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Digital Communication Transformation in Micro Tourism Enterprises: Adaptation Strategies and Media Literacy Barriers

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Abstract - This paper investigates the adaptive tactics, expectations, and obstacles micro-entrepreneurs (UMKM) in coastal tourism zones of Indonesia encounter in adopting digital communication tools. This study intends to grasp how local and migrant business people experience digital transformation. The study takes a qualitative descriptive technique to find patterns of communication behaviour and readiness toward digitalization rather than suggesting a particular hypothesis. In-depth interviews and field observations with chosen informants representing different tourism-related micro-enterprises—including apparel stores, food vendors, and guesthouse operators—provided data. Participants were classified as local or migrant business owners. Emphasizing data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, Miles and Huberman's methodology was used to thematically evaluate the data. The results show notable variations in digital adaptation between local and migrant business owners. While native players depend mostly on conventional word-of-mouth and direct consumer contacts, migrant entrepreneurs are more proactive and savvy in exploiting internet channels like Agoda or Instagram. Key expectations the report also underlines are the requirement of focused training, ongoing mentoring, and equitable access to digital infrastructure and government support. Among the obstacles found are low digital literacy, psychological resistance, information access restrictions, and policy execution structural inequities. Digital communication revolution among UMKM, this study finds, is not just about technological acceptance but also about cultural adaptation, psychological preparation, and institutional support—emphasizing the need of inclusive, community-based communication approaches.
Keywords: adaptation strategies; coastal tourism; digital communication; media literacy; UMKM empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has become a need in many spheres of society, including microeconomic activity in tourist locations (Kraus et al., 2023). Information and communication technology (ICT), particularly social media and digital platforms, has revolutionized the way micro-entrepreneurs market goods, connect with customers, and create business image (Müller et al., 2018). But not everyone will find this shift to be seamless. Adapting to an ever more complicated digital ecosystem presents significant difficulties for tourism MSMEs, particularly those in Indonesia's tourist beach regions.

Data from the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs (Kementrian UMKM Republik Indonesia, 2019) indicates Indonesia has over 65 million MSMEs and about 24.1 million enterprises will have been linked to the digital ecosystem by 2022. This number, though, suggests that many companies still operate offline, particularly in non-urban tourist destinations. Local people used to customary communication patterns still largely run MSMEs in tourist beach locations like Pangandaran, Pelabuhan Ratu, and Ujung Genteng. Digital transformation in these circles is meantime hampered significantly by issues including low media literacy, lack of training, and inconsistent internet infrastructure (Sundah et al., 2021).

The arrival of more tech-savvy entrants has also produced certain social dynamics in the sector. While immigrants are faster to embrace social media as a tool for advertising, local residents often rely on classic techniques like word of mouth or banners at tourist spots. Many still do not grasp efficient digital marketing tactics, though. This situation causes a disparity amongst MSME companies in using digital media, which could increase the competitive difference at the local level if not addressed.

The Innovation Diffusion model developed by Rogers (2014) offers a theoretical lens through which to examine this event. This theory describes how interpersonal communication channels and social networks spread an innovation—in this case digital communication technology—in society. Rogers classifies the adoption of innovation across five actor types: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. Local MSMEs in tourist coastal areas usually fall into the 'late majority' or even 'laggards' category, suggesting a low degree of trust and readiness for new technology resulting from a lack of information and support.

Furthermore, from the perspective of media literacy, it is also important to examine the capacity of MSME players to critically grasp, utilize, and assess digital media (Puspitasari et al., 2014). Media literacy is not simply about technical skills; it also involves knowledge of message material, social media environment, and efficient communication techniques (Nurfitriya et al., 2022). MSME players in this situation are not only expected to run social media but also to know how to create product stories, use images, select publication times, and deliberately communicate with customers. Many earlier studies have underlined how crucial MSME digitization is for the tourist business. Studies by (Sánchez-Medina et al., 2020) and (Santos et al., 2023), for instance, reveal that tourism MSMEs that can maximise the use of digital media tend to have higher turnover and stronger relationships with consumers. These studies, meantime, have mostly concentrated on large cities or tourist locations with established infrastructure. Research on somewhat digitally poor coastal micro-entrepreneurs is still quite scant. Indeed, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 epidemic, which has severely affected the tourism sector, tourist beach locations are frequently the foundation of the local community's income (Amri, 2020; Sigala, 2020).

