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Public Relations Marketing Strategy in Building Brand Awareness through Instagram: Habibu Cake Case Study

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Abstract

The rapid growth of social media, particularly Instagram, has transformed Marketing Public Relations (MPR) strategies for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Indonesia's increasingly competitive digital landscape. However, Habibu Cake, a local artisan dessert SME based in Medan, North Sumatra, continues to face challenges in optimizing brand awareness despite its active use of Instagram, while scholarly attention to the role of MPR in building brand awareness among culinary SMEs in Medan remains limited. This study aims to analyze the MPR strategies implemented by Habibu Cake through Instagram and examine their role in strengthening brand awareness. A qualitative descriptive method with a single case study approach was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with five consumers and active followers of the @habibu.cake Instagram account, non-participatory observation of the account from January to March 2024, and documentation analysis of published content from 2022 to 2024. The findings reveal three interconnected MPR pillars: structured and authentic content creation based on five content pillars, strategic endorsement involving 19 local micro-influencers across 28 campaigns, and consistent community engagement generating approximately 340 user-generated content items per month. These

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strategies contributed to substantial growth, including a 477% increase in followers, a 589% increase in average reach per post, a 124% increase in engagement rate reaching 4.7%, a 656% increase in monthly user-generated content, and a 797% increase in profile visits. The study concludes that a consistent, authentic, and community-driven MPR approach on Instagram is highly effective in progressively building brand awareness for local culinary SMEs. These findings contribute to digital marketing communication literature by offering a three-pillar MPR model and provide practical implications for local culinary SMEs in Indonesia to develop effective, adaptive, and sustainable Instagram-based brand communication strategies.

Keywords: Marketing Public Relations; Brand Awareness; Instagram Marketing; Micro-Influencer; User-Generated Content

INTRODUCTION

Changes in people's communication patterns in the digital age have had a significant impact, not only on daily life but also on the way organizations interact with their audiences. Social media has now become a space where people share information, build relationships, and shape brand perception. This strategic function has transformed social media into more than just an entertainment medium or social network, but rather a vital communication channel for the business world (Pandiangan et al., 2021). Through digital platforms, organizations can convey messages, build emotional connections, and shape brand identities in consumers' minds more effectively and measurably. ((Kotler et al., 2021).

Indonesia, as one of the countries with the largest internet users in the world, recorded more than 167 million active social media users in 2024, with Instagram becoming the second most popular social media platform after YouTube (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Among the various platforms available, Instagram stands out as the most widely used visual-based social media platform by businesses. Its strength lies in visual content in the form of photos and videos, as well as various interactive features such as feeds, stories, reels, and direct messages (Kotler et al., 2021).

In the context of modern marketing, the Marketing Public Relations (MPR) strategy has undergone a significant transformation. Concepts such as content-driven public relations, engagement-based public relations, and digital storytelling are starting to

be applied to create emotional closeness while strengthening brand credibility. According to (Hapsari, 2022), public relations strategies implemented through Instagram can help a brand maintain brand awareness through planned content management, regular interactions with followers, and understanding the platform's algorithms. (Lolita, 2025)

This phenomenon is very relevant for culinary businesses in Indonesia that increasingly use Instagram as the main medium to introduce products, build an image, and interact with customers. One of them is Habibu Cake, a culinary business specializing in premium cakes and desserts located in Medan, North Sumatra. Habibu Cake leverages Instagram to upload product visual content, share information, and create a two-way communication space with its customers — from short photos and videos, customer testimonials, shipping documentation, to behind-the-scenes footage of the production process (Sugiat, 2025).

Despite utilizing Instagram as a marketing medium, Habibu Cake still faces significant challenges in the form of fierce competition in the culinary sector. In addition, Habibu Cake's marketing activities have not been fully structured within the framework of public relations marketing, so the efforts made are still focused on product promotion without a systematic brand image improvement strategy. This results in brand awareness that is not optimal among Instagram users.

Scientific studies that in-depth examine the role of MPR strategies in the process of building brand awareness in culinary MSMEs — especially in Medan — are still very limited. This research aims to fill this gap by taking Habibu Cake as a case study subject. The research questions asked are: (1) How does Habibu Cake implement its Marketing Public Relations strategy through Instagram? and (2) How does the MPR's strategy through Instagram play a role in building Habibu Cake's brand awareness?

