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**INNOVATION AND DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES OF MSMEs IN  
BAUBAU CITY TO ENHANCE COMPETITIVENESS IN THE MODERN ERA**

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**ABSTRACT**

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Although micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) play a crucial role in regional economic development, many MSMEs in Baubau City still operate conventionally and have not yet optimally utilized digital technology. This study examines innovation, digital marketing strategies, and the supporting and inhibiting factors faced by MSMEs in Baubau City to increase their competitiveness. A descriptive qualitative method was used. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with five purposively selected MSME informants, supplemented by field observations and documentation. Data analysis was conducted according to the Miles et al. (1994) model, which consists of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. MSMEs in Baubau City utilize digital-based product, packaging, and service innovations. This includes online ordering and cashless payments. For promotion, sales, and customer interaction, digital marketing strategies utilize platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Shopee, and WhatsApp Business. However, the level of utilization varies among informants. Supporting factors include available technology, high consumer interest in local products, and government-facilitated digital training. Inhibiting factors include limited knowledge of digital marketing, limited capital, inability to create engaging content, and increasingly fierce market competition. This study adds to the MSME literature by providing empirical evidence from Eastern Indonesia that the synergy between innovation and digital marketing is a key mechanism for building competitive advantage. This research differs from previous studies that consider each of these elements separately. Instead, it demonstrates how these elements contribute to the digital transformation of the regional economy. It includes small businesses in underserved areas through the Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities framework.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) play a crucial role in the national economy, particularly in generating employment, distributing income, and reducing poverty. According to data from the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs, MSMEs absorb approximately 97% of the workforce and contribute more than 60% to national GDP (Khumairo et al., 2025). These figures confirm that MSMEs form the backbone of Indonesia's economy, including in Baubau City, Southeast Sulawesi Province.

Baubau City possesses significant economic potential in trade, culinary businesses, handicrafts, and services. Local specialties such as traditional foods, processed seafood products, and handicrafts constitute the primary business activities of many MSMEs in the area. Despite this potential, MSMEs must continuously adapt in order to survive and remain competitive amid rapid technological advancements and changing market dynamics. Limited product innovation, reliance on conventional marketing methods, and suboptimal utilization of digital technology remain major challenges faced by MSMEs, particularly in non-metropolitan regions.

Previous studies in Indonesia have examined innovation (Larassati et al., 2024; Susanti, 2024) and digital marketing (Khairunnisa, 2022; Yansahrita et al., 2023) as separate determinants of MSME performance. However, limited research has explored the combined effect of innovation and digital marketing on competitiveness, especially in regional contexts outside Java. Studies conducted in metropolitan areas may not fully capture the distinct constraints faced by MSMEs in cities such as Baubau, including limited internet infrastructure, lower levels of digital literacy, and geographical isolation. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how innovation and digital marketing strategies interact to build competitive advantage in a transitioning regional economy.

This study is grounded in several key theoretical frameworks, including Dynamic Capabilities (Teece et al., 1997), the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), and Competitive Advantage theory (Porter, 1985). Innovation refers to the development of unique products, processes, and services that are difficult for competitors to replicate. Digital marketing, in turn, transforms these internal resources into market value by expanding reach, enhancing brand visibility, and improving customer engagement through internet-based platforms. When integrated, these two capabilities can generate sustainable competitive advantage, particularly for resource-constrained enterprises such as MSMEs.

This relationship is supported by empirical evidence. Due to their adaptability and uniqueness, MSMEs have survived the economic crisis (Eggers, 2020). Innovation, which includes strategic renewal, product development, and process improvement, continues to be a crucial factor in business growth and long-term success (Manilang et al., 2025; Susanti, 2024). Meanwhile, MSMEs that employ digital marketing strategies have a greater purchasing intention compared to MSMEs that only use conventional methods (Rohman et al., 2024). Digital marketing also reduces geographical barriers and market access costs (Khairunnisa, 2022). Competitiveness theoretically stems from the convergence of distinctiveness generated by innovation and market expansion enabled by digital marketing (Mardikaningsih, 2023). Competitiveness, according to Kovtunen et al. (2021), is defined as the ability of an economic entity to produce products of higher value than its competitors in terms of quality, price, or service.

