

DIGITAL IDENTITY AND CONSUMER TRUST: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF INSTAGRAM-BASED SMALL BUSINESSES IN MAKASSAR

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of social commerce has transformed Instagram into a strategic marketplace for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Indonesia, particularly in urban areas such as Makassar. As consumers increasingly rely on digital interactions to evaluate products and services, issues of authenticity, credibility, and trustworthiness become central to online purchasing behavior. While previous studies have extensively examined social media marketing and purchase intention, limited qualitative research has explored how urban consumers interpret digital identity and trust within Instagram-based MSME environments in Eastern Indonesia. This study addresses this gap by investigating how consumers in Makassar construct perceptions of trust toward local businesses operating through Instagram marketplaces. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 20 active Instagram consumers aged 19–34 in Makassar and supported by digital observations of selected MSME accounts. Thematic analysis revealed five major themes: visual authenticity as symbolic trust, interactive responsiveness and relational intimacy, consumer-generated content as social validation, skepticism toward curated branding, and locality-based emotional connection. Findings demonstrate that trust is not solely shaped by product quality but also by perceived transparency, communication style, and culturally familiar digital narratives. The study contributes to social commerce and consumer behavior literature by contextualizing digital trust formation within emerging urban Indonesian markets. Practically, the findings provide strategic insights for MSMEs seeking to strengthen consumer trust through authentic and culturally resonant Instagram branding.

Keywords: Digital Identity, Consumer Trust, Instagram Marketing, MSMEs, Makassar.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of digital commerce has fundamentally altered contemporary consumer behavior, particularly among urban populations that actively engage with social media platforms. Instagram has evolved beyond a visual-sharing application into a commercial ecosystem where consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase products through digitally mediated interactions. In Indonesia, the growth of Instagram-based commerce has been particularly significant among Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), which increasingly depend on social media visibility to survive in competitive urban markets.

Makassar, one of the largest metropolitan centers in Eastern Indonesia, has experienced rapid digital transformation alongside increasing internet penetration and smartphone adoption. Urban consumers in Makassar frequently utilize Instagram not only for entertainment and communication but also for culinary exploration, fashion consumption, beauty product purchasing, and local lifestyle engagement. This phenomenon has enabled local MSMEs to develop digital identities that shape consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions.

However, the expansion of Instagram commerce also creates challenges regarding authenticity and trustworthiness. Unlike traditional retail environments, Instagram-based transactions often occur without direct physical interaction between sellers and buyers. Consumers, therefore, rely heavily on symbolic cues such as visual presentation, customer testimonials, influencer endorsements, responsiveness, and

storytelling to evaluate business credibility. In this context, digital identity becomes a critical mechanism through which MSMEs establish legitimacy and relational trust.

Existing studies largely focus on quantitative relationships between social media marketing, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and purchase intention. Although such studies provide valuable insights, they often overlook how consumers subjectively interpret trust within local socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, limited research has examined how consumers in secondary metropolitan regions such as Makassar negotiate authenticity in social commerce environments characterized by increasing visual commodification and algorithmic marketing.

This study aims to explore how consumers in Makassar interpret the authenticity, credibility, and trustworthiness of Instagram-based MSMEs. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research question:

How do urban consumers in Makassar construct trust toward local MSME brands operating through Instagram marketplaces?

By adopting a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study contributes to digital marketing and consumer behavior scholarship by emphasizing lived consumer experiences and culturally embedded interpretations of trust within Indonesian social commerce environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Identity in Social Commerce

Digital identity refers to the representation of individuals or organizations within online environments through visual, textual, and interactive communication practices. In social commerce contexts, MSMEs construct digital identities through branding aesthetics, storytelling, engagement patterns, and platform activity. According to Labrecque et al. (2020), digital identity functions as a symbolic extension of brand personality that shapes consumer interpretation and emotional attachment.