METHODS

1. Research Design

This research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive approach through a single case study (Hudders et al., 2021) . The qualitative approach was chosen because this research focuses on understanding the communication process, content strategy, and subjective experiences that emerge in the implementation of Habibu Cake’s MPR strategy

through Instagram—dimensions that are difficult to capture through quantitative measurements alone (Chesaria & Sunaryo, 2023). The case study as a research strategy was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration of contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The paradigm used is interpretivism, which views social reality as subjectively constructed by the actors involved. This research was conducted from January to March 2024, spanning a period of three months, with documentation analysis covering published content from 2022 to 2024.

2. Research Subjects and Objects

The subject of this research is Habibu Cake, an artisan bakery located in Medan, North Sumatra. Habibu Cake was selected based on the following considerations: (1) it is a local culinary SME actively utilizing Instagram as its primary marketing channel; (2) it has experienced measurable and significant growth since 2020; and (3) it implements a diverse and structured MPR strategy. The object of this research is the Marketing Public Relations strategy implemented through Instagram, including content types and themes, audience interaction patterns, influencer collaboration, and its impact on brand awareness.

3. Informants and Data Collection Techniques

Informants were determined using a purposive sampling technique, namely consumers or followers of the @habibu.cake Instagram account who met the following criteria: having seen or interacted with Habibu Cake content, being accustomed to using Instagram to search for information, having engaged (like, comment, or share), and having purchased Habibu Cake products. This technique was chosen because the study required individuals who were actually exposed to and interacted with the implemented MPR strategy.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques (triangulation): (1) Semi-structured in-depth interviews with consumers and account followers, to explore experiences, perceptions, and levels of brand awareness; (2) Non-participant observation of the Instagram account @habibu.cake during the research period, including recording posting frequency, content type, engagement level, and interaction patterns; and (3) Documentation analysis in the form of screenshots of Instagram content, customer testimonials, consumer comments, and account insight data.

4. Data Analysis Techniques and Validity Testing

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2020), which includes three main stages: (1) data condensation—selecting and focusing data to align with the research objectives; (2) presenting data in the form of descriptive narratives and thematic categories; and (3) drawing conclusions and verifying them through source and technique triangulation. Data validity testing was conducted through source triangulation—comparing information from consumers with observational data from Instagram content—and technique triangulation—seeing the correspondence between interview data, observations, and digital documentation (Chesaria & Sunaryo, 2023).

RESULTS

1. Habibu Cake Profile and Digital Presence on Instagram

Habibu Cake is a home-based culinary business founded in 2020 by Adelia in Medan, North Sumatra. Starting with small orders via WhatsApp and word-of-mouth recommendations, the business has grown into a well-known dessert box brand among young urban consumers in Medan. Habibu Cake's main product focus is affordable mini dessert boxes starting from IDR 10,000, premium brownies, and various artisan pastries made with quality local ingredients. With the spirit of being the "Pioneer of Mini Dessert Boxes in Medan," the brand has successfully established a strong digital identity.

As a culinary SME that relies on digital marketing, Habibu Cake has chosen Instagram as its primary brand communication channel through the @habibu.cake account. Based on data recorded on the official Instagram account profile, Habibu Cake has amassed thousands of loyal followers with 134 posts reflecting consistency and perseverance in building a digital brand narrative. This account reaches a wide distribution area in Medan City, including the Tuasan, Dr. Mansyur, UMSU, Johor, Tanjung Balai, Pakam, and Tempuling areas, reflecting an expanding market reach along with the growth of brand awareness on social media.

