

Toward empowered and sustainable tourism MSMEs: a three-level social commerce intervention model

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ABSTRACT

The digital era offers great potential for tourism MSMEs through social commerce, which blends social media with online transactions. This study develops an adaptive empowerment strategy for tourism MSMEs in developing regions to help them become independent and sustainable. Using a qualitative case study, data were collected from 23 MSMEs across 12 destinations in Polewali-Mandar through interviews, observation, and document analysis. Findings highlight three key points: (1) Digital skills remain low, promotional content is basic, and social commerce tools are underused. (2) There are clear opportunities in social media usage, youth involvement, and community support. (3) A step-by-step mentoring model is needed, tailored to digital readiness levels. The study introduces a Three-Level Social Commerce Intervention Model: Basic digital literacy, Content creation and engagement, and Branding, digital payments, and collaboration. Its novelty lies in integrating phased strategies with strong community roles in digital transformation. This model supports both academic understanding and practical efforts to empower tourism MSMEs in developing regions.

ABSTRAK

Era digital menghadirkan peluang besar bagi UMKM pariwisata melalui social commerce, yakni integrasi antara media sosial dan transaksi daring. Penelitian ini bertujuan merumuskan model strategi pemberdayaan digital social commerce yang adaptif bagi UMKM pariwisata di daerah berkembang agar mampu menjadi usaha yang mandiri, berdaya saing, dan berkelanjutan. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah deskriptif kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus, melibatkan 23 UMKM di 12 destinasi wisata di Polewali Mandar. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi partisipatif, dan studi dokumen. Hasil penelitian mengungkap tiga poin utama: (1) Literasi digital UMKM masih rendah; promosi tidak konsisten, konten sederhana, dan fitur social commerce belum dimanfaatkan secara optimal. (2) Terdapat peluang dari tingginya penetrasi media sosial, keterlibatan generasi muda, dan dukungan komunitas lokal. (3) Diperlukan strategi pendampingan bertahap sesuai tingkat kesiapan digital masing-masing UMKM. Penelitian ini menghasilkan Model Intervensi Social Commerce Tiga Level, yaitu Literasi digital dasar, Pengembangan konten dan interaksi pelanggan, dan Optimalisasi branding, pembayaran digital, dan kolaborasi komunitas. Model ini menggabungkan strategi bertahap dengan penguatan peran komunitas sebagai agen transformasi digital, serta memberikan kontribusi teoritis dan praktis dalam pemberdayaan digital social commerce UMKM pariwisata di daerah berkembang.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a strategic sector that contributes significantly to economic growth, job creation, and the empowerment of local communities. Within this ecosystem, Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a vital role as providers of tourism services such as culinary offerings, handicrafts, lodging, and tour services (Ibrahim & Musadad, 2021; Satrya *et al.*, 2024). Changes in consumption patterns resulting from digital transformation have driven a shift in marketing practices from conventional media to digital platforms, including social commerce (Purnomo *et al.*, 2024; Sa'adah *et al.*, 2023). Social commerce, which integrates social media with online transaction features, is growing rapidly through platforms such as Instagram Shop, TikTok Shop, and WhatsApp Business. International studies show that social commerce not only increases consumer trust but also fosters greater loyalty and more intensive interaction (Mobini *et al.*, 2024; Tao *et al.*, 2024). However, the majority of these studies were conducted in relatively developed markets. Research in the context of developing countries particularly tourism-related MSMEs in non-urban areas remains limited.

In Indonesia, the digital readiness of MSMEs is uneven. A study (Lei *et al.*, 2023) in Bali confirms that low digital literacy, infrastructure limitations, and resistance to technology are the main barriers. (Giyatmi *et al.*, 2022) also emphasize that the lack of ongoing support is a serious obstacle to the adoption of digitalization by MSMEs, particularly in the tourism sector. Furthermore, promotional strategies for tourism-related MSMEs in developing regions still rely on traditional media (Ibrahim & Musadad, 2021), while the use of interactive social commerce features is more prevalent in urban areas (Asmawati *et al.*, 2024; Wardhani & Subriadi, 2020).

