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# Is brand management critical to SMEs' product sustainability? Qualitative analysis in the context of Indonesia small enterprise environment

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**Abstract.** This qualitative study aims to analyze brand management's implementation in small, medium enterprises (SMEs) in three areas in Indonesia, which specialized in craft, food, and fashion companies. The performance of brand management addresses five main stages based on Keller's framework of brand management, including 1) developing brand positioning, 2) identifying and developing brand plans, 3) designing and implementing brand marketing programs, 4) measuring and interpreting brand performance, 5) managing brand equity. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data in Yogyakarta, Lombok, and Makassar. The study found that brand management is perceived to be important in supporting SMEs' performance. This study contributes to the importance of brand management in SME by applying the framework of brand management. The finding can help SME managers or owners formulate branding strategies that strengthen SMEs. However, the results also show that some respondents argued about the unimportance of brand management.

## 1. Introduction

Brand management is relatively closely related to the context of big business. SMEs typically lacked the capabilities, marketing power, and other organizational capacities, [1] and then brand management literature has focused almost exclusively on vast and multinational brands [2]. The enterprise strategy was driven by senior management as the owner; consequently, the brand strategy was also dependent upon the top management. Powerful brands were challenging to develop and to maintain [3]. The attention of brand management in SMEs was focused only on significant companies and multinationals [4]. There was a lack of support for brand orientation in SMEs' context [5]. Thus brands did not become an unseparated part of a firm's value and a vital strategic asset. SMEs would perceive they did not have enough time or resources to conduct branding activities; therefore, they failed to invest in business activities concerning marketing and branding activities. Understanding SME branding remained underdeveloped, and branding research was more emphasized in big brand corporates [6]. The integrative theoretical framework was proposed about critical attributes that differentiate rapid growth firms from slow growth companies; the model did not discuss brand

management [7]. SMEs were at a disadvantage in developing brand values, norms, artifacts, and practices compared to larger organizations [8]. Branding must have been the focus in the literature on SMEs and entrepreneurship [9]. The unique context for brand studies of previous research such as the creation of a company with no established identity and reputation [9], [10], [11]; branding activities as the essential aspect to acquire customers and for the sustainability of the company [12]; start-ups typically with limited resources in terms of capital [13], [14]. SMEs with young and new entrepreneurs hardly find the procedures of brand management in branding literature. Brand management addresses brand architecture and brand equity elements that are more relevant in analyzing big companies' brand [15]. Many SMEs did not practice branding strategies because of many barriers limiting the SMEs' owner-manager from investing in building stronger brands [16]. The scarcity of finance is a significant obstacle, which prevents SMEs from aggressively competing in the fast-changing and competitive. Unlike larger firms, SMEs cannot obtain enough financial support from the banks to fight. Brand development was needed to influence the performance of SMEs [17].

Progressively, the time has changed. SMEs have shown dramatic progress in their development. Many start-up businesses, like SMEs, have demonstrated professional management. They are initiated by young workers who have started to work self-independently and can offer qualified products. The growth of SMEs is getting more advanced. They are supposed to be supported by the government to accelerate the start-up business, strengthen financial access, improve supply chain management, and support the women's role. The progress of SMEs is practically encouraged by the progress of SMEs theoretically.

The importance of branding strategy in SMEs is also supported by Indonesia's informal economic sector's growth. The informal financial sector in Indonesia dominated by SMEs was not significantly affected by the crisis and could survive well. Therefore, SMEs in Indonesia have played a significant role in supporting entrepreneurship and economic growth. The micro-enterprises in Indonesia have dominated the current entrepreneurship progress in Indonesia. The data of the State Ministry of Cooperative and Small and Medium Enterprises showed that the number of Micro Enterprises in Indonesia is the largest of the existing SMEs [18]. SMEs in Indonesia have provided sources of employment. The government has provided subsidized credit, human resource training, general management training, quality management, entrepreneurship, advisory extension workers, promotion facilitation, and implementation of an incubator system.