Furthermore uncommon are studies that distinguish between the experiences of local business owners and newcomers. Often, their perspective and reaction to digital change is shaped by differences in educational background, migration experience, and access to technology. As a kind of knowledge gap that has not been extensively exposed in prior studies, this imbalance is fascinating to investigate in more depth. Conversely, the practice of digital communication transformation among MSMEs does not only address technological difficulties, but also relates to cultural, social, and psychological elements (Subekti et al., 2025).

Some business owners are concerned that their goods will be duplicated if they are published online or that they will be seen as arrogant if they are too involved on social media. There are also others who believe aging or inadequate self-confidence makes social media usage unsuitable. This indicates that the digitization process calls for a cultural and educational as well as a technical approach. Given these actual circumstances, it is essential to do study that investigates the process of transformation of digital communication of tourism MSME players in tourist beach areas in more depth. This study intends to highlight the key challenges MSME participants encounter in using digital media. Apart from that, to examine the digital communication adaptation techniques used by local and newcomer companies.

This study aims to help create an inclusive, contextual and sustainable digital communication model in the tourism micro-economy sector by stressing the local context and hearing directly to the experiences of MSME players. Moreover, the findings of this study are meant to offer feedback for local governments, local communities and other stakeholders in creating more efficient MSME

empowerment initiatives pertinent to field circumstances. This paper intends to demonstrate that digital transformation is not only about adopting technology but also about creating awareness, shaping new social networks, and adjusting communication strategies to cultural values and the psychosocial situation of society as part of the conversation on development communication and digital literacy. This paper intends to provide a grassroots viewpoint on the problems and prospects of digital communication in the tourist MSME sector on the Indonesian coast by means of a qualitative study that investigates the voices of business operators directly.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on several communication science theories pertinent to grasping the digital transformation process undergone by tourism MSME players in coastal regions. The theories applied offer a conceptual framework for investigating how micro-entrepreneurs in the context of a community-based tourism economy develop, distribute, and adapt communication technologies.

The idea of innovation dissemination created by Rogers (2014) is one of the key theories applied in this paper. This theory emphasizes how an invention, particularly digital communication technology, spreads in a social system via the process of communication between people. Individuals pass through five key steps in this diffusion process before embracing an innovation: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. Rogers also categorizes people into five adoption groups: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. Many business people in coastal areas' tourism MSMEs exhibit traits of the late majority or perhaps laggards. Limited information, low digital literacy, and lack of technical support explain sluggish adoption of digital technologies. This idea clarifies that the social, psychological, and structural traits of the MSME players themselves as well as technology sophistication affect the speed of adoption.

Apart from the theory of innovation dissemination, this paper uses the idea of media literacy to clarify how MSME players may critically and effectively access, analyze, assess, and use the media. Media literacy is not just technical knowledge in running social media or other digital platforms; it also includes the capacity to critically analyze message material, media environment, and efficient communication techniques. Livingstone (2008) defines media literacy as a kind of competence comprising knowledge of the creation and dissemination processes of media messages as well as their audience influence. For tourism MSMEs, even though some business owners already have access to social media like WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikHub, they usually lack a strategic awareness of how to utilize them to develop relationships with consumers, enhance product image, or control online interactions professionally. Examining the degree to which these business people can control digital communication efficiently helps one to understand media literacy theory as well as whether aspect of the process still needs help or intervention.

The development communication technique is also applied as an analytical lens in this study to finish the conceptual framework. Development communication sees communication as a strategic tool in promoting social and economic change in society in a participatory way (Fiddiniyah, 2021). Development communication stresses the need of business people actively participating in the process of digital transformation in the context of tourism MSMEs not only as information consumers or passive technology users but also as actors who influence communication strategies and practices based on their local setting (Christiana et al., 2022).