These conditions highlight a research gap that needs to be addressed. First, most previous studies have focused on e-commerce or destination promotion, rather than on social commerce strategies for tourism MSMEs in developing regions (Indrajaya *et al.*, 2021). In fact, social commerce has unique characteristics such as social interaction and user communities that differ from conventional e-commerce. Second, existing approaches tend to be technical or consumer-oriented and do not emphasize phased strategies tailored to the readiness levels of business operators (Esmaceli *et al.*, 2020; Rahmadiane & Utami, 2022). Without such phased strategies, SMEs risk failing to adopt digitalization in a sustainable manner. Third, the contributions of local communities including the younger generation as digital talent and the role of community groups have not yet been fully integrated into the social commerce strategic framework (Asy'ari *et al.*, 2025; Utama *et al.*, 2025).

To address this gap, this study aims to formulate an adaptive digital social commerce empowerment strategy model for tourism MSMEs in developing regions. The novelty of this study lies in the integration of a phased strategy with an emphasis on the role of the community as an agent of digital transformation. Unlike the study by Esmaceli *et al.* (2020), which placed greater emphasis on tourism recommendation systems, or the study conducted by Rahmadiane & Utami (2022), which focused solely on general digital readiness, this study offers a contextual, community-based framework for phased interventions.

Thus, this study contributes to enriching the literature on social commerce in the field of sustainable tourism, while also providing a practical framework for empowering tourism MSMEs in developing regions. Therefore, this study not only expands our understanding of social commerce development but also offers concrete solutions for strengthening MSMEs in the tourism sector.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study design. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the conditions, barriers, and opportunities surrounding the use of social commerce by tourism MSMEs in developing regions. In line with the perspective of Creswell (2018), qualitative case studies allow researchers to explore phenomena in real-world contexts by drawing on a variety of data sources.

The main participants in this study were 23 tourism MSMEs operating in the culinary, handicrafts, tourism services, and destination management sectors across 12 tourist locations in Polewali-Mandar. Selection was conducted using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) actively operating in tourist destinations, (2) having a business social media account, and (3) being willing to be interviewed and observed. In addition, interviews were also conducted with officials from the Polewali Mandar Youth, Sports, and Tourism Office as key informants to strengthen source triangulation and validate the analysis results within the context of local policy.

To collect comprehensive empirical data, this study employed a threefold qualitative approach comprising semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and document review. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 tourism MSMEs to evaluate their digital readiness across eight key indicators: social media account ownership, promotional strategies, content quality, adoption of digital payment systems, utilization of social commerce features, customer responsiveness, comprehension of social media analytics, and prior participation in digital training programs. Second, participatory observations were carried out directly at the MSMEs' business locations. This provided firsthand insight into their operational practices, specifically observing their real-time promotional methods, customer interaction dynamics, content generation, and practical

implementation of social commerce features. Finally, a thorough document review was conducted, encompassing relevant academic literature, national strategic policies—namely RIRIN 2020–2045 and Asta Cita—and local government reports pertaining to tourism MSMEs. This was further supplemented by field-derived artifacts, such as promotional brochures and screenshots of the MSMEs' official social media platforms.

Data analysis was executed using the thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analytical process progressed through four systematic stages. First, data reduction was performed to condense and synthesize the raw data obtained from semi-structured interviews, participatory observations, and document reviews. Second, thematic coding was conducted to identify, analyze, and categorize recurrent patterns, specifically focusing on key themes such as operational barriers, growth opportunities, content strategies, and customer interaction dynamics. Third, the analyzed data were presented using descriptive narratives, readiness categorization tables (classified into low, medium, and high levels), and illustrative direct quotes from interviewees along with field observation notes to ensure empirical richness. Finally, the findings were synthesized to formulate a draft Strategic Model derived directly from the field-level patterns and insights identified during the analysis.