This study analyzed the role of the brand management process in SMEs. [19] have given a significant contribution review of a small and medium-sized enterprise, including branding strategies. At last, these brand instruments can have an impact on performance. This study highlights the brand management process proposed by [20] in understanding the brand management implementation in SMEs. The brand management addressed that strategic brand management, including the design and implementation of marketing programs and activities to build, to measure, and to manage brand equity as having four main steps; (1) developing brand positioning, (2) identifying and developing brand plans, (3) designing and implementing brand marketing programs, (4) measuring and interpreting brand performance, (5) managing brand equity. The brand management process allows this research to make four contributions to the article. First, the study implements the brand management process through strategic views. Strategic views here are related to the management functions anchored with the founder who manages the critical role of corporate identity and branding so, and it saves time and energy. Due to the small scale, SMEs have more advantages than large companies due to the flexibility of structure and managing brand management [21].

Second, strategic brand management is also related to good branding at the beginning of the SMEs and can lead to a good reputation among existing players in a similar field. Small businesses viewed importance as one strategy to obtain legitimation from a diverse stakeholder, create good image management, and increase word of mouth advocacy or recommendation [22]. Entrepreneurs' strategy and capability to access brands and marketing knowledge were essential [23]. Small entrepreneurial brand firms generate creative brand ideas, so presenting the early stage activities is very important, including branding in small businesses [24]. Branding in small companies is an important aspect that

has been explored from the perspective of customers but not SME management. Understanding of branding is essential, given the impact of the entrepreneurial personality on SME branding, the need to create sustainable value, the emphasis on differentiation, and nurturing the generation of growth [25].

Third, it is argued that by analyzing the brand management process in SMEs, this study will gain a better understanding of SMEs' performance. The branding had an essential role in increasing SME's performance [26]. There was a branding strategy contribution to SMEs' sales performance [27]. The impact of brands on small to SMEs performance in the fashion industry was also examined by also focusing on the different effects that corporate and product brands may produce through trademark as a brand instrument [28]. The study indicated that trademarks positively influenced SMEs' performance in the fashion industry and helped make a sales increase. Branding strategy is also available in B2B SMEs. Brand orientation contributed to business growth through brand performance [29]. Growing enterprises tend to know market and brand orientations to a greater extent. SMEs with varying growth intentions, adopted market or brand orientation [30].

Fourth, there is a gap in the method approach that has to focus on mixed-method techniques in examining branding strategy for SMEs [31]. Qualitative studies need to be explored more to establish theories, models, and frameworks. To address the contributions as the research gaps related to the brand management process, this study's objective has been to explore the possible implementation of the brand management process that determines SMEs' performance in the Indonesian context. The article discusses the theoretical background for the brand management process, including (1) developing brand positioning, (2) identifying and developing brand plans, (3) designing and implementing brand marketing programs, 4) measuring and interpreting brand performance, (5) managing brand equity. The literature review is followed by a qualitative interview of the implementation of brand developments on SMEs in three Indonesia regions.

Keller's brand management framework also has some stages for developing the brand, measuring, and sustaining. The first stage is developing brand positioning. Positioning is designing a company's market entity and image to be placed in the target market [32]. Keller developed excellent positioning. Good positioning should be aspirational, reflect a consumer point of view regarding the benefits that consumers derive from the brand, and contain rational and emotional elements. SMEs should develop brand positioning to strengthen brand identity among the existing players. Points of difference based on specific attributes should be developed.

Identifying and developing brand plans as the second stage are initiated by crafting brand elements. Brand elements include brand identities that can stress the points of difference. Keller formulated brand elements, including brand names, URL, logo, symbol, slogan, jingle, and package. Brand name as the brand element is crucial because it has a key associated with the central product. Brand names should be more straightforward, meaningful, different, and distinctive. URL (uniform resource locators) specifies locations on the web or domain names. In the era of digital, the use of the URL can identify the company efficiently. Logo and symbol as visual elements can play an essential role in developing brand equity and creating brand awareness. The logo is related to ownership or association and includes corporate names or trademark (word marks with text only). The slogan, as the brand elements, communicates information about the brand. Jingles are musical messages played around the brand. The last brand element is the packaging. It is the activity of designing and producing containers for a product. The packaging is related to logistic matters, but it helps the product attract attention and positively communicate the product's informational elements [33]. Designing and implementing brand marketing programs as the third stage are supported by integrated marketing. The 4ps programs are the means corresponding marketing programs, including product, pricing, channel strategies, and communication strategies. These programs provide interaction with company entities. Marketing activities of 4Ps are the tool to build brand equity.