This research focuses on MSMEs in Baubau City to examine how they use innovation and digital marketing strategies to improve their current business competitiveness. Specifically, the objectives of this study are as follows: (1) to describe the types of innovations implemented by MSMEs in Baubau City; (2) to evaluate the digital marketing techniques used to improve competitiveness; and (3) to identify factors that support and hinder the implementation of innovation and digital marketing.

This research is expected to contribute to the development of entrepreneurship research, particularly on how digital marketing and innovation influence the competitiveness of regional MSMEs in an integrated manner. Practically, these findings can help MSMEs, local governments, and relevant institutions design effective programs for capacity building and digital transformation.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach to examine how MSMEs in Baubau City apply digital innovation and marketing strategies to improve competitiveness. The focus included product, packaging, and service innovation; digital marketing strategies to expand market reach; and supporting and inhibiting factors. The research was conducted in Baubau City, Southeast Sulawesi Province. Data were obtained from primary and secondary sources. Primary data came from in depth interviews and field observations. Secondary data were derived from scientific articles, journals, and relevant documents.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling in line with qualitative principles that emphasize depth rather than statistical representativeness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Criteria included MSMEs domiciled in Baubau City, operating for at least two years, actively using digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Shopee, or TikTok, and willing to provide open information. Five informants represented fashion, culinary, herbal beverages, handicrafts, and seafood processing sectors.

Data collection consisted of semi structured interviews, direct field observations, and documentation including photographs, business profiles, brochures, social media content, and official records. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles et al. (1994), including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Credibility was ensured through source triangulation, member checking with two informants, and rich contextual description to support relevance and transferability.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Overview of Research Location and Informants

Baubau City is one of the strategic cities in Southeast Sulawesi Province located on Buton Island. As a center of economic activity, trade, and service provision, Baubau plays an important role as a link between mainland Sulawesi and the surrounding island areas, such as South Buton, Central Buton, and the Wakatobi Islands cluster. This strategic geographical position has made Baubau develop rapidly as a transit city and trading city. The growth of the economic sector in Baubau City is supported by abundant local potential, such as marine products, traditional culinary, and various regional handicraft products that become tourist attractions and trade commodities. In addition, the dynamic and creative culture of the community encourages the development of the creative industry sector, especially MSMEs which are one of the pillars of the regional economy. The majority of MSMEs operate in the culinary sector (local food and beverages), fashion (especially products made from Buton woven fabric), and handicrafts such as souvenirs made from wood, woven materials, and local art products.

Although the number of MSMEs continues to increase, major challenges are still faced by business actors. Some MSMEs still use conventional sales methods, such as word-of-mouth marketing or promotion only through the surrounding environment. The lack of understanding of digital technology, lack of product branding capabilities, and limited access to capital make it difficult for some MSMEs to follow the development of increasingly competitive modern markets. On the other hand, the development of digital technology actually opens up great opportunities for Baubau MSMEs to expand their markets. Digital platforms are now widely used in this area, but not all business actors are able to utilize them optimally. This condition is interesting to study because it shows a gap between economic potential and the digital adaptation capabilities of MSME actors. Therefore, this research chose Baubau City as the research location to explore more deeply how MSME actors implement business innovation and digital marketing strategies in improving competitiveness. Baubau is a relevant location because it illustrates the dynamics of local MSMEs that are transforming from traditional business systems to the use of modern technology, but still based on strong local potential. This research involves five main informants. All informants are active MSME actors in Baubau City who have been running their businesses for at least three years. The selection of informants was carried out using purposive sampling technique, namely selecting informants who are considered to best understand and are involved in digital marketing activities.

