

Personal Branding Marketing as An Effort to Strengthen the Entrepreneurial Identity of Mekar Baru Village

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: October 28, 2025
Revised: November 23, 2025
Accepted: November 25, 2025

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.52970/grcsd.v6i1.1816>

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the implementation of personal branding marketing as a strategy to strengthen business identity among entrepreneurs in Mekar Baru Village, Batu Bara Regency. The research employed a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collected through interviews, observations, and documentation involving 15 MSME actors from culinary, handicraft, service, and small trading sectors. The findings reveal that most MSMEs are still managed traditionally with a weak business identity. Only 40% of business owners have implemented basic elements of personal branding, such as logos, consistent brand names, and specially designed packaging. The main obstacles to branding are low digital literacy, limited capital, and a lack of institutional support. Nevertheless, the application of personal branding has shown positive impacts in enhancing customer loyalty, expanding market reach, and strengthening the image of local products. These findings highlight that personal branding marketing is an essential instrument in building the competitiveness of village-based MSMEs, although continuous support from multiple stakeholders is required.

Keywords: Personal Branding, Marketing, MSMEs, Rural Entrepreneurship, Business Identity.

I. Introduction

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) have long been recognized as the backbone of Indonesia's economy. According to the 2023 data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS), there are more than 66 million MSMEs in Indonesia, contributing roughly 61% to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and providing employment for over 117 million people (Rofik & Budiarto, 2023). This role confirms that MSMEs are not only an engine of economic growth but also a crucial pillar for social resilience by offering job opportunities across the informal sectors. Despite their significant contribution, MSMEs in Indonesia still face serious foundational challenges. These include low legal formalization, limited access to capital, underutilization of technology, weak product innovation, and ineffective marketing strategies. These problems are especially severe in rural areas, where infrastructure and access to market information are constrained. As a result, many rural entrepreneurs can only reach local customers and struggle to scale their businesses more broadly.

These challenges are evident in MSMEs operating in Mekar Baru Village, Datuk Tanah Datar Subdistrict, Batu Bara Regency. The village has strong potential in the culinary, handicraft, and service sectors. However, most business operators still run their operations conventionally, lacking a clear business identity. Their products often lack strong differentiation and thus have difficulty competing with more established branded goods from outside the region. Consequently, the market reach remains limited, added value is low, and customer loyalty is underdeveloped. In today's globalized and digital era, business identity or branding is more important than ever. A strong identity not only enhances product image in consumers' minds but also builds trust, loyalty, and competitiveness. Personal branding marketing the process of building a consistent, recognizable public perception of an individual or a business (Dwiyanti & Yulianti, 2024), can be a highly relevant strategy for rural MSMEs. (Kotler & Keller, 2016) emphasize that branding in modern marketing is a primary differentiator: consumers do not simply buy products for their function, but also because of the values, stories, and identity they represent. Through personal branding, local MSMEs can reinforce their image, highlight their uniqueness, and expand their market reach via social media and digital platforms.

Implementing personal branding in rural areas like Mekar Baru Village still faces several barriers. First, entrepreneurs often lack digital literacy, limiting their use of social media or online platforms. Second, limited capital constrains the development of professional packaging, logos, and promotional materials. Third, there is insufficient support from local government and relevant institutions, such as training or mentoring programs. These constraints slow down the process of strengthening business identity at the local level. Previous studies highlight the importance of branding in increasing MSMEs' competitiveness. (Rahmawati & Amaliah, 2020) Found that personal branding has a significant positive influence on consumer loyalty in Indonesian MSMEs. Demonstrated that marketing rooted in local identity can broaden the market reach of coastal-area MSMEs. Meanwhile, Arumaningtyas, D., Sari, R., & Lestari, (2022) identified low digital literacy as a main obstacle to effective branding among MSME actors. These findings reinforce that personal branding marketing is not merely an option but a necessity for rural MSMEs struggling to compete in increasingly challenging markets. Therefore, the main research problem in this study is the weak business identity of MSMEs in Mekar Baru Village due to limited understanding and implementation of personal branding marketing, which undermines competitiveness and market reach. This research aims to analyze how personal branding marketing can serve as an effective strategy to strengthen the entrepreneurial identity of MSMEs in Mekar Baru Village. By reinforcing their identity, it is hoped that these enterprises will increase their competitiveness, product value, and economic self-reliance.