Product is an essential element of marketing activities and related to the market offering. Related price, price is an element that can be identified by the customer and the company [34]. The distribution includes the activities in transferring goods or services to the final users. Related to it, retailing as a part of distribution has two types. There are store retailers and non-store retailers. The retail marketing

environment has changed dramatically. The use of technology can affect how marketers conduct their business [35]. Related to communication, companies can communicate with their consumers through integrated marketing communication (IMC). Coordination and integrated marketing communication programs maximized the impact on the customer and other stakeholders[36].

Measuring and interpreting brand performance as the fourth stage elaborates on the marketer's activity that traces the value creation process for their brand better to understand the marketing expenditures' financial impact. There are two aspects to measure brand performance through brand audit and brand tracking. A brand audit is an integrative evaluation of a brand to understand brand equity. The assessment is related to financial health. Managing brand equity is related to managing brands over time [37]. Marketing activities are always well planned to create consumers' brand awareness. These strategies are intended to build brand engagement with the existing customer.

## 2. Method

This study was done in the context of the emerging market of Indonesia. This study used purposive sampling. The resources were selected purposively. The purposive sampling may be used when analyzing a larger population subset, but enumeration will be impossible [38]. Purposive sampling for business players of micro-enterprises to be interviewed would be most appropriate in this study. The data from manufacturing companies were gathered from secondary data, such as the list of manufacturers. The researcher attempted to obtain a sample in a small and medium-scale enterprise that represented the population. To ensure that ranged from one extreme to the other was included and based on some criteria. The respondents were entrepreneurs. They were selected because (1) they had a business regularly, (2) had a business activity for more than two years, (3) focused on fabric small-medium enterprises. The unit analysis was a company. The population was micro-enterprises in Lombok Timur, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta, and Makassar. The number of companies used in the study was two companies in Yogyakarta, five companies in Makassar, and eight companies in Lombok. These areas were chosen based on the number of existing SMEs in those regions. The growth of the SMEs in those regions is increasing. They become the target market for bank credit.

This study carried out a qualitative collecting method by having an interview. A sub-sample of entrepreneurs was selected from a sample of entrepreneurial organizations. The interview process was the primary method used to collect data. The interviews were semi-structured, with specific questions served as a base. Interview questions were adapted from the theoretical in the research.

**Table 1.** SME Details.

<b>ID</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Formal education</b>	<b>Company age</b>	<b>Industry</b>
001_Makasar	Woman	54	Senior High school	10	Food
002_Makasar	Man	50	Senior High school	15	Food
003_Makasar	Woman	40	Senior High school	4	Food
004_Makassar	Woman	38	Junior High School	9	Food
005_Makassar	Woman	34	Senior High school	10	Food
006_Makassar	Woman	43	Junior High School	4	Food
001_Jogja	Woman	43	Senior High school	10	Fashion
002_Jogja	Woman	54	Senior High school	19	Fashion
003_Jogja	Woman	30	Senior High school	16	Fashion
004_Jogja	Man	38	Senior High school	10	Fashion
005_Jogja	Man	29	Senior High school	7	Fashion

C_Lombok	Woman	32	Senior High school	5	Craft
D_Lombok	Woman	35	Senior High school	4	Craft
E_Lombok	Woman	19	Senior High school	5	Craft
F_Lombok	Woman	25	Senior High school	5	Craft
G_Lombok	Woman	37	Senior High school	8	Craft

Data coding could use open, axial, and selective coding methodologies [39]. The central concept of brand management and the elements of the brand element were generated and given names with open coding. The emergent concepts were labeled based on the literature's concepts by correlating the concepts emerging from the data collected with the literature's concepts. The researcher discovered the relationship between the concepts from the data and deductively related to the existing literature. In the end, coding was applied to integrate the existing relationships among concepts.