This framework situates communication as both a *means* and an *environment* for development: a means to convey digital literacy training, access to market platforms, and policy information; and an environment that fosters trust, peer learning, and community empowerment. It also considers the cultural and psychological dimensions of communication, recognizing that digital transformation requires not only technical skills but also emotional readiness, identity negotiation, and sociocultural alignment. Therefore, development communication in this study is not limited to technical interventions, but entails building a supportive communication ecosystem—one that enables MSME actors to exchange experiences, voice challenges, and co-design sustainable digital strategies with stakeholders such as local governments, civil society organizations, and community networks.

The combination of these three theoretical perspectives offers a robust basis for clarifying the intricacy of the digital communication transformation process undergone by MSME players in tourist coastal regions. The process comprises not just access to digital devices but also elements of knowledge, skills, and social readiness in using communication technology. Thus, this paper argues

that MSME players are active subjects enduring a process of adaptation to changing times rather than just objects of top-down digitalization programs.

Drawing on these communication theories, this paper aims to address issues regarding how digital adaptation strategies are created, what challenges arise in the media literacy process, and how power relations and social structures affect the success or failure of technology adoption at the micro level. These theories also assist in shaping results that are not only descriptive but also critical and reflective of the dynamics of digital communication in the always changing environment of tourist MSMEs.

MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

This paper describes and comprehends in depth the process of digital communication transformation in tourism MSME players in tourist beach locations using a descriptive qualitative method (Moleong, 2000). This method was selected since it can show the meaning, experience, and adaption strategies of business actors in using digital media as part of their promotional activities and corporate communication. The major goal of this study is to investigate contextually how the process of adopting communication technology occurs, what challenges are encountered, and how MSME actors create adaption strategies in an always changing digital environment.

Particularly those concentrating on the tourism industry and the creative economy, several MSME centres in tourist beach areas undertook the study. These sites comprise regions with a high density of micro enterprises including housing, food, souvenirs, and handicrafts that turn the beach area a gathering place for local entrepreneurs, newcomers, and visitors. Field observations and in-depth interviews were the core activities of the study, which ran from December 2023 to February 2024. This period was strategically chosen because it coincides with the high and transitional tourism season, allowing researchers to observe business dynamics during peak activity and also capture post-holiday adjustments made by MSME actors.

Research informants were chosen according to the idea of purposive sampling and then followed a snowball sampling technique to investigate various stories and experiences (Bajari, 2015). The amount of data saturation—when the information gathered starts to repeat itself and does not provide new results—determined the number of informants. The informants were local MSME players and newcomers running tourism-related businesses (like lodging managers, clothing and souvenir sellers, culinary entrepreneurs, and handicrafts), as well as representatives of supporting institutions such MSME office staff and members of the local economic community. The depiction of these informants is essential to create a thorough picture of the digital gap and the tactics employed by companies to confront the obstacles of digital communication.

Research variables were not applied in the quantitative method in this work. The study's main emphasis, however, was on three key areas: (1) challenges MSME actors encounter in using digital media, (2) digital communication strategies they create, and (3) expectations of business actors for training, support, and policies supporting the digital transformation of MSMEs. Semi-structured interviews, direct observation at the business sites, and documentation of digital promotional media utilized by MSME players constituted data gathering. Interviews were done in person at the informant's workplace so that researchers could also see the surroundings, the digital tools in use, and the interaction of company people with consumers both directly and via social media.

This study applied model thematic analysis approach for data examination (Miles et al., 2014). Data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification were the steps of analysis. Interview data were recorded, transcribed, and manually categorized to identify thematic patterns pertinent to the study emphasis. Then all data were grouped into general topics like community-based digital communication practices, technology adaptation techniques, and challenges to digital literacy. Source triangulation—namely, comparing data from corporate actors with the community and supporting organizations—strengthened the validity of the information. This method aims to provide an in-depth and genuine knowledge of how MSME players in tourist coastal areas experience and control the process of digital communication transformation as part of their adaptation to changing times and the demands of the tourism market.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Business people, both local and migrant, have reacted in many ways to the digital shift in the tourist MSME industry. Interviews and field observations revealed that experience, age, educational background, and personal drive-in entrepreneurship substantially influence the adaption techniques MSME actors create using digital media. Especially in the employment of digital media as a tool of corporate communication, the distinctions between local and migrant business actors are rather pronounced.