Data validity was ensured by applying the principle of trustworthiness (Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, 1985). Credibility was achieved through methodological triangulation (interviews, observations, and document analysis) and source triangulation (MSMEs, local communities, and the Tourism Office). The draft strategy model resulting from the initial analysis was then validated through a limited panel discussion involving the research team and officials from the Tourism Office as key informants. Transferability is ensured through a detailed contextual description of Polewali-Mandar. Dependability is achieved through systematic documentation of the research process. Confirmability is ensured through an audit trail consisting of field notes, interview transcripts, thematic coding results, and digital documentation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 23 tourism-related MSMEs spread across 12 tourist destinations in Polewali-Mandar Regency, West Sulawesi. The types of businesses represented were quite diverse, covering the culinary sector, handicrafts, homestays, and tourism services such as local guides and tourism equipment rentals. This variety of sectors provides a comprehensive picture of the direct contribution of MSMEs in supporting the growth of local tourism. Most participants are family-run businesses that have been passed down through generations. Many of them are managed by the second generation, who have taken over the business from their parents or close relatives. This reflects business continuity, but also indicates a tendency toward traditional management practices that have not yet been significantly influenced by digital innovation.

In terms of capacity, the majority of MSME operators have never participated in formal training on digital literacy or online marketing. This limitation has a direct impact on the minimal use of information technology in business activities, particularly in terms of promotion and customer interaction via digital platforms. Some participants mentioned that they are self-taught or receive assistance from younger family members. This participant profile confirms that tourism MSMEs in Polewali-Mandar have great potential to serve as a pillar of the region's tourism ecosystem. However, they also face structural challenges regarding the adoption of digital technology. Their status as family-run businesses, limited access to training, and low digital literacy are factors that affect their readiness to optimally adopt social commerce strategies.

Level of Digital Readiness

After describing the participants' profiles, the next step was to map the level of digital readiness among tourism MSMEs. It is important to understand digital readiness because it determines the extent to which business operators are able to adopt social commerce strategies on a sustainable basis. This mapping was conducted based on the results of semi-structured interviews and participatory observations, which were then descriptively categorized into three levels: low, moderate, and high. The low-moderate-high categories were determined based on the results of a qualitative interpretation of the interviews and observations. A summary of the digital readiness mapping results is presented in Table 1.

Field observations on table 2 show that most MSMEs simply upload product photos without engaging visuals or narratives capable of creating an emotional connection with their audience. The content they publish tends to be inconsistent, while their interactions with customers are largely passive; comments or messages rarely receive prompt or personalized responses. Furthermore, features such as Instagram Shop, TikTok Shop, and live selling have not yet been fully utilized.

Content quality tends to be “merely present.” Editing and storytelling are virtually nonexistent. This aligns with the research by Tao et al. (2024), which states that visual content and social interaction are the primary factors influencing purchase intent in social commerce. In other words, this situation poses a major obstacle. This situation indicates that the digital strategies implemented by MSMEs still tend to be one-way promotional in nature and have not yet evolved toward the creation of an interactive and dynamic social commerce ecosystem.

In fact, as noted by (Puteh et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2020), elements such as community interaction, user reviews, and recommendations among consumers are key factors in building customer trust in today's digital age.

"We only update our photos when there's a major event. Otherwise, we just leave them as they are." (Tourism equipment rental SME, 2025)

Table 1. Digital Readiness Levels of Tourism MSMEs in Polewali Mandar

Indicator	General Condition	Category
Social Media Account Ownership	Almost everyone has WhatsApp or Facebook; Instagram use is limited; TikTok is rarely used	Moderate
Digital Promotional Activities	Inconsistent- only when there are new products or specific events	Low
Content Quality	Casual photos, with minimal visual design or storytelling	Low
Digital payment system	Almost all transactions are still made in cash; QRIS and e-wallets are not yet in use	Low
Social commerce features	No one has used shopping carts, product tags, or live selling yet	Low
Customer feedback	Message replies are often slow, and there is little interaction	Low
Utilization of insights	Almost no one understands social media analytics	Low
Digital training experience	Very few have ever participated, with no follow-up	Low

