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DIGITAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT IN MICRO, SMALL, AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES OF SOUTH SULAWESI: INTEGRATING LOCAL WISDOM AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Digital transformation is reshaping micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Indonesia, yet how entrepreneurs reconcile global digital marketing practices with indigenous cultural values remains poorly understood. This study examines how MSME actors in South Sulawesi manage digital marketing by integrating Bugis-Makassar-Toraja local wisdom with emerging artificial intelligence (AI) tools. Using a qualitative case study, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with seventeen MSME owners in the culinary, handicraft, fashion/woven-textile, and coffee sectors across Makassar, Gowa, Bone, and Toraja, complemented by observation and documentation review, and analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke. Four themes emerged: (1) informal, owner-centric, platform-driven marketing management; (2) local wisdom values (siri' na pacce, sipakatau, sipakalebbi, gotong royong) embedded in branding, storytelling, and customer relations; (3) cautious AI adoption, constrained by digital literacy, cost, and fear of cultural inauthenticity; and (4) a synergy in which AI accelerates production while local wisdom anchors meaning. The study proposes a Local Wisdom–AI Hybrid Digital Marketing Model and offers recommendations for MSME actors, platform providers, and policymakers.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Digital Marketing, Local Wisdom, MSMEs, South Sulawesi*

1. INTRODUCTION

Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are the backbone of the Indonesian economy, contributing more than sixty percent of gross domestic product and absorbing most of the national workforce. South Sulawesi is among the most dynamic MSME ecosystems in Eastern Indonesia and one of its most culturally saturated regions, home to the Bugis, Makassar, Toraja, and Mandar peoples, each with long-standing philosophies of commerce, craftsmanship, and social relations. Registered MSME units in the province exceeded 268,000 by 2022 (Bachtiar et al., 2023), and entrepreneurship and digital transformation jointly strengthen MSME performance (Wahyuni et al., 2026).

Digital marketing management refers to the planning, execution, and evaluation of marketing activities through social media, search engines, marketplaces, and messaging applications. In MSMEs it is rarely formalized: it is typically owner-managed, resource-constrained, and adaptive rather than pre-planned, with owners combining several tactics according to their market instead of following a single framework (Kurniawan et al., 2025). Digital marketing raises visibility, promotional efficiency, and market reach, mainly through

social media, food-delivery platforms, and increasingly AI-based tools (Aghni et al., 2025). Yet low digital literacy, weak infrastructure, and a shortage of trained personnel still limit results (Fahrezi et al., 2023; Maszudi, 2023). Cross-national evidence indicates that social media improves SME performance mainly through marketing capabilities rather than platform use alone (Cao et al., 2023; Susanto et al., 2021), so digital marketing management is better understood as capability building than as tool adoption.

Local wisdom (*kearifan lokal*) is the body of values, norms, and practical knowledge a community develops in response to its environment and passes across generations (Rummar, 2022). In the Bugis-Makassar sphere, it is expressed through *siri' na pacce*, an ethic of dignity, shame, and empathetic solidarity that governs honorable conduct, including honest trade; *sipakatau*, the mutual obligation to treat others as fully human; and *sipakalebbi*, mutual honoring in social and commercial exchange. Local wisdom is increasingly treated as a developmental resource rather than a cultural residue (Wahyuningsih, 2021), and digital campaigns that incorporate traditional values, local language, and cultural symbols generate higher engagement and loyalty than culturally generic ones, with storytelling rooted in tradition building emotional connection (Rubedo et al., 2024), and religiosity-based entrepreneurial marketing likewise improves social enterprise performance ("Marketing Based on Local Wisdom," 2025). In South Sulawesi, socio-cultural capital strengthens MSME innovation indirectly, through entrepreneurial learning and digital readiness (Hamid et al., 2025).

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) has meanwhile entered small-business marketing. Chatbots, large language models such as ChatGPT, and multimodal generative tools are used for content creation, translation, personalization, and customer engagement (Gupta et al., 2024), and successful SME adoption depends on workforce training, infrastructure, and a data-driven culture (Le Dinh et al., 2025). In Indonesian MSMEs, qualitative studies report gains in marketing efficiency and customer engagement alongside high costs, limited technical expertise, and privacy concerns (Khaq et al., 2024; Laksmono et al., 2025), while ChatGPT-based content creation raises questions about authentic voice (Amalia et al., 2023). Among women micro-entrepreneurs, generative AI improved the creativity and efficiency of content production, but a prompt-engineering gap limited conversion (Ghonisyah et al., 2025).

