

# Empowering Communities through Digitalization and Marketing: A Community Service Initiative in Pematang Johar Village

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**Abstract:** *Community empowerment through digital literacy has become increasingly important, especially for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) that serve as the backbone of Indonesia's rural economy. This community service project, conducted in Pematang Johar Village, Deli Serdang Regency, aimed to strengthen the capacity of local MSMEs in implementing digital marketing strategies to improve product visibility and tourism potential. The activity was part of an international collaboration between several universities from Indonesia and Malaysia. The method used combined education, training, and mentoring, focusing on practical use of social media and online branding. Results showed that participants were able to create promotional content, manage social media pages, and integrate local tourism themes into their business promotion. The program encouraged MSMEs to adopt a digital mindset and positioned Pematang Johar as a community ready to develop sustainable digital tourism.*

## Keywords:

*Community Empowerment; Community Service; Digital Marketing; Digitalization; Rural Tourism*

## Introduction

The role of digital transformation has become increasingly central in driving the growth of rural economies. In today's rapidly evolving global marketplace, technology acts as both a catalyst and an equalizer, enabling small businesses to compete beyond geographical limitations. The ability of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) to adopt and utilize digital technology now determines not only their market reach but also their long-term sustainability and competitiveness (Kotler & Keller, 2020). In Indonesia, MSMEs hold a strategic position in the national economy, contributing more than 60% to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employing nearly 97% of the total workforce (Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs,

2024). Despite their major contribution, many MSMEs especially those located in rural and semi-urban regions continue to face barriers in adopting digital tools for marketing, sales, and brand development (Otoritas Jasa Keuangan, 2022).

Several factors contribute to these challenges, including limited digital literacy, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of access to training or mentorship programs. Many small business owners still rely on traditional promotional strategies such as printed banners, local exhibitions, and word-of-mouth marketing, which restrict their visibility to a narrow customer base (Norrahman, 2023). This condition highlights the urgency of empowering rural entrepreneurs with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate digital platforms effectively. The transformation toward digital marketing not only allows businesses to communicate directly with customers but also helps build stronger brand positioning, enhance customer engagement, and increase market competitiveness (Kotler & Keller, 2020).

Pematang Johar Village, located in Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra, represents one of Indonesia's rural communities with vast potential for economic and tourism development. The village is characterized by its rich agricultural landscapes, traditional culinary heritage, and unique local culture, making it a promising site for community-based tourism initiatives. However, the majority of local MSMEs in Pematang Johar still operate using conventional approaches and have limited exposure to online marketing channels. This lack of digital engagement has made it difficult for them to expand their market reach, attract visitors, and strengthen their business identity in the digital era (Yusrizal et al., 2024).

To address these challenges, the International Community Service Program was initiated as a collaborative effort between STIE Eka Prasetya, Universitas Syiah Kuala (USK), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Malaysia, and University College Bestari (UCB) Malaysia. The program aimed to provide comprehensive training and mentoring in digital marketing, helping local MSMEs enhance their online presence, create attractive promotional content, and align marketing activities with the broader tourism vision of Pematang Johar Village. Through practical, hands-on learning sessions, the program introduced participants to social media marketing, content creation, branding strategies, and e-commerce utilization as key tools for business expansion.

This initiative also aligns with the broader national and international frameworks for sustainable development. In particular, it supports the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) notably Goal 8, which promotes inclusive and sustainable

economic growth and decent work opportunities, and Goal 9, which focuses on fostering innovation, digital infrastructure, and technological advancement in rural communities (United Nations, 2023). The integration of MSME development with digital technology provides a pathway for achieving inclusive prosperity and strengthening the resilience of rural economies in facing the challenges of globalization (Iskandarsyah et al., 2023).

Moreover, by combining elements of entrepreneurship, innovation, and tourism promotion, the digital empowerment of MSMEs in Pematang Johar contributes to a more dynamic and participatory model of local development. As noted by Yusrizal et al. (2024), sustainable economic progress in rural settings depends not only on financial capital but also on human capacity and digital readiness. Therefore, programs that bridge academic expertise with community empowerment—such as this international collaboration play a vital role in realizing digital inclusion and building a self-reliant local economy.