Source: Data Collection (2025)

Table 2. Results of Participatory Observation

Aspect	Key Findings
Content Quality	Most of them are still simple photos; there are no professional designs yet
Consistency in Posting	Irregular; some only post updates when there are new products
Interaction with customers	There are comments/messages, but they're rarely taken seriously
Interactive features	Almost no one uses product tags, reviews, or live streams
Branding	There is currently no consistent visual identity (logo, tagline)

Source: Data Collection (2025)

Digital Literacy Deficits and Technological Hesitancy among Tourism MSMEs

The empirical findings of this study delineate four primary themes regarding the digital readiness of tourism micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Polewali Mandar: foundational digital literacy deficits, operational promotional inconsistency, minimal social commerce feature adoption, and nascent strategic opportunities.

Low Digital Literacy and Technological Hesitancy

The foremost barrier identified is a pervasive lack of advanced digital literacy among MSME owners. While basic digital familiarity exists, operational knowledge regarding the application of social media for strategic enterprise growth remains rudimentary. As one informant illustrated, *"We only know WhatsApp and Facebook, but we rarely use Instagram or TikTok for selling."* Another participant further corroborated this knowledge gap regarding advanced social commerce mechanisms, noting, *"We've heard that TikTok can be used for selling, but we don't know how."*

This pervasive technological hesitation aligns with the observations of Giyatmi et al. (2022), who highlighted that the absence of sustained digital training serves as a primary bottleneck to technology integration among MSMEs. Furthermore, as Munikrishnan et al. (2019) contend, traditional tourism enterprises frequently experience friction in information and communications technology (ICT) adoption due to limited technological self-efficacy and lingering skepticism regarding long-term returns on investment. In the broader context of digital disruption, such structural barriers—compounded by regulatory ambiguities and limited comprehension of emerging tools—severely impede organizational digital resilience (Zirar et al., 2024). Ultimately, as synthesized by Hadi Putra and Santoso (2020), social commerce adoption remains inextricably tied to technological readiness, internal managerial capacity, and institutional environmental pressures.

Inconsistent Digital Engagement and Operational Constraints

Secondly, the empirical data reveal a pronounced operational inconsistency in digital promotional endeavors. Business operators predominantly engage in sporadic content generation—typically tied to isolated events or new product releases—rather than maintaining a structured marketing cadence. This operational reality was succinctly articulated by a local vendor: *"When I'm busy at the warung, I don't have time to post."*

This behavior highlights a critical tension between immediate daily operations and long-term digital management. From a theoretical standpoint, this finding can be critically analyzed through the lens of *social*

presence theory (Tao et al., 2024), which asserts that continuous, predictable digital interaction is paramount to establishing brand trust and consumer rapport. The structural demographic profile of the respondents—predominantly aged between 35 and 50—further exacerbates this challenge, as primary management attention is continuously absorbed by offline operational survival rather than digital strategy execution.

Disparity in Social Commerce Feature Adoption

The third core theme centers on the minimal adoption of integrated social commerce functionality. Features such as in-app shopping carts, direct product tagging, and live-stream selling remain virtually unutilized across the surveyed enterprises. A stark manifestation of this disconnect was captured in one merchant's statement: *"We don't face any challenges because we don't engage in social commerce. I've never even heard of it."*

This empirical reality contrasts sharply with observations from more mature tourism ecosystems, such as Bali, where tourism SMEs have begun integrating these functionalities into their sales channels (Lei et al., 2023). This divergence underscores the crucial role of spatial and contextual determinants in technology diffusion; MSMEs situated in developing peripheral regions experience a distinct developmental lag compared to those operating within globally connected tourist hubs.