II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Personal Branding Marketing

Personal branding refers to the strategic process of creating a unique, consistent, and memorable identity that distinguishes an individual or business in the eyes of the public. (Dwiyanti & Yulianti, 2024) defines personal branding as a deliberate effort to shape how others perceive a person or enterprise, thereby establishing a distinct and recognizable image. In the context of small businesses and entrepreneurship, personal branding often serves as a fundamental marketing tool that communicates values, expertise, and authenticity. The development of personal branding typically involves visual identity (logo, color scheme, packaging), communication style, storytelling, and customer experience. Kotler and Keller (2016) emphasize that branding is a central differentiating factor in modern marketing, helping build customer trust and loyalty. For MSMEs, especially in rural areas, effective personal branding can attract consumer attention, strengthen competitive positioning, and enhance visibility in both physical and digital markets.

Prior studies support the role of personal branding in strengthening business performance. Rahmawati (2022) found that strong personal branding positively influences customer loyalty in Indonesian MSMEs. Similarly, Arumaningtyas, D., Sari, R., & Lestari, (2022) highlight that personal branding enhances product recognition and competitive advantage, although challenges such as limited digital skills often hinder

its implementation. These findings demonstrate that personal branding is not merely an optional marketing tool but a strategic necessity for small enterprises aiming to build a recognizable identity.

2.2. Entrepreneurial Business Identity

Business identity refers to the characteristics, values, and image that represent a business and differentiate it from competitors. A clear identity helps customers identify, recall, and trust a product or service. According to Wheeler (2017), business identity includes elements such as brand values, visual identity, market positioning, and communication strategies. A strong business identity contributes to consistent customer perceptions and supports long-term brand equity. For rural entrepreneurs, business identity is often shaped by local cultural elements, product uniqueness, and personal values infused by the business owner. Rizal et al. (2021) argue that integrating local identity into marketing strategies can strengthen product appeal and expand market reach, particularly for MSMEs that rely on traditional or community-based production. The absence of a clear business identity, on the other hand, leads to difficulties in competing with branded products from outside the region. Without distinctiveness, MSMEs struggle to attract loyal customers and differentiate themselves in increasingly crowded markets. Therefore, strengthening business identity becomes a crucial step in enhancing the sustainability and competitiveness of rural entrepreneurship.

2.3. The Relationship Between Personal Branding and Business Identity

Personal branding and business identity are closely related, particularly in micro and small enterprises where the business often reflects the characteristics of its owner. Strong personal branding can reinforce business identity by ensuring that values, image, and communication are consistent and recognizable. Kapferer (2012) explains that branding shapes customer perception, which subsequently becomes the foundation of business identity in the marketplace. Studies show that personal branding positively affects how businesses are perceived. Rahmawati (2022) found that personal branding influences consumer trust and loyalty—two key components of a strong business identity. Meanwhile, research by Widodo & Safitri (2023) states that personal branding enhances visibility, credibility, and differentiation, which collectively strengthen the identity of SMEs. In rural communities such as Mekar Baru Village, where entrepreneurs typically operate with limited marketing resources, personal branding becomes an accessible and powerful approach to shaping business identity. Through consistent messaging, visual branding, and authentic storytelling, entrepreneurs can build a unique presence that appeals to local and broader markets.

2.4. Research Gap

Although many studies have discussed personal branding and its impact on MSME performance, only a few focus specifically on rural settings with limited digital literacy and access to modern marketing tools. Moreover, little attention has been given to how personal branding functions as a strategy to strengthen entrepreneurial business identity in village-level enterprises. This research aims to fill that gap by specifically examining MSMEs in Mekar Baru Village, where branding practices are still minimal, and business identity remains weak.

2.5. Hypothesis Development

Based on the theoretical framework and previous empirical findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Personal branding marketing has a positive and significant effect on strengthening the entrepreneurial identity of SMEs in Mekar Baru Village.

H2: The consistency of personal branding marketing mediates the relationship between marketing efforts and the entrepreneurial identity of SMEs in Mekar Baru Village.

H3: Personal branding marketing strategies that emphasize local uniqueness and cultural values have a stronger impact on enhancing the entrepreneurial identity of SMEs in Mekar Baru Village.



Figure 1. Documentation of Entrepreneurship Marketing Counseling with MSME Actors and PKK

III. Research Method

3.1. Research Design

(Sugiyono, 2019) This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design, grounded in a constructivist paradigm that assumes social reality, such as business identity and branding practices, is formed through the perceptions and experiences of individuals. A qualitative approach is selected because the research aims to explore and interpret the lived experiences of MSME entrepreneurs in applying personal branding marketing, rather than measuring variables numerically. Quantitative methods were not selected because they are less capable of capturing complex phenomena such as identity formation, branding narratives, and personal meaning-making. Qualitative design, therefore, enables in-depth exploration of the strategies, challenges, and motivations underlying personal branding, which cannot be fully understood using structured numerical indicators. The research design is guided by branding theory (Kotler & Keller, 2016) and personal branding theory, which explain how identity, differentiation, and communication shape market perceptions. These theories provide the conceptual foundation for analyzing how personal branding strengthens entrepreneurial business identity in rural MSMEs. This design directly addresses the research questions by allowing the researcher to examine how entrepreneurs understand, practice, and internalize personal branding in their daily business activities.

