

Beyond the Menu: A Qualitative Study on Social Media-Driven Brand Engagement in Makassar's F&B MSMEs

Achmad Ridha^{1*}, Lidya Anastasya², Leny Yuliana³

¹Department of Management, State University of Makassar

^{2,3}Department of Management, STIE Nusantara Makassar

email: achmad.ridha@unm.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the food and beverage sector in Makassar utilized social media to enhance brand engagement. The research aimed to explore the strategies, experiences, and challenges faced by MSME owners in leveraging digital platforms for customer interaction and brand building. A qualitative method was applied, involving in-depth interviews with eight business owners and direct observations of their Instagram and TikTok activity. The findings revealed that social media served as a primary channel for customer acquisition, especially in the absence of traditional advertising. Visual content, authenticity, and emotional connection emerged as key drivers of engagement. While most MSMEs used social media regularly, strategic planning and data analysis were generally lacking. Some businesses achieved notable customer loyalty through simple interaction techniques and culturally relevant content. However, limited digital skills and time constraints remained significant barriers. The study concluded that brand engagement among MSMEs was driven more by relational authenticity than by follower counts, and that meaningful support structures are essential to maximize the digital potential of small businesses.

Keywords : Social media, Brand Engagement, MSMEs, Food and Beverage, Digital Marketing



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INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, the use of social media has become a fundamental component of modern marketing strategies, particularly for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) seeking to build brand engagement. In Indonesia, MSMEs account for more than 60% of the national GDP and serve as the backbone of employment across sectors, including the highly competitive food and beverage (F&B) industry (Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs, 2023). Within this industry, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for shaping brand narratives and interacting directly with consumers, especially in urban centers like Makassar, where digital consumption is increasing rapidly.

F&B products are inherently sensory and visual, making platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook especially suitable for conveying product appeal, promoting brand identity, and stimulating engagement. (Liu & Mattila, 2017) argue that “Instagramming food” transforms a product into a brand experience, capitalizing on users' visual appetite and social sharing behaviors. In Indonesia, where culinary culture is deeply embedded in daily life, this form of visual storytelling not only enhances product visibility but also becomes a cultural interaction.

Recent studies have confirmed the importance of visual content and community engagement in MSME branding. (Kirana & Hambalah, 2025) demonstrated how strategic Instagram content helped culinary MSMEs like Raja Pisang Keju Arjuna develop loyal online communities. Similarly, (Tahalea et al., 2025) found that MSMEs that underwent food photography training and visual branding workshops reported significant increases in social media engagement. These findings reinforce the notion that even simple content optimization can yield measurable engagement gains in resource-constrained MSME contexts.

Despite widespread adoption of social media by MSMEs in Indonesia, the transition from content posting to strategic engagement remains inconsistent. (Aprilianti et al., 2025) found that many F&B MSMEs across Indonesia use social media primarily for transactional purposes posting menus or

promotions while underutilizing its relational and emotional engagement potential. The authors suggest that although digital platforms are widely adopted, there is a “missed opportunity” in cultivating brand loyalty through meaningful interaction.

Makassar represents a compelling microcosm for studying these dynamics. Known for its vibrant culinary culture, the city has seen a significant rise in digitally active MSMEs, particularly in the F&B sector. Many small food businesses rely on Instagram Stories, TikTok videos, and hashtags to reach local audiences, replacing the need for physical advertising and printed menus. This phenomenon aligns with the engagement theory of (Brodie et al., 2011), who emphasize that brand engagement involves emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions driven by interactive experiences.

Although prior literature on MSMEs and social media exists (Ghapar et al., 2024; Kawimbe & Sihweya, 2023) there is a clear gap in context-specific analysis focusing on F&B sectors in Indonesia, particularly at the micro level. Much of the current literature either focuses on large-scale digital enterprises or offers macro-level policy analysis without delving into how everyday MSME owners use digital tools to foster relational engagement. As highlighted by (Hamdan et al., 2025), financial literacy and content personalization are key success factors often lacking in digitally transitioning MSMEs.

Moreover, emotional branding and cultural authenticity have been noted as powerful drivers of engagement in Indonesian culinary enterprises. (Putri & Yuniarti, 2023) argue that brand stories embedded in local culinary identity foster deeper connections between consumers and MSME brands, especially when conveyed through personalized social media content. However, many MSMEs lack the capacity or knowledge to implement such storytelling techniques effectively.

