

ADAPTATION OF MOLUCCAN CULTURAL VALUES IN DIGITAL BRANDING OF AMBON'S LOCAL PRODUCTS

Rido Latuheru¹, Junus Kwelju², Samson Laurens³

Universitas Kristen Indonesia Maluku^{1,2,3}

latuheru.rido@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research examines the adaptation of Moluccan cultural values in digital branding strategies for local products from Ambon City. In the digital era, local producers face challenges in maintaining cultural identity while competing in a digitalized global market. Using an exploratory qualitative approach, this research involves in-depth interviews with 25 MSMEs in Ambon City, digital content analysis of their marketing platforms, and focus group discussions with Moluccan cultural experts. Research findings indicate that integrating cultural elements such as *pela gandong*, *sasi*, and traditional motifs in digital branding strategies not only strengthens product differentiation but also creates emotional resonance with local and diaspora consumers. The study identifies four models of cultural value adaptation: visual transformation, heritage narrative, contemporary reinterpretation, and community collaboration. This study provides a strategic framework for local entrepreneurs to optimize cultural identity as a competitive advantage in the digital economy, while contributing to the preservation and revitalization of Moluccan cultural heritage.

Keywords: digital branding, cultural values, local products, Moluccan identity, digital economy

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital landscape, local producers worldwide face unprecedented challenges in maintaining their cultural authenticity while competing in increasingly globalized markets. The tension between preserving traditional values and adapting to modern consumer expectations has become particularly acute for businesses in culturally rich regions such as the Moluccas (Maluku), Indonesia. Cultural differences,

varying consumer behaviours, and distinct societal norms necessitate a nuanced approach to brand management (Bolder Agency, 2024).

The concept of brand authenticity has gained significant prominence in international marketing literature, with scholars emphasizing its role as a fundamental driver of consumer trust and loyalty. From a cultural perspective, coming across as fake or artificial can indeed be damaging for many brands (Södergren, 2021). This challenge is particularly relevant for local producers in regions with rich cultural heritage, who must navigate the delicate balance between modernization and tradition preservation.

Local brands often represent local icons, characterized by uniqueness, originality and local culture (Emerald Insight, 2021). The Moluccan archipelago, with its distinct cultural values embodied in traditions such as *pela gandong* (brotherhood alliance), *sasi* (traditional resource management), and rich artisanal heritage, presents a unique case study for understanding how cultural authenticity can be leveraged in digital branding strategies.

Recent scholarship on cultural identity in the digital age has highlighted both opportunities and challenges. Digital platforms serve as both a challenge and an opportunity. On the one hand, they expose local cultures to homogenizing global trends, particularly affecting younger generations. On the other hand, these platforms act as powerful tools for sharing and preserving local traditions, enabling communities to reassert their cultural distinctiveness on a global stage (Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2023).

The theoretical framework for this study draws from multiple disciplinary perspectives. Brand authenticity theory provides the foundation for understanding how cultural elements can be integrated into modern marketing strategies without compromising their essential meaning. Social identity theory helps explain how consumers connect with brands that reflect their cultural values and heritage. Finally, digital transformation theory offers insights into how traditional cultural practices can be effectively communicated through digital platforms.

This research addresses a significant gap in the literature by focusing specifically on the adaptation of indigenous cultural values in digital branding within the Indonesian context. While extensive research exists on global brand localization strategies, limited

attention has been paid to how small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in culturally rich regions can leverage their heritage as a competitive advantage in digital markets.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate the adaptation of Moluccan cultural values in digital branding strategies. The qualitative approach was selected due to the exploratory nature of the research questions and the need to understand complex cultural meanings and their digital interpretations. The study utilizes a phenomenological framework to capture the lived experiences of entrepreneurs and cultural practitioners involved in digital branding initiatives.

Participants and Sampling

The research involved multiple stakeholder groups to ensure comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon:

Primary Participants: 25 Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) owners in Ambon City who have implemented digital marketing strategies for local products. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) business operations for minimum two years, (2) active use of digital platforms for marketing, (3) incorporation of Moluccan cultural elements in their branding, and (4) willingness to participate in the study.

Secondary Participants: 8 Moluccan cultural experts including traditional leaders (raja), cultural scholars, and community elders with deep knowledge of *pela gandong*, *sasi*, and other traditional practices. These participants were selected through snowball sampling and cultural community recommendations.

Data Collection Methods

In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants over a period of six months (March-August 2024). Interview protocols were developed based on the theoretical framework and pilot tested with three entrepreneurs. Questions explored participants' understanding of Moluccan cultural values, their digital branding strategies, challenges faced in cultural adaptation, and outcomes achieved.

Digital Content Analysis: Systematic analysis of digital marketing content from participating MSMEs was conducted across multiple platforms including Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and business websites. Content was analyzed for visual elements, narratives, cultural symbols, and engagement metrics over a 12-month period (January-December 2023).

