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MSMEs Needs Assessment in Rural Communities: Implications for Digital Branding and Packaging Mentoring

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Abstract: *Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are the backbone of the Indonesian economy, but MSMEs in rural areas generally still face limitations in capital, brand identity, packaging, and digital marketing, including those in Balleanging Village, Ujung Loe District, Bulukumba Regency. This study aims to identify business profiles, levels of social media utilization, key issues, and training and mentoring needs of MSMEs as an empirical basis for designing a digital branding and packaging-based empowerment program. The study used a quantitative descriptive approach with a total sampling technique of 25 MSMEs. Data were collected through a needs identification questionnaire containing closed and open questions, then analyzed using descriptive statistics in the form of frequency distribution. The results showed that the culinary/food sector dominated the type of business (40%), as many as 96% of respondents had utilized social media although its use was still limited to simple promotions, and the most frequently complained about problems were limited business capital (72%), rising raw material prices (60%), and low sales (40%). In terms of capacity needs, training in sales improvement strategies, digital marketing, product development, and packaging were the highest priorities. These findings provide theoretical contributions by enriching the study of needs-based empowerment of rural MSMEs and practical contributions by providing a priority intervention map for universities, village governments, and MSME facilitators.*
Keywords: *Rural MSMEs, Needs Assessment, Digital Branding, Packaging, Product Competitiveness*

INTRODUCTION

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) occupy a strategic position in the Indonesian economic structure. Data from the Ministry of Cooperatives and Small and Medium Enterprises shows that the number of MSMEs in Indonesia has reached more than 65 million business units, or approximately 99% of the total national business units, with a contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ranging from 60-61% and employment absorption of up to 97% of the total workforce (Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025; Hapsari et al., 2024). This contribution emphasizes the role of MSMEs not only as drivers of economic growth but also as instruments for equitable welfare, including in rural areas which are the economic base of lower-class communities (Zakiyah et al., 2022).

Despite their significant aggregate contribution, MSMEs in rural areas generally still face structural barriers such as limited access to capital, low managerial capacity, a lack of brand identity, and lagging

behind in digital marketing compared to urban MSMEs (Zakiyah et al., 2022). This condition was also identified among MSMEs in Balleanging Village, Ujung Loe District, Bulukumba Regency, South Sulawesi. Initial identification results conducted by the Makassar State University Community Service Team of 25 MSMEs showed that the culinary/food sector was the most dominant type of business, followed by trade, fashion, and other sectors. Twenty-four of the 25 respondents (96%) had utilized social media as a promotional tool, but their use was limited to simple posts and had not yet been directed as an integrated digital marketing strategy. The most frequently reported problems were limited business capital, rising raw material prices, and low sales. Some businesses also lacked logos, brands, or adequate business legality.

These conditions demonstrate that the challenges facing MSMEs in Balleanging Village cannot be reduced to a single issue, but rather represent a series of interrelated limitations involving capital, brand identity, packaging, and digital marketing capabilities. From a marketing perspective, brand identity and digital branding play a crucial role in building brand differentiation and equity, which in turn influence consumer perceptions of value and decisions (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2013). Consequently, packaging is no longer viewed solely as a means of protecting a product, but rather as a marketing communication medium that influences consumer perceptions of quality and purchasing motivation (Shukla et al., 2022; Quartier et al., 2024). When MSMEs do not have a strong brand identity and representative packaging, products that are substantially of high quality have the potential to lose out in an increasingly competitive market, as shown by Porter's (1985) competitive advantage framework and Barney's (1991) resource-based view, which places intangible assets such as brands and marketing capabilities as sources of competitive advantage that are difficult for competitors to imitate.