Instagram particularly emphasizes visual communication, making aesthetic presentation central to consumer evaluation. Research demonstrates that visually coherent branding enhances perceptions of professionalism and credibility (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). However, excessive curation may simultaneously generate skepticism when consumers perceive content as artificial or overly commercialized.

Consumer Trust in Online Environments

Consumer trust represents the willingness of consumers to rely on sellers despite uncertainty and perceived risk. In online marketplaces, trust becomes especially important because consumers cannot physically inspect products before purchase. Gefen et al. (2020) argue that online trust emerges through perceived integrity, competence, and benevolence.

Within social commerce ecosystems, trust is often mediated through relational interactions and community validation. User-generated content, online reviews, testimonials, and peer recommendations significantly influence purchasing behavior. Hajli (2021) emphasizes that social support and digital interaction reduce uncertainty and enhance transactional confidence.

Authenticity and Instagram Marketing

Authenticity has become a dominant concept within digital marketing literature. Consumers increasingly seek brands that appear transparent, relatable, and emotionally genuine. Authenticity in Instagram commerce is frequently communicated through behind-the-scenes content, owner visibility, local storytelling, and interactive communication.

Studies indicate that consumers are more likely to trust brands that display imperfections and humanized communication styles rather than excessively polished corporate imagery (Audrezet et al., 2022). In Indonesia, authenticity is also shaped by cultural proximity and local identity, particularly among younger urban consumers who value relational familiarity.

Social Commerce and Indonesian MSMEs

The digitalization of Indonesian MSMEs has accelerated significantly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Instagram and TikTok have become strategic platforms for small businesses due to low entry barriers and high audience engagement. Previous studies demonstrate that social commerce adoption positively influences MSME competitiveness and customer engagement (Setiawati et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the literature remains dominated by studies conducted in Western Indonesia, especially Jakarta and Bandung. Research focusing on Eastern Indonesian urban consumers remains limited despite differing socio-cultural dynamics and digital consumption patterns.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore consumer experiences and interpretations regarding Instagram-based MSMEs in Makassar. Phenomenology was selected because the study seeks to understand how individuals subjectively experience authenticity and trust within digital commercial interactions.

Participants

Twenty participants were selected using purposive sampling. Participants consisted of active Instagram users aged between 19 and 34 years who had purchased products from local Instagram-based MSMEs within the previous six months. Participants included university students, young professionals, freelancers, and entrepreneurs residing in Makassar.

Data Collection

Data were collected between January and March 2026 through semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting approximately 45–70 minutes. Interviews explored participant experiences related to trust formation, authenticity perception, online communication, and purchasing behavior.

To strengthen contextual understanding, the study also conducted digital observations of 15 local MSME Instagram accounts operating in culinary, fashion, skincare, and lifestyle sectors.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s six-stage framework: familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Summary of Research Findings

Theme	Main Findings	Participant Illustrations	Theoretical Interpretation
Visual Authenticity as Symbolic Trust	Consumers perceived authentic and realistic visual content as more trustworthy than overly polished branding. Transparency through original photos, production processes, and unedited content increased credibility and reduced perceived risk.	“When the photos look too perfect, I become suspicious...” (Participant 7); “Local brands in Makassar that show their production process make me feel more confident...” (Participant 11)	Supports Authenticity Theory, where transparency and imperfection symbolize sincerity and honesty in digital branding.
Interactive Responsiveness and Relational Intimacy	Fast responses, friendly communication, and personalized interaction strengthened emotional closeness and consumer trust toward MSMEs. Relational communication was highly valued in Makassar’s digital culture.	“If they reply quickly and speak politely, I feel like they care about customers...” (Participant 3); “Some stores in Makassar remember returning customers...” (Participant 15)	Reflects Relationship Marketing Theory, emphasizing trust formation through repeated social interaction and emotional engagement.
Consumer Reviews as Collective Validation	Consumers relied heavily on testimonials, tagged posts, and peer-generated reviews to evaluate seller credibility. Social proof reduced uncertainty and increased purchase confidence.	“I always check tagged photos first...” (Participant 9); “When many people from Makassar repost the product, I feel safer buying it.” (Participant 18)	Aligns with Social Proof Theory and electronic word-of-mouth literature, where peer validation influences online trust formation.
Skepticism Toward Excessive Branding	Excessive influencer marketing and highly commercialized aesthetics generated distrust. Consumers critically evaluated whether branding reflected genuine product quality.	“Some Instagram shops look luxurious online, but when the product arrives, it feels disappointing.” (Participant 6); “Too many influencer promotions sometimes make the brand	Demonstrates the paradox of Digital Branding Performativity, where excessive visibility may weaken authenticity perceptions.