Three gaps remain. First, studies of Indonesian MSME digital marketing largely treat management as culturally neutral. Second, local-wisdom marketing and AI-based marketing have rarely been examined together, leaving unclear whether they operate in tension or in synergy. Third, South Sulawesi remains underexplored relative to Java-centric research, although regional evidence on entrepreneurship training, networking, and entrepreneurial orientation is accumulating (Abidin et al., 2023; Adam et al., 2024; Nirwana et al., 2023). The Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), which underpins much AI-marketing theory (Abrokwah-Larbi, 2026), would predict that culturally embedded local wisdom is a valuable, rare, and difficult-to-imitate resource that, combined with AI-enabled production capability, could yield sustainable advantage rather than the sameness that purely technology-driven marketing risks. This study therefore treats digital marketing management as the practice layer, local wisdom as the cultural-resource layer, and AI as the technological-capability layer, and asks: (1) How do MSME actors in South Sulawesi manage digital marketing in practice? (2) How is Bugis-Makassar-Toraja local wisdom embedded in these practices? (3)

How is AI adopted, adapted, and perceived, and how does this interact with local wisdom values?

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Research Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative case study design within an interpretive paradigm, suited to questions about how and why entrepreneurs manage digital marketing in a specific socio-cultural setting and consistent with recent Indonesian MSME research that relies on interviews and case studies (Kurniawan et al., 2025; Laksmono et al., 2025; Maszudi, 2023). Fieldwork covered four locations chosen for sectoral and cultural diversity: Makassar City, the hub of creative-economy and culinary MSMEs; Gowa Regency, known for handicrafts and Bugis-Makassar textiles; Bone Regency, representing coastal and agricultural MSMEs; and Toraja (Tana Toraja and North Toraja), representing highland communities with woven and carved crafts and a tourism-linked MSME sector. Participants were selected through purposive sampling with maximum-variation criteria: owners who (a) actively used at least one digital marketing channel, (b) had operated for at least two years, and (c) represented culinary products, handicrafts and woven textiles (*tenun* and *lipa' sabbe*), fashion and apparel, or specialty coffee. Seventeen owners were interviewed, a sample comparable to the five to twelve interviews typical of related Indonesian studies (Ghonisyah et al., 2025; Khaq et al., 2024; Laksmono et al., 2025).

2.2 Data Collection

Data were collected between February and May 2026 using three techniques. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews of 45 to 90 minutes were conducted in Indonesian and, where appropriate, Bugis or Makassarese, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. The guide covered marketing routines, the expression of local cultural values, experience with and barriers to AI tools, and perceived tensions or synergies between cultural authenticity and technological efficiency. Second, non-participant observation was conducted at business premises and digital storefronts, including live demonstrations of AI tools used by participants. Third, documentation review examined social media accounts, marketplace listings, promotional materials, and AI-generated content that participants agreed to share, providing triangulation against self-reported accounts.

2.3 Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the analytic narrative. Coding was manual and cross-checked by two researchers, with codes grouped into marketing practice, local wisdom, AI adoption, and an emergent category on their interaction. Trustworthiness followed the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability: triangulation across interviews, observation, and documentation; member checking of preliminary themes with a subset of participants; thick description; and peer debriefing with an audit trail linking data, codes, and themes. Participants gave informed consent, were assured of confidentiality, and are cited by anonymized codes (P1–P17).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the interview, observation, and documentation data yielded four themes, summarized in Table 1 and elaborated below with informant excerpts. Each theme is discussed in light of prior research.

Table 1 Summary of Themes and Key Findings

Theme	Key findings	Informants
Digital marketing management practices	Informal, owner-led, and platform-driven; WhatsApp Business, Instagram, and TikTok dominate; routines rest on engagement monitoring; planning, analytics, and budgeting lag behind tool use	P4, P11
Local wisdom embedded in marketing	Siri' na pacce and sipakatau shape customer care; motif storytelling is a core marketing asset; gotong royong, halal, and berkah act as trust signals	P2, P6, P9
Patterns and perceptions of AI adoption	Emergent and selective; used for captions, translation, and image editing; led by younger owners; constrained by literacy, cost, connectivity, and fear of cultural inauthenticity; no full chatbot automation	P3, P14
Synergy and tension	AI handles production tasks while humans retain cultural meaning-making; concern that AI visuals homogenize Sulawesi identity	P4, P6