Various previous studies have examined the relationship between digital branding, packaging, and MSME competitiveness. Sa'adah et al. (2024) and Sifwah et al. (2024) showed that digitalization and branding technology contribute to increasing MSME competitiveness, while Pangestu and Nugroho (2024) found that digital marketing strategies play a role in strengthening MSME brand equity. Regarding packaging, Kurniasari et al. (2023) and Shukla et al. (2022) showed that creative packaging design influences consumers' motivation to process information and make purchases. On the other hand, several community service studies, such as those by Setiari et al. (2023), Vitaharsa and Julisawati (2025), and Ismarina and Anggraini (2025) show that MSME mentoring contributes to increasing digital competitiveness, but most of these studies are descriptive-qualitative or cross-sectional surveys that measure participants' perceptions or satisfaction at a single point in time, without measurable comparisons before and after the intervention. There are also few studies that explicitly integrate digital branding interventions and packaging innovations as a single program package whose impact is empirically

evaluated, especially in the context of rural MSMEs, which are still rarely studied compared to urban MSMEs.

This gap emphasizes the need for research that starts from a careful needs assessment as a foundation for designing a targeted mentoring program, as well as a baseline for evaluating the effectiveness of the program in the next stage. The novelty of this research lies in: (1) providing an empirical database from the identification of the needs of 25 MSMEs in Balleanging Village that simultaneously maps business profiles, social media adoption, problems, and training needs; (2) placing digital branding and packaging innovation as a unified intervention designed to address the specific needs of rural MSMEs, not just one variable in a satisfaction survey; and (3) formulating a one-group pretest-posttest evaluative methodology design as a framework for further research to measure the effectiveness of the program measurably, so that this research bridges the gap between descriptive studies of MSME needs and evaluative studies of empowerment programs that have rarely been carried out continuously under one research umbrella.

Based on the description, this study aims to: (1) describe the profile and characteristics of MSME actors in Balleanging Village; (2) identify the level of social media utilization by MSME actors; (3) identify the main problems faced by MSME actors; (4) identify the most priority training and mentoring needs; and (5) formulate an evaluative methodology design for further research to measure the effectiveness of the digital branding and packaging mentoring program after the program is implemented.

Brand Identity and Brand Equity

Aaker (1991) defines brand equity as a set of assets and liabilities attached to a brand that can increase or decrease the value of a product for the company and its customers, consisting of brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Keller (2013) expands this framework through the Customer-Based Brand Equity model which emphasizes that brand strength is formed from consumer knowledge of the brand, which is built through visual identity, communication consistency, and customer experience. For MSMEs, a clear brand identity in the form of a name, logo, and consistent visual elements is an initial prerequisite before brand equity can be formed. The absence of a professional brand identity, as found in some MSMEs in Balleanging Village, is a fundamental obstacle to the formation of product differentiation in the market.

Digital Branding and Digital Marketing

Digital branding is the extension of branding practices into the digital realm through the use of social media, promotional content, and marketplace platforms to build and strengthen brand identity (Sa'adah et al., 2024). This practice encompasses social media marketing and content marketing, enabling MSMEs to reach a wider market at a relatively low cost compared to conventional marketing. Pangestu and Nugroho

(2024) demonstrated that a consistent digital marketing strategy contributes to strengthening MSME brand equity, while Sifwah et al. (2024) emphasized that the implementation of targeted digital marketing increases the competitiveness of small businesses. However, high levels of social media adoption do not necessarily reflect optimal utilization; as found in this study, most MSMEs in Balleanging Village have social media accounts but do not understand how to develop strategic promotional content.

Packaging as a Marketing Communication Media

Packaging serves a dual function: as a physical protector of the product and as a marketing communication medium that conveys visual messages to consumers (Quartier et al., 2024). Shukla et al. (2022) empirically demonstrated that creative packaging design increases consumer motivation to process product information and ultimately influences purchasing decisions. Kurniasari et al. (2023) also found that packaging that clearly displays brand identity increases purchasing interest among MSME consumers. In the context of MSMEs in Balleanging Village, simple packaging with minimal product information has the potential to reduce the perception of product quality in the eyes of consumers, even though the quality of the product substance itself is adequate.