Local Identity and Emotional Connection	Businesses emphasizing Makassar identity, local culture, and community familiarity generated stronger emotional attachment and consumer confidence.	look fake...” (Participant 14) “I prefer local Makassar brands because I feel closer to them.” (Participant 4); “When businesses use local slang or show familiar places in Makassar, it creates an emotional connection.” (Participant 17)	Expands Social Commerce and Symbolic Capital Theory, highlighting how regional identity strengthens digital trust and emotional proximity.
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Source: Author, 2026

Theme 1: Visual Authenticity as Symbolic Trust

Participants frequently associated authentic visual presentation with credibility and professionalism. Consumers preferred businesses that uploaded original product photos, behind-the-scenes content, and realistic customer experiences rather than overly edited promotional material.

One participant stated:

“When the photos look too perfect, I become suspicious. I trust stores that show real packaging, real customers, and even simple mistakes because it feels honest.” (Participant 7)

Another participant explained:

“Local brands in Makassar that show their production process make me feel more confident because they seem transparent.” (Participant 11)

These findings support authenticity theory, which suggests that consumers interpret imperfection and transparency as indicators of sincerity. Unlike highly commercialized branding, localized visual authenticity creates emotional familiarity and reduces perceived risk.

The findings also challenge the assumption that polished aesthetics automatically increase trust. Instead, consumers critically evaluate whether visual branding reflects genuine business practices or merely algorithmic marketing strategies.

Theme 2: Interactive Responsiveness and Relational Intimacy

Participants emphasized that responsiveness significantly shaped perceptions of trustworthiness. Fast replies, friendly communication, and personalized interaction contributed to relational intimacy between consumers and MSMEs.

One participant noted:

“If they reply quickly and speak politely, I feel like they care about customers, not just sales.” (Participant 3)

Another participant stated:

“Some stores in Makassar remember returning customers and use casual local language. That makes the interaction feel personal.” (Participant 15)

This theme reflects relationship marketing theory, where trust emerges through repeated social interaction rather than transactional exchange alone. In Makassar’s urban culture, relational communication and familiarity remain highly valued even within digital environments.

Theme 3: Consumer Reviews as Collective Validation

Participants consistently relied on testimonials, tagged posts, and customer reviews to evaluate seller credibility. User-generated content functioned as collective social evidence that reduced uncertainty.

A participant explained:

“I always check tagged photos first because official posts can be manipulated, but customer uploads are usually more honest.” (Participant 9)

Another participant remarked:

“When many people from Makassar repost the product, I feel safer buying it.” (Participant 18)

This finding aligns with social proof theory and previous studies on electronic word-of-mouth. Consumers perceive peer-generated content as more trustworthy than direct advertising because it appears less commercially motivated.

However, participants also acknowledged increasing skepticism toward fabricated testimonials and influencer endorsements. Several respondents expressed concern regarding paid promotions that lacked transparency.

Theme 4: Skepticism Toward Excessive Branding

Although participants appreciated aesthetic branding, excessive commercialization often generated distrust. Consumers perceived some businesses as prioritizing visual performance over actual product quality.