Strategic Opportunities and Community-Driven Interventions

Despite these multifaceted structural and technical impediments, the study uncovers significant contextual opportunities for digital transformation. High local social media penetration, combined with rich regional assets—such as Mandar's unique culinary heritage, cultural traditions, and natural landscapes—provides a strong foundation for differentiated digital branding. Crucially, the region possesses substantial social capital, characterized by active local tourism awareness groups (*Pokdarwis*) and an energetic youth demographic capable of serving as digital intermediaries. As noted by the Chair of a local *Pokdarwis*: *"The young people here are more skilled at making videos. If they were taught how to help MSMEs, the results would definitely be better."*

This perspective strongly reinforces the framework advocated by Halawani et al. (2020), which posits that community-based digital strategies are highly effective in driving technology adoption across regional tourism sectors. By adopting a network-based approach to build organizational resilience, synergy can be established among business operators, local government entities, and youth communities (Canevari-Luzardo, 2019). When targeted digital mentorship is paired with existing local social capital, tourism MSMEs in Polewali Mandar can effectively bypass structural limitations and achieve sustainable digital transformation.

Three-Level Intervention Strategy Model

Based on the data synthesis, this study proposes a three-level intervention strategy model (figure 1). To address the varying degrees of digital adoption among tourism MSMEs, this study conceptualizes a progressive, three-tiered digital capability framework designed to systematically build organizational capacity. At Level 1 (Basic Digital Literacy), the foundational objective centers on establishing formal digital operational infrastructure, where enterprises master professional account management (e.g., WhatsApp Business and Instagram Business), basic visual content creation, rudimentary copywriting, and the integration of digital payment gateways such as QRIS and e-wallets. Transitioning to Level 2 (Content & Interaction), enterprises leverage their foundational skills to enhance customer engagement through narrative-driven product storytelling—utilizing short-form video platforms like Reels and TikTok—alongside simulated interaction management and introductory exposure to social commerce tools, including Instagram Shop and TikTok Shop. Ultimately, Level 3 (Optimization & Branding) represents an advanced operational state in which MSMEs execute live-stream commerce, run targeted paid advertisements, interpret social media analytics, and cultivate culturally grounded digital branding through local community collaborations. Crucially, embedded across all three stages is an iterative evaluation protocol that mandates a formal reassessment whenever an enterprise fails to attain the designated readiness benchmarks following the completion of prescribed training and mentorship modules.

This model includes assessment systems at the beginning, middle, and end, so that each MSME can undergo a gradual and targeted digital transformation process. Before implementing technology-based interventions, it is important to assess the MSME's internal readiness, including human resources, organizational structure, and technological readiness (Pigosso et al., 2018). If an SME is not yet ready to advance to the next level, it will still receive support at the level it is currently at.

Once MSMEs have progressed from literacy to content to branding, they need a supportive ecosystem—that is, external support in the form of stable internet access, an understanding of regulations and consumer protection, and access to digital marketplaces and platforms. This ensures that once they reach Level 3, MSMEs can continue to grow and remain empowered, self-reliant, and sustainable. Once they reach the third level and have secured external support - consistent posting, a steadily growing

transaction volume, and a minimum number of repeat orders over a six-month period—these tourism MSMEs are considered empowered, self-reliant, and sustainable.

This model also demonstrates that the digital transformation of MSMEs cannot stop at improving digital literacy and promotion, but must be reinforced by a supportive ecosystem and sustainability measures so that its impact is tangible and long-lasting. This model is adaptive and contextual. Not all MSMEs need to move directly to the optimization stage. The majority require guidance tailored to their respective levels of readiness. This approach aligns with the principle of a phased capacity-building process (Miles, B. M. et al., 2014), and has been shown to support improved performance among tourism MSMEs, as demonstrated in a study (Halawani et al., 2020) conducted in Lebanon. Unlike the study by Esmaeili et al. (2020), which focused more on tourism recommendation systems, or that by Rahmadiane & Utami (2022), which examined only general digital readiness, this model emphasizes phased interventions based on readiness. This is the novelty of this research.