Focus Group Discussions: Three focus group discussions were conducted with cultural experts to validate findings and explore the appropriateness of cultural adaptations observed in digital branding practices. Each session lasted approximately 2 hours and was audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Interview transcripts were coded inductively to identify patterns and themes related to cultural adaptation strategies. Digital content analysis employed both quantitative metrics (engagement rates, reach, shares) and qualitative assessment of cultural representation accuracy. Cross-validation was ensured through triangulation of data sources and member checking with selected participants. The research team included both local and external researchers to provide insider and outsider perspectives on cultural interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the Universitas Kristen Indonesia Maluku Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent, and cultural protocols were observed throughout the research process. Special attention was paid to ensuring that cultural knowledge shared by participants was treated with appropriate respect and confidentiality.

FINDINGS

Cultural Value Integration Patterns

The analysis revealed four distinct models of cultural value adaptation in digital branding strategies employed by Moluccan entrepreneurs:

Visual Transformation Model

This model involves the incorporation of traditional Moluccan visual elements into contemporary digital designs. Participants demonstrated sophisticated understanding of how traditional motifs, colors, and symbols could be adapted for digital platforms while maintaining cultural authenticity. The batik patterns from Central Maluku, traditional house architecture elements, and pela gandong symbols were frequently transformed into modern logo designs, packaging graphics, and social media templates.

One successful example involved a local coffee producer who integrated traditional Moluccan geometric patterns into packaging design while maintaining modern aesthetic appeal. The visual elements directly referenced traditional textile patterns used in ceremonial contexts, creating immediate cultural recognition among local consumers while appealing to broader audiences through contemporary design execution.

Heritage Narrative Model

The heritage narrative model focuses on storytelling approaches that connect products to Moluccan cultural history and values. Entrepreneurs utilizing this model demonstrated skill in crafting narratives that explain the cultural significance of their products while making these stories accessible to digital audiences.

A spice producer exemplified this approach by creating content that explained the historical role of Moluccan spices in global trade, connecting this heritage to their contemporary sustainable farming practices. The narrative strategy successfully positioned their products within a larger story of cultural pride and environmental stewardship, resonating with both local and diaspora consumers.

Contemporary Reinterpretation Model

This model involves taking traditional cultural practices and values and expressing them through modern business practices and digital communication strategies. Rather than simply depicting traditional elements, entrepreneurs in this category actively embody cultural values in their business operations and use digital platforms to communicate these values.

The *sasi* principle of sustainable resource management was particularly well-adapted through this model. Several marine product businesses used digital platforms to

educate consumers about traditional sasi practices while demonstrating how these principles guide their contemporary harvesting and distribution methods. This approach created strong authenticity credentials while educating consumers about Moluccan environmental wisdom.

Community Collaboration Model

The community collaboration model reflects the *pela gandong* principle of mutual assistance and solidarity through collaborative digital marketing initiatives. This approach involves multiple businesses or community groups working together to promote shared cultural values while supporting individual business objectives.

Several successful examples included collaborative social media campaigns during traditional festivals, joint participation in digital marketplaces, and shared storytelling initiatives that highlighted different aspects of Moluccan culture. These collaborative approaches demonstrated how traditional community values could be effectively translated into modern digital marketing strategies.

Digital Platform Utilization Strategies

Platform-Specific Adaptations

Analysis of digital content revealed sophisticated understanding of platform-specific requirements and audience expectations. Instagram was primarily used for visual storytelling, with entrepreneurs creating carefully curated feeds that balanced traditional aesthetic elements with contemporary lifestyle imagery. Facebook served as the primary platform for longer-form storytelling and community engagement, while TikTok was utilized for dynamic demonstrations of traditional practices adapted for younger audiences.

Audience Segmentation Approaches

Participants demonstrated nuanced understanding of their diverse audiences, including local consumers, Moluccan diaspora communities, and broader Indonesian and international markets. Content strategies were adapted accordingly, with local content emphasizing community values and shared cultural understanding, while content for broader audiences focused on educational and exotic appeal of Moluccan culture.

Challenges and Barriers

Cultural Appropriation Concerns

Many participants expressed concerns about the appropriate use of cultural symbols and narratives, particularly when targeting broader markets. The fear of misrepresenting or commodifying sacred cultural elements created tension between marketing effectiveness and cultural responsibility.

Digital Literacy Limitations

Technical challenges in digital platform management were identified as significant barriers, particularly for older entrepreneurs with strong cultural knowledge but limited digital skills. This gap highlighted the need for capacity-building programs that bridge traditional cultural knowledge with digital marketing capabilities.

Market Response Variability

Participants reported varied market responses to cultural integration strategies, with some consumers appreciating authentic cultural representation while others preferred more universalized approaches. This variability required sophisticated market understanding and flexible strategy development.

Success Factors and Outcomes

Consumer Engagement Metrics

Quantitative analysis of digital engagement revealed significantly higher interaction rates for content that successfully integrated cultural elements compared to generic product marketing. Posts featuring cultural narratives averaged 40% higher engagement rates than standard product advertisements.