One participant stated:

“Some Instagram shops look luxurious online, but when the product arrives, it feels disappointing.” (Participant 6)

Another explained:

“Too many influencer promotions sometimes make the brand look fake instead of trustworthy.” (Participant 14)

This finding demonstrates the paradox of digital branding: while visibility increases exposure, excessive performativity may undermine authenticity. Consumers in Makassar appear increasingly digitally literate and capable of critically evaluating persuasive marketing tactics.

Theme 5: Local Identity and Emotional Connection

Participants expressed stronger trust toward businesses that emphasized Makassar identity, local culture, and community familiarity.

One respondent noted:

“I prefer local Makassar brands because I feel closer to them. It feels easier to trust people from the same city.” (Participant 4)

Another participant commented:

“When businesses use local slang or show familiar places in Makassar, it creates an emotional connection.” (Participant 17)

These findings suggest that locality functions as symbolic social capital in digital commerce. Shared cultural identity reduces psychological distance and enhances consumer confidence. This perspective expands social commerce literature by highlighting how regional identity influences digital trust formation.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that consumer trust toward Instagram-based MSMEs in Makassar is shaped through complex interactions between visual representation, relational communication, social validation, and cultural familiarity. Unlike conventional online purchasing models that primarily emphasize transactional efficiency, consumers in this study interpreted trust as a socially constructed and emotionally negotiated process embedded within digital interactions. The findings reveal that digital identity is not merely a branding strategy but a symbolic mechanism through which MSMEs communicate authenticity, legitimacy, and relational closeness to consumers.

The first theme, visual authenticity as symbolic trust, indicates that consumers increasingly value transparency and realism in digital branding practices. Participants associated original product images, behind-the-scenes content, and unfiltered visual presentation with honesty and credibility. This finding supports the argument of Audrezet et al. (2022), who suggest that consumers perceive imperfection and humanized content as stronger indicators of authenticity compared to highly curated promotional imagery. In the context of Makassar, visual authenticity also appears connected to local consumer skepticism toward excessive commercialization on Instagram. Consumers no longer passively consume visual content; instead, they actively evaluate whether branding reflects genuine business operations or merely algorithmic performance designed to maximize engagement. This finding challenges traditional assumptions in digital marketing that professional aesthetics automatically increase consumer trust. Instead, authenticity emerges from perceived transparency rather than visual perfection alone.

The findings further reveal that responsiveness and interpersonal communication significantly influence trust formation within Instagram marketplaces. Participants emphasized the importance of quick responses, personalized interactions, and the use of informal local communication styles. This reflects the principles of relationship marketing theory, where trust develops through ongoing relational exchanges rather than isolated transactions. Hajli (2021) argues that social commerce environments encourage interactive engagement that reduces uncertainty and strengthens consumer confidence. In Makassar's socio-cultural context, relational intimacy remains highly valued, even within digital spaces. The use of casual language, personalized greetings, and culturally familiar expressions contributed to emotional closeness between consumers and MSMEs. This suggests that digital trust in Indonesia cannot be fully understood through technological functionality alone, as cultural communication norms continue to shape online consumer behavior.

Another important finding concerns the role of consumer-generated content as collective social validation. Participants consistently relied on tagged photos, customer testimonials, and reposted consumer experiences when evaluating seller credibility. This supports previous studies emphasizing the importance of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) in influencing online purchasing decisions (Mala et al., 2023). Consumers perceived peer-generated content as more trustworthy because it appeared less commercially manipulated compared to official promotional posts. However, the findings also demonstrate increasing consumer awareness regarding fabricated testimonials and paid influencer promotions. This reflects the growing digital literacy of urban consumers in Makassar, who are becoming more critical of persuasive marketing tactics. The findings, therefore, extend social proof theory by illustrating that consumers not only seek validation from peer content but also critically evaluate the authenticity of such validation itself.