### 3. Results and discussion

This study implements the framework of Keller's brand management for SMEs, including (1) developing brand positioning, (2) identifying and developing brand plans, (3) designing and implementing brand marketing programs, (4) measuring and interpreting brand performance, (5) managing brand equity. As time passes, little by little, SMEs have realized the essence of brand management to sustain their business in the long run. The findings presented here support the view that SMEs entrepreneurs should be developing brand management within their organizations. Focusing on brand management will lead to better financial outcomes [40]. As the company grows, the performance of SMEs in the study is much better to some degree. The long period of the company ranges from 4-19 years. The period of running a business is varying, but this indicates a high degree of entrepreneurial understanding of SME strategies' brand-focused strategies. The entrepreneurs of SMEs understand brand management to emphasize the product offering to their target market. Besides, the data of the State Ministry of Cooperative and Small and Medium Enterprises showed that the number of Micro Enterprises in Indonesia is the largest of the existing SMEs. The growth of SMEs is getting more advanced. They are supposed to be supported by the government to accelerate the start-up business, strengthen financial access, improve supply chain management, and support the women's role based on Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation. The existing conditions have led to these entrepreneurs' awareness and intent in the study to devote resources to brand management.

Second, identifying and developing brand plans. Creating a brand relates to brand identity; consequently, it has a role for the customer. The brand takes on personal meaning to consumers and becomes an essential part of their identity [41]. The evidence presented in this finding suggests that when consumers learn about brands through experience with the product and finding out which brands satisfy their needs and which do not, there should be a brand identity that describes the visual aspect to signify the company. In this study, fourteen companies realized that identity could become the strategies to build brand equity, including color, symbol, and logo. This is in line with [42]; a marketer should have brand equity drivers such as (1) the initial choices for the brand elements or identities making up the brand, including brand names, URL, logo, symbol, character, spokesperson, slogan, jingle, package and signage; and (2) other association indirectly transferred to the brand by linking it to some other entity (a person, place or thing).

Third, designing and implementing brand marketing programs. The informants of this study recognize the importance of the marketing program. The industry of food, fashion, and craft needs marketing programs. Marketing programs include product, price, place, and promotion. One informant said that work is an essential element of marketing activities, and the product offering can be bundling as a part of product differentiation. Another informant argued that they do not provide the core benefit of the product, but they can also offer lifestyle when consumers wear products. Price is intended to communicate the value positioning of its product. This study shows that they have to

decide the right strategy when setting a price due to their SMEs' position. Consumers of their segments tend to be price sensitive. Related to distribution as the activities in transferring goods or services to consumers, they use both physical retail and the internet as the media to have interaction directly about products and services and have a comparison. Related to communication, this study's companies can communicate with their consumers through integrated marketing communication (IMC), including tradeshow, exhibition, and direct marketing, to maximize the impact on their customers.

Fourth, measuring and interpreting brand performance. Fourteen companies recognize the benefit of measuring brand performance, especially sales, as an indicator. This indicator signifies the easy measurement in the short-term. The indicator can also provide information concerning the performance of the brand. This is also in line with [43]; brand equity impacts SMEs' performance in terms of sales performance. The process of measuring brand equity is essential though it is just small companies. This is a part of becoming a company in the future on a bigger scale. SME's manager can develop marketing strategies and manage them proactively in the long run. One informant of the study also argued that the measurement is not executed regularly due to the lack of adequate knowledge and resources for measuring. However, the others have agreed that measuring brand performance can also support SMEs' ability to adjust the strategy.

