

BRANDING STRATEGY EXPLORATION IN BUILDING BRAND AWARENESS IN COFFEE SHOP MSMEs IN KENDARI CITY

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ABSTRACT

The development of coffee MSME-based shops in Kendari City show that competition is no longer only determined by product quality, but also by the ability to build a brand. awareness through consistent branding strategies. This situation drives the need for a deeper understanding of business actors' experiences in shaping brand identity amidst changing consumer behavior and digital marketing. This study aims to explore branding strategies in building a brand. awareness of coffee SMEs shop in Kendari City. The method used was qualitative research with a phenomenological approach through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation of informants directly involved in branding practices. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results of the study indicate that brand Awareness is built through a consistent brand identity, a pleasant customer experience, active marketing communications, and a responsive digital presence. These findings confirm that branding in MSME coffee A shop serves not only as a promotional tool but also as a means of building emotional connection and differentiation in the local market. Consequently, MSMEs need to strengthen branding strategies that are simple, consistent, and appropriate to the local social context to maintain business competitiveness now and in the future.

Keywords: branding, brand awareness, MSMEs, coffee shop

INTRODUCTION

Coffee is now no longer understood solely as a commodity, but also as part of a lifestyle, a space for social interaction, and a symbol of brand identity (Alsharif 2026) . In recent years, the growth of coffee The number of shops in Indonesia is increasing rapidly, including on the MSME scale which is spread across various medium-sized cities (Faiq and Khalik 2026) . This phenomenon shows that coffee Shops have become a promising sector in local economic development, especially because they are able to absorb labor, encourage regional economic turnover, and open up business opportunities based on creativity (Wijaya, Chai, and Khan 2025) . Amidst increasingly selective changes in consumer behavior, the success of coffee

businesses Shop is no longer determined solely by the taste of the product, but also by how the brand is built, recognized, and remembered by consumers (Malik et al. 2026) . Therefore, branding and brand Awareness is becoming an increasingly important aspect for MSMEs to pay attention to, especially amidst increasingly intense competition and the ever-growing digitalization of marketing (Laila et al. 2024) . However, in practice, many coffee MSMEs Shops still face difficulties in building consistent brand awareness. Some businesses have good products but haven't been able to package them in a strong brand identity (Bahukeling and Suroso 2026) . Not a few still rely on simple promotions, less than uniform visual communication, and less than optimal use of digital media (Aboladaka et al. 2026) . This condition makes it difficult for brands to occupy a strong position in the minds of consumers, so that business competitiveness becomes vulnerable (Hartati et al. 2025) . On the other hand, today's consumers are increasingly influenced by a business's experiences, brand narratives, and digital presence (Pasuhuk, Kainde, and Mandagi 2025) . Thus, the main problem that arises is not only how coffee Shops survive, but how can MSMEs build a brand? relevant, affordable, and effective awareness according to the character of the local market.

A number of recent studies have emphasized the importance of branding in the context of coffee shops and MSMEs. Research (Qi et al. 2024) shows that an integrated marketing communications strategy, which includes promotions, advertising, public relations, and social media, can significantly increase brand awareness. Similar results are also shown by the findings (Mandung 2025) which emphasizes that a consistent visual identity, authentic local narrative, and active digital interactions can strengthen a brand. customer awareness and loyalty. Both studies suggest that branding is inseparable from how businesses build relationships with consumers, both directly and through digital channels. However, not all findings directly align with the context of small MSMEs in developing regions.

Research (Fitri 2025) shows the importance of digitalization and strengthening internal management, but the focus is more on the readiness for larger-scale business expansion, so it does not fully address the reality of coffee MSMEs. shops operating with limited resources. This suggests that the existing literature still leaves room for more contextual research. A clear research gap lies in the lack of a sufficiently in-depth understanding of how coffee MSMEs operate. shop in a medium-sized city building a brand awareness through branding strategies that truly align with the real-world conditions of small businesses. Most previous studies tend to focus on the context of large cities, established brands, or business models with stronger financial and digital support. However, a strategy that is effective in one context may not necessarily be applicable in another. Therefore, this research needs to focus on branding strategies that are not only theoretically compelling but also realistic and feasible for MSMEs. In other words, the main gap lies not simply in a lack of research, but rather in a lack of explanation of how branding works in different business environments, with varying market characteristics, resources, and challenges.