User-generated content (UGC) and influencer collaboration also play increasing roles in building engagement. (Pahlawan & Cahyono, 2025) found that social media marketing efforts that included e-WOM (electronic word-of-mouth) strategies and customer reposts were significantly more effective in raising purchase intentions, particularly in F&B businesses targeting Gen Z. Yet, smaller businesses often struggle to leverage these trends due to lack of strategic planning or digital partnerships.

Additionally, the rapid emergence of TikTok as a platform of choice among younger consumers has changed how MSMEs approach visibility. While some business owners have successfully used viral audio and “recipe hacks” to promote their offerings, others expressed uncertainty in using video-based content due to limited digital literacy (Aprilianti et al., 2025). This fragmentation of platform effectiveness suggests that while MSMEs are present on digital channels, their ability to optimize engagement remains uneven.

This study aims to fill this research gap by examining how MSMEs in Makassar’s F&B sector use social media platforms to enhance brand engagement. It explores not only the types of content and platforms used, but also the strategies, challenges, and perceptions surrounding digital brand engagement. Unlike prior research that often generalizes MSME behavior across sectors, this study provides a focused analysis of the F&B niche a space where emotional resonance, aesthetic presentation, and rapid consumer feedback are vital to survival and growth.

By addressing this gap, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of brand engagement in the MSME context. It builds upon the engagement framework of (Brodie et al., 2011), visual storytelling literature (Liu & Mattila, 2017), and recent Indonesian studies on MSME digitization (Aprilianti et al., 2025; Kirana & Hambalah, 2025; Pahlawan & Cahyono, 2025). Ultimately, it offers practical insights for MSME practitioners, policymakers, and digital strategists aiming to support small businesses in navigating Indonesia’s dynamic digital economy.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore how food and beverage (F&B) micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Makassar utilize social media to enhance brand engagement. The qualitative approach was selected to capture the rich, contextualized experiences and perceptions of business owners, allowing the researcher to investigate how engagement is conceptualized, practiced, and reflected upon from within the industry itself.

The research population consisted of F&B MSMEs operating within the city of Makassar, South Sulawesi. This location was chosen due to its cultural richness, rapidly growing digital economy, and the prominence of culinary-based enterprises in its urban landscape. From this population, participants were selected using purposive sampling based on criteria such as active use of social media (especially

Instagram and/or TikTok), a minimum of one year of digital marketing activity, and willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. The sample comprised eight MSME owners from diverse culinary sub-sectors including local cuisine, beverages, bakery, and casual dining services.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for both consistency across key questions and flexibility in exploring emergent themes. Interviews were conducted in person and online, depending on the availability of each participant, and lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews focused on how participants planned their social media content, perceived their audience engagement, and evaluated the outcomes of their branding efforts online. Each session was recorded with informed consent and later transcribed for analysis.

In addition to interviews, non-participant digital observations were carried out on the public social media profiles of the participating businesses. This involved analyzing content formats, posting frequency, interaction levels, and types of engagement (such as comments, likes, reposts, and follower behavior). These observations served to triangulate the interview data and provide a clearer picture of branding practices in the digital environment.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were carefully coded and categorized into thematic clusters such as engagement strategy, visual storytelling, customer interaction, and perceived brand value. To ensure validity and reliability, the study employed data triangulation by cross-referencing interview findings with social media observations and publicly available business information. The analysis process emphasized interpretation over quantification, aligning with the exploratory nature of qualitative research.

No experimental or novel methods were introduced in this study. All procedures followed standard qualitative research protocols, including ethical clearance, informed consent, data anonymization, and secure storage of research records. The insights drawn from this study aim to provide a nuanced understanding of how MSMEs in the F&B sector navigate the intersection of branding and digital communication in an increasingly competitive social media landscape.