Competitive Advantage and Resource-Based View

Porter (1985) explains that competitive advantage can be achieved through differentiation strategies or cost advantages that distinguish a business from its competitors. Barney (1991) through the resource-based view (RBV) emphasizes that sustainable competitive advantage stems from a company's internal resources and capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. Brands, packaging, and digital marketing capabilities can be viewed as intangible resources that, if managed well, have the potential to become sources of competitive advantage for rural MSMEs that have previously relied solely on cost advantages.

Community Empowerment and MSME Mentoring

Community empowerment is understood as a process of capacity building followed by mentoring and knowledge transfer so that target groups are able to manage their resources independently (Latare & Bumulo, 2023). In the context of MSMEs, mentoring serves as a bridge between identifying needs and increasing the actual capacity of business actors (Ismarina & Anggraini, 2025; Vitaharsa & Julisawati, 2025). Setiari et al. (2023) emphasized that on going mentoring not just one-time training is more effective in driving changes in business behavior. This principle of knowledge transfer forms the basis for the design of the digital branding and packaging mentoring program proposed in this study.

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Previous Research Review and Research Gaps

Table 1 summarizes a number of previous studies relevant to the themes of digital branding, packaging, and MSME mentoring, along with the research gaps that form the basis of this research's position.

Author (Year)	Focus/Method	Key Findings	Research Gap
Sa'adah et al. (2024)	Descriptive, community service	Digitalization and branding technology increase the competitiveness of tourism MSMEs	Not measuring before-after changes in a measurable way
Sifwah et al. (2024)	Quantitative descriptive	The right digital marketing increases the competitiveness of MSMEs	Cross-sectional design, without evaluation of the mentoring program
Pangestu & Nugroho (2024)	Case study	Digital marketing strengthens MSME brand equity	Not integrating packaging aspects
Mariam & Ramli (2023)	Descriptive, devotion	Superior digital marketing improves MSME marketing	There is no pretest-posttest measurement yet
Kurniasari et al. (2023)	Associative survey	Packaging and brand image influence purchasing interest	Focus on consumer purchasing interest, not the effectiveness of the mentoring program
Shukla et al. (2022)	Consumer experiments (Scopus Q1)	Creative packaging design increases information processing motivation	General consumer context, not rural MSMEs
Quartier et al. (2024)	Conceptual (Scopus)	Design, branding and marketing are intertwined in value creation	Conceptual in nature, without MSME field data
Setiari et al. (2023)	Descriptive, devotion	Continuous mentoring encourages the development of retail MSMEs	Does not statistically compare before-after conditions
Vitaharsa & Julisawati (2025)	Descriptive, devotion	Digital marketing assistance increases business competitiveness	The evaluation is narrative in nature, without statistical testing.
Ismarina & Anggraini (2025)	Descriptive, devotion	Integrated mentoring strategy increases digital competitiveness	Not yet combining branding and packaging as one intervention package

Table 1. *Summary of Previous Research and Research Gaps*

In general, previous research shows three tendencies: (1) most use cross-sectional survey designs that measure perceptions at a single point in time; (2) evaluations of mentoring programs are generally narrative-descriptive without statistical comparisons of before and after conditions; and (3) digital branding and packaging innovation are rarely treated as an integrated intervention package, especially for MSMEs in rural areas. This research positions itself to fill these gaps, first by providing a comprehensive needs database, and second by formulating a one-group pretest-posttest methodology design as an evaluation framework that can be used in further research stages.

