The Role of Influencers and Digital Marketing in Boosting Sales for Culinary MSMEs in Solo

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This study aims to explore the impact of influencers on promoting MSMEs in Solo City, the effectiveness of influencer and digital marketing strategies in supporting MSMEs, and the benefits derived from influencer collaborations. Qualitative research employing a case study approach is utilized, with data validity ensured through source triangulation. Data analysis follows Miles and Huberman's methodology, encompassing four stages: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion. The study focuses on MSMEs in Solo City employing influencer marketing strategies, with participants including both influencers and MSME owners. Findings reveal that influencers play a crucial role in introducing MSME products, enhancing brand image and awareness, and significantly boosting sales by up to 2 to 3 times. Moreover, digital marketing, particularly leveraging Instagram as a promotional platform, is highlighted as an effective tool for reaching a wider audience and driving sales growth for Solo's culinary MSMEs.

A B S T R A K

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dampak influencer dalam mempromosikan UMKM di Kota Solo, efektivitas strategi influencer dan pemasaran digital dalam mendukung UMKM, dan manfaat yang diperoleh dari kolaborasi influencer. Penelitian kualitatif menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus, dengan validitas data yang dipastikan melalui triangulasi sumber. Analisis data mengikuti metodologi Miles dan Huberman, yang meliputi empat tahap: pengumpulan data, reduksi data, penyajian data, dan kesimpulan. Penelitian ini berfokus pada UMKM di Kota Solo yang menggunakan strategi pemasaran influencer, dengan partisipan yang terdiri dari influencer dan pemilik UMKM. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa influencer memainkan peran penting dalam memperkenalkan produk UMKM, meningkatkan citra dan kesadaran merek, dan secara signifikan meningkatkan penjualan hingga 2 hingga 3 kali lipat. Selain itu, pemasaran digital, khususnya memanfaatkan Instagram sebagai platform promosi, disorot sebagai alat yang efektif untuk menjangkau audiens yang lebih luas dan mendorong pertumbuhan penjualan untuk UMKM kuliner di Solo.

INTRODUCTION

According Saeroji & Wijaya (2017) , the city of Solo has various kinds of tourism potential, ranging from culture, history, shopping tourism, and also its very famous culinary tourism. If this potential is optimally developed, it can become an attraction for tourists visiting the city of Solo. According to Suryati (2021) Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) is a people's economy that has a small scope that stands alone and is managed by individuals or groups. MSME unit in the city of Solo has an important role in regional economic growth and development. The MSME sector has proven to be resilient

during the COVID-19 pandemic storm in 2020 until now, able to survive various economic pressures due to the government's social distancing policy (Wulandari et al., 2023).

Based on the latest data from the Surakarta City Department of Cooperatives, SMEs, and Industry, it is recorded that in 2022 there will be 11,157 MSMEs operating in the area. When compared with data from the previous year, namely 2021, it shows that there will only be 3,635 MSMEs. This data proves the rapid development of MSMEs in the city of Solo. The development of information technology is currently experiencing very rapid progress, including the use of social media by Indonesians. These developments make companies continue to innovate and look for new methods in their business strategies, especially in marketing strategies (Nasih et al., 2020). According to Marpaung et al., (2021), digital marketing is a form of marketing process that is supported by online digital media using various digitalization tools. Apart from that, according to Coviello digital marketing is product marketing using the internet and interactive technology to connect business people and consumers (Hartanti & Oktiyani, 2020).

According to (Constantinides, 2014) social media is a place to create, connect, communicate, and share content online and can be used as promotional media (Djakasaputra et al., 2023). One example is the social media platform Instagram, which is currently being widely used by the millennial generation. Instagram is an application where we can share our photos and videos on feeds, Instagram stories, and the newest feature, namely reels (Rifiani et al., 2022). Apart from being a social media site for sharing photos, Instagram can also advertise products with paid ads or do marketing with influencers.