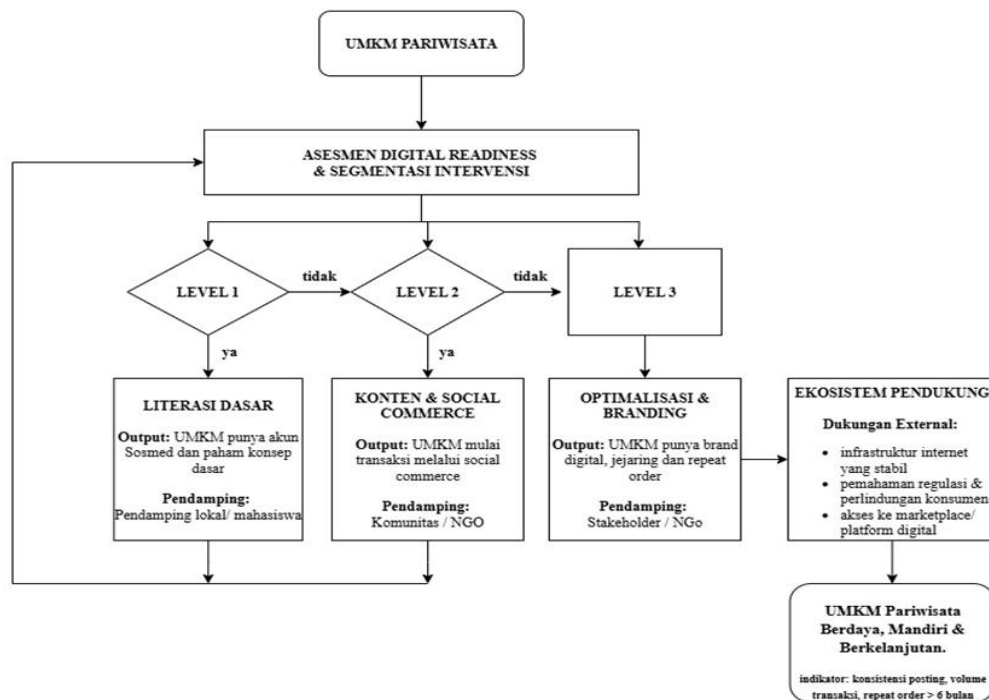


Figure 1. Three-Level Strategic Model for Social Commerce Interventions for Tourism MSMEs in Polewali Mandar (a Developing Region)

Model Validation

The strategic model formulated in this study was validated through a limited panel discussion involving the research team, two academics, and one official from the Tourism Office. This validation process yielded several important insights, including the need for a phased mentoring process and an emphasis on community collaboration in the social commerce strategy. As the urgency of digitalization increases, tourism MSMEs require guidance to design and implement ICT solutions that align with local capacities and needs (Scott et al., 2010). The results of the limited panel discussion reinforced the model's structure, which emphasizes basic digital literacy, content development and customer interaction, as well as the optimization of branding, digital payments, and community collaboration.

This strategic model has the potential to be replicated in other regions with similar characteristics—namely, family-based MSMEs, low digital literacy, but strong local community support. For example, other districts in West Sulawesi, South Sulawesi, or East Nusa Tenggara have relatively similar conditions. However, this model cannot be automatically applied in large urban areas with well-developed infrastructure, as MSMEs there have already moved beyond the basic digital literacy phase. Given these limitations, the model remains contextual and adaptable to the needs of developing regions.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the overall digital readiness among tourism MSMEs in Polewali Mandar remains predominantly at a foundational level. Grounded in a empirical data triangulation—encompassing readiness interviews, participatory observations across 23 enterprise respondents in 12 tourist destinations, and

semi-structured in-depth interviews—this research formulates a contextualized Three-Level Social Commerce Intervention Strategy Model. Designed to address field-identified operational bottlenecks, the model delineates a progressive, phased trajectory comprising: (1) basic digital literacy, (2) content creation and customer interaction management, and (3) strategic branding optimization, digital payment integration, and community-driven collaboration. This framework offers a novel contribution to the existing literature by providing a contextually tailored, step-by-step roadmap for accelerating digital transformation among small tourism enterprises operating within developing regional economies.

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