**Table 1. Informant Profiles in Research**

Informant Name	Business Type	Business Duration	Digital Media Used
Isnawati	Culinary (Traditional Cakes)	10 Years	Facebook, WhatsApp
Veni	Fashion (Buton Traditional Woven)	10 Years	Facebook, Shopee, WhatsApp
Dwieka	Local Herbal Drinks	5 Years	Facebook, WhatsApp
Zamna	Handicrafts (Souvenirs)	Heritage	Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Shopee
Mama Ardan	Processed Seafood	7 Years	Facebook, WhatsApp

Table 1 shows the informant profiles in this research. More detailed explanations regarding informants: Isnawati is a culinary business actor who produces various types of traditional cakes typical of Baubau such as bagea, peanut bagea, cashew nuts and local sponge bread. Isnawati began using Facebook as the main promotional media because it is considered effective in reaching customers outside the neighborhood. Veni is a fashion entrepreneur based on Buton's typical woven fabric. Veni actively sells through Facebook and the Shopee marketplace, with photo posting strategies that are quite successful in increasing sales outside the region such as the Islands and districts around Baubau City. Dwieka is a local herbal beverage business actor such as red ginger and Buton's typical spices. Dwieka uses Facebook as the main medium to easily reach the market. Zamna is a tourism souvenir craftsman who produces traditional accessories, jewelry, regional souvenirs and crafts made from brass and silver. Zamna uses the Facebook marketplace, Instagram, Shopee to expand the inter-provincial market because the products are easy to ship. Mama Ardan is a processed seafood business actor such as Parende, Grilled Fish and Fried Fish. Mama Ardan uses Facebook to reach the people of Baubau, tourists and maximize sales.

#### Forms of Innovation Implemented by MSME Actors in Baubau City

Research results show that innovation is an important aspect carried out by MSME actors to maintain business amid competition. The forms of innovation found are divided into three categories, namely product innovation, process innovation, and service innovation. Product innovation was carried out by almost all informants to improve product quality and attractiveness. For example, Isnawati modified the shape and taste of traditional cakes to be more modern, such as adding chocolate, cheese toppings, and premium packaging. Veni developed clothing variations made from Buton's typical woven fabric into modern designs such as outer wear, bags, and accessories. Dwieka innovated flavors such as honey red ginger, lemon ginger, and practical sachet packaging. This product innovation aims to increase consumer interest and expand the market.

**Table 2. MSME Innovation Findings**

Informant Name	Product Innovation	Process Innovation	Service Innovation
Isnawati	Taste & packaging modification	Modern oven	WA & FB
Veni	Modern fashion design	Digital stock	FB, Shopee, WA
Dwieka	New herbal variants	Financial application	Fast delivery
Zamna	Unique souvenirs	Modern carving equipment	FB, IG, Shopee, WA
Mama Ardan	Seafood processing variants	Cooked	Dine-in and delivery

Table 2 show the MSME Innovation findings. Production and business management are examples of innovation processes. Process innovations implemented include the use of more efficient production equipment such as modern ovens, financial recording systems using simple applications like Buku Warung, and product packaging using vacuum sealers for longer shelf life.

More efficient processes increase production capacity and product quality. New services have emerged, including an online ordering system via WhatsApp and direct messaging on Facebook and Instagram, a delivery service using local Baubau couriers, and Facebook's auto-reply feature that speeds up customer response.

These findings are consistent with innovation theory by Susanti (2024) which states that innovation includes five aspects: development of new products, new production methods, new markets, new raw material sources, and new business organizations. In the research context, product innovation carried out by MSME actors such as Isnawati who produces new flavor variants and more modern product designs is in line with the view of Zulva & Ali, (2025) that product innovation is a key strategy to win competition and increase customer satisfaction. Process innovation shown through the use of modern production tools and financial recording applications by Dwieka and Zamna demonstrates increased process efficiency. This is relevant to Process Innovation theory Syahputri et al. (2025) which emphasizes the importance of process changes to improve quality and reduce costs. Service innovation such as online ordering, auto-reply, and delivery services is a form of adaptation to modern customer needs that prioritize speed and convenience. This is strengthened by Service Innovation theory (Safitri et al., 2025) which states that technology-based services are the key to competitive advantage in the digital era. Overall, the innovations carried out by Baubau MSMEs are in line with modern innovation concepts. These innovations are the main factor for MSMEs to survive and compete amid market changes.