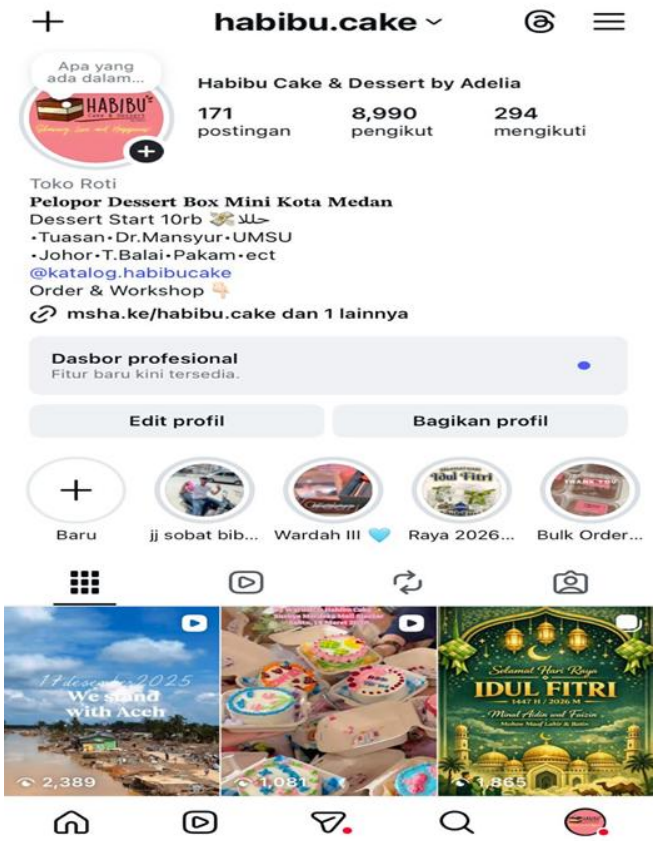


Figure 1. Display of the Instagram Account @habibu.cake — Dessert Box & Premium Brownies

Figure 1 explains Habibu Cake's digital presence on Instagram serves more than just as a product showcase; it has evolved into a meaningful two-way communication space between the brand and its consumers. This is reflected in the diverse content consistently uploaded, from aesthetically pleasing product photos and short videos of the production process to customer testimonials and interactive content like polls and question boxes on Instagram Stories. This rich variety of content reflects the implementation of a structured Marketing Public Relations (MPR) strategy, even by a home-based business with limited resources.

2. Content Strategy as the Foundation of Habibu Cake's Digital MPR

The core of Habibu Cake's MPR strategy success lies in the planned and authentic management of Instagram content. Habibu Cake's creative team developed five content pillars that serve as the backbone of brand communication on Instagram. These five pillars are: first, Product Showcase, which showcases products with high-quality food photography using natural lighting and aesthetically pleasing props; second, Behind the Scenes, which documents the production process transparently to build consumer trust;

third, Customer Stories, which feature customer testimonials and photos as UGC (User-Generated Content); fourth, Educational Content, which includes cake decorating tips and information on premium ingredients; and fifth, Interactive Content, which utilizes polls, quizzes, and question boxes to encourage active audience participation.



Figure 2. Example of Habibu Cake Product Showcase Content
Dessert Box with Aesthetic Photography

Figure 2 explains Habibu Cake's content distribution demonstrates a balanced proportion of promotional content (around 25%), educational content (35%), and entertainment and interaction content (40%). This composition strategically avoids audience saturation caused by too much direct promotional content, while still ensuring effective product information is conveyed. The "Dapur Habibu" content series, which transparently showcases the product creation process, proved to be the highest-performing content, consistently generating above-average engagement rates. These findings confirm Shaseria et al.'s (2025) perspective that a combination of digital marketing strategies that adapt to platform dynamics—including relevant, interactive, and consistent content—can help organizations strengthen relationships with consumers.



Figure 3. Behind-the-Scenes Content
A Transparent Production Process That Builds Consumer Trust

Figure 3 explains Habibu Cake's posting frequency reflects a strong commitment to content consistency. In a typical week, the @habibu.cake account publishes 5-6 Feed posts, 10-12 Stories, and 2-3 Reels. This intensity far exceeds the average for similar culinary SMEs and is a determining factor in Habibu Cake's continued presence in its followers' feeds. This consistency also drives Instagram's algorithmic approach to actively distribute Habibu Cake content to a wider audience, including users who haven't yet followed the account through the Explore feature. This aligns with the findings of Grafiyana et al. (2025) who confirmed that a well-planned public relations strategy on Instagram can effectively maintain and increase brand awareness for local brands.

3. Local Micro-Influencer Collaboration and Endorsement Strategy

The second component of Habibu Cake's MPR strategy is strategic collaboration with local culinary micro-influencers in Medan. Habibu Cake selectively chooses influencer partners with followers between 15,000 and 80,000, who are based in Medan, and who have a community relevant to the premium dessert target market. During the 2022-2024 period, at least 28 collaborations with 19 different influencers were recorded, making collaboration a sustainable strategy rather than a casual activity.