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METHOD

This research uses a descriptive quantitative approach to identify the profiles, problems, and mentoring needs of MSMEs. The research was conducted in Balleanging Village, Ujung Loe District, Bulukumba Regency, South Sulawesi Province, as part of the pre-activity phase of the researcher. Population comprised all active MSMEs in Balleanging Village. The sampling technique used was total sampling, involving all 25 MSMEs willing to participate and attend the needs identification activity. Data were collected through a needs identification questionnaire containing closed-ended questions (type of business, social media usage status, business problems with multiple response options, and training needs) and open-ended questions regarding the most pressing issues and expectations for the mentoring program. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in the form of frequency distributions and percentages for each answer category. Because some questions were multiple-response, the total percentages for the business problems and training needs variables could exceed 100%. Open-ended responses were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of the most pressing problems and respondents' expectations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Profile

A total of 25 MSMEs in Balleanging Village participated in the needs identification activity. Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents' business types.

Type of business	Amount	Percentage
Culinary/Food	10	40%
Trading	5	20%
Fashion/Clothing	2	8%
Drink	2	8%
Agriculture/Plantation	1	4%
Service	1	4%
Sell and Service Cell Phones	1	4%
Counter	1	4%
Stationery and Photocopying	1	4%
Entertainment	1	4%
Total	25	100%

Table 2. *Distribution of Respondents' Business Types*

The data in Table 2 shows that the culinary/food sector dominates the types of MSMEs in Balleanging Village (40%), followed by the trade sector (20%). This culinary sector dominance aligns with the general

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characteristics of rural MSMEs in Indonesia, which tend to operate in household-scale food processing businesses.

Utilization of Social Media

Information	Amount	Percentage
Already using social media	24	96%
Not using social media yet	1	4%

Table 3. *Level of Social Media Utilization*

The adoption rate of social media by MSMEs in Balleanging Village is relatively high (96%). However, further analysis of respondents' responses revealed that its use is still limited to simple promotional posts and has not been directed as a planned digital marketing strategy, such as through consistent content, product storytelling, or optimal use of marketplace features.

Problems Faced

Because respondents could select more than one answer, the total percentages exceed 100%. Table 4 presents the most frequently reported problems.

Problems	Amount	Percentage (n=25)
Limited business capital	18	72%
Prices of raw materials often rise	15	60%
Sales are still low	10	40%
Don't have a product logo yet	5	20%
Don't understand how to create promotional content	4	16%
Doesn't have a strong brand yet	4	16%
Don't have a business permit (NIB/PIRT/Halal)	4	16%
Business competition is getting higher	4	16%
Difficulty marketing products digitally	3	12%
Product distribution/delivery is still limited	3	12%
Others (finance, packaging, quality, production equipment)	7	28%

Table 4. *Main Problems of MSMEs (Multiple Response)*

The three most pressing issues, based on respondents' open-ended responses, were limited business capital, rising raw material prices, and low sales. All three directly impact business sustainability. However, the subsequent issues, aggregated—lack of a logo, weak branding, minimal business legality, and digital marketing difficulties—suggest that brand identity and packaging issues are not immediate short-term priorities but rather inhibiting medium-term competitiveness that require programmatic intervention.

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Training and Mentoring Needs

Types of Training	Amount	Percentage (n=25)
Sales Increase Strategy	15	60%
Digital Marketing	7	28%
Product Development	6	24%
Packaging	6	24%
Financial Management of MSMEs	5	20%
Social Media Content Creation	4	16%
Preparation of Simple Financial Reports	4	16%
Business Legality (NIB/PIRT/Halal)	4	16%
Product Photography	3	12%
Product Branding	3	12%
Logo and Product Label Design	3	12%

Table 5. *Training and Mentoring Needs (Multiple Response)*

The data in Table 5 shows that training needs are not solely focused on increasing sales, but also include digital marketing, product development, and packaging as the top four needs. Combined, needs directly related to branding and product visual identity (product branding, logo and label design, product photography, social media content creation) were selected by a significant proportion of respondents, indicating MSMEs' awareness of the importance of these aspects, although they are not the single most dominant needs.