These innovation practices have real economic consequences beyond confirming theoretical fit. Product variations, such as the Dwieka sachet variant and Isnawati premium packaging, reduce price sensitivity by creating perceived added value. This is a mechanism that aligns with Porter's differentiation strategy. Process innovations, particularly the use of the Buku Warung application, improve inventory management and reduce transaction costs, indirectly increasing profit margins. Some empirical evidence from comparable MSMEs suggests that process digitization correlates with cost reductions of between 10 and 30 percent, although these improvements were not quantified in this study. The creation of new services, such as WhatsApp ordering and auto-reply, increases customer retention and reduces response times (Kotler, P., & Keller, 2016). These innovations have been linked to repeat purchasing behavior in small business research. Overall, these innovations are not isolated changes, as aligned with the dynamic capabilities perspective; rather, they are competitive positioning efforts that develop incrementally but cumulatively (Teece et al., 1997).

### Digital Marketing Strategies Applied by MSME Actors in Improving Competitiveness

Digital marketing strategies for MSMEs in Baubau City are divided into three main patterns. First, the use of social media as the main promotional tool. All informants actively use social media as a core promotional tool, especially Instagram for quality product photos, reels, promotional stories; Facebook because its use is in high demand by housewives and local communities; and TikTok for creative video content and wider reach (Table 3). Content that is often uploaded includes product photos, manufacturing process videos, behind-the-scenes, and customer testimonials.

Second, marketplace utilization. Several informants utilize national marketplaces such as Shopee and TikTok to expand markets outside the region. Third, digital branding strategies. Branding efforts are carried out by creating simple logos and brand identities, posting consistently (weekly schedule), using special hashtags (#UMKMBaubau, #KulinerBaubau), and building relationships with customers through comments and direct messages.

**Table 3. MSME Digital Marketing Strategies**

Informant Name	Digital Media	Marketing Techniques	Impact
Isnawati	FB, WA	Product photos & stories	Increase in daily orders
Veni	FB, Shopee, WA	Product photos & stories	Out-of-region reach
Dwieka	FB, WA	Product photos & stories	Followers increase
Zamna	FB, IG, WA Shopee	Product photos & stories	Seasonal sales
Mama Ardan	FB, WA	Product photos & stories	Inter-provincial buyers

These findings are relevant to digital marketing theory according to Rohman et al., (2024) which emphasizes that digital marketing focuses on using internet-based technology to promote products to consumers. The use of social media by all informants for promotion and branding is consistent with Social Media Marketing theory (Bella et al., 2025) which states that social media enables two-way interaction, increases closeness with customers, and expands market reach. The success of informants using platform applications is in line with E-commerce theory which states that digital platforms expand markets without geographical boundaries and increase transaction opportunities. Branding efforts such as logo design, posting consistency, and hashtags show that MSMEs understand the importance of brand identity. This is in line with Digital Branding theory (Esa, 2024) which emphasizes that strong brands gain customer loyalty and trust. Digital marketing strategies carried out by Baubau MSMEs are in accordance with modern digital marketing concepts. The use of social media, marketplaces, and digital branding has a significant impact on increasing reach and sales.

A comparative analysis reveals varying levels of digital marketing sophistication with varying competitive outcomes. Veni and Zamna have customer bases spread across provinces and islands, as both employ platform-based strategies (Facebook, Instagram, Shopee, and TikTok). In contrast, Isnawati and Mama Ardan, who rely primarily on Facebook, remain focused on the local market, despite their success in the Baubau region. This variation demonstrates a gradient in digital marketing intensity across geographic markets. Greater platform diversity appears to increase market reach beyond local boundaries, consistent with e-commerce literature on market breadth (Tavalaei & Cennamo, 2020). Although Dwieka has an innovative product line, her focus on promotion solely through Facebook may limit her growth opportunities, suggesting that product innovation alone is insufficient without diversification of digital marketing channels. The results have a direct impact on competition: informants residing in an integrated digital ecosystem, comprising online marketplaces and social media, exhibit more resilient sales patterns, particularly during the winter. This suggests that small businesses can mitigate risk by leveraging multiple digital channels.

