culinary microenterprise—Mr. Leman's Goat Satay—in the context of Indonesia's evolving digital economy. Through qualitative inquiry, the findings reveal that while the enterprise exhibits a growing awareness of digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, its strategies remain informal, sporadic, and constrained by limited digital literacy, budgetary restrictions, and infrastructural challenges. Nevertheless, the stall demonstrates genuine engagement with customers and a commitment to value-driven communication, signaling the potential for deeper digital integration if adequate support mechanisms are provided.

The analysis aligns partially with mainstream digital marketing frameworks such as Chaffey's model and the Marketing Mix 4.0, but also highlights the

importance of contextual adaptation, particularly within rural and culturally rooted business settings. Importantly, the study introduces an ethical dimension by linking observed practices with Islamic business values—truthfulness, trust, and social benefit—which are often overlooked in conventional marketing literature. These values not only inform interpersonal transactions but also shape the tone and authenticity of digital engagement in microenterprises serving Muslim-majority communities.

Given these insights, the research underscores the need for inclusive digital capacity-building programs and ethical entrepreneurship models tailored to microenterprises in low-resource settings. Future research may build upon this case by conducting comparative analyses across different sectors or by evaluating the impact of structured digital literacy interventions. Additionally, there is room to explore how Islamic financial instruments—such as *qard al-hasan* or profit-sharing models—could facilitate equitable access to digital transformation tools. By grounding digital entrepreneurship in ethical and cultural frameworks, small businesses can achieve both market relevance and socio-spiritual legitimacy in an increasingly competitive digital economy.

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