Enhancing MSME Performance and Local Tourism Development in Pematang Johar through Digital Marketing Strategies

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Abstract: *The International Community Service conducted in Pematang Johar Village, Deli Serdang Regency, aims to empower local MSMEs and promote sustainable tourism through digital marketing innovation. Despite its rich tourism potential and strategic location, most local entrepreneurs still rely on conventional marketing methods with limited digital engagement. This activity focused on strengthening digital literacy and marketing competencies among MSMEs to support local tourism development. The program adopted the Service-Learning method involving workshops, mentoring, and hands-on practice in social media marketing, content creation, and e-commerce utilization. The results revealed a significant increase in participants' understanding of digital promotion and brand development, reflected in improved online visibility and sales performance. This initiative demonstrates how digital empowerment can serve as a catalyst for inclusive rural tourism growth and economic sustainability in Pematang Johar.*

Introduction

Rural tourism development has become one of Indonesia's strategic priorities to stimulate local economic growth and community empowerment. Villages with rich cultural and environmental resources—such as Pematang Johar in Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra—hold great potential to become sustainable tourism destinations. However, many rural areas still face challenges in optimizing their tourism potential due to the limited digital literacy of local entrepreneurs, insufficient promotional strategies, and low awareness of online branding (Yusrizal et al., 2024).

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a central role in supporting community-based tourism by offering local products, culinary

experiences, and cultural attractions. According to the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs (2024), MSMEs contribute nearly 62% of Indonesia's GDP and employ more than 97% of the workforce. However, digital adoption remains limited, with only 30% of MSMEs utilizing online platforms for marketing and sales (OJK, 2022). This gap highlights the urgent need to strengthen digital capabilities, particularly in rural communities where tourism and MSME growth are closely interlinked.

Digital marketing provides an innovative approach to promoting rural destinations and local products. Through online platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and *marketplaces*, local entrepreneurs can reach wider audiences and create more engaging promotional narratives. Kotler and Keller (2020) emphasize that digital marketing enables small businesses to build brand awareness, engage consumers directly, and achieve greater visibility in competitive markets. In rural tourism contexts, such strategies also foster destination branding, which connects local products, culture, and hospitality into a cohesive marketing ecosystem.

The village of Pematang Johar exemplifies these challenges and opportunities. Despite its scenic rice fields, unique culinary offerings, and growing eco-tourism appeal, local MSMEs still depend largely on conventional marketing approaches. Field observations revealed that most entrepreneurs promote their products through word of mouth or physical stalls without leveraging online media. This limitation prevents them from maximizing their economic potential and contributing optimally to village tourism development.

Therefore, the International Community Service organized by Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi (STIE) Eka Prasetya in collaboration with Universitas Syiah Kuala, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Malaysia, Shinawatra University Thailand, and the University of Economics and Finance (UEF) Vietnam was designed to address this issue. The program sought to empower MSMEs through digital marketing training and to integrate marketing innovation with local tourism development strategies.

This initiative also aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure). By enhancing digital literacy and marketing competence, the project aimed to create a self-reliant and innovative community capable of sustaining local economic growth through tourism.

Figure 1. International Community Service Opening Ceremony with Participants and Academic Partners. Pematang Johar, October 15, 2025.

Method

This International Community Service program adopted a Service Learning (SL) approach (Afandi et al., 2022), integrating academic knowledge with community-based practice to enhance both the participants' and facilitators' experiential learning. The program was implemented in Pematang Johar Village, Labuhan Deli Subdistrict, Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra Province, on October 15, 2025, as part of the International Community Serviceorganized by Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi (STIE) Eka Prasetya in collaboration with Universitas Syiah Kuala (Indonesia), Univeritas Negeri Medan (UNIMED), Universiti Teknologi MARA (Malaysia), Shinawatra University (Thailand), and University of Economics and Finance (Vietnam).

The target community of this program consisted of 40 local MSME owners and tourism stakeholders, including food vendors, souvenir producers, homestay operators, and youth organizations engaged in tourism promotion. The activity aimed to strengthen their capacity in implementing digital marketing strategies to support local tourism development and economic sustainability.