The use of digital marketing is currently very important in business activities. With digital marketing, MSME players can promote their products very easily. Through social media, the web, and other internet media, they can provide product information to the public and increase their sales turnover (Chotimussoleh & Wicaksana, 2021). According to Chaffey in Es et al. (2017), the use of digital marketing can help marketing activities aimed at increasing consumers' knowledge of their needs. As explained again by Marpaung et al. (2021), digital marketing can make it easier for MSMEs to research the market and provide various consumer needs and desires, and vice versa, consumers can search for and obtain product information with the facilities provided by features on social media, which are used as promotional media.

Based on research conducted by Acmad et al. (2020), the use of social media really makes the marketing and buying and selling processes carried out by MSME players very easy to market their products and can minimise costs. However, there are still many MSME players in the city of Solo who do not use social media as a forum for promoting their businesses. Quoting from (Wicaksono & Duhri, 2023) in Solopos.com According to the Head of the Solo Cooperative and UKM Office, most or the majority of MSMEs still use traditional marketing, which is around 71.94%, while MSME players who utilize digital marketing are only 12.59% of the total of around 11,157 MSMEs. In this case, it is confirmed by the results of research by Arjuna et al. (2022) that the main reason that few MSMEs use

social media in their marketing strategy is the lack of skills in using technology. This shows that the knowledge of MSME actors regarding the use of digital marketing is still low.

One way to utilise digital marketing is by using influencers. Nasih et al. (2020) argue that influencer is a term that comes from the English word influence, which means to influence. So, an influencer is someone who can have a positive influence on society. The use of influencers via social media is very appropriate for MSME players to promote their products to consumers, especially millennial consumers (Fatimah et al., 2021). Because the nature of the millennial generation is very attached to technology and the internet, they use social media to obtain information and make decisions about purchasing products based on reviews or testimonials from people who have purchased or used the product (Hanindharputri & Putra, 2019).

In line with this, Lailiyah (2023) stated that using influencers as a marketing strategy will increase awareness of a brand because influencers act as buyers who show positive things about the product. The more positive the impression of a brand, the higher the level of buyers' trust in that brand, which will be in line with their decision to purchase the goods they want to buy (Anggraeni et al., 2022). And it was explained again by Rahmawati (2021) that a good brand image of a company introduced by influencers can have an impact on sales and income, so that it can increase significantly.

RESEARCH METHODS

This type of research uses qualitative research. According to Barlian (2016), qualitative research is research that aims to understand the phenomena experienced by research subjects. The research method or approach used in this research is a case study. The case study method focuses attention on a particular object that is raised as a case to be studied in depth so that it is able to reveal the reality behind the existing phenomenon (Assyakurrohim et al., 2023).

In this research, data collection techniques were obtained by interviewing MSME actors whose products had been promoted by Kuliner neng solo influencer. The type of interview used by the author is a semi-structured interview, namely an interview that starts with the issues included in the interview guide. The sequence of questions for each participant is different depending on the interview process and individual answers, but the interview guide ensures that researchers can collect the same type of data from participants. (Alhamid & Anufia, 2019). Interviews were conducted with *Kuliner Neng Solo* influencer and three MSME owners in the city of Solo.

Apart from that, supporting data is obtained from observation and documentation. In order to gain credibility for qualitative research and ensure the validity of the data, source triangulation is used. According to Barlian (2016), source triangulation is useful for testing the credibility of data by checking data obtained from several sources.

The data analysis technique used in this research is as described by Miles and Huberman in Alexandro et al. (2020), namely using 4 stages: collecting data, reducing data, presenting data, and drawing conclusions. The objects of this research are MSMEs in the

city of Solo that use influencer services as a marketing strategy. The subjects of this research are Kuliner neng solo influencer and MSME owners in the city of Solo who use influencer services as a marketing strategy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The role and impact of influencers in promoting MSMEs

Influencer Profile

Based on the results of observations and interviews conducted by researchers, Kuliner neng solo influencer is one of the many culinary influencers in the city of Solo. The types of influencers are divided into three, namely:

a. Mega Influencer
An artist or celebrity who has more than 1 million followers. According to Hanindharputri & Putra (2019), these celebrities already have personal branding, which no longer needs to be formed by a brand, so with a very large number of followers, celebrities can promote businesses with a wider reach.

b. Macro Influencer
Macro influencers are influencers who have a number of followers between 100,000 and 1 million people. These influencers share their lives on social media with a focus on specialisations or interests in certain fields only (Hanindharputri & Putra, 2019).

c. Micro Influencer
According to Widyadhana (2023), this type of influencer has a number of followers ranging from 1,000 to 100,000. Micro influencers have a closer relationship with their followers and have a very high level of trust because Indonesian people's purchasing behaviour relies heavily on recommendations from relatives or product reviews from people they know or trust.