DISCUSSION

The finding that limited capital, rising raw material prices, and low sales are the most pressing issues is consistent with the general characteristics of MSMEs in Indonesia, which face structural constraints in access to financing (Zakiyah et al., 2022). However, these issues are shortterm and responsive to external conditions (e.g., fluctuations in raw material prices), while brand identity and packaging issues are structural and impact medium- to long-term competitiveness. Within the resource based view (Barney, 1991), the lack of a strong brand and representative packaging means that MSMEs in Balleanging Village lack valuable and difficult-to-imitate intangible resources, so their competitiveness still relies solely on price a position vulnerable to production cost pressures, as complained by 60% of respondents.

The high rate of social media adoption (96%) that has not been balanced with strategic utilization strengthens the argument that the problem of MSMEs in Balleanging Village is not only about technology access, but also digital branding management capabilities (Sa'adah et al., 2024; Pangestu & Nugroho, 2024).

The findings related to brand identity further strengthen this interpretation. The absence of logos and weak brand identity among some MSMEs may appear to be a relatively minor operational problem compared with capital constraints. Nevertheless, from a long-term marketing perspective, these weaknesses can restrict the formation of brand recognition and differentiation. Keller's (2013) Customer-Based Brand Equity perspective suggests that brand strength is developed through consistent brand knowledge, communication, and consumer experience. Thus, the lack of a recognizable name, logo, visual identity, and consistent promotional message may prevent rural MSMEs from transforming individual products into recognizable brands. The implication is that branding intervention should not be viewed merely as a cosmetic activity. Instead, it should be positioned as a capability-building process that helps MSMEs communicate value and establish a distinctive market position..

Packaging also needs to be understood beyond its conventional function as product protection. The relatively high demand for packaging training indicates that MSMEs recognize the relationship between product appearance and marketability, even though packaging was not identified as the most immediate business problem. This finding is consistent with Quartier et al. (2024), who emphasize the interconnectedness of design, branding, and marketing in value creation, and with Shukla et al. (2022), who demonstrate that creative packaging can stimulate consumers' motivation to process product information and influence purchasing decisions. The importance of packaging is particularly relevant because culinary and food businesses constitute the largest MSME category in Balleanging Village. For these businesses, packaging can simultaneously provide product protection, communicate brand identity, convey product information, and create visual differentiation. Consequently, packaging improvement should be integrated with branding and digital marketing rather than implemented as a separate technical activity.

From a community empowerment perspective, these findings support a staged mentoring approach. Immediate concerns such as sales and financial pressures should not be separated from longer-term capability development. Instead, the two dimensions should be addressed sequentially but in an integrated framework. The first stage may focus on diagnosing business constraints and developing short-term sales strategies. The second stage can strengthen product presentation through branding and packaging improvements. The third stage should focus on applying these improvements through structured digital marketing. Continuous mentoring is particularly important because previous studies have shown that sustained assistance is more likely to encourage changes in MSME behavior than one-time training (Setiari et al., 2023). Therefore, the proposed intervention should emphasize practice, feedback, revision, and monitoring rather than relying exclusively on classroom-based knowledge transfer.

The findings have several practical implications for stakeholders involved in rural MSME empowerment. Universities can use the needs assessment as a baseline for determining the content, sequence, and intensity of mentoring. for **village governments**, the findings can serve as a basis for establishing more targeted MSME empowerment policies and resource allocation. The village government can facilitate access to training, business legality services, digital infrastructure, promotional activities, and potential financing networks based on the problems identified in the needs assessment.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the identification of 25 MSME actors in Balleanging Village, it can be concluded that: (1) MSMEs in Balleanging Village are dominated by culinary/food and trade businesses; (2) the level of social media adoption is high (96%) but its use is not optimal as a digital marketing strategy; (3) the main problems faced are limited business capital, rising raw material prices, and low sales; (4) there are still capability gaps in the aspects of branding, business legality, digital marketing, and product packaging; and (5) the most priority assistance needs are sales increase strategies, digital marketing, product development, packaging, and financial management of MSMEs. These findings provide an empirical basis that is worthy of being used as a basis for designing and implementing a digital branding and packaging assistance program for MSMEs in Balleanging Village.

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