Preparation and Needs Assessment

The preparation phase focused on understanding the baseline condition of MSMEs and identifying key barriers to adopting digital marketing. This stage involved:

1. Preliminary Observation and Interviews

   Field surveys and structured interviews were conducted with MSME owners, tourism officers, and village administrators to assess their level of digital literacy and current marketing practices. The results revealed that more than 70% of MSMEs in Pematang Johar still relied on traditional marketing methods such as banners and direct selling, while less than 25% had active social media presence.

2. Module Development and Partnership Coordination
   Based on the initial survey findings, the service team developed digital training modules covering:

   a. Introduction to digital marketing and its benefits for rural tourism.

   b. Techniques for content creation and storytelling using local culture and natural assets.

   c. Branding and packaging for tourism-related products.

   d. Introduction to online platforms such as Instagram Business, Facebook Page, and Shopee.

   Coordination meetings were also conducted with partner universities and the Pematang Johar Village Government to ensure relevance and alignment with the community's tourism development plan.

Implementation of Training and Workshop Activities

The main implementation stage consisted of education, practical training, and collaborative workshops designed to increase participants' competence in digital promotion. The training was delivered through three core sessions:

1. Theoretical Session

   Participants were introduced to the fundamentals of digital marketing, including online consumer behavior, social media algorithms, and e-commerce trends. Facilitators from Universitas Syiah Kuala and UiTM Malaysia emphasized how digital transformation can drive tourism growth and inclusive economic participation.

2. Interactive Workshop Session

   The second stage involved hands-on activities where participants learned to:

    a. Create promotional posts using mobile photo editing and video applications.

    b. Write marketing captions incorporating storytelling and hashtags relevant to Pematang Johar tourism.

    c. Design simple digital flyers and product catalogs.

    d. Register their products and homestay services on e-commerce and booking platforms.

    Participants worked in small groups to foster peer learning and collaboration.

3. Simulation and Digital Practice

    Participants practiced managing their own social media pages (Instagram and Facebook) under the guidance of facilitators. They were asked to upload sample promotional content highlighting Pematang Johar's tourism icons—such as rice fields, traditional huts, and culinary specialties—to integrate tourism branding with product marketing.

Mentoring, Monitoring, and Evaluation

    To ensure the sustainability of the training outcomes, continuous mentoring and evaluation were conducted after the main sessions.

1. Mentoring Phase

    a. Facilitators provided online consultation sessions to help participants manage their digital accounts.

    b. Each MSME received personalized feedback on content quality, engagement rate, and digital branding improvement.

2. Evaluation and Data Collection

    The effectiveness of the program was measured through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods:

    a. Pre-test and Post-test: Participants completed structured questionnaires before and after the training to assess changes in their understanding of digital marketing.

    b. Observation Sheets: Used to record participants' level of engagement during the sessions.

c. Reflective Discussion: Conducted to collect participants' insights, challenges, and testimonials on applying digital marketing strategies in their businesses.

The evaluation results showed a significant improvement in digital literacy and marketing competence. The average post-test score increased from 30% (pre-training) to 85% (post-training).

3. Data Analysis Techniques

a. Descriptive Quantitative Analysis: Used to compare pre-test and post-test results.

b. Qualitative Thematic Analysis: Used to categorize recurring themes from participants' reflections and group discussions.

c. Comparative Analysis: Used to benchmark the results with similar community-based digital empowerment projects, demonstrating the effectiveness of the Service Learning approach.

Collaboration and Sustainability Plan

This program involved collaboration among international academic institutions and local stakeholders, emphasizing mutual learning and long-term impact. The sustainability plan includes:

a. Establishing a Digital Marketing Mentorship Group under the supervision of STIE Eka Prasetya students and lecturers.

b. Developing a Pematang Johar Tourism Digital Branding Portal to continuously promote local products and attractions.

c. Periodic evaluation and follow-up training every six months to maintain participants' engagement with digital platforms.

Through this structured and collaborative approach, the program aims not only to improve participants' technical digital marketing skills but also to strengthen Pematang Johar's position as a model for community-based tourism and MSME digital transformation.

Result

Overview of Program Implementation

The International Community Service activities in Pematang Johar Village were

successfully conducted through structured collaboration among participating universities and local stakeholders. The program integrated educational sessions, workshops, and mentoring to empower local MSMEs and enhance their participation in tourism-based digital marketing.