Figure 1. Opening Ceremony of the International Community Service in Pematang Johar Village

## Method

The community service activity was carried out on October 15, 2025, in Pematang Johar Village, located in the Deli Serdang Regency of North Sumatra. This location was selected due to its growing potential in community-based tourism and the presence of active local entrepreneurs eager to expand their businesses through digital platforms. A total of 100 participants took part in this program,

consisting of MSME owners, local youth representatives, and members of the village's tourism management committee. The activity formed part of an *International Community Service Program*, jointly organized by STIE Eka Prasetya, Universitas Syiah Kuala (USK), Universitas Negeri Medan (UNIMED), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Malaysia, and University College Bestari (UCB).

The approach used in this program was the Participatory Training Model, emphasizing collaboration, experiential learning, and problem-based engagement between facilitators and participants. The implementation combined lectures, workshops, interactive discussions, and personal mentoring sessions, allowing participants not only to acquire theoretical understanding but also to immediately apply practical digital marketing techniques suitable for their business context.

#### **a. Preparation Stage**

The preparation phase began several weeks prior to the main event and involved a series of preliminary assessments to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of the program. The implementing team conducted field observations, focus group discussions (FGDs), and semi-structured interviews with MSME owners, youth leaders, and the Pematang Johar village administration.

The main objectives of this stage were to:

1. Identify the current level of digital literacy among MSME actors.
2. Map the types of products and services offered (such as traditional snacks, handicrafts, and homestays).
3. Determine the main barriers in marketing, branding, and communication.

The findings revealed that most MSMEs still relied heavily on conventional marketing methods, such as printed flyers, roadside stalls, and word-of-mouth promotion. Only a few had active social media accounts, and even fewer used e-commerce platforms. Many participants admitted to having difficulties in taking high-quality product photos, writing persuasive captions, or understanding the algorithms of social media platforms. These insights became the foundation for developing customized learning materials tailored to the local needs and digital readiness of the community.

In addition, the preparation stage also involved coordination

meetings among academic partners and the village government. The team from STIE Eka Prasetya focused on local MSME empowerment and entrepreneurship, while representatives from Universiti Teknologi MARA contributed expertise in content design and digital branding. This cross-institutional collaboration ensured that the training content reflected both international best practices and local realities.

#### **b. Training and Workshop**

Based on the diagnostic findings, the team designed a series of interactive learning sessions structured into three main modules:

1. Digital Marketing Fundamentals – This module introduced participants to basic concepts such as target audience identification, value proposition, and digital branding strategies. Facilitators explained how digital marketing differs from traditional approaches and emphasized its advantages in expanding market reach at low cost.
2. Social Media Content Creation – Participants were guided through the process of creating engaging digital content using smartphones. They practiced photography techniques for product display, learned basic editing skills, and explored storytelling strategies that highlight Pematang Johar's cultural and tourism uniqueness.
3. E-commerce and Online Platform Utilization – This module introduced participants to online marketplaces and booking platforms, such as Tokopedia, Shopee, and Google Business Profiles. They were shown how to list products, manage online transactions, and interact with potential customers.

The workshop adopted a *learning-by-doing* approach, where participants directly practiced every concept under the guidance of facilitators. Instead of focusing on technical complexity, the training emphasized creativity, authenticity, and consistency in building a digital presence. To make the sessions more engaging, participants were grouped according to product categories such as culinary, craft, or tourism service so they could share experiences and develop ideas collaboratively.

In between sessions, short discussions and experience-sharing activities were conducted, allowing participants to present their newly created content and receive feedback. This interactive format encouraged peer learning and

helped participants gain confidence in promoting their products online.



Figure 2. Group Photo of Participants and Facilitators during the International Community Service Program

### c. Mentoring and Evaluation

Following the main training, participants underwent a mentoring phase to help them implement the newly acquired skills in real business contexts. Facilitators provided one-on-one assistance to each MSME actor, guiding them in setting up or improving their digital business profiles. Participants were encouraged to upload authentic product photos, create promotional captions, and use hashtags linking their businesses with Pematang Johar's tourism identity such as *#ExplorePematangJohar* and *#UMKMPematangJohar*.

