

Building Brand Equity through Viral TikTok Content Strategies: A Phenomenological Study of MSME Entrepreneurs

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Abstract

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The rapid development of social media has fundamentally transformed digital marketing practices, particularly for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Among various platforms, TikTok has emerged as a prominent medium due to its strong viral potential, short-form video format, algorithm-driven content distribution, and dynamic trend culture. These characteristics position TikTok as a strategic tool for MSMEs in building and strengthening brand equity. This study aims to explore how MSME entrepreneurs interpret and implement viral TikTok content strategies in their efforts to develop brand equity. Employing a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method, this research investigates the subjective experiences of MSME actors who actively utilize TikTok as a marketing platform. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and systematic observations of TikTok content produced by MSMEs. The findings reveal that viral TikTok content strategies play a significant role in enhancing brand awareness, shaping positive brand associations, strengthening perceived quality, and fostering consumer brand loyalty. Content that is authentic, aligned with current trends, and delivered consistently is perceived as effective in creating emotional connections between brands and audiences. These results suggest that TikTok functions not only as a promotional channel but also as a strategic medium for constructing brand value among MSMEs. This study contributes to both theoretical discussions on brand equity and practical insights for MSME digital marketing strategies.

Keywords:

Brand Equity; Viral Content; TikTok; MSMEs; Digital Marketing; Phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has fundamentally transformed contemporary marketing practices, particularly for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Social media has evolved beyond a mere communication tool into a strategic platform for building brand identity, fostering interactive engagement with consumers, and expanding market reach in a cost-effective manner (Azzara & Saefullah, 2026). Given the limited resources typically faced by MSMEs, the ability to adopt creative and efficient digital marketing strategies has become a critical determinant of business sustainability and competitiveness (Andriansyah et al., 2025).

Among various social media platforms, TikTok has experienced remarkable growth and exhibits distinctive characteristics. The platform relies on short-form, visually driven, and highly engaging video content, supported by an algorithm that enables extensive content distribution regardless of follower count. This viral mechanism provides MSMEs with significant opportunities to introduce their brands to a wide audience within a relatively short period. By leveraging trends, storytelling, and authentic content, MSME entrepreneurs attempt not only to attract audience attention but also to build emotional connections with consumers.

From a marketing perspective, brand success is not solely measured by short-term sales performance but also by the strength of brand equity. Brand equity represents the added value embedded in a brand, reflected through brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and customer loyalty. For MSMEs, strong brand equity plays a vital role in enhancing consumer trust, fostering long-term relationships, and generating sustainable competitive advantages in increasingly dynamic markets (Aisha et al., 2025).

Although research on social media and branding has expanded substantially, studies that specifically examine how MSME entrepreneurs build brand equity through viral TikTok content strategies remain limited, particularly from a qualitative standpoint. Existing literature predominantly emphasizes quantitative assessments of social media's impact on marketing performance, which inadequately capture the subjective experiences, strategic interpretations, and meaning-making processes of MSME actors when engaging with viral content dynamics (Salsabila & Indrawati, 2022)

Addressing this research gap, the present study aims to explore in depth the lived experiences of MSME entrepreneurs in building brand equity through viral TikTok content strategies. Employing a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to understand how MSME actors perceive viral phenomena, design content strategies, and experience the branding outcomes generated through TikTok. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the digital marketing and branding literature by offering an experience-based perspective, while also providing practical insights for MSMEs in developing effective and context-sensitive branding strategies within social media environments (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

Brand Equity

Brand equity refers to the added value embedded in a brand as a result of consumers' perceptions, experiences, and interactions with that brand over time. This value extends beyond the physical attributes of a product or service and encompasses symbolic meanings, brand image, trust, and emotional attachment developed through sustained brand–consumer relationships.

Strong brand equity enables a brand to achieve a superior competitive position and enhances its ability to differentiate itself within highly competitive markets. Brand equity is commonly conceptualized through several core dimensions, namely brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Brand awareness reflects consumers' ability to recognize and recall a brand, while brand associations relate to the set of meanings, impressions, and values linked to the brand in consumers' minds. Perceived quality represents consumers' subjective evaluation of a product's or service's overall excellence, whereas brand loyalty indicates the degree of consumers' commitment to repurchase and consistently engage with the same brand (Bruhn et al., 2012)

Viral Content in Social Media

Viral content in social media refers to digital content that spreads rapidly and extensively through user interactions, such as sharing, liking, and commenting. The virality of content is generally driven by elements of creativity, emotional appeal, audience relevance, and alignment with prevailing social or cultural trends. Content that successfully evokes emotional responses—such as amusement, curiosity, or empathy—tends to capture greater attention and stimulate higher levels of user engagement.

Within the context of digital marketing, viral content functions as an effective communication mechanism for enhancing brand visibility and reach. For MSMEs, viral content strategies offer a particularly advantageous alternative, as they enable broad audience exposure without requiring substantial promotional budgets. Consequently, understanding the characteristics and dynamics of viral content is essential for designing effective social media-based marketing strategies (Prameshti & Priastuty, 2024)

TikTok as a Marketing Platform for MSMEs

TikTok is a short-form video-based social media platform that emphasizes creativity, entertainment, and interactive user participation. Its algorithm-driven content distribution system prioritizes user interests rather than follower count, allowing content from relatively small accounts to achieve wide exposure. This feature positions TikTok as a highly promising platform for MSMEs seeking to establish brand presence and visibility.