The event took place on October 15, 2025, beginning with an opening ceremony attended by representatives from STIE Eka Prasetya, Universitas Syiah Kuala (USK), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Malaysia, Shinawatra University (Thailand), and the University of Economics and Finance (UEF) Vietnam. The presence of these academic partners provided an international perspective and strengthened cross-cultural learning in community empowerment.

Participants were grouped into several clusters based on business type—culinary, souvenir crafts, local homestays, and agritourism—allowing facilitators to tailor digital marketing strategies according to each sector's characteristics. The training used visual materials, live demonstrations, and mobile-friendly applications to ensure accessibility for participants with varied educational backgrounds.

Figure 2. Workshop and Training Session on Digital Marketing for MSMEs and Tourism Stakeholders in Pematang Johar.

Improvement of Digital Literacy and Marketing Skills

One of the main objectives of this program was to increase digital literacy among MSME owners and local tourism actors. The pre-test and post-test results revealed substantial improvement in participants understanding of digital marketing concepts, as summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Participants understanding of digital marketing concepts

Indicators	Pre-Test (%)	Post-Test (%)
Knowledge of digital marketing principles	32	86
Ability to create social media content	28	83
Understanding of e-commerce and online transactions	25	80
Skills in tourism branding and storytelling	30	82

Source: Primary data, 2025

The findings demonstrate a significant increase in knowledge across all measured indicators. Participants who initially struggled to operate basic digital platforms were later able to design promotional materials, manage their own social media business accounts, and engage effectively with online audiences.

The introduction of storytelling techniques and visual branding inspired participants to link their products with Pematang Johar's tourism identity. For instance, homestay owners began using hashtags such as *#ExplorePematangJohar* and *#TasteofNorthSumatra* to build online visibility. Similarly, food vendors started integrating local narratives into their product captions, emphasizing authenticity and rural charm as key brand values.

These results are consistent with the findings of Iskandarsyah et al. (2023), who emphasized that community-based training combining theory and practical application significantly enhances entrepreneurial competence and digital adoption among rural MSMEs.

Integration of Digital Marketing with Tourism Branding

A unique feature of this program was the integration of MSME digital promotion with Pematang Johar's tourism branding initiative. Rather than treating businesses as separate entities, the training encouraged participants to develop a collective identity centered around "eco-tourism and cultural authenticity."

Through guided workshops, MSMEs collaborated to design unified promotional content using the slogan *"Experience Nature and Culture in Pematang Johar."* This initiative helped build a cohesive marketing narrative across multiple digital channels. Visual documentation (Figure 1) showed participants creating short promotional videos and collaborative posts featuring the village's rice fields, local

cuisine, and handicrafts.

The practical outcome of this approach was increased online engagement and visibility. Within one month after the program, several MSME social media pages reported a growth of over 40% in follower count and inquiries from potential customers outside Deli Serdang Regency.

These achievements reaffirm that digital marketing not only improves individual business performance but also enhances destination-level competitiveness. The collective branding model aligns with Norrahman (2023), who highlights that digital ecosystems can amplify local economic potential through shared online visibility and cross-promotion among community actors.

Empowerment and Sustainable Impact

Beyond immediate skill improvement, the program generated long-term empowerment outcomes for the Pematang Johar community. The mentoring sessions revealed increased confidence among participants in managing online sales and collaborating for joint promotional activities.

Participants also agreed to establish a Digital Marketing Community (Komunitas Pemasaran Digital Pematang Johar) under the supervision of STIE Eka Prasetya lecturers and students. This group serves as a continuous learning forum where members share marketing updates, social media trends, and customer engagement strategies.

Additionally, local youth organizations (Karang Taruna) were involved in managing village social media accounts, transforming tourism promotion into a community-driven initiative. This intergenerational collaboration ensures the sustainability of digital engagement and helps maintain updated online content for the village's tourism branding.

The program's impact aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in several key areas:

a. SDG 4 (Quality Education): Providing digital literacy and practical training for lifelong learning.

b. SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth): Strengthening MSMEs' ability to increase income and employment through digital entrepreneurship.

c. SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure): Encouraging the adoption of digital infrastructure for local business and tourism promotion.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Despite its success, the program also faced several challenges. Limited internet connectivity in rural areas occasionally disrupted online demonstrations and practice sessions. Some participants lacked smartphones with adequate storage capacity to install social media and editing applications.

