

VISUAL STORYTELLING AS A MARKETING TOOL FOR SMES ON INSTAGRAM

Rudi Hermanto¹, Sri Desti Purwatiningsih²

^{1,2} Master's Program in Communication Studies, Universitas Nasional

E-mail: rudiherma1607@gmail.com¹, psridesti@yahoo.com²

Copyright © 2026 The Author



This is an open access article

Under the Creative Commons Attribution Share Alike 4.0 International License

Abstract

This study explores the role of visual storytelling as a digital marketing strategy for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) on Instagram. Employing a qualitative approach with a multiple case study design, the research involved six purposively selected Indonesian MSMEs. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, content observation, and documentation, then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Three main implementation patterns emerged: origin story narratives, behind-the-scenes content, and customer journey storytelling. Five effective visual elements were identified: consistency in visual identity, human elements, conflict-resolution narratives, strategic use of color, and synergy between captions and visuals. MSMEs that consistently implemented these approaches demonstrated higher consumer engagement rates, stronger brand trust, and more sustainable customer loyalty. This study reinforces the relevance of consumer engagement theory (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014) and visual semiotics perspectives within digital MSME marketing contexts.

Keywords: Visual Storytelling; MSMEs; Instagram; Digital Marketing; Brand Communication; Consumer Engagement

1. Introduction

The development of digital technology has brought significant changes to the world of marketing, especially for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Instagram, as a visual-based platform, has become one of the most widely used marketing channels by MSME operators in Indonesia. With over 100 million active users in Indonesia as of 2023 (DataReportal, 2023), Instagram offers immense opportunities for MSMEs to build brand awareness, reach new consumers, and boost sales.

Amid increasingly fierce content competition, the visual storytelling approach has emerged as a strategy that sets brands apart from competitors. Visual storytelling does more than simply showcase products; it builds narratives that resonate on an emotional level with consumers. This study aims to explore how MSMEs implement visual storytelling on Instagram and to identify the elements proven to be effective in increasing consumer engagement and trust.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Visual Storytelling in Digital Marketing

Visual storytelling is the integration of visual elements and narrative to convey messages in an emotional and meaningful way. In the context of digital marketing, van Laer et al. (2019) demonstrate that a strong narrative can transport consumers into a mental state where they become immersed in the story, thereby increasing persuasion and brand engagement.

2.2 SMEs and Social Media Marketing

SMEs face unique challenges in digital marketing: limited budgets, human resources, and technical capabilities. However, social media particularly Instagram provides them with equal access to compete with large brands. Syaifullah et al. (2021) show that active use of social media is positively correlated with SME business performance, especially during the pandemic.

2.3 Visual Semiotics

Visual semiotics analysis emphasizes that every visual element color, composition, lighting, and expression conveys meaning that goes beyond its literal appearance. In the context of digital marketing, De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) show that visual elements in Instagram content significantly influence consumers' perceptions and attitudes toward a brand, particularly through visual attributes that reflect authenticity and cultural relevance to the target audience.

2.4 Consumer Engagement Theory

Brodie, Ilic, Juric, and Hollebeek (2013) define consumer engagement as a psychological state that reflects consumers' interactive motivation toward a brand in a virtual context. This engagement manifests in three dimensions: cognitive (information processing), emotional (positive feelings), and behavioral (tangible actions such as liking, commenting, and purchasing).

Hollebeek et al. (2014) show that the quality of engagement as indicated by the depth of comments, repeat purchases, and recommendations is more valuable than quantity. Visual storytelling has the potential to trigger this high-quality engagement by creating authentic emotional connections.

2.5 Instagram as a Visual Marketing Platform

Instagram has transformed from a simple photo-sharing app into a complex visual marketing ecosystem. Features such as Stories, IGTV, Reels, and Instagram Shopping create a variety of content formats that allow brands to convey narratives across various temporal and interactive dimensions (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; De Veirman et al., 2017). Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) demonstrate that Instagram has a significant influence on the purchasing decisions of young consumers, particularly through authentic and personalized content.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach using a multiple case study design. This design was chosen because it allows for cross-case analysis, which strengthens the analytical generalization of the findings and provides stronger evidence compared to a single case study (Yin, 2018).

3.1 Research Subjects

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) MSMEs actively using Instagram as their primary marketing channel; (2) at least 5,000 followers with two years of activity; (3) experiencing business growth related to Instagram activity; and (4) representing diverse sectors to enable cross-sector analysis. The study involved six SMEs (coded SME-A through SME-F) in Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, and Surabaya.