3.1 Digital Marketing Management Practices

Digital marketing management was predominantly informal, owner-led, and platform-driven rather than guided by a formal marketing plan. WhatsApp Business was the near-universal foundation, used for both promotion and direct transactions, while Instagram and increasingly TikTok served for brand storytelling and audience growth; marketplace listings were secondary. A handicraft entrepreneur in Gowa described a routine echoing the sequence documented elsewhere (Saktisyahputra, 2022):

> "Every week I look at which posts get the most likes and comments, then I try to make similar content. I post product photos in the morning and customer testimonials in the evening. I check my WhatsApp orders every night before I sleep." (P4, handicraft entrepreneur, Gowa)

This intuitive cycle of posting, monitoring engagement, and informal adjustment appeared across sectors, although culinary owners in Makassar were more systematic, coordinating content with food-delivery platform campaigns and periodic paid advertising. Owners older than forty-five often relied on younger family members or part-time staff for content and scheduling, reflecting the human-resource constraints noted in prior research (Fahrezi et al., 2023). A Toraja coffee producer captured the gap between enthusiasm and capability: "I know I should have a proper content calendar and analyze my Instagram Insights, but most days I just post when I remember. What I really need is training, not just apps" (P11, coffee producer, Toraja).

Participants thus saw digital tools as accessible but structured management, comprising planning, scheduling, performance analysis, and budgeting, as aspirational. This corroborates evidence that social media improves performance through developed marketing capability rather than platform presence alone (Cao et al., 2023; Susanto et al., 2021). It also suggests that the informality observed here is a structural feature of Indonesian MSMEs, rooted in resource constraints and limited marketing training (Kurniawan et al., 2025; Maszudi, 2023), rather than a regional peculiarity. Capacity building should therefore

prioritize content calendars, analytics literacy, and budget planning over platform onboarding.

3.2 Local Wisdom Embedded in Digital Marketing

Nearly all participants deliberately, though often intuitively, embedded Bugis-Makassar-Toraja values in their content and customer interaction, in three ways. First, customer service followed the logic of siri' na pacce and sipakatau, namely dignity and mutual humanization, even when participants did not use these terms. A culinary owner in Makassar explained: "If a customer complains, I never argue online, even if I am right. In our culture it is shameful, siri', to make a customer feel small in public. I always reply politely and fix it privately through chat" (P2, culinary entrepreneur, Makassar). Preserving mutual dignity in public digital spaces worked as an informal customer-relationship principle that participants believed set their brand voice apart from more transactional large sellers.

Second, cultural storytelling and visual identity featured prominently, consistent with evidence that storytelling rooted in tradition builds emotional connection (Rubedo et al., 2024). A *tenun* entrepreneur explained:

> "Every motif has a meaning passed down from my grandmother. When I post on Instagram, I always explain the story behind the pattern, not just the price. Customers from Jakarta and even Malaysia want to know the meaning, not just buy fabric." (P6, tenun entrepreneur, Bone)

Toraja handicraft producers likewise embedded carving motifs such as *pa'barre allo* and *pa'tedong* in photography and short videos, treating cultural explanation as a core marketing asset (Riu et al., 2026). Third, participants invoked communal and religious symbols, namely *gotong royong* production narratives, halal certification, and *berkah* (blessing), as trust signals, consistent with the role of religiosity-based entrepreneurial marketing in social enterprise performance ("Marketing Based on Local Wisdom," 2025). One informant summarized: "When I write 'made together by our women's group with barakka' [blessing] on the caption, orders increase. People trust a product more when they feel the human and spiritual story behind it" (P9, culinary entrepreneur, Bone).

These findings add empirical texture to survey-based evidence that local-wisdom campaigns raise engagement and loyalty (Rubedo et al., 2024) by showing how the association arises in South Sulawesi: the siri' na pacce norm of preserving customer dignity in public, the sipakatau practice of respect in service recovery, and the narration of motif meaning as differentiation. Such resources are valuable, rare, and hard for outsiders to imitate, matching the Resource-Based View's criteria (Barney, 1991) and supporting the view that local wisdom is a defensible source of advantage (Arif & Windarsari, 2026; Rifqiansyah et al., 2025). They also identify one channel through which socio-cultural capital influences innovation in South Sulawesi (Hamid et al., 2025): translating cultural values into marketing content and customer relations.