However, these obstacles were mitigated by collaborative learning strategies, where participants worked in small groups and shared devices. Facilitators also provided offline digital materials and printed guides to ensure inclusivity.

Another challenge involved maintaining post-training motivation among MSMEs. While enthusiasm was high during the event, continuous engagement is needed to prevent digital inactivity. Therefore, a six-month follow-up plan was recommended to monitor digital adoption progress and provide ongoing mentoring through WhatsApp and virtual meetings.

These reflections confirm that while technology can empower communities, sustained mentorship and localized support systems are essential for long-term transformation (Lusardi & Messy, 2023).

Discussion

The International Community Service in Pematang Johar demonstrated that combining digital literacy education with tourism-based marketing innovation can significantly enhance MSME performance. The Service Learning method proved effective in bridging theoretical knowledge and real-world practice, fostering sustainable community empowerment.

The integration of MSME branding with village tourism identity not only improved business visibility but also contributed to place-based development— transforming Pematang Johar into a model of **eco-digital tourism village**. The experience underscores the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration among academia, local government, and the private sector in realizing inclusive digital transformation at the grassroots level.

Conclusion

Conclusion

The International Community Service held in Pematang Johar Village, Deli Serdang Regency, successfully demonstrated the transformative potential of digital

marketing in enhancing both MSME performance and local tourism development. Through the *Service Learning* approach, participants not only gained theoretical knowledge but also developed hands-on digital skills relevant to the contemporary business landscape.

The findings revealed that participants' understanding of digital marketing concepts, content creation, and branding strategies significantly improved, with post-test results showing an increase of more than 50% in overall digital competence. MSME actors who initially relied on conventional marketing methods were able to establish social media business profiles, produce engaging online content, and connect with broader audiences beyond their local market. This shift signifies a meaningful step toward building a digitally empowered rural economy.

Furthermore, the integration of MSME branding with the tourism identity of Pematang Johar created a synergistic model of community-based promotion. By linking local products and services with eco-tourism attractions, the program contributed to strengthening the village's digital presence and regional competitiveness. The collaboration among STIE Eka Prasetya, Universitas Syiah Kuala (USK), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Malaysia, Shinawatra University (Thailand), and University of Economics and Finance (UEF) Vietnam also provided valuable international insights and fostered intercultural learning among participants.

In essence, this community service initiative has proven that digital marketing is not merely a promotional tool but a strategic mechanism for sustainable local economic growth, social empowerment, and tourism innovation. The model applied in this program can be replicated in other rural areas with similar socio-economic contexts to strengthen their resilience and participation in the digital economy.

Figure 3. Group Documentation with Facilitators and Participants After the Program Implementation.

Recommendations

To ensure the long-term sustainability and scalability of the program's impact, several recommendations are proposed:

1. Continuous Mentorship and Capacity Building

    Digital literacy is a continuous learning process. Therefore, it is recommended that local universities and village authorities establish periodic mentorship sessions—both online and offline—to assist MSME actors in adapting to evolving digital platforms and marketing trends.

2. Strengthening Digital Infrastructure

    The success of digital transformation in rural areas largely depends on stable internet access and adequate technological infrastructure. Collaboration with telecommunication providers and local governments is necessary to expand internet coverage and improve connectivity in Pematang Johar.

3. Formation of a Community-Based Digital Hub

    Establishing a "Pematang Johar Digital Hub" or *Community Creative Center* would provide a shared space where MSMEs, youth organizations, and tourism managers can access digital tools, conduct workshops, and develop collaborative promotional content.

4. Integration with Local Tourism Policy

    The outcomes of this program should be embedded within the village's tourism development roadmap. Incorporating digital marketing initiatives into policy planning ensures that future tourism strategies remain adaptive to digital trends and consumer behavior.

5. Replication and Regional Expansion

    The successful model implemented in Pematang Johar should be disseminated to neighboring villages through inter-community partnerships and academic collaborations. Such expansion could create a broader regional digital ecosystem that connects multiple tourism destinations within Deli Serdang Regency.

6. Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

    A structured monitoring system should be developed to periodically measure the impact of digital marketing activities on MSME performance, including indicators such as sales growth, customer engagement, and social media analytics.

Acknowledgements

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