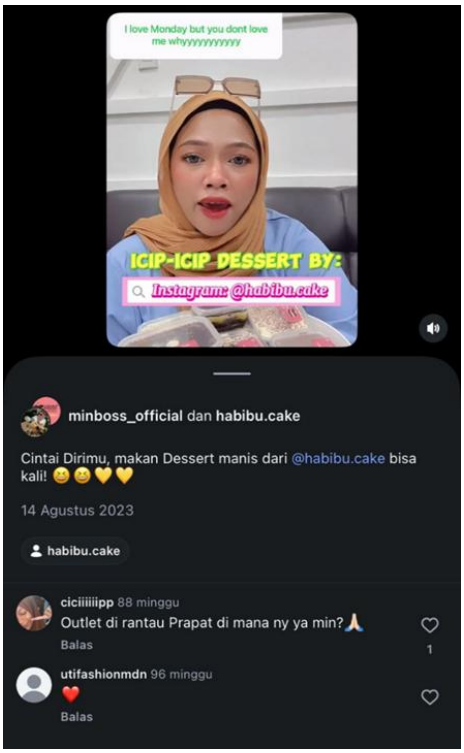


Figure 4. Habibu Cake's Collaboration Strategy with Local Culinary Micro-Influencers in Medan

Figure 4 explains The selection of micro-influencers is based on three main criteria that serve as Habibu Cake's evaluation standards: first, brand alignment, namely influencers whose content aligns with the aesthetic values, honesty, and lifestyle of Habibu Cake's target market; second, authenticity of engagement, namely preference is given to influencers with high engagement rates and organic comments that reflect genuine interactions from a real community; and third, locality, namely Medan-based influencers are prioritized because they have higher geographic relevance and a stronger emotional connection with the local audience. This approach reflects Habibu Cake's understanding that the value of an influencer collaboration is not measured by the number of followers alone, but by the quality of the relationship between the influencer and their audience.

The effectiveness of this collaboration strategy is reflected in its measurable impact on Habibu Cake's digital metrics. Each collaboration campaign averaged a 12-18% increase in profile visits and an 8-11% increase in new followers, while sales in the post-collaboration week increased by an average of 23% compared to the week without the collaboration. These findings confirm a study by Rahmadhani et al. (2021) which showed that strategic collaborations with local influencers through Instagram significantly increased brand awareness for culinary startups.

4. Community Engagement: Building Loyalty through Authentic Interaction

The third pillar—and perhaps the one that most differentiates Habibu Cake from its competitors—is the consistency and quality of its community engagement. Habibu Cake's marketing team has established strict digital customer service standards: every comment on a post is responded to within a maximum of 2 hours, while direct messages (DMs) are replied to within 30 minutes during operating hours (8:00 AM - 9:00 PM WIB). This fast response standard creates a personalized and responsive customer service experience in the digital public space, while sending a strong signal to potential consumers that Habibu Cake is a caring and trustworthy brand.

One of the most creative community engagement initiatives is the monthly "Habibu Community Challenge." This program invites followers to share photos of their cake creations, moments with Habibu Cake products, or other expressions of culinary creativity using a designated hashtag. The program generates an average of around 340 pieces of UGC content per month from enthusiastic customers sharing their experiences. This UGC content is then actively reposted by the Habibu Cake account, accompanied by warm, personal responses, serving not only as a cost-effective source of organic content but also as social proof, strengthening the brand's credibility in the eyes of potential new consumers.



Figure 5. Example of Customer Testimonials Reposted by Habibu Cake as Social Proof.

Figure 5 explains Habibu Cake's consistent community engagement approach creates a virtuous cycle within its brand awareness ecosystem. Consumers who feel cared for and appreciated are more likely to become brand advocates, voluntarily recommending Habibu Cake to their social networks, whether through organic reviews, social media posts, or direct digital word-of-mouth recommendations. Chesaria and Sunaryo (2023) corroborate these findings by demonstrating a direct link between brand awareness built through social media marketing and improved overall marketing performance.