In this context, Kendari City holds significant significance. As one of the centers of economic growth in eastern Indonesia, Kendari exhibits a continuously evolving consumption dynamic, including in the culinary and coffee sectors shop. This city is an interesting place to observe how MSMEs adapt to changing trends, especially as consumers become increasingly familiar with digital media, online reviews, and more personalized brand experiences. Furthermore, Kendari represents a mid-sized city that is often overlooked in branding literature, yet it is precisely in areas like these that simple, efficient, and contextual strategies are most needed.

By making With Kendari City as the research location, this study not only provides an empirical contribution to the literature but also broadens the understanding of MSME branding beyond major economic centers. Based on this background, this study aims to explore the branding strategies used by coffee MSMEs. shop in Kendari City in building a brand awareness. Specifically, this study aims to identify current branding practices, understand the factors influencing their success, and formulate strategies that better suit the characteristics of local MSMEs. This objective is important because the research results are expected to provide a more operational overview for business actors and enrich academic discussions on branding in the MSME sector in the digital era. In addition, the novelty of this research lies in its contextual focus which places coffee MSMEs Shops in Kendari City are the primary focus of this research. This research examines branding not only as a promotional tool but also as a process of building brand recall, emotional connection, and differentiation within a competitive market. Furthermore, this research provides important justification for a mid-sized city like Kendari as a suitable study location, reflecting the real challenges and opportunities faced by today's MSMEs.

Thus, this research is expected to be able to provide theoretical and practical contributions, especially in formulating branding strategies that are more adaptive, relevant, and sustainable for the present and the future.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design because its main focus is to understand the experiences, views, and meanings that MSME actors construct regarding branding strategies in forming a brand awareness. This approach is appropriate when researchers want to capture social reality in depth, rather than measure it through numbers. As Creswell explains, phenomenology is used to understand the essence of informants' subjective experiences of a phenomenon. Therefore, this method is relevant for examining how coffee shop owners Shop interprets branding in the context of the Kendari local market. This research is descriptive and exploratory. This design was chosen because phenomenology does not begin with hypothesis testing, but rather with an effort to explore meanings that emerge from participants' experiences. The study population was all coffee MSMEs. The sample was purposively selected from 5–7 informants, consisting of business owners, managers, and active consumers. These informants were deemed appropriate

because they had direct experience in branding practices and were able to explain the brand formation process real awareness.

The research location was determined in Kendari City because this city is the center of culinary MSME growth in Southeast Sulawesi and shows rapid changes in consumption behavior, especially in the coffee sector shop. The research procedure was conducted through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. This stage is important because, according to Moleong, qualitative data will be stronger if obtained through direct interaction with research subjects. Data analysis used the Miles and Huberman model through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, as this model helps organize complex field data into systematic and easily interpreted findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Brand Identity

Based on the results of this study, it shows that a strong brand identity in coffee SMEs Shops in Kendari rely on memorable business names, consistent logos and colors, and distinctive visuals. Informants interpret these elements as the initial cues that quickly recognize the business and differentiate it from other coffee shops other shops. In practice, menu names, packaging, and the atmosphere of the place reinforce the brand's character, so that identity doesn't stop at visual symbols but rather presents as a complete experience. This finding aligns with research findings (Purnamasari and Affandi 2025). which shows that coffee Shops tend to use earth tones, minimalist typography, and coffee symbols to create a premium and easily recognizable image. Research (Izza 2026) demonstrates that a consistent visual identity through a logo and Graphic Standard Manual helps strengthen a brand awareness. On the contrary, (Voloshchuk and Volkov 2024) shows that visual identities that rely too heavily on narrative aesthetics without consistency of implementation can make brand differentiation less stable in daily practice.

Thus, the brand identity of coffee Local shops are not just design elements, but important mechanisms for instilling brand memory and building consumer intimacy.

Customer Experience

Based on the results of this study, it shows that customer experience plays an important role in forming a brand. awareness of MSME coffee A shop in Kendari City. Friendly, communicative, and responsive barista service makes customers feel valued from the moment they visit, and the comfortable and personalized atmosphere further reinforces this positive impression. Informants' experiences suggest that comfort extends beyond the seating or layout, but also to a sense of "home" that arises from warm interactions and an atmosphere conducive to hanging out, working, or simply relaxing. These findings align with research (Zahra et al. 2024). who found that interpersonal communication Baristas have a positive influence on customer satisfaction by creating a sense of comfort and encouraging repeat visits. Similar results were also shown (Alfiansyah, Pamungkas, and Bakhri 2024).

which emphasizes that friendliness, politeness, and responsiveness Baristas create a pleasant experience that strengthens customer loyalty. Conversely, (Haryanti et al. 2024) shows that customer experience does not always automatically form loyalty if the quality of service is inconsistent and the atmosphere of the place does not fully meet visitor expectations.