The theme of skepticism toward excessive branding highlights a paradox within Instagram-based commerce. While visual branding enhances market visibility and brand recognition, excessive performativity may simultaneously undermine credibility. Participants expressed distrust toward

businesses perceived as overly dependent on influencer endorsements, luxury aesthetics, or aggressive promotional strategies. This finding aligns with Marwick's (2021) concept of the "algorithmic brand," where businesses increasingly optimize visibility according to platform logic, sometimes at the expense of perceived authenticity. The results suggest that urban consumers in Makassar are not fully persuaded by symbolic indicators of popularity or aesthetic sophistication. Instead, they compare digital presentation with actual product experience and evaluate consistency between online identity and offline reality. This finding demonstrates that trust is fragile within social commerce ecosystems and can quickly deteriorate when branding performance exceeds product quality.

The final theme, locality-based emotional connection, reveals the importance of cultural proximity in shaping consumer trust. Participants expressed stronger confidence toward businesses that incorporated Makassar identity through local language, familiar urban imagery, and regional cultural references. This finding expands existing social commerce literature by demonstrating that locality functions as symbolic social capital in digital marketplaces. Shared cultural identity reduced psychological distance and increased emotional familiarity between consumers and businesses. In collectivist social contexts such as Indonesia, trust is often relationally embedded rather than purely transactional. Therefore, consumers may perceive local MSMEs as more relatable and socially accountable compared to anonymous national or international brands. This finding also suggests that digital identity construction among MSMEs is deeply influenced by local cultural narratives rather than solely by globalized branding standards.

Collectively, the findings indicate that consumer trust within Instagram-based commerce is multidimensional and culturally contextualized. Trust is not formed exclusively through product quality or platform functionality but through the interaction of symbolic authenticity, relational communication, peer validation, and localized emotional attachment. Consumers actively negotiate trust by interpreting digital cues, evaluating consistency, and comparing online representations with social experiences. This demonstrates that digital identity in social commerce functions simultaneously as a marketing tool, a relational mechanism, and a cultural performance.

The study contributes theoretically to consumer behavior and social commerce literature by contextualizing digital trust formation within an emerging urban Indonesian setting. Most existing studies on social commerce rely heavily on quantitative frameworks emphasizing purchase intention and platform engagement. In contrast, this study highlights the subjective and culturally embedded nature of trust construction among urban consumers in Makassar. The findings also reinforce the relevance of authenticity theory, relationship marketing theory, and social proof theory within contemporary Instagram commerce environments.

Practically, the findings suggest that MSMEs should prioritize authentic engagement strategies rather than relying solely on aesthetic optimization and influencer visibility. Consumers increasingly value transparent storytelling, responsive interaction, and culturally resonant communication. Businesses that maintain consistency between digital representation and actual consumer experience are more likely to establish sustainable trust relationships. Moreover, emphasizing local identity and community familiarity may provide competitive advantages for MSMEs operating in urban Indonesian social commerce markets.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how urban consumers in Makassar interpret authenticity, credibility, and trustworthiness toward Instagram-based MSMEs. The findings demonstrate that consumer trust within social commerce environments is socially and culturally constructed through visual authenticity, relational interaction, peer validation, critical evaluation of branding practices, and emotional connection to local identity.

The study reveals that consumers are not passive recipients of digital marketing messages. Instead, they actively interpret symbolic cues, negotiate authenticity, and critically assess credibility within Instagram marketplaces. While aesthetic branding remains important, consumers increasingly value transparency, responsiveness, and culturally familiar communication.

Theoretically, this study contributes to digital marketing and consumer behavior literature by contextualizing online trust formation within emerging urban Indonesian settings. It also extends social commerce scholarship by emphasizing the intersection between digital identity and locality-based emotional attachment.

Practically, the findings suggest that MSMEs should prioritize authentic communication strategies rather than excessively curated branding. Transparent storytelling, responsive interaction, and community-oriented digital engagement may strengthen long-term consumer trust more effectively than purely promotional approaches.

Future studies may expand this research by examining cross-platform comparisons between Instagram, TikTok, and marketplace applications or by investigating generational differences in digital trust construction.

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