TikTok offers various features—such as trending music, visual storytelling, and participatory challenges—that enable MSME entrepreneurs to communicate brand messages in a more engaging and authentic manner. These features encourage two-way communication between brands and consumers, fostering emotional connections and enhancing audience engagement. As a result, TikTok serves not only as a promotional channel but also as a relational medium that supports brand-building efforts (De Vries et al., 2012).

TikTok Content Strategies in Building Brand Equity

Effective TikTok content strategies extend beyond direct product promotion and instead emphasize storytelling, value communication, and audience relevance. Content that showcases production processes, entrepreneurial journeys, and real interactions with consumers can enhance brand credibility and foster emotional closeness. Such approaches allow MSME entrepreneurs to humanize their brands and create more meaningful consumer experiences.

From a brand equity perspective, viral TikTok content contributes significantly to increasing brand awareness through extensive content reach. Consistent and authentic messaging

further supports the development of positive brand associations and strengthens perceived quality in the minds of consumers. Moreover, sustained interaction through TikTok content and platform features facilitates the formation of brand loyalty, which is crucial for the long-term sustainability and growth of MSMEs (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010)

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach employing a phenomenological method to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprise (MSME) entrepreneurs in utilizing viral TikTok content as a strategy for building brand equity. The phenomenological approach is deemed appropriate as the study seeks to explore how MSME actors interpret, experience, and assign meaning to the use of TikTok within their digital marketing practices, rather than to measure causal relationships quantitatively.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews and non-participant observation. The interviews aimed to elicit detailed insights into entrepreneurs' perspectives, experiences, and strategic considerations in managing TikTok content for branding purposes. Meanwhile, observation focused on analyzing the TikTok content produced by the informants, including message construction, content presentation patterns, and the nature of audience interaction, in order to contextualize the narratives obtained from interviews.

Data analysis followed a qualitative thematic analysis process, encompassing data reduction, categorization into key themes, and interpretative analysis aligned with the research objectives. This analytical procedure was intended to identify meaningful linkages between viral TikTok content strategies and the formation of brand equity from the perspective of MSME entrepreneurs. The study was conducted within a defined time frame, covering the stages of research preparation, data collection, data analysis, and the compilation of research findings (Laraskana & Sakir, 2025).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the empirical findings derived from in-depth interviews and observations conducted with MSME entrepreneurs who actively utilize TikTok as a branding platform. The findings focus on the characteristics of informants and the contextual background that shapes their experiences in producing viral content and building brand equity.

The study involved five MSME entrepreneurs operating in diverse business sectors, including culinary, fashion, handicrafts, cosmetics, and accessories. These sectors were selected to capture variations in content strategy and branding practices across different types of consumer markets. The informants varied in terms of business age and intensity of TikTok usage, providing a rich and heterogeneous dataset for phenomenological analysis.

Table 1 summarizes the key characteristics of the research informants, including business sector, length of business operation, and intensity of TikTok usage

No	Business Sector	Length of Business Operation	TikTok Usage Intensity
1	Culinary	>3 years	Active
2	Fashion	2-3 years	Active

3	Handicrafts	>5 years	Moderately Active
4	Cosmetics	1-2 years	Very Active
5	Accessories	>3 years	Active

The variation in business maturity and social media engagement intensity indicates differing levels of strategic awareness and experiential learning in utilizing TikTok for branding purposes. Informants with higher intensity of TikTok usage demonstrated greater familiarity with platform trends, algorithm dynamics, and audience engagement mechanisms, which influenced their approaches to content creation.

These characteristics provide an important contextual foundation for interpreting the thematic findings related to viral content strategies and brand equity formation, which are elaborated in the subsequent discussion section

Table 2. Patterns of Viral TikTok Content Strategies among MSMEs

No	Content Type	Key Characteristics
1	Business storytelling	Highlights entrepreneurial experiences and business processes
2	Trend-based content	Adapts popular music, formats, and viral trends
3	Product education	Explains product functions and value propositions
4	Production process	Shows behind-the-scenes activities
5	Audience interaction	Responds directly to customer comments and feedback

The findings presented in Table 2 indicate that MSME entrepreneurs predominantly employ informative and communicative content strategies to attract and engage TikTok audiences. Rather than focusing solely on direct selling, informants emphasized storytelling, transparency, and interaction as core elements of viral content creation. This approach reflects an effort to humanize the brand and foster emotional connections with viewers.

Impact of Viral Content on Brand Awareness.