3.2. Research Location and Participants

The study was conducted in Mekar Baru Village, Datuk Tanah Datar Subdistrict, Batu Bara Regency, an area with active MSMEs in the culinary, craft, and service sectors. The participants consisted of 15 MSME owners who have operated their businesses for at least one year. A purposive sampling technique was used based on criteria such as business longevity, willingness to participate, and variation in business type. The sample size of 15 participants is justified because qualitative research prioritizes data saturation, which was achieved when no new themes emerged during the later interviews. To strengthen representativeness, diversity was considered based on:

- a. Gender,
- b. Age,
- c. Type of business,

- d. Length of business operation, which allowed the study to capture variations in branding practices and perspectives.

The potential limitation of purposive sampling—namely, sampling bias—is acknowledged, and efforts were made to minimize it by including multiple business types and demographic backgrounds.

3.3. Data Collection Techniques

Three primary data collection methods were used:

- a. Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews focused on participants' understanding of personal branding, marketing strategies, identity-building practices, and challenges faced. Details include:

- 1) Duration: 30–60 minutes per participant
- 2) Setting: participant homes or business locations
- 3) Tools: interview guide containing open-ended questions aligned with the theoretical framework
- 4) Recording: audio recordings with permission

The interview guide was pilot-tested with two MSME owners to ensure clarity and relevance.

- b. Direct Observation

Observations were conducted at business locations using structured observation sheets.

Observed elements include:

- 1) visual identity (logo, colors, packaging),
- 2) customer interaction patterns,
- 3) product display,
- 4) Use of digital platforms,
- 5) consistency of branding across media.

- c. Documentation

Documentation included:

- 1) product packaging,
- 2) promotional brochures,
- 3) social media profiles (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok),
- 4) digital advertisements,
- 5) village administrative records (UMKM lists, training data),
- 6) Government service documents from the Cooperative and MSME Office.

3.4. Research Instruments

The primary research instrument was the researcher, equipped with interview guides, observation forms, and field notes. To ensure the reliability of instruments:

- a. The interview guide was reviewed by two qualitative research experts,
- b. Observation sheets were developed based on branding theory (Kotler & Keller),
- c. Documentation checklists were aligned with personal branding indicators (Montoya).

The researcher received prior training in qualitative interviewing and observation techniques, ensuring proper application of methods.

3.5. Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed using Miles & Huberman's Interactive Model (1994), with added details for rigor:

a. Data Reduction

- 1) Transcribing interview recordings verbatim
- 2) Coding initial concepts (manual coding and assisted by NVivo qualitative analysis software)
- 3) Identifying themes related to branding practices, challenges, and identity formation
- 4) Filtering irrelevant or repetitive information

b. Data Display

- 1) Thematic matrices,
- 2) Narrative descriptions,
- 3) Visual diagrams,
- 4) Tables comparing branding practices across participants.

c. Conclusion Drawing and Verification

- 1) Developing thematic relationships between personal branding elements and business identity
- 2) Revisiting raw data to ensure accuracy
- 3) Validating interpretations through repeated comparison across sources

Researcher reflexivity was maintained by keeping analytic memos to reduce bias and ensure transparency in interpretation.

3.6. Data Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility, several strategies were applied:

a. Triangulation

- 1) Source triangulation: comparing interviews, observations, and documents
- 2) Method triangulation: using multiple data collection techniques
- 3) Researcher triangulation: consulting with two research supervisors for interpretation validation

Details of implementation:

- 1) Social media documentation was compared with participants' interview claims,
- 2) observational findings (e.g., packaging quality) validated interview statements.

b. Member Checking

Participants were asked to review interview summaries and thematic interpretations to ensure accuracy and confirm that their perspectives were represented correctly.

c. Dependability and Confirmability

- 1) An audit trail was kept (recordings, field notes, coding steps, memos).
- 2) Reflexive journals were used to acknowledge researcher biases and maintain neutrality.

d. Ethical Considerations

- 1) Participants provided informed consent before the study.
- 2) Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed.
- 3) Data were stored securely and only used for academic purposes.
- 4) Participants had the right to withdraw at any time.

3.7. Summary

Through this enhanced qualitative methodology, supported by theoretical grounding and systematic procedures, the study aims to provide a rigorous and credible understanding of how personal branding marketing strengthens entrepreneurial business identity among MSMEs in Mekar Baru Village.