3.3 Patterns and Perceptions of AI Adoption

AI adoption was emergent, selective, and uneven across sectors and age groups, in line with national evidence (Laksmono et al., 2025; Le Dinh et al., 2025). Three use cases recurred: generative text tools for captions and content, AI image tools for product visuals and motif design, and, less commonly, chatbot features in messaging or marketplace platforms. Participants under thirty-five experimented most. A fashion entrepreneur in

Makassar said: "I use ChatGPT to write my Instagram captions in Bahasa Indonesia and English, then I edit it so it still sounds like me, not like a robot. It saves maybe two hours every week" (P3, fashion entrepreneur, Makassar). Such AI-assisted but human-edited drafting mirrors gains reported elsewhere (Ghonisyah et al., 2025; Laksmono et al., 2025; Windarsari & Arif, 2026). Handicraft and fashion owners likewise used AI image tools for mockups, background removal, and preliminary motif variations before finalizing designs by hand.

Older and more rural participants were more hesitant, echoing literacy and trust barriers in the adoption literature (Sharma et al., 2024). A Toraja coffee producer said: "I have heard about ChatGPT from my nephew, but I do not really understand how to use it, and I worry it will make my content look fake or too generic, not like real Toraja coffee" (P14, coffee producer, Toraja). The price of premium tools and unstable connectivity in rural regencies were also cited (Khaq et al., 2024; Santosa et al., 2024). No participant used a dedicated chatbot for full customer-service automation; most replied manually through WhatsApp, sometimes with simple auto-reply templates, so the chatbot adoption prominent in the wider SME literature (Sharma et al., 2024) has not yet reached this sample.

The cautious pattern is consistent with the technology-organization-environment factors of cost, complexity, perceived usefulness, and employee capability (Santosa et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2024). However, the fear that AI content will look generic or culturally inauthentic emerges as a distinct barrier, rooted in identity preservation rather than resource constraint, which receives little attention beside the concerns about cost, skills, and privacy documented in Indonesian studies (Khaq et al., 2024; Laksmono et al., 2025). It qualifies the techno-optimistic framing of generative AI marketing models that stress revenue, cost, and customer-experience gains (Abrokwah-Larbi, 2026; Gupta et al., 2024) and suggests that adoption models for culturally embedded MSMEs should add a cultural-authenticity risk dimension.

3.4 Synergy and Tension between Local Wisdom and AI

The most conceptually significant theme concerns how participants navigated AI-enabled efficiency and cultural authenticity. Rather than seeing them as exclusive, several described a division of labor in which AI accelerates production while cultural meaning-making remains human. A *tenun* entrepreneur put it plainly: "AI can help me translate my caption or fix grammar quickly, but the story about the motif, the meaning behind each color, that must come from me, from what my family taught me. AI does not know sipakatau" (P6, tenun entrepreneur, Bone). Several participants drafted with AI and then manually inserted local terms, proverbs, or cultural references, treating AI as an assistant subordinate to human authorship. A minority, however, worried that growing reliance on AI visuals and captions, especially among younger competitors, could flatten South Sulawesi products into globally homogenized templates:

> "Sometimes I see other UMKM using AI-generated photos that look nice but could be from anywhere in the world. That is not what makes Sulawesi products special. We need to be careful not to lose our identity just because AI makes things faster." (P4, handicraft entrepreneur, Gowa)

This tension between efficiency-driven homogenization and identity-driven differentiation is the central dialectic of the study, echoing concerns that ChatGPT-based content may erode authentic voice (Amalia et al., 2023).

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3.5 A Local Wisdom–Artificial Intelligence Hybrid Digital Marketing Model