Fifth, managing brand equity as a way to achieve sustainability in the long run. When SMEs have already passed hard times and achieved good results, SMEs recognized the importance of branding. Managing brand equity is relevant to achieving sustainability, survival, and profit. One informant argued that managing brand equity is a part of the owner's values and emotional spirit. It is relevant to the mission, which becomes the baseline of the SMEs' founding since the beginning.. SMEs are increasingly pursuing strategies to support their sustainability to gain financial and performance goals.

Furthermore, related to the mission, the mission statement can support the performance and create SMEs' growth in the long run [44]. During a certain period, one informant recognized that they have to innovate, provide something new, and interact with the customers. Related to the consumer's interaction, it is intended to create brand engagement with the existing customer. Brand engagement is a part of brand interaction with the customer by activating the relationship.

Based on the research, this study has another finding. The following study also supports that the consumers were less sensitive to a brand. First, SMEs are more vulnerable to a changing competitive environment than larger firms [45]. Businesses should prioritize product quality for market development. Therefore, it could support the sustainability of the business. Marketing management becomes a fundamental factor in promoting business sustainability in the long run. SMEs have some problems related to inadequate cash flow, marketing incompetence, company size, customers, and strategically related issues [46].

Entrepreneurs develop brand management based on practical matters. They don't have an understanding of brand management theories. The knowledge is obtained through discussion with the partners of the existing industry. First is developing brand positioning. No company could survive if its product and service offering is not well designed [47]. Creating a compelling, well-differentiated brand position requires a keen understanding of consumer needs and wants company capabilities and competitive action. SMEs in this study discover the needs of customers and target them by satisfying excellently. The company can deliver high customer value and satisfaction. Companies from Jogjakarta may become a good example. The company has realized the importance of a good brand positioning that can help the company design a marketing strategy and achieve customer preference. They feel being intimidated in a competitive marketplace. The competition of the existing players in the batik fashion industry is intense. The product and service should be unique.

SMEs should compete by focusing on differentiation. In Makassar, focusing services on the brand can leverage the agility and boost uniqueness. SMEs can make quick decisions and can be ready to start delivering products. Implementing this uniqueness is relatively easy in Lombok. Hand-made craft should be promoted differently. The advantage of being unique is the easiness of being recognized by the customers. Fourteen companies argued that engaging positioning through uniqueness is their weapon to compete with the big brands. Related to brand identity, SMEs should emphasize creating a

unique brand identity, including tradeshow, exhibition, and direct marketing, to maximize its customer impact. SMEs should learn a lot and need assistance to gain useful knowledge and resources for measuring brand performance. SMEs also anticipate consumer preference change through product innovation and providing for media interaction with the consumers.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The research has found two brand management practices in SME (brand is essential, and the brand is not essential). In the case of a brand is essential; most of the respondents agree that brand management is a critical factor in supporting business performance. While on another side, SME said that the brand is unimportant because a consumer is not sensitive to a brand. Here, there is a perception that the brand building is only for large companies, associated with cost, focusing on quality, using supplier brand, and having limited sources and budget.

For the overall discussion, SMEs must develop the brand marketing program and create new ideas in developing marketing strategies. If it is analyzed with the product life cycle, it is recognized that most SMEs are positioned in the maturity stage. They should develop a better branding strategy because they have to allocate their time and other resources in managing a product. As one of the indicators of performance in the product life cycle, the sale becomes the determinant of firm sustainability. Consequently, the profit, as a result, can be allocated to other resources. The need for branding is still necessarily relevant. SMEs need more investment in crafting branding strategy so their target market. SMEs have to improve product quality, add a new feature, and improve attributes by emphasizing brand. SMEs should shift from awareness to preference of consumers. By spending money on branding, SMEs can capture more market share to sustain the next stage's more significant profit.

The branding concept should be discussed from various perspectives that can better understand how to maintain SMEs in the future. It is possible to reinforce further calls for studies analyzing branding's performance effect in different contexts, including cultural and industry context. The next study also discusses the relationship between brand management to customer equity and evaluation of brand equity. A call for studies in the small business literature is analyzing the branding orientation with a strategic perspective. The study also discusses marketing communication and other secondary associations in small businesses.

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