The Kuliner Neng Solo influencer falls into the category of macro influencers, boasting 16 thousand followers on Instagram and 65 thousand followers on TikTok. Beginning her influencer journey in January 2018 with only 2 thousand followers, Kuliner Neng Solo initially focused on creating content about street food. By June 2018, her follower count had surged to 10 thousand. Initially, Kuliner Neng Solo had a vague target audience as her journey began with a simple passion for snacking. However, her engaging content soon caught the attention of her followers, mainly as there were few culinary influencers in Solo then. This contributed to the widespread recognition of Kuliner Neng Solo among the community.

Figure 1 Instagram Account of @Kuliner.neng.Solo
Source: Processed by the Researcher (2024)

The mission of Kuliner neng solo influencer is different from most culinary influencers, who only promote well-known MSMEs. Kuliner neng solo influencer is more focused on introducing MSMEs that are not yet known to the public in the city of Solo. This is one of the roles of influencers, namely to create brand awareness for brands owned by MSMEs. Brand awareness is a term in marketing strategy that can describe the level of consumer awareness of a product or brand (Sonani & Pramadista Sudrajat, 2023). According to Febriani (2022), the higher the brand awareness of a brand, the more impact it will have on the brand as a priority choice and increase consumer buying interest. Therefore, the expertise of influencers who have experience, skills, and knowledge of using social media will have an impact on brand awareness.

The role of influencers as a marketing strategy is very important for MSMEs to use because influencers can attract attention and convince consumers to buy products from a brand. They can also comment on products in an interesting way through review content uploaded to their social media accounts with the hundreds of thousands of followers they have. According to Hanindharputri & Putra (2019), the majority of an influencer's followers have interests that match the influencer's, so when the influencer creates content that suits a brand, indirectly the target audience will match that brand. For example, when a food brand collaborates with a food vlogger or influencer, the target followers will be suitable because the influencer's followers have an interest in the culinary field.

By having a good brand image or brand awareness for a product, influencers who have a good reputation can also help build the credibility of MSME businesses. Positive recommendations and testimonials from influencers can increase consumer trust in a brand. According to Rifani's research (2022), consumers are more likely to trust and accept a recommendation from a source with a reputation in the industry. Based on the results of interviews with UMKM C, it also shows that most of their customers are followers of the kuliner neng solo influencer. "Yes, they know from the influencer; if asked, they know from Instagram Kuliner neng solo; and they also know from their social media status or status from my other customers." This can mean that Kuliner neng solo influencer has the quality, capability, or power to trigger consumer trust in a brand. Apart from that, influencers who are trustworthy and have a good reputation are also very influential in increasing consumer buying interest.

Influencers and Digital Marketing Strategies to Support MSMEs

Kuliner Neng Solo, an influencer, captivates followers with engaging content marketing strategies. As described by Maszudi (2023) in Rachmah & Madiawati (2022), content marketing involves creating, curating, sharing, and developing content on social media platforms to enhance communication and influence consumer purchasing decisions. Kuliner Neng Solo's unique content is particularly beneficial for street food and culinary MSMEs, especially those in their early stages. The influencer explains, "I typically share content featuring street food stalls and distinctive products." She scouts for inspiration on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Google Maps, often opting for lesser-known or less-

frequented locations to boost their visibility. She elaborates, "I prefer undiscovered or quieter spots. For instance, I couldn't feature Mie Kalia at UMS since it's already popular and has collaborated with other Instagram accounts in Solo."