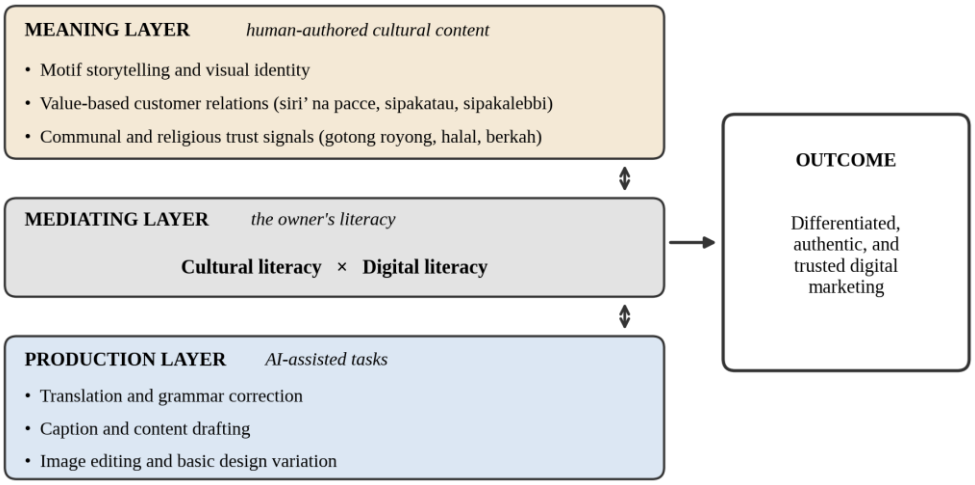


Figure 1 Local Wisdom–Artificial Intelligence Hybrid Digital Marketing Model

Synthesizing the four themes, this study proposes a Local Wisdom–Artificial Intelligence Hybrid Digital Marketing Model with three functional layers (Figure 1). The production layer comprises AI-assisted tasks, namely translation, grammar correction, caption drafting, image editing, and basic design variation, which participants readily delegate to save time and cost. The meaning layer comprises human-authored cultural content, namely motif storytelling, value-based customer interaction, and religious or communal trust signaling, which participants consistently kept as a human responsibility, treating AI output here as at best a rough draft. The mediating layer is the owner's combined cultural and digital literacy: owners with strong cultural grounding but weak digital skill under-use AI's efficiency potential, whereas those with strong digital skill but weak cultural grounding risk efficient yet homogenized content. The model proposes that the strongest outcomes accrue to owners holding both literacies, and extends generative-AI marketing frameworks stressing technology-organization-environment readiness (Abrokwah-Larbi, 2026; Le Dinh et al., 2025) by adding cultural capital as a co-equal readiness dimension alongside digital readiness.

3.6 Implications and Limitations

Theoretically, the study grounds empirically the claim that local wisdom and digital technology can operate synergistically (Rifqiansyah et al., 2025; Rubedo et al., 2024) and identifies cultural-authenticity risk as an under-theorized adoption barrier for culturally embedded small businesses (Sharma et al., 2024). Practically, three recommendations follow. For MSME actors, training should teach a hybrid workflow in which AI handles production-layer tasks while owners are coached to preserve and articulate meaning-layer cultural content. For platform providers and AI developers, there is an opportunity to design prompt templates and motif libraries adapted to the Bugis-Makassar-Toraja repertoire. For regional policymakers and MSME service agencies, programs such as the PLUT-KUMKM assistance in South Sulawesi (Nirwana et al., 2023) should combine digital marketing management training with modules on articulating and monetizing local cultural narratives, treating cultural literacy as a co-equal curriculum component.

Limitations apply. The case design supports analytical rather than statistical generalization; the modest sample skews toward owners already engaged in digital marketing, potentially under-representing non-digitalized MSMEs; and because AI adoption was nascent, the study captures early perceptions rather than mature performance patterns, which longitudinal or mixed-method designs could track.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined how South Sulawesi MSME actors manage digital marketing at the intersection of local wisdom and AI. Digital marketing management remains largely informal, owner-centric, and platform-driven, dominated by WhatsApp Business, Instagram, and TikTok, with planning, analytics, and budgeting lagging behind tool adoption. Bugis-Makassar-Toraja values, particularly siri' na pacce, sipakatau, sipakalebbi, and gotong royong, are strategically embedded in content and customer relations as sources of trust, differentiation, and authenticity. AI adoption is emergent and selective, concentrated among younger entrepreneurs and centered on drafting, translation, and image editing, and is constrained not only by cost, literacy, and infrastructure but also by a distinct concern over cultural inauthenticity. Rather than treating local wisdom and AI as competing forces, many entrepreneurs have intuitively developed a hybrid practice in which AI accelerates production while human authorship safeguards meaning, conceptualized here as the Local Wisdom–AI Hybrid Digital Marketing Model.

These findings imply that training should treat AI literacy and cultural-narrative literacy as complementary, that developers should build culturally adapted AI features, and that policymakers should pair digital marketing management training with modules on local cultural heritage. Future research should use longitudinal and mixed-method designs and extend comparison to other culturally distinctive Indonesian regions to test the model's transferability. The South Sulawesi case suggests that digital competitiveness need not force a choice between tradition and technology; it may depend on integrating both.

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