3.2 Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: (1) semi-structured in-depth interviews (60–90 minutes) with the Instagram account owners or managers of each MSME; (2) non-participant observation of Instagram content over a three-month period; and (3) documentation in the form of screenshots of content, analytics data, and marketing strategy documents.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic analysis: data familiarization, code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and report writing, supported by NVivo 12 software. The validity of the findings was ensured through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

4. Results And Discussion

4.1 Research Case Profiles

The six MSMEs represent a diversity of sectors and business scales: MSME-A (artisanal cuisine, 32,000 followers), MSME-B (contemporary batik fashion, 28,500 followers), MSME-C (pottery crafts, 19,000 followers), SME-D (wedding photography services, 45,000 followers), SME-E (natural skincare, 67,000 followers), and SME-F (interior design, 22,000 followers).

Table 1. Profile of MSMEs in the Study

SME Code	Sector	Followers
UMKM-A	Artisanal Culinary	32,000
MSME-B	Contemporary Batik Fashion	28,500
MSME-C	Pottery Crafts	19,000
MSME-D	Wedding Photography Services	45,000
MSME-E	Natural Skincare	67,000
MSME-F	Interior Design	22,000

Source: Primary Research Data (2024)

4.2 Three Patterns of Visual Storytelling Implementation

The analysis revealed three main patterns applied by all MSMEs in this study.

The first pattern is the Origin Story. All SMEs use origin stories as the foundation of their visual storytelling to convey the background of their establishment, personal motivations, and the values underlying each product. The founder of SME-C explained: “I always start with the story of why I began making ceramics because my mother was an artisan and every piece embodies the spirit of our life journey. That’s what connects with my followers.”

The second pattern is Behind-the-Scenes Visual Narrative. Five out of six SMEs consistently use behind-the-scenes (BTS) content that transparently showcases the product creation process from raw material selection and production to packaging. This transparency serves a dual purpose: building trust while fostering a deep appreciation for the product’s value.

The third pattern is Customer Journey Storytelling. Four SMEs actively integrate customer stories into their visual narratives through reposts of customer-generated content, testimonial videos on Instagram Stories, and collaborative content that showcases customers’ transformations after using the products.

4.3 Five Elements of Effective Visual Storytelling

A semiotic analysis of Instagram content identified five elements that consistently appear in content with high engagement.

First, consistency in visual identity. All SMEs with high engagement rates demonstrate consistency in color palette, photography style, and typography, creating brand recognition conceptualized by Keller (2008) as the ability of consumers to identify a brand solely based on its visual appearance.

Second, the human element. Content that consistently features the faces of founders, employees, or customers generates higher engagement rates. This finding aligns with Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas (2015), who showed that content containing personal and human elements within an online brand community consistently yields higher engagement rates.

Third, the conflict-resolution narrative. Content that recounts challenges and how to overcome them elicits a stronger emotional response. This aligns with the findings of Shanahan et al. (2019) and Puspitasari & Nugroho (2021), who emphasize the importance of narratives containing an emotional journey to build authentic brand connections.

Fourth, the strategic use of color and lighting. SMEs-A and SMEs-E consistently use warm tones and natural lighting, which create a warm and natural impression, reinforcing the narrative of high-quality products.

Fifth, captions as an extension of the visual narrative. SMEs successfully use captions not merely as product descriptions, but as stories that enrich the meaning of the images, creating synergy between visual and textual elements.

4.4 Impact on Consumer Engagement and Trust

Observational data shows that strong visual storytelling content generates a higher engagement rate than conventional promotional content. For UMKM-E, behind-the-scenes content about the serum production process generated an engagement rate of 8.7%, far above the skincare industry average of 3.5–5% (Rival IQ, 2023).

Beyond quantitative metrics, an analysis of comment quality reveals a deeper dimension of engagement. Comments on visual storytelling content tend to be personal and emotional sharing similar experiences or expressing deep appreciation which differs from transactional comments on promotional content. This supports the findings of Brodie et al. (2013) and Hollebeek et al. (2014) that emotional engagement is the strongest predictor of long-term consumer loyalty within the digital brand ecosystem.

UMKM-B, a contemporary batik producer, consistently posts content on the batik-making process from wax application and natural dyeing to rinsing. The account manager stated: “Since we’ve been regularly posting the batik-making process, the comments have changed. People used to ask why it’s so expensive; now they say the price is reasonable because they’ve seen for themselves just how difficult it is.” This statement illustrates the mechanism of visual transparency in shifting price perceptions.

This finding aligns with the concept of narrative personalization proposed by Shanahan et al. (2019), in which consumers who feel a personal connection to a brand’s story experience a significant increase in loyalty. Ismail (2017) also demonstrated that social media marketing activities perceived positively by consumers have a mediating effect on brand loyalty through increased value awareness.

4.5 Implementation Challenges

The study also identified three main challenges: (1) content consistency maintaining visual quality and narrative coherence requires careful planning, which often conflicts with the time constraints of SME owners who juggle multiple roles; (2) technical capabilities for producing visual content; and (3) the uncertainty of Instagram’s ever-changing algorithms, which demand continuous adaptation.