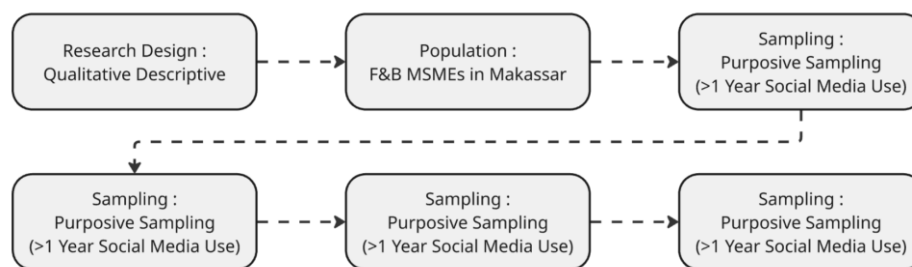


Figure 1. Flow of Research Methodology

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are based on qualitative data gathered from in-depth interviews with eight owners of food and beverage (F&B) micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Makassar, alongside observations of their social media practices. All participants had active social media accounts, primarily on Instagram and TikTok, and had used these platforms for at least one year as part of their marketing efforts. The findings provide insight into how these businesses perceive and implement social media strategies to build brand engagement.

A dominant theme that emerged across all interviews was the recognition of social media as a critical driver for customer acquisition, especially in the absence of traditional advertising budgets. Many respondents shared that their first customers often came through Instagram interactions, and that visibility in the form of reposts, hashtags, or food-related trending sounds on TikTok led directly to increased customer visits or orders. One business owner noted that a single viral story post led to a 40% increase in foot traffic over three days. These experiences confirm that, particularly in the F&B sector where the product is inherently visual, social media serves as a functional substitute for physical storefronts and word-of-mouth marketing.

The most commonly used content formats were product photos, menu updates, promotional posters, and short-form videos showing food preparation or behind-the-scenes kitchen activity. Despite variation in content quality and posting frequency, all participants expressed an awareness of the

importance of visual appeal. This reflects prior findings by (Liu & Mattila, 2017), who emphasized that visual content especially in food marketing triggers affective consumer responses that lead to stronger brand recall and emotional connection.

However, the findings also revealed limitations in strategic depth. While most businesses posted content regularly, few had a structured content calendar or branding strategy. Interaction with followers was typically limited to responding to direct messages or comments, and only two of the eight businesses reported using Instagram Insights or other analytics tools to evaluate performance. Live sessions, user-generated content campaigns, and storytelling-based captions were rare. This suggests that while MSMEs in Makassar's F&B sector recognize the *importance* of social media, their use is still largely intuitive rather than data-driven or narrative-oriented.

Interestingly, those businesses that implemented even minimal engagement strategies such as responding consistently to comments or using local humor in captions reported stronger repeat customer activity. One cafe owner shared that they gained new loyal customers after launching a short "Meet the Barista" video series on Instagram Stories, which humanized their brand and fostered audience relatability. These findings support the engagement model proposed by (Brodie et al., 2011), where emotional and cognitive bonds precede behavioral loyalty.

A significant insight from the data was the perceived emotional closeness between brand and customer. Participants often referred to their "followers" as "community" or "family," highlighting a relational rather than transactional orientation. This sentiment aligns with the arguments of Kim and Kim (2020), who note that visual storytelling in the food industry is most effective when it builds a sense of identity and belonging rather than simply showcasing a product.

From a strategic perspective, the findings demonstrate that brand engagement is not merely a function of content quantity, but rather of perceived authenticity and interactivity. While professional photography and regular updates were helpful, what mattered more was how customers felt seen, heard, and emotionally connected. In this sense, follower count was not always proportional to engagement outcomes. Businesses with modest followings but high responsiveness often reported more sustained customer loyalty than those with large but disengaged audiences.

These findings are consistent with the broader literature on social media engagement among MSMEs, such as the work by (Ghapar et al., 2024), who emphasize that resource limitations should not prevent meaningful digital engagement. The Makassar-based MSMEs in this study showed that even with limited technical skills or budgets, small businesses can cultivate brand loyalty through responsive communication and culturally relevant storytelling.

Nevertheless, the study also uncovered barriers to deeper engagement. Participants cited a lack of time, content creation skills, and social media literacy as key challenges. Many felt overwhelmed by the pace of platform changes and algorithm shifts, and some expressed reluctance to appear on camera or share personal stories online. These limitations resonate with previous findings by (Kawimbe & Sihweya, 2023), who found that while MSMEs adopt social media out of necessity, few are equipped to use it strategically.

The implications of these findings are twofold. First, they reinforce the importance of capacity-building programs that equip MSME owners with not only the tools but also the mindset for digital storytelling and community engagement. Second, they suggest that platform developers and local governments could support small businesses by offering localized templates, content kits, or access to creators for collaboration. Social media, in this context, should not be viewed as a mere communication tool but as a space for brand co-creation and relational marketing.