Migrant background business professionals usually have more willingness to include digital technologies into their company procedures. Some of them, like lodging business owners who have registered their business units on several online booking sites including Agoda, Traveloka, and Tiket.com since 2011, have used digital platforms since launching their companies. With up to 70% of total bookings, this platform has become a very efficient main promotional channel. This approach indicates that business professionals from migrant backgrounds, most of whom have a higher education background and professional work experience, tend to be more flexible and visionary in using digital communication technology.

The digital adaption this group undertakes also reveals a division of responsibilities in business management; family members—for example, wives—play a significant part in financial management and digital administration. This suggests that the adaptation plan incorporates internal family unit cooperation as well as individual level activity (Randerson et al., 2016). Though not completely maximized, social media like Instagram is recognized as a tool for a more forward-looking digital marketing approach. As a follow-up to past triumphs in using digital hotel booking systems, one informant even disclosed intentions to create a more professional digital marketing tool. Local MSME players, on the other hand, mostly follow traditional communication patterns like direct product display setups in physical storefronts and word of mouth marketing. Their tactics usually depend on years of experience, consumer loyalty, and trust developed gradually from personal interactions. Though known to most local firms, social media has not been fully exploited because of technological knowledge, advanced age, and the belief that online tactics need particular knowledge (Li et al., 2018).

While some local players express a wish to participate in the digital sphere, many feel hindered by technical constraints and lack of knowledge regarding training or support. Consequently, the adoption of digital methods in this group is passive or reactive; they wait for outside motivation, such young individuals or communities of traders more active online. Many local MSME businesses in this situation look to the community or collective, like the traders' forum on Jalan Pramuka, to inspire the group and organized use of technology.

Generally speaking, the adaptation strategy of tourism MSME players towards digital communication occurs within a broad spectrum—from those already actively using online platforms strategically to those still depending on conventional methods because of age, technical capacity, or information access constraints. From the standpoint of Rogers's (2014) theory of innovation diffusion, newcomers are more likely to fall into the 'early adopter' and 'early majority' categories while local players are more likely to be in the 'late majority' or perhaps 'laggards,' which indicates resistance to change owing to various constraints.

The adaptation approach, then, should be viewed not just from the perspective of media sophistication but also from the capacity of business people to adjust to local circumstances, build social ties with consumers, and run companies sustainably (Ahunov & Yusupov, 2017). In this instance, both local and migrant players have their own advantages: local players are good at developing personal emotional ties and customer trust, while migrant players are better at efficient promotion and technology-based management.

These results show that the digital communication adaptation strategy among tourism MSMEs cannot be standardized, but rather must be regarded as the outcome of a mix of human character, social support, access to technology, and the policy environment. Strengthening digital adaption techniques thus calls for an inclusive and participatory approach considering the socio-cultural background and the specific demands of every group of business actors (Nurul Awwaliyah et al., 2024). Tourism MSME players in coastal areas have different expectations of external entities—including local communities, the government, and the corporate sector—as they confront the

difficulties and changes the digital era brings about. These expectations are not simply about technical or financial support but also about access to more organized information, training, and help.

Business people from migrant groups typically have more knowledge of the need of enhancing digital capabilities in front of corporate rivalry. One lodging company actor who has exploited internet booking sites like Agoda and Traveloka voiced his need to create more professional digital marketing, including active and quantifiable administration of social media accounts. He does, however, understand that personal projects have limits, particularly in terms of personnel resources and time. So, he wishes for local governments or commercial partners to help provide particular training in the area of digital marketing suited to the circumstances of small-scale MSMEs.

Moreover, newcomers stress the need of continuous support rather than one-way instruction. Many business people think this help will enable them to consistently and appropriately use training tools for their company. Developing digital strategies that are not only generic but contextual would be greatly aided by the presence of facilitators or mentors who know the traits of tourism enterprises in coastal locations. Local business owners, on the other hand, have great expectations for the community of traders that has grown spontaneously in tourist regions.