Table 3. Impact of Viral TikTok Content on Brand Awareness

Indicator	Research Findings
Content reach	Increased significantly
Number of followers	Gradual and consistent growth
Brand recall	Brand became easier to recognize

The data in Table 3 demonstrate that content virality contributes substantially to enhanced brand awareness among TikTok users. Informants reported that viral videos enabled their brands to reach audiences beyond their existing follower base, consistent with TikTok's algorithmic distribution system. Increased exposure and repeated appearance on users' feeds strengthened brand recall, positioning the brand more firmly in consumers' cognitive awareness.

Formation of Brand Associations and Perceived Quality

Table 4. Formation of Brand Associations and Perceived Quality

Aspect	Perceived Impact
Brand image	Perceived as more authentic
Consumer trust	Increased significantly
Perceived quality	Evaluated more positively

As shown in Table 4, viral TikTok content that emphasizes authenticity and message consistency plays a critical role in shaping positive brand associations and perceived quality. Content that transparently presents business values, production processes, and real experiences strengthens consumer trust. This finding suggests that authenticity serves as a symbolic cue for quality evaluation, particularly in MSME branding contexts where consumers may have limited prior brand familiarity.

Indications of Brand Loyalty Formation

Table 5. Indicators of Emerging Brand Loyalty

Indicator	Form of Consumer Response
Repeat purchase	Consumers re-engage with the brand
Repeated interaction	Ongoing comments and direct messages
Recommendation	Content is reshared to other users

The findings in Table 5 reveal early indications of brand loyalty formation among consumers. Repeated interactions, continued engagement in comment sections, and voluntary content sharing suggest that consumers move beyond passive viewing toward active brand advocacy. Although loyalty in this context is still emerging, these behavioral signals indicate that viral TikTok content can function as an initial catalyst for long-term consumer-brand relationships.



Gambar 1. Alur Strategi Konten Viral TikTok dalam Membangun Brand Equity UMKM
Sumber gambar: Olahan Peneliti (2025)

Figure 1. Flow of Viral TikTok Content Strategies in Building MSME Brand Equity

Figure 1 illustrates the strategic flow through which viral TikTok content contributes to the development of brand equity among MSMEs. The process begins with the creation of trend-

based and authentic content that leverages popular formats, music, and storytelling styles to achieve content virality. This virality increases content reach and visibility, leading to enhanced brand awareness.

As audiences repeatedly engage with the content, consistent messaging and transparent narratives foster positive brand associations and strengthen perceived quality. Continuous interaction between MSMEs and audiences—through comments, responses, and shared content—gradually builds emotional attachment and trust. Over time, these interactions contribute to the formation of brand loyalty, reflected in repeated engagement, recommendations, and repurchase intentions.

Overall, the figure demonstrates that viral TikTok content functions not merely as a short-term promotional tool but as a dynamic and iterative mechanism for building sustainable brand equity among MSMEs.

Based on the research findings, viral TikTok content strategies play a pivotal role in strengthening MSMEs' brand equity. Content virality functions as an initial mechanism for enhancing brand awareness by expanding content reach and increasing brand visibility among broader audiences. Subsequently, the consistent delivery of relevant, engaging, and authentic content contributes to the development of stronger brand associations. MSME entrepreneurs perceive TikTok not merely as a promotional platform, but as an interactive medium that enables two-way communication with consumers, thereby fostering relational engagement (Mery et al., 2024).

Furthermore, transparency in communicating product information and business activities positively influences consumers' perceived quality of the brand. Content that highlights real production processes, entrepreneurial experiences, and honest narratives helps build consumer trust and reinforces favorable quality perceptions. Continuous interaction through comments, replies, and user-generated engagement also strengthens emotional bonds between consumers and brands, which gradually contributes to the formation of brand loyalty. Overall, these findings indicate that TikTok can be strategically leveraged as an effective and sustainable branding tool for MSMEs. When viral content is managed with authenticity, consistency, and audience engagement, TikTok not only enhances short-term visibility but also supports the long-term development of brand equity (Muhammad Fikri Setiawan & Muamar, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings and discussion, this study concludes that viral TikTok content strategies play a significant role in the process of building brand equity among Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). MSME entrepreneurs utilize TikTok not merely as a promotional channel, but as a strategic medium to communicate brand identity through authentic, informative, and interactive content. Content that aligns with current trends, combined with storytelling techniques and active audience engagement, has been shown to effectively enhance brand awareness and foster positive brand associations. Furthermore, consistency in content delivery and transparency in communicating product information contribute to the development of favorable perceived quality and consumer trust. Sustained interactions between MSME actors and audiences on TikTok also encourage emotional attachment, which gradually leads to the formation of brand loyalty—an essential foundation for long-term business sustainability. Overall, this study highlights that viral TikTok content strategies can be regarded as an effective and dynamic approach to strengthening MSME brand equity in the digital era. Based on the study's findings, MSME practitioners are encouraged to manage TikTok content strategically and consistently by aligning trending content formats with

the core values and identity of their brands. Maintaining authenticity and engaging actively with audiences are crucial to sustaining brand equity development. For future research, it is recommended to examine similar phenomena using quantitative approaches or mixed methods to measure the magnitude of the relationships identified in this study. Additionally, involving other social media platforms could provide a broader understanding of digital branding strategies and their implications for brand equity development across different digital ecosystems.

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