Mentoring activities continued over the next several weeks through online communication channels, ensuring that participants remained engaged and motivated. The mentors also monitored progress through feedback sessions and follow-up discussions with MSME owners.

The evaluation of the program employed both quantitative and qualitative methods.

- a. Quantitative data were obtained through pre-test and post-test instruments that measured participants' understanding of digital marketing, social media management, and content creation. The results showed a significant increase in comprehension from an average score of 32% in the pre-test to 85% in the post-test.



- b. Qualitative evaluation was conducted through direct observation and participant reflection. Many MSME owners reported improved confidence in managing online promotions and an increased sense of ownership toward their digital branding.

In addition, several MSME participants successfully established active social media pages for their products, while others integrated tourism elements into their marketing narratives for example, promoting their products as “authentic souvenirs of Pematang Johar” or showcasing village scenery as part of their content.

Overall, the mentoring and evaluation stage revealed not only measurable knowledge improvement but also a positive behavioral shift among participants from passive observers of digital trends to active content creators contributing to the village’s tourism image. This stage also demonstrated the importance of continuous mentoring, as consistent guidance and motivation were crucial to ensuring that participants maintained their digital engagement over time.



Figure 3. Presentation Session on Digital Marketing Strategies by the Facilitators

#### d. Sustainability and Follow-Up Plan

Sustainability is an essential component of every community empowerment initiative. Therefore, beyond the short-term outcomes of training and mentoring, this program was designed with a structured follow-up plan to ensure the continuity and long-term effectiveness of the digital transformation process among MSMEs in Pematang Johar Village.

The first sustainability strategy was the establishment of the Pematang

Johar Digital Marketing Community, a group composed of active MSME participants, youth representatives (*Karang Taruna*), and students from STIE Eka Prasetya. This community serves as a peer-learning hub where members can exchange ideas, share new trends in digital promotion, and help one another manage online platforms. The group also functions as a local support system, ensuring that participants who face difficulties in digital implementation can receive assistance from fellow members or mentors.

Secondly, the program initiated collaboration with academic institutions to provide continuous mentoring and monitoring. STIE Eka Prasetya and Universitas Syiah Kuala (USK) committed to sending student interns and faculty members periodically to assist MSMEs in developing more advanced digital skills, such as video marketing, data analytics, and e-commerce optimization. This ongoing academic engagement not only strengthens the university's community outreach mission but also creates a real-world learning environment for students through direct social contribution (Afandi et al., 2022).

In addition, the team proposed the development of a Digital Tourism Portal for Pematang Johar Village an integrated online platform showcasing local products, homestays, and tourism attractions. This portal is envisioned to act as a unified digital window for potential visitors and consumers, promoting both entrepreneurship and village tourism simultaneously. By connecting MSME digital profiles to this central portal, the visibility of Pematang Johar's creative economy can expand to a broader regional and even international audience.

The program also emphasized the importance of partnerships with local government and private sectors. The Village Head of Pematang Johar and representatives from the Deli Serdang tourism office expressed their commitment to continue supporting digital literacy programs through local funding and public-private collaborations. In the long term, the goal is to incorporate digital marketing activities into the village's annual tourism agenda, ensuring alignment with regional economic development policies.

Furthermore, evaluation and monitoring mechanisms were established to track progress every six months. This involves collecting data on the number of active MSME social media accounts, engagement metrics, and sales performance improvements. The data will be used to assess the effectiveness of



the program and identify areas for improvement in future iterations.

Lastly, the sustainability plan includes encouraging participants to become local trainers or “digital ambassadors”. Selected MSME representatives who demonstrated high capability and motivation during the training are encouraged to share their knowledge with new entrepreneurs in surrounding villages. This “train-the-trainer” approach ensures that the benefits of the program continue to spread organically within the community, promoting a culture of collaboration and self-reliance.

Overall, the sustainability strategy demonstrates that digital empowerment is not a one-time intervention but a continuous process that requires consistent learning, collaboration, and adaptation. By combining community initiative, academic partnership, and institutional support, Pematang Johar is well-positioned to evolve into a self-sustaining digital tourism village, serving as a model for rural digital transformation in Indonesia.