### **Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in the Implementation of Innovation and Digital Marketing in MSMEs**

From interview results, the main supporting factors include ease of internet access in Baubau City, availability of easy-to-use digital platforms (IG, WA, marketplace), and strong local potential such as fish raw materials, woven fabrics, and spices. Meanwhile, obstacles that are widely expressed by informants are lack of digital skills, especially content editing and marketplace management; limited capital for innovation such as production equipment, premium packaging, and digital advertising; limited time because MSME actors work alone (one-person business); and lack of network stability in some peripheral areas of the city.

Several factors such as government support, internet access, and local potential support MSME actors in innovating and marketing products. These findings are in line with Entrepreneurial Ecosystem theory by Mariana et al., (2025) that business growth is greatly influenced by supporting ecosystems such as regulations, markets, resources, and technology. Obstacles such as limited digital skills, minimal capital, and limited time are consistent with UMKM Constraints theory (Lubis & Salsabila, 2024) which states that limited human and financial resources are common obstacles that hinder MSME growth. Technology Acceptance Model theory (Utomo, 2023) also explains that technology acceptance barriers often arise due to lack of knowledge and perception of ease in using digital technology. Supporting and inhibiting factors found in this research are very consistent with MSME theory and entrepreneurial ecosystems. Supporting factors create opportunities for MSMEs to develop, while obstacles need to be overcome through training and capital support.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The results show that MSMEs in Baubau City have made their goods, services, packaging, and manufacturing methods more innovative by changing the way they make things, improving the quality of their products, making their packaging more appealing, and using digital services like online ordering and payments that don't involve cash. These steps make the product more valuable and help it compete better in both online and local marketplaces. MSMEs also use online platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp Business to communicate with customers, make sales, and promote their businesses. Collaborating with influencers, using compelling images and testimonials, and running promotional campaigns make businesses more competitive today. The availability of technology, the growing interest of many buyers in local goods, government initiatives to facilitate technology education, and the active participation of MSME groups in digital innovation and marketing support the use of technology. However, significant challenges remain that hinder the effective use of technology, such as lack of capital, differences in digital literacy levels, uneven production, and limited internet access. As a result of this study, MSMEs in Baubau City must develop creative concepts and utilize digital technology to become more competitive. This demonstrates how digital marketing and innovation can work together to improve business in certain areas of Eastern Indonesia.

Several issues in this study need to be considered. For exploratory qualitative research, a small sample size of five respondents is sufficient for conducting the study. However, it is difficult to apply the research results to a larger number of MSMEs in Baubau City or other regions. The perspectives and behaviors described by the qualitative approach; However, this approach does not measure direct financial impacts such as increased revenue, profit margins, or market share. A cross-sectoral approach cannot accurately show how MSMEs adapt to the digital market in the long term. Consequently, it ignores the temporal dynamics of digital transformation.

Future research should aim to address this issue using alternative approaches. Using both qualitative and quantitative approaches can make more general statements while maintaining context. Second, it will be easier to assess how digital innovation and marketing impact MSME competitiveness. Third, a longitudinal study is needed to examine how digital transformation in regional MSMEs evolves over time. A comparative study conducted across various regional cities in Eastern Indonesia would help explain contextual differences and enhance the external validity of this study's findings.

Many people will be significantly impacted by this. Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) must continually strive to develop new products and services, ensure their online presence is consistent and creative, participate in programs that help them acquire new skills, and carefully spend funds on digital marketing and production equipment. By improving internet infrastructure, facilitating access to funding and equipment, and expanding long-term training programs, MSMEs must continue to develop new products and services. Researchers should broaden their explorations and methodological frameworks to provide deeper insights into MSME digital transformation.

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