There are several limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. The sample size is small and specific to Makassar's urban context, which may not represent rural MSMEs or those in other regions. Moreover, the study focused only on the supply side business owners and did not include customer perspectives, which could provide a more balanced view of engagement effectiveness. Additionally, platform-specific features and metrics were not analyzed in depth due to the qualitative scope of the research.

For future studies, it would be valuable to conduct comparative analyses between F&B MSMEs with differing levels of social media engagement, or to include customer interviews and digital interaction analytics. A longitudinal approach could also reveal how engagement strategies evolve over time and correlate with business growth or customer retention.

In conclusion, the findings show that MSMEs in Makassar’s food and beverage sector recognize social media as essential for market access and brand development. However, while many understand the importance of presence, fewer fully grasp the mechanics of engagement. The businesses that succeed are those that go beyond broadcasting to genuinely connecting through visual storytelling, responsiveness, and emotional authenticity. These insights affirm the theoretical relevance of customer engagement models and highlight the need for practical interventions to support the digital maturity of small businesses in Indonesia’s evolving economic landscape.

Table 1. Summary of Research Findings

| Key Findings | Supporting Evidence |
|--|--|
| Social media as primary customer acquisition tool | Participants attributed initial customer growth to Instagram/TikTok exposure. One viral Instagram story led to a 40% increase in foot traffic within 3 days. |
| Visual content is central to engagement strategy | Most-used formats included product photos, menu posts, and behind-the-scenes videos. Reflects Liu & Mattila (2017) on emotional connection through visuals. |
| Limited strategic planning and data usage | Only 2 out of 8 businesses used analytics tools. Most lacked content calendars, structured branding, or live/interactive content. |
| Minimal engagement practices yield strong loyalty | Even simple strategies like replying to comments or using humor led to increased repeat customers. “Meet the Barista” series boosted relatability. |
| Emotional branding and relational orientation dominate | Owners referred to followers as “family” or “community,” emphasizing emotional closeness rather than transactional interaction. |
| Authenticity and interactivity matter more than follower count | Smaller but interactive accounts saw more sustained customer loyalty than accounts with large but disengaged followings. |
| Barriers include time, literacy, and platform shifts | Challenges included limited digital skills, lack of time, fear of camera, and confusion over algorithms or platform changes. |
| Support needed from platforms and local government | Findings suggest a need for training, content toolkits, and digital mentorship programs to improve MSME readiness. |
| Study limited to urban MSMEs; lacks customer perspective | The sample is limited to 8 businesses in Makassar; does not include customer interviews or data analytics from platforms. |

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how food and beverage (F&B) micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Makassar utilize social media platforms, particularly Instagram and TikTok, to build brand engagement in a digitally evolving marketplace. Through in-depth qualitative interviews and observational analysis, the research confirms that social media is not only an essential promotional tool but a critical space for relationship-building, especially in contexts where traditional advertising channels are inaccessible or unaffordable.

While MSME owners are generally aware of the potential of social media, their engagement practices remain largely intuitive, with limited use of data-driven strategies or structured content planning. Nonetheless, the findings reveal that even basic interaction such as replying to comments, sharing customer posts, and employing culturally relevant humor can generate significant relational capital and customer loyalty. This underscores the notion that authenticity and emotional resonance often outweigh follower count in shaping consumer trust and retention.

The study also surfaces deeper structural challenges faced by MSMEs, including time constraints, limited digital literacy, and discomfort with visual storytelling techniques. These constraints hinder businesses from fully actualizing the interactive and co-creative possibilities of social media. Despite these limitations, several participants have demonstrated innovative, low-cost strategies for engagement, suggesting that with targeted support through capacity-building programs, platform features, or policy interventions these businesses could significantly enhance their digital impact.

Importantly, this research adds to the growing body of literature emphasizing the human dimension of digital engagement in small-scale enterprises. In Makassar's vibrant culinary scene, social media does more than sell it connects, narrates, and cultivates community. For MSME stakeholders, understanding this dynamic is vital to designing support systems that are not only technologically empowering but also culturally resonant. By centering the lived experiences of business owners and highlighting the practices that foster brand intimacy, this study affirms the strategic importance of social media as both a marketing and meaning-making tool in Indonesia's F&B MSME sector.

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