## Result

The *International Community Service Program* conducted in Pematang Johar Village produced significant improvements in both knowledge and practice among participants. The outcomes can be observed across several dimensions: changes in digital literacy levels, improvements in marketing skills, increased confidence, and stronger collaboration between local MSMEs and youth organizations.

Prior to the program, most MSME owners in Pematang Johar relied heavily on traditional marketing approaches such as face-to-face sales, banners, and word-of-mouth promotion. Their understanding of digital marketing was limited, and only a small percentage had ever used social media or online platforms for business purposes. Based on the preliminary survey of 50 participants, it was found that:

Table 1. Field Survey Result

Survey Indicator	Before Training (%)	After Training (%)	Increase (%)
Understanding of digital marketing concepts	30	88	+58

Survey Indicator	Before Training (%)	After Training (%)	Increase (%)
Ability to create product photos and digital content	25	85	+60
Use of social media for business promotion	28	82	+54
Confidence in managing online branding	22	80	+58
Integration of tourism elements in product promotion	20	75	+55

(Source: Field survey conducted by the Pematang Johar Community Service Team, 2025)

These data demonstrate a remarkable knowledge increase in all indicators, with an average overall improvement of +57%. The most significant gain was observed in the participants' ability to create product photos and digital content—an area previously identified as their main weakness. This result aligns with Iskandarsyah et al. (2023), who found that practical, hands-on digital marketing training can rapidly enhance both skills and self-confidence among rural entrepreneurs.

### *Change in Knowledge and Digital Practices*

During the post-training phase, participants were observed actively applying the skills they had learned. They began to conceptualize their products not merely as commodities but as cultural representations of their village. For example, several traditional snack producers adopted the branding slogan “Authentic Souvenirs from Pematang Johar” and redesigned their packaging to include visual elements symbolizing local identity.

Similarly, homestay owners started to create business profiles on Facebook and Instagram, posting photos of their rooms and surrounding landscapes to attract potential visitors. They learned how to respond to customer inquiries online and manage booking requests through direct messages. Several participants also expressed pride in being able to handle these processes independently, which they previously assumed required professional assistance.

A follow-up post-activity survey revealed that:

- a. **85%** of participants reported feeling more confident using social media for promotion.
- b. **78%** stated they could now edit product photos using smartphone applications.
- c. **70%** had created at least one digital marketing post within two weeks after the program.
- d. **60%** experienced increased inquiries or engagement on their social media pages.

These findings clearly illustrate that knowledge transfer translated into tangible behavioral change. The ability to integrate technology into business operations marks a critical step toward digital inclusion and empowerment.

### ***Strengthening Collective Identity and Tourism Branding***

One of the most meaningful outcomes of this activity was the emergence of a shared digital identity for the village. Through discussions and brainstorming during the workshop, participants collectively agreed to use the hashtag #ExplorePematangJohar for all online promotional posts. This grassroots initiative gave birth to a unified branding approach, connecting diverse businesses—culinary, crafts, and homestays—under one recognizable village identity.

Within the first month after implementation, participants' combined online visibility increased significantly. Based on monitoring of social media metrics:

- a. The total number of business-related posts tagged with #ExplorePematangJohar grew from 15 to 120.
- b. The average number of likes and comments per post rose by 48%.
- c. Several MSMEs reported receiving new customers from outside Deli Serdang Regency, including inquiries from Medan and Binjai.

The unification of MSME promotions under a shared hashtag created what Kotler and Keller (2020) describe as a “co-branding ecosystem” where collective storytelling amplifies individual marketing efforts. By framing their businesses as part of a tourism narrative, MSME owners successfully merged economic and cultural promotion, turning local entrepreneurship into a channel for destination marketing.

The involvement of Karang Taruna (youth organization) also proved vital for sustainability. Many young participants took the initiative to assist MSME owners

with content creation, video editing, and social media management. This collaboration bridged the generational digital gap: older entrepreneurs contributed business wisdom and authenticity, while younger participants provided technical proficiency and creativity. The intergenerational teamwork not only sustained digital activity but also strengthened community solidarity and shared purpose.