5. Conclusion

This study confirms that visual storytelling is an effective and accessible digital marketing strategy for SMEs on Instagram. SMEs that consistently implement visual storytelling through origin stories, behind-the-scenes content, and customer journey storytelling are able to build more meaningful consumer engagement, strengthen brand trust, and drive sustainable business growth.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the relevance of the consumer engagement concepts proposed by Brodie et al. (2013) and Hollebeek et al. (2014) in the digital marketing communications of MSMEs, and integrate a visual semiotics perspective into the understanding of brand meaning construction on Instagram. The five identified elements of visual storytelling consistency of visual identity, human elements, conflict-resolution narratives, strategic use of color, and caption-visual synergy can serve as practical guidelines for SME practitioners.

For future research, the use of mixed methods is recommended to allow for broader statistical generalization, as well as the expansion of the research context to a more diverse and cross-cultural SME sector.

Bibliography

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Chen, S. C., & Lin, C. P. (2019). Understanding the effect of social media marketing activities: The mediation of social identification, perceived value, and satisfaction. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 140, 22–32. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2018.11.025>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- DataReportal. (2023). *Digital 2023: Indonesia*. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-indonesia>
- De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(5), 798–828. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035>
- Dessart, L., & Pitardi, V. (2019). How stories generate consumer engagement: An exploratory study. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 183–195. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.06.045>
- Djafarova, E., & Rushworth, C. (2017). Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 68, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.11.009>
- Gurrieri, L., & Drenten, J. (2019). Visual storytelling and vulnerable health care consumers: Normalizing practices and social support through Instagram. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 33(6), 702–720. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSM-09-2018-0262>
- Hollebeek, L. D., Glynn, M. S., & Brodie, R. J. (2014). Consumer brand engagement in social media: Conceptualization, scale development, and validation. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 28(2), 149–165. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2013.12.002>
- Ismail, A. R. (2017). The influence of perceived social media marketing activities on brand loyalty: The mediating effect of brand and value consciousness. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 29(1), 129–144. <https://doi.org/10.1108/APJML-10-2015-0154>
- Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs. (2023). *2022 Performance Report of the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs*. Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs of the Republic of Indonesia.
- Kurniawati, D., & Safaruddin, S. (2020). Digital marketing strategies for MSMEs in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. *Journal of Business Management*, 17(2), 192–207. <https://doi.org/10.38043/jmb.v17i2.2336>
- Mulyani, S., Hendayana, Y., Sulaeman, S., & Johansyah, I. (2022). The role of Instagram in the marketing strategies of culinary MSMEs in Bandung. *Journal of Business and Entrepreneurship*, 18(1), 47–58. <https://doi.org/10.31940/jbk.v18i1.2601>
- Santos, Z. R., Cheung, C. M. K., Coelho, P. S., & Rita, P. (2022). Consumer engagement in social media brand communities: A literature review. *International Journal of Information Management*, 63, Article 102457. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2021.102457>
- Santoso, M. V., & Jatmiko, B. (2022). The influence of visual storytelling in Instagram content on Generation Z consumers' purchasing decisions. *Journal of Communication Science*, 20(1), 63–78. <https://doi.org/10.31315/jik.v20i1.6014>
- Seo, E. J., Park, J. W., & Choi, Y. J. (2020). The effect of social media usage characteristics on e-WOM, trust, and brand equity: Focusing on users of airline social media. *Sustainability*, 12(4), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12041691>

- Shanahan, T., Tran, T. P., & Taylor, E. C. (2019). Getting to know you: Social media personalization as a means of enhancing brand loyalty and perceived quality. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 47, 57–65. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2018.10.007>
- Suryani, T., Fauzi, A. A., & Nurhayati, T. (2023). Digital marketing capabilities and SME performance: Evidence from Indonesia. *Journal of Management and Service Marketing*, 16(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.25105/jmpj.v16i1.15436>
- Syaifullah, J., Syaifudin, M., Sukendar, M. U., & Junaedi, J. (2021). Social media marketing and business performance of MSMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Asian Finance, Economics and Business*, 8(2), 523–531. <https://doi.org/10.13106/jafeb.2021.vol8.no2.0523>
- Tajvidi, R., & Karami, A. (2021). The effect of social media on firm performance. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 115, Article 105174. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017s.09.026>
- Tran, V. T., & Nguyen, N. P. (2022). The relationship between social media marketing and purchase intention among young consumers: The mediating role of brand awareness and brand image. *Journal of Asian Finance, Economics and Business*, 9(4), 57–66. <https://doi.org/10.13106/jafeb.2022.vol9.no4.0057>
- van Laer, T., Feiereisen, S., & Visconti, L. M. (2019). Storytelling in the digital era: A meta-analysis of relevant moderators of the narrative transportation effect. *Journal of Business Research*, 96, 135–146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.10.053>
- Watajdid, N. I., Lathifah, A., Andini, D. S., & Fitroh, F. (2021). Systematic literature review: The role of social media in the development of digital marketing. *Indonesian Journal of Marketing Science*, 20(2), 163–179.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.