IV. Results and Discussion

4.1. Overview of MSMEs in Mekar Baru Village

Mekar Baru Village, located in Datuk Tanah Datar District, Batu Bara Regency, is an area with diverse entrepreneurial potential. Based on observation data and village documentation from 2024, approximately 45 active MSME units were recorded, consisting of the following business categories:

- 1) Culinary: 21 units (food stalls, traditional snacks, contemporary beverages).
- 2) Handicrafts: 12 units (bamboo weaving, traditional textiles, waste-based crafts).
- 3) Services: 7 units (tailoring, beauty salons, decoration services).
- 4) Others: 5 units (small retail, daily necessities shops).

Despite the relatively high number of MSMEs, most of them are still managed traditionally, employing simple marketing strategies with limited use of digital technology. This condition contributes to the limited market visibility of local products beyond the village level.

4.2. Business Identity Conditions

Observations revealed that only 6 out of the 15 MSME respondents had applied basic personal branding elements, such as using logos, customized packaging designs, and consistent business names. The remaining businesses still relied on plain packaging without any visual identity. For instance, a culinary business owner uses a logo featuring rice and coconut imagery for the brand "Rasa Desa Mekar Baru." This identity successfully attracts consumers by emphasizing local cultural elements. Conversely, bamboo craft artisans still sell their products without any brand label, making it difficult for customers to distinguish them from similar products from other areas. These findings align with Kotler & Keller's (2016) assertion that branding functions as a differentiation tool that helps consumers recognize and remember products. Consistent visual identity strengthens brand image and enhances consumer loyalty potential.

4.3. Utilization of Personal Branding Marketing

MSME actors in Mekar Baru Village demonstrate varying levels of understanding of personal branding. From in-depth interviews, some respondents interpret branding merely as creating a logo, while others have begun to grasp the significance of storytelling in business identity. Several emerging personal branding strategies include:

- a. Logos and Business Names: Some culinary businesses use simple logos to increase brand recognition.
- b. Product Storytelling: A banana chip entrepreneur highlights that the product uses fresh, locally sourced ingredients, creating an emotional value for consumers.
- c. Social Media: Five business owners actively use platforms such as Facebook and Instagram for promotion, although the usage remains limited to product photo uploads without structured content strategies.

These practices support Montoya's (2010) perspective that personal branding involves not only visual components but also how business owners shape public perception through consistent values, quality, and communication.

4.4. Challenges in Implementing Personal Branding

The study identified several key challenges limiting the implementation of personal branding, including:

- a. Low digital literacy: Many business owners are unfamiliar with social media or marketplaces for branding purposes.
- b. Limited financial resources: Developing professional logos, attractive packaging, and digital promotion requires additional costs that not all MSMEs can afford.
- c. Lack of assistance: To date, there are no dedicated programs from the village government or related institutions focusing on branding training for MSMEs.

These findings correspond with Arumaningtyas et al. (2022), who highlight that limited digital literacy remains a major barrier to branding implementation among rural MSMEs.

4.5. Impact of Personal Branding Implementation

Although still limited, personal branding has shown positive impacts for MSMEs that apply it consistently, including:

- a. Increased Consumer Loyalty: Businesses with clear visual identity and product narratives are easier for customers to remember, encouraging repeat purchases.
- b. Market Expansion: MSMEs utilizing social media have attracted customers from outside the village, with some reaching the district-level market.
- c. Strengthened Local Product Image: Personal branding rooted in cultural values provides unique identities, helping rural products compete with external products.

These results align with Rahmawati (2022), who found that personal branding significantly influences MSME consumer loyalty.

4.6. Discussion

The study concludes that personal branding marketing plays an important role in strengthening entrepreneurial business identity in Mekar Baru Village. However, its implementation remains at an early stage, requiring strategic interventions from both business actors and local authorities.

- a. For business owners, greater awareness of the importance of branding and creative utilization of digital media is necessary.
- b. For local governments, training programs on branding, packaging design, and digital marketing support are essential to help MSMEs grow sustainably.

Thus, personal branding marketing can serve as a strategic instrument not only to enhance business competitiveness but also to empower the village's economic independence.

V. Conclusion

The study on personal branding marketing in Mekar Baru Village shows that:

- a. The village's MSMEs possess significant economic potential, particularly in the culinary and handicraft sectors; however, most still lack a clear and consistent business identity.
- b. The implementation of personal branding remains at an early stage, such as the use of simple logos, social media promotion, and product narratives that highlight uniqueness.
- c. The main challenges include limited digital literacy, financial constraints, and the absence of specialized assistance from the government or related institutions.
- d. Despite these limitations, the application of personal branding has proven effective in increasing consumer loyalty, expanding market reach, and strengthening the image of local products.

Overall, personal branding marketing has contributed to strengthening the entrepreneurial identity of local businesses in the village, although further support and development are still needed to optimize its impact.

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