### ***Participant Feedback and Reflection***

Qualitative data were gathered through interviews and focus group discussions at the end of the mentoring phase. Participants' reflections provided deeper insight into how the program affected their perspectives. Some representative statements include:

"Before the training, I thought social media was only for young people. Now I can promote my cake business myself."

*(Female MSME participant, 43 years old)*

"We learned that a good photo and caption can make a big difference. My customers now order through WhatsApp after seeing my Instagram post."

*(Snack producer, 37 years old)*

"We feel proud because people outside our area now know about Pematang Johar. This motivates us to keep posting."

*(Homestay owner, 49 years old)*

Such feedback highlights not only increased digital competence but also enhanced self-esteem and ownership among participants. Empowerment, therefore, extended beyond technical skill acquisition—it fostered confidence and a sense of belonging to a larger digital community.

These outcomes reinforce the findings of Yusrizal et al. (2024) that digital empowerment in rural contexts must go hand in hand with community building and motivational reinforcement to ensure lasting transformation.

### ***Challenges and Adaptive Strategies***

While the overall results were highly positive, several challenges were encountered during implementation. The most common difficulties included:

1. Limited internet access in some parts of the village, which caused delays in uploading photos or videos.
2. Varying quality of devices, as many participants used older smartphones with low storage or outdated applications.

3. Time management constraints, since most MSME owners had to balance business activities with household responsibilities.

To address these issues, the facilitators implemented several adaptive strategies:

1. Offline learning materials such as printed modules and USB-based tutorial videos were distributed to ensure inclusivity for participants with poor internet access.
2. Participants were grouped into small clusters to encourage peer learning, where those with better devices assisted others.
3. Short, flexible mentoring sessions were scheduled during weekends to accommodate participants' availability.

Despite infrastructural challenges, these adaptive approaches ensured that 100% of participants completed the program and gained measurable improvements in their digital marketing knowledge. The experience also proved that when learning is contextualized and participatory, technological limitations can be overcome through community collaboration.

### ***Implications for Sustainable Digital Empowerment***

The findings from this program provide several insights relevant to rural digital development strategies. First, digital transformation must begin with behavioral change, not just technology introduction. By reframing digital tools as storytelling and marketing instruments, participants became more motivated to adopt them voluntarily.

Second, mentorship and peer support are crucial. Post-program follow-ups showed that participants who joined the *Pematang Johar Digital Marketing Community* remained active online, while those who did not engage in follow-ups tended to regress in activity. This highlights the importance of maintaining continuous engagement and social motivation to prevent digital stagnation (Lusardi & Messy, 2023).

Finally, collaboration between academia, local government, and community actors proved effective in fostering both knowledge transfer and social capital. The participatory, cross-sectoral model used in this program can serve as a blueprint for other villages aiming to integrate MSME empowerment with digital tourism branding.

## Discussion

In summary, the community service activity brought measurable progress in digital literacy, online engagement, and collaborative branding among MSME actors in Pematang Johar. The program transformed local entrepreneurs from passive technology users into active digital promoters of their own village. Although limited infrastructure remains a challenge, the evidence from survey results, participant reflections, and social media performance suggests that the digital transformation process in Pematang Johar has been successfully initiated and can serve as a model for sustainable rural innovation in Indonesia.

## Conclusion

### *Conclusion*

The International Community Service Program held in Pematang Johar Village, Deli Serdang Regency, successfully demonstrated the transformative impact of digital marketing training on rural MSMEs and community-based tourism initiatives. Through a participatory and experiential learning approach, the program enabled local entrepreneurs to acquire practical skills, adopt digital platforms, and collectively promote their village's identity through online branding.

Survey results showed a remarkable improvement in participants' digital marketing knowledge and confidence. The average post-test scores increased from 32% to 85%, while 85% of participants reported greater confidence in using social media for business. The creation of a shared hashtag, #ExplorePematangJohar, became a symbol of collective digital identity, linking MSME products with the village's tourism narrative. This innovation led to increased online visibility and strengthened community cohesion.

The findings highlight that digital empowerment in rural contexts goes beyond technical training—it is a process of social and cultural transformation. By integrating marketing, storytelling, and tourism promotion, MSME actors in Pematang Johar began to view themselves not only as business owners but also as ambassadors of their village's cultural and economic heritage. This sense of ownership is essential in sustaining long-term development.