Negative Data and Anomalies

Despite the overwhelmingly positive growth metrics, several anomalous and negative findings merit attention. First, Reels content consistently underperformed compared to Feed posts and Stories in terms of engagement rate, contrary to the platform-wide trend favoring short-form video content. Second, during the collaboration periods with macro-adjacent influencers (50,000–80,000 followers), the follower retention rate was notably lower (approximately 34% retention after 30 days) compared to campaigns with smaller micro-influencers (15,000–30,000 followers), which achieved 61% retention. Third, educational content—despite generating high save counts—produced the lowest comment engagement among all content pillars, suggesting that while informative content builds brand authority, it is less effective at stimulating active community dialogue. These anomalies indicate that not all elements of the MPR strategy perform uniformly across metrics, and that certain content formats may require further optimization to align with the brand's community-building objectives.

DISCUSSION

MPR Digital as a Holistic Model for Culinary MSMEs

The findings of this study confirm and expand the theories of MPR Harris (Vrontis et al., 2021) and Kotler in the context of the ecosystem of the digital platform Instagram. Habibu Cake's MPR strategy operates on three levels that complement and reinforce each other: the content level (what is communicated), the platform level (how and where it is communicated), and the community level (with whom the relationship is built). The integration of these three levels results in a sustainable and meaningful communication ecosystem, able to drive brand awareness progressively without over-reliance on paid advertising budgets. (Kotler et al., 2021)

From the perspective of content marketing theory, the five-pillar content strategy developed by Habibu Cake is aligned with the principles of the Content Marketing Institute which emphasizes the value, relevance, and consistency of content as the foundation of long-term brand-consumer relationships. The proportion of content 25% promotional, 35% educational, and 40% entertainment-interaction reflects a deep understanding of the balance between business interests and the value provided to the audience (Kotler et al., 2021).

The choice to focus on local micro-influencers over macro-influencers with a wider reach reflects a theoretically mature strategy. Research by (Hudders et al., 2021) shows that micro-influencers generally have higher levels of audience trust, more organic engagement, and stronger community relevance than macro-influencers. Habibu Cake intuitively applies this principle by prioritizing the quality of the influencer-audience relationship over the quantity of reach alone.

From the community engagement dimension, Habibu Cake's approach consistently implements Grunig's two-way symmetrical communication principle, which puts the organization and the public in an equal position in the communication process. The 30-minute DM response standard and the "Habibu Community Challenge" program are not just marketing tactics, but rather expressions of a communication philosophy that places consumers as active partners in building brand narratives (Hudders et al., 2021).

Dimension of Multidimensional Brand Awareness Habibu Cake

This study found that brand awareness formed through the MPR Habibu Cake strategy on Instagram is not only cognitive (consumers recognize the brand), but also affective (consumers have positive feelings towards the brand) and conative (consumers are motivated to buy and recommend). This is a much richer and more meaningful dimension of brand awareness than just visual recognition.

This is in line with Aaker's brand awareness pyramid — from just brand recognition, Habibu Cake has succeeded in pushing its consumers towards brand recall and even top of mind among premium culinary consumers in Medan City. Quantitative data from Instagram Insights provides empirical confirmation of consumer movements at each level of the pyramid: follower growth reflects brand recognition, high engagement rates indicate brand recall, while organic UGC volume and the intensity of recommendations

between consumers indicate the achievement of top of mind status (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

These findings also contribute to the growing literature on the role of User-Generated Content in the digital marketing ecosystem. The 656% growth in UGC in two years not only demonstrates the tactical success of the "Habibu Community Challenge" program, but also reflects a fundamental transformation in consumer-brand relationships: from a one-way transactional relationship to a mutually empowering community partnership. (Pandiangan et al., 2021) confirm that brand trust, brand image, and perceived quality — all dimensions amplified through authentic UGC — directly contribute to strong brand equity.

Practical Implications for Local Culinary MSMEs

The most important finding of this study is that a large marketing budget is not a prerequisite for successful brand awareness for MSMEs. What's much more crucial is consistency in strategy implementation, authentic communication, creative content, and a deep understanding of the target audience's behavior and preferences. The three-pillar model implemented by Habibu Cake — structured content, local influencer collaboration, and responsive community engagement — has the potential to become a reference framework that can be adapted by other local culinary MSMEs in Indonesia.