Moreover, Kuliner Neng Solo's influencer sheds light on an intriguing MSME brand that uses Javanese captions as a distinctive feature on social media. She emphasizes the significance of providing a direct experience to viewers through Javanese captions, stating, "Our content utilizes Javanese captions, allowing viewers to feel a genuine connection with our posts." This sets Kuliner Neng Solo apart from other food vloggers, as they incorporate cultural proximity into their message packaging strategies on social media. According to Saputro et al. (2023), uniqueness is crucial for influencers to be memorable to their audience. This characteristic distinguishes an influencer from others, even if the content type remains the same.

Furthermore, Kuliner Neng Solo influencer ensures clarity in the captions accompanying the shared products, providing details such as the place's name, location, operating hours, and pricing. Additionally, she leverages hashtags to categorize and organize posts effectively. According to Putri & Mormes (2017), hashtags categorize photos and group them into specific, more defined categories.


Figure 2 Instagram Caption Screenshots @Kuliner.neng.Solo
Source: Processed by the Researcher (2024)

Another effective strategy for influencers in their content marketing efforts is leveraging the Instagram Insight feature. Instagram Insight, primarily designed for businesses, offers invaluable data including demographics, follower personas, content engagement metrics, active hours, and more. Analyzing these insights enables influencers to tailor their marketing strategies for wider audience reach. Furthermore, as highlighted by Rachmawati in Suranto et al., (2022), maximizing Instagram's features—such as crafting engaging content, optimizing link accessibility, and employing effective call-to-action techniques—can significantly enhance marketing effectiveness in the digital age.

On the culinary Instagram account of Neng Solo, influencers share content through photo feeds and video reels, reaching an average audience ranging from 6 thousand to 595

thousand followers. According to research conducted by Hidayati (2019), influencers should utilize engagement rates as a metric to assess audience interaction, enabling effective communication with followers and aligning their image with the products they endorse. Engagement rates serve as indicators for researching audience preferences and needs based on interactions with specific content. These rates encompass various forms such as likes, shares, retweets, comments, link clicks, direct messages, mentions, and audience duration, depending on the social media platform's available tools. By analyzing these metrics, influencers can gain insights into follower interests and use them to evaluate and refine content creation strategies. According to research on 3 MSMEs, the Kuliner neng solo account received the following engagement rate:
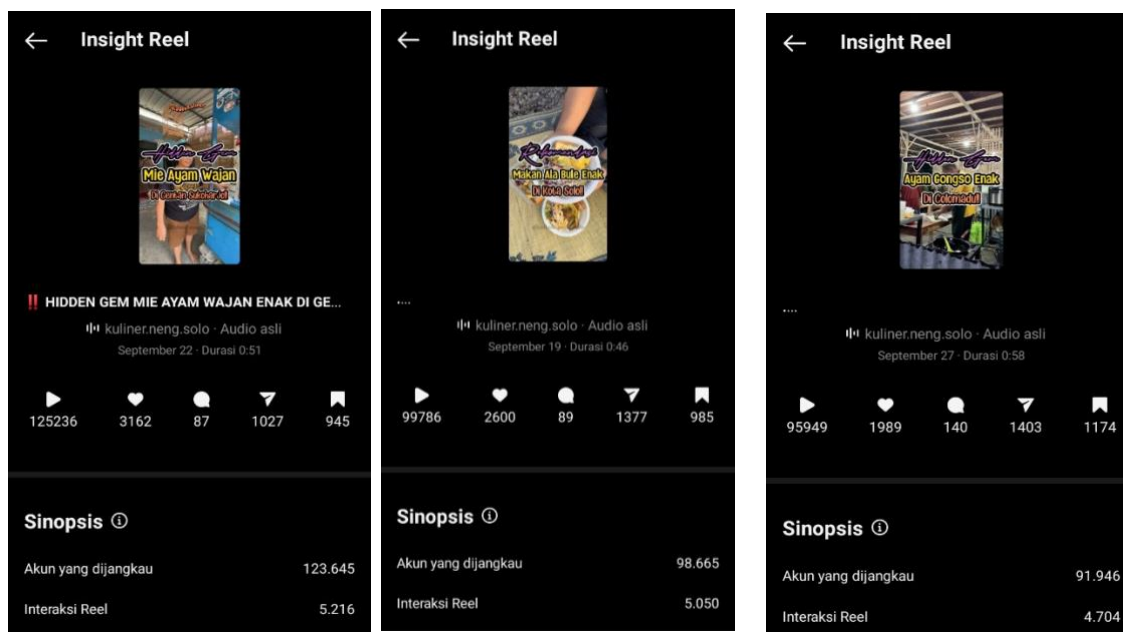
Figure 3 Account Insight Reels screenshot @kuliner.neng.solo
Source: Processed by the Researcher (2024)