Though not all business people are actively engaged in the community, the presence of trader forums like the one on Jalan Pramuka is seen as a possible channel for spreading knowledge, fostering solidarity, and closing the gap between companies and government bodies. Some small companies claim that training or business support information sometimes does not come to them directly. They wish the community might be more effectively used as a communication hub to link the demands of MSME players with initiatives from relevant agencies. Local players also desire fair and open access to financial help. Post-tsunami and pandemic experiences reveal that many local MSME players are not accessible by humanitarian programs, either because they are not part of official communities or because of poor information distribution networks at the grassroots level. They wish that one day the MSME data collecting system would be enhanced to enable help to get to business people who are genuinely in need, not only those with access to information or robust social networks.

Many local business people have also said they want to participate in digital literacy and entrepreneurship training, but they have never had the chance as the information has not gotten to them. Here, the function of community facilitators and government authorities is rather vital. For instance, by visiting MSME centers directly or including the community in the planning process of training initiatives, they anticipate a more proactive attitude from the government. Strengthening business networks between MSME players, both local and newcomers, is another expectation that stands out. Business people working together is seen as a way to help and learn from one another as well as to improve the competitiveness of tourism regions generally. Community-based initiatives—such as the creation of digital cooperatives, shared creative content training, or branding campaigns for MSME-based tourist areas—are especially relevant here.

All of these results show that while many MSME players still believe they are going alone without a strong support system, others really have a great desire to expand and evolve. They require not just financial or short-term training help but also an ecosystem that promotes ongoing learning, equitable access to information and technology, and good cooperation between business people and others.

From the point of view of development communication (Fiddiniyah, 2021), this expectation emphasizes the need of a participative and contextual strategy in developing the digital communication ability of MSME players. Technological intervention by itself will not bring about sustainable digital transformation; rather, it calls for a communication paradigm anchored in the socio-cultural dynamics of local communities and open and horizontal. The government, community, and private sector thus have to play roles aimed at establishing fair venues for discussion and cooperation so that the aspirations of MSME players may be turned into a group force confronting the difficulties of the times.

Tourism MSME players on the beachfront still struggle with several challenges in the process of digital communication transformation even with increasing chances for employing digital media in the tourism sector. These challenges result not only from technical considerations but also from social, psychological, and structural characteristics that combined impede the speed and efficacy of the use of communication technology in their business processes (Ratten, 2022; Ratten & Jones, 2021; Ughetto et al., 2021).

Especially among local MSME players over the age of 45, inadequate digital literacy emerges as one of the key barriers discovered. Many of them know about social media like Instagram or WhatsApp, but they still don't know how to utilize them tactically to promote their businesses. Some even said they wanted to use digital media but believed they lacked enough technical knowledge. The lack of technical support or training immediately reaching field-level business actors exacerbates this constraint. Many company people therefore decide to continue using conventional techniques like word of mouth marketing or depending on personal ties with consumers.

Though most tourist regions are currently served by the internet, access to devices and stable connectivity remains a challenge, particularly for micro-scale enterprises without fundamental digital tools like laptops or sufficient internet connections. Some business personnel claim that the signal where they are often fluctuates or that their equipment are too old to best control digital applications. These challenges force people to doubt entering the digital world since they fear not being able to control internet platforms or social media accounts consistently.

From a psychological and cultural point of view, perceptual barriers emerge (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2014; Fernández-Salinero & de la Riva, 2014). Some MSME players claimed they felt "unworthy" to compete on vibrant social media teeming with youthful entrepreneurs. Some also felt resigned due to their age and believed that the younger generation should handle digitalization initiatives. This kind of perspective reveals that digital transformation is about altering attitudes and self-confidence as well as technology, which are not yet uniformly spread across business personnel. Lack of knowledge and training possibilities is another major challenge. Some business people claimed local governments or local communities had never sent them invitations or information on digital literacy or entrepreneurship training. Especially among people who are already part of formal forums or communities, information tends to move in restricted circles. Consequently, MSME players who are not socially involved or who operate alone usually fall behind in access to information and chances for personal growth.