Furthermore, the involvement of local youth groups (*Karang Taruna*) in supporting content creation and digital promotion established a bridge between generations. Their participation ensured that digital practices would continue beyond the training period, making the initiative more resilient. This intergenerational

collaboration also aligns with the principles of *inclusive digital development*, where technological adoption becomes a community effort rather than an individual challenge.

In essence, the program contributed to the realization of several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly:

- a. Goal 4 (Quality Education): Providing digital literacy and practical entrepreneurship training.
- b. Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth): Enhancing MSME competitiveness and supporting sustainable livelihoods.
- c. Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure): Strengthening digital innovation and access in rural communities.

The collective outcome of this program underscores that digital marketing serves not only as a commercial strategy but as a key driver for social empowerment, cultural promotion, and local tourism advancement. Pematang Johar's experience shows that when local wisdom and digital innovation intersect, community transformation becomes both achievable and sustainable.

### ***Recommendations***

Based on the outcomes and challenges identified throughout this initiative, several recommendations are proposed for future implementation, policy alignment, and academic contribution:

#### **1. Continuous Mentorship and Capacity Building**

The post-training phase should not mark the end of the empowerment process. Regular mentoring, follow-up workshops, and online discussion groups are essential to maintain participants' motivation and adapt to evolving digital trends. Collaboration with local universities can ensure ongoing technical support and facilitate student involvement in community-based digital mentoring.

#### **2. Strengthening Digital Infrastructure**

Stable and affordable internet access remains a prerequisite for successful digital transformation. Partnerships between local governments, telecommunication providers, and private sectors are recommended to improve connectivity in Pematang Johar. This includes the installation of Wi-Fi hotspots in public areas such as community halls or MSME centers to facilitate digital activities.

#### **3. Establishment of a Community Digital Hub**

The formation of a Pematang Johar Digital Hub can provide a shared



workspace for MSME owners and youth to access digital tools, attend training, and develop creative content. Such a center can also serve as a tourism information point, integrating product showcases, booking systems, and cultural event promotion within one digital ecosystem.

#### **4. Integration with Village Tourism Policy**

The local government should formally include digital marketing activities in Pematang Johar's tourism development plan. Allocating annual budget support for digital promotion, branding campaigns, and training will institutionalize the initiative and ensure sustainability. Collaboration with regional tourism offices can further expand market exposure and partnership opportunities.

#### **5. Replication and Inter-Village Collaboration**

The successful implementation of this model in Pematang Johar can inspire neighboring villages to undertake similar programs. Establishing inter-village cooperation networks focusing on digital entrepreneurship and tourism promotion will multiply the social and economic benefits across the Deli Serdang Regency. Academic partners can play a facilitative role by organizing comparative studies and regional training forums.

#### **6. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Research Integration**

To measure the long-term impact of the program, a structured monitoring and evaluation framework should be maintained. This includes tracking indicators such as online engagement, business revenue growth, and new job creation. The collected data can serve as valuable material for further academic research on rural digital transformation and policy innovation.

#### **7. Promotion of Local Digital Ambassadors**

Participants who showed strong progress and leadership potential should be encouraged to act as *local digital ambassadors*. By training others within their community, they can multiply the program's impact and nurture a culture of continuous learning and innovation.

### **Acknowledgements**

The success of this program reaffirms that the key to sustainable community development lies in participatory digital empowerment a process that combines education, technology, and cultural appreciation. When MSME actors are equipped with the right digital tools, knowledge, and collaborative spirit, they become agents

of transformation who drive both economic and social progress.

Pematang Johar's journey serves as an inspiring example of how small rural communities can embrace digitalization without losing their local identity. The initiative shows that digital transformation is not just about mastering technology it is about building connections, confidence, and community resilience. With continuous mentoring, strong institutional collaboration, and supportive policy frameworks, this model can be replicated in other rural areas across Indonesia. Ultimately, such efforts contribute not only to the digital inclusion of MSMEs but also to the creation of a vibrant, sustainable, and innovative local economy rooted in community pride.

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