Based on the insights mentioned earlier, the role of Kuliner Neng Solo influencer towards the audience is to establish and foster meaningful connections and interactions that are both expansive and effective. Therefore, the engagement rate serves as a valuable tool for gauging the success of content.

Additionally, a strategy that influencers can employ to maintain stable account impressions or the share ratio of Kuliner Neng Solo delights is to consistently post on their feed. "Consistent posting enhances account impressions; the more frequently you post, the higher your impressions will be. Increased impressions lead to higher engagement rates, reach, and likes, consequently attracting more businesses interested in advertising." Impressions data indicates the extent to which created content is disseminated and the number of audiences it reaches successfully. By understanding reach data, potential audiences for brands can be identified. On the other hand, impressions refer to the frequency of post appearances on viewers' social media homepages (Setiawati, 2012). In

this context, impression and reach serve as vital strategies or metrics for influencers to gauge brand awareness among MSME players.

Benefits Derived by MSMEs from Influencers

According to interview findings, utilizing influencers and digital marketing among MSMEs has yielded significant benefits as a marketing tool. Leveraging influencers has proven highly effective for MSMEs, boosting brand awareness, expanding market reach, enhancing engagement, and driving notable increases in sales volumes for their products. As per feedback from three MSMEs, influencer collaborations have led to substantial boosts in sales figures. MSME A reported doubling sales, stating, "Our sales surged by 200% after the influencer's promotion; the stall was bustling from dusk until 9:30 PM, selling out within just 2-3 hours." Similarly, MSME B witnessed a 2-3 times increase in sales, with the owner noting, "Our sales spiked by 2-3 times; previously, we sold only 10-20 portions per day before the promotion, but after advertising, we're selling 50-100 portions daily across two morning and afternoon sessions. Weekends are busy in the mornings, while weekdays see increased activity in the afternoons." Likewise, MSME C experienced a significant threefold increase in sales, echoing similar sentiments.

In addition to driving sales growth, influencer reviews prompt MSMEs to continually enhance their products in terms of quality, service, location, and marketing strategies. According to MSME A, the influx of consumers following influencer reviews led to an expansion of their workforce and plans to open additional branches to accommodate the growing demand. Furthermore, they have begun actively utilizing social media platforms like Instagram for promotional purposes. Encouraged by positive influencer reviews and growing digital presence, MSMEs leverage delivery applications such as GoFood, GrabFood, and ShopeeFood to market their products. This digital marketing strategy further boosts sales turnover for MSMEs, indicating the successful role of influencers in fostering digital literacy among MSMEs.

CONCLUSION

The research findings highlight the significant potential of influencer marketing and digital media for MSME players, who often need more expertise. Specifically, macro-influencers like Kuliner Neng Solo emerge as pivotal in promoting MSMEs, fostering brand awareness, increasing consumer interest and trust, expanding market reach, and ultimately driving sales volume. Kuliner Neng Solo's practical strategies, including crafting unique and engaging content, utilizing distinctive Javanese captions, employing hashtags and Instagram Insight, and assessing engagement levels, underscore influencers' impact on MSME success.

For MSME owners, the implication of this research is clear: collaborating with influencers, especially macro-influencers like Kuliner Neng Solo, can yield substantial benefits. By leveraging influencer reviews, MSMEs can continuously enhance the quality, service, location, and marketing strategies of their products. Moreover, the findings offer

valuable insights for MSME owners to develop influencer marketing strategies and forge partnerships with influencers to elevate their businesses.

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