From a structural standpoint, the current MSME development programme or support system has not completely met the actual demands of field business operators. Many sources claimed that government support was inconsistent and usually went to business people already known to or near certain interests (Kulkarni et al., 2024; Zuñiga-Collazos et al., 2025). This diminishes the drive to be actively engaged in top-down digitalization projects and fosters dissatisfaction and injustice. Conversely, newcomers, while fairly more digitally knowledgeable, face difficulties in human resource management as well, particularly if they must oversee corporate operational systems under tourist number variation. The shortage of qualified digital marketing professionals forces them to manage their own digital platforms or social media accounts, so consuming time and compromising productivity.

These challenges highlight, within the context of media literacy theory (Livingstone, 2008), that media literacy comprises not just technical skills but also cognitive, emotional, and structural components. The support of a suitable social environment and policy shapes a person's capacity to access and use media. Likewise, MSME players that have not embraced digital communication are typically stuck in the unfinished "persuasion" and "decision" phases under the framework of innovation dissemination (Rogers, 2014), since there is insufficient support to go to the implementation and confirmation stages. Efforts to digital tourism MSMEs should thus focus on the actual challenges experienced by business people. A top-down strategy predicated on the idea that all company people are eager to use technology might increase the digital gap. Sustainable digital transformation can only be accomplished if all MSME players have equal access, learning possibilities and emotional support to develop in the new communication age.

Beyond technical capacity, the psychological barriers identified in this study—such as feelings of inferiority, lack of confidence, and a perception that digital media is reserved for younger generations—highlight critical dimensions of media literacy that are often overlooked. As defined by Livingstone (2008), media literacy encompasses not only access and operational skills, but also the cognitive, emotional, and motivational abilities to engage with media meaningfully. Many local MSME actors may know how to open a social media app but hesitate to use it actively due to fear of judgment or failure. This shows that digital empowerment efforts should not be limited to improving technical proficiency, but must also address self-efficacy, identity, and emotional readiness—especially for older entrepreneurs or those operating in low-support environments.

CONCLUSION

Focusing on adaption tactics, expectations of external support, and the challenges tourist MSME operators in coastal areas confront during digital transformation, this paper uncovers the dynamics of their digital communication techniques. Interview and field observation findings of local and migrant business people suggest that individual background, access to technology, and the social environment in which they operate strongly influence the uneven transformation of digital communication in the tourism MSME sector.

MSME players' adaption tactics reveal significant disparities between local and migrant participants. Because they have a larger amount of education, experience, and networks, newcomers usually use digital media more quickly and purposefully. They are beginning to think about more professional digital marketing tactics and have employed digital platforms including online booking systems. By contrast, local performers are starting to understand the need of digitization but still depend on traditional advertising and direct interactions. There is a will to change, but often poor technical knowledge and low media literacy get in the way.

MSME participants have quite high expectations of outside entities including the government, the community, and the corporate sector. They require a just and sustainable business environment, fair information, training, and access to help. Community-based support and contextual training are very much wanted so that business people not only grasp the theory of digital marketing, but are also able to apply it depending on the features of their company. The process of participatory digital transformation is also seen to be hastened by the creation of cooperation spaces between MSME players and the growing involvement of local communities.

Ranging from low digital literacy, limited internet devices and connections, to psychological and cultural barriers including emotions of inferiority, resignation due age, and an attitude of waiting for efforts from other parties, the challenges faced by MSME players are quite complicated. The absence of training and information only disseminated among some groups also creates structural impediments. The lack of openness in the delivery of aid and the inadequacy of the data collecting system serve to increase the disparity in access and possibilities between commercial players.

Drawing on these results, this paper advocates for an inclusive and community-based digital transformation approach. Local governments and appropriate partners have to create a focused, sustainable mentoring and training program that directly benefits business people. Media literacy training should be customized to local capacities and traits, not only technical in nature, but also with regard to the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of MSME actors. Building a mutually helpful digital ecosystem will also be aided by strengthening the business community as a medium for information sharing and a platform for cooperation.

Digital communication in the MSME sector is not only about technology; it is also about social and cultural preparation for change. Efforts to digitise MSMEs thus call for a thorough knowledge of their realities as well as a humanizing and empowering strategy. Although this article uses three relevant theories (Diffusion of Innovations, Media Literacy, and Development Communication), the analysis in the results and discussion sections could be more explicit and in-depth in linking specific findings to key concepts from the three theories.

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