Thus, customer experience in the context of coffee A shop is not just an additional service, but an emotional space that determines whether consumers only come once or choose to return and recommend the brand to others.

Marketing Communications

Based on the results of this study, it shows that marketing communications plays an important role in forming a brand. awareness coffee shop, especially when promotions are actively conducted through social media with interesting, informative, and consistent content. In the context of MSME coffee In Kendari, social media is understood not only as a product showcase, but also as a space to build rapport with consumers through regular posts, cohesive visuals, and easy-to-understand promotional messages. Informants also emphasized that discounts, new menu items, and small events are more effective when packaged simply yet sustainably, as this makes it easier for consumers to grasp the information and encourage them to respond. This finding aligns with research (Bourguignon, Terho, and Hajjem 2025). that engaging content and consistent use of social media help businesses expand their market reach. Similar results were also seen in research (Olfat et al. 2025). found that two-way interactions, content optimization, and influencer collaboration can strengthen brands. awareness of seasonal menus. However, research (Alexandro and Alexandro 2025) also shows that digital promotion is not always effective if the quality of human resources is inadequate and the use of the platform is still manual or undirected.

Thus, successful marketing communications are not just about being active on social media, but must be consistent, relevant, and tailored to local consumer habits to truly build brand recall and drive customer engagement.

Digital Presence

Based on the results of this study, digital presence is one of the main pillars in building the image of coffee MSMEs. Shop in Kendari City. Active social media accounts, engaging photo and video uploads, and positive customer reviews help businesses become more recognizable and memorable to consumers. Furthermore, quick responses to messages, comments, and questions in digital spaces create a closer and more vibrant customer relationship. This finding aligns with research (Maramis 2025) showing that social media has a positive and significant impact on brand awareness. awareness of coffee shop, because visual content and online interactions make it easier for consumers to recognize brands. Similar results were also shown by (Mikraj et al. 2025) that promotions through photos, videos, and discounts on social media increase audience interest while expanding brand

reach. However, the findings (Prasetya et al. 2025) shows that even though Instagram is actively used, the level of brand awareness still stops at the brand stage recognition and has not yet fully transformed into the consumer's primary choice, mainly because interactions are not yet strong enough and some aspects of digital communication are not significant.

Thus, the digital presence in coffee A shop is not just about being present on social media, but also about how content, responses, and reviews are managed consistently to truly expand the market and strengthen the brand's position in the minds of consumers.

Brand Awareness

Based on the results of this study, it shows that the brand awareness of coffee A shop in Kendari is formed when a brand is easily recognized, quickly comes to mind when consumers need a coffee shop, and is distinct enough to be chosen over competitors. Informants' experience, a strong brand usually doesn't stop at a familiar name, but rather becomes the first choice that spontaneously comes to mind for customers, and is then recommended to others. This finding aligns with the findings of (Husriadi 2026) which shows that consistency of visual identity and utilization of social media accelerates brand strengthening. awareness among coffee MSMEs in Kendari. Similar results were also seen in (Djou 2025) which confirms that creative content, storytelling, and targeted social media management can increase the visibility and recall of MSME brands. However, findings (Manik 2025) shows that even though social media is actively used, awareness often stops at the initial introduction stage and does not develop into a primary choice because audience engagement is not yet strong enough. Thus, brands Awareness is not just a matter of being known or remembered, but also the brand's ability to occupy a stable position in the minds of consumers.

Coffee SMEs shop, these findings confirm that identity consistency, digital communications, and customer experience must work together for a brand to truly live in the market's memory.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study shows that branding strategy has an important role in building a brand. awareness of coffee SMEs shop in Kendari City. Consistent brand identity, a delightful customer experience, active marketing communications, and a responsive digital presence have been shown to mutually reinforce a brand's position in consumers' minds. These findings confirm that brand loyalty is key. Awareness is not only shaped by product quality, but also by the experiences, interactions, and image consistency experienced by customers repeatedly. Suggestions for MSMEs include maintaining a consistent visual identity, strengthening friendly service, and managing social media regularly and purposefully to make the brand more recognizable. Furthermore, simple yet relevant content-based promotions need to be continuously developed to suit the characteristics of local consumers. Future researchers can expand similar studies by incorporating a more balanced consumer perspective, comparing several mid-sized cities, or testing branding

strategies through a mixed approach to achieve more comprehensive and applicable results for future Msme development.

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