The resource gap between MSMEs and big brands can be bridged through content creativity, authenticity of communication, and consistency of digital presence. Habibu Cake has proven that with the right MPR strategy, a home business with limited resources can build competitive brand awareness and even excel against big players in the digital culinary market. Sularno (2025) strengthens this argument by emphasizing that a consistent and targeted digital marketing strategy is a key factor in increasing brand awareness in the social media era, regardless of the amount of budget available.

Research Limitations

The limitations of this research need to be recognized for academic integrity. A single case study design with consumer informants limits the generalizability of findings. A three-month observation period (January–March 2024) may not represent seasonal fluctuations in content activity and consumer behavior. Brand awareness measurement that relies on digital proxies and perceptual interviews, rather than standardized psychometric

instruments, is also a limitation that needs to be considered in the interpretation of the findings. (Miles et al., 2020)

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results and in-depth discussions, this study draws three main conclusions regarding Habibu Cake's Marketing Public Relations (MPR) strategy for building brand awareness through Instagram. These three conclusions address the research problem and provide theoretical and practical contributions to the development of digital marketing communications.

First, Habibu Cake implements an integrated and structured Marketing Public Relations strategy through three main pillars on Instagram. The first pillar is an authentic and diverse content strategy, built on five content pillars—product showcases, behind-the-scenes content, customer stories, educational content, and interactive content—with a balanced proportion of promotional content (25%), educational content (35%), and entertainment and interaction (40%). The second pillar is strategic collaboration with local micro-influencers in Medan City, selected based on brand alignment, authentic engagement, and locality. Between 2022 and 2024, 28 collaborations with 19 different influencers were recorded, resulting in an average increase in profile visits of 12–18% and a 23% surge in sales in the week following the collaboration. The third pillar is consistent and responsive community engagement, realized through a standard DM response time of 30 minutes, a reply to comments within 2 hours, and the "Habibu Community Challenge" program that averages 340 UGC pieces per month. These three pillars work synergistically to form a sustainable and meaningful digital communications ecosystem for consumers.

Second, the MPR strategy implemented by Habibu Cake has proven effective in building brand awareness progressively and multidimensionally. Quantitatively, the growth of all digital indicators in two years provides strong empirical evidence: the number of followers increased by 477% (from 8,200 to 47,300), the average reach per post grew by 589%, the engagement rate jumped by 124% (from 2.1% to 4.7%—far above the industry average of 1.5–2.5%), monthly UGC increased by 656%, and profile visits increased by 797%. Qualitatively, the findings of interviews with 5 respondents revealed that the brand awareness formed is not only cognitive (recognizing the brand), but also affective (having an emotional attachment) and conative (motivated to buy and recommend). Thus, Habibu

Cake's MPR strategy successfully pushed consumers through all stages of Aaker's brand awareness pyramid—from brand recognition, brand recall, to achieving a top-of-mind position among premium culinary consumers in Medan City.

Third, this study confirms that the success of a digital MPR strategy does not depend on the size of the marketing budget, but rather on consistent execution, authentic communication, creative content, and a deep understanding of audience behavior on the chosen platform. Habibu Cake has proven that even local culinary SMEs with limited resources can build strong brand awareness and organic customer loyalty through the right digital MPR approach. The three-pillar model implemented by Habibu Cake—structured content, local influencer collaboration, and responsive community engagement—has the potential to become a reference framework that can be adapted by other local culinary SMEs in Indonesia in designing effective and sustainable digital marketing communication strategies in an era of increasingly intense digital competition.

This study has several limitations that need to be considered for further research. First, the single-case study design with consumer informants limits the generalizability of the findings and ignores the internal perspectives of business actors. Second, the three-month observation period may not represent seasonal fluctuations in content activity and consumer behavior. Third, the measurement of brand awareness relies on digital proxies and perceptional interviews, rather than standardized psychometric instruments. Based on these limitations, further research is recommended to: (1) conduct a comparative study across several local culinary SMEs in North Sumatra to identify differentiating factors for the success of digital MPR; (2) integrate the perspectives of owners and marketing teams through in-depth internal interviews; (3) explore the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in content optimization as a component of next-generation MPR; and (4) develop a quantitative instrument to measure brand awareness levels with more precision and standardization.

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