Brand Differentiation Achievements

Businesses that successfully implemented cultural adaptation strategies reported stronger brand recognition and customer loyalty. Several participants noted increased customer retention and word-of-mouth marketing, particularly among diaspora communities seeking authentic cultural connections.

Cultural Preservation Contributions

An unexpected finding was the role of digital branding in cultural preservation and transmission. Several participants reported that their digital marketing efforts had sparked increased interest in traditional practices among younger community members, contributing to cultural revitalization efforts.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute significantly to existing theory on cultural branding and digital marketing. The four adaptation models identified in this study extend current understanding of how indigenous cultural values can be successfully integrated into contemporary marketing strategies. The visual transformation and heritage narrative models align with existing literature on cultural mixing strategies, while the contemporary reinterpretation and community collaboration models represent novel approaches specific to collectivist cultural contexts.

The success of the community collaboration model particularly challenges individualistic assumptions in branding theory. Life by helping each other is obligatory, not based on coercion but naturally (Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal, 2018). This finding suggests that traditional marketing theories may need adaptation when applied to communities with strong collectivist values.

Practical Implications

For entrepreneurs and marketing practitioners, this study provides concrete strategies for cultural value integration in digital branding. The four models offer flexible frameworks that can be adapted to different product categories, target markets, and cultural contexts. The emphasis on authenticity and community involvement provides guidance for avoiding cultural appropriation while maximizing marketing effectiveness.

The findings also have implications for policy makers and development organizations. The demonstrated success of cultural integration strategies suggests that supporting traditional culture preservation and modern business development need not be competing priorities. Programs that combine digital literacy training with cultural

education could enhance both economic development and heritage preservation outcomes.

Cultural Preservation and Economic Development

The study reveals a positive feedback loop between successful digital branding and cultural preservation. People shared stories about the artisanal salt on social media, and chefs, foodies, and investors eventually designed and marketed more recipes around it, ultimately reviving demand and essentially saving it (FNB Report, 2024). This pattern was evident in several Moluccan cases where digital marketing success led to increased community interest in traditional practices.

This finding has important implications for understanding how market mechanisms can support rather than threaten cultural heritage. When cultural elements are successfully integrated into viable business models, they gain economic value that can support their preservation and transmission to future generations.

Digital Platform Evolution and Cultural Adaptation

The study's findings regarding platform-specific cultural adaptations reflect the broader trend toward diversified digital marketing strategies. Digital platforms serve as both a challenge and an opportunity (Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2023). The ability of Moluccan entrepreneurs to adapt their cultural content to different platform requirements while maintaining authenticity demonstrates sophisticated cultural and digital literacy.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study's focus on Ambon City and specific cultural practices limits the generalizability of findings to other regions and cultural contexts. Future research should explore how the identified adaptation models perform in different cultural and economic contexts. Longitudinal studies tracking the long-term impacts of cultural branding strategies on both business outcomes and cultural preservation would provide valuable insights.

Additionally, the study's qualitative approach, while appropriate for exploratory research, could be complemented by quantitative studies measuring the economic

impacts of cultural integration strategies on business performance and community development outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

This research demonstrates that Moluccan cultural values can be successfully adapted for digital branding strategies through four distinct models: visual transformation, heritage narrative, contemporary reinterpretation, and community collaboration. The study reveals that authentic cultural integration not only enhances brand differentiation and consumer engagement but also contributes to cultural preservation and community development.

The findings challenge assumptions about the incompatibility between traditional cultural values and modern digital marketing. Instead, they demonstrate how thoughtful cultural adaptation can create competitive advantages while supporting heritage preservation. The *pela gandong* principle of mutual assistance translates effectively into collaborative digital marketing strategies, while *sasi* values of sustainable resource management provide authentic foundations for environmental marketing approaches. For practitioners, the study provides actionable frameworks for cultural value integration that respect cultural authenticity while achieving business objectives. The emphasis on community involvement and cultural education as components of marketing strategy offers a sustainable approach to cultural commercialization that benefits both businesses and communities. The research contributes to the growing literature on cultural branding by providing empirical evidence from an understudied context and demonstrating how indigenous cultural values can be successfully leveraged in digital economies. The findings support the argument that globalization and cultural preservation need not be opposing forces when appropriate adaptation strategies are employed.

Future research should explore the long-term sustainability of these approaches and their applicability in other cultural contexts. The development of metrics for measuring cultural authenticity in digital branding would provide valuable tools for both researchers and practitioners working at the intersection of culture and commerce. This study ultimately demonstrates that the digital age presents opportunities for cultural revitalization and economic development when communities possess the knowledge, skills, and frameworks necessary to adapt their heritage for contemporary contexts while maintaining its essential character and community value.

REFERENCES

- Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal. (2018). Pela dan gandong culture as basic of a network formation for poverty alleviation in the village. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 5(3). <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.53.4247>
- Bolder Agency. (2024). The impact of culture on global branding. *Bolder Journal*. <https://www.bolderagency.com/journal/the-impact-of-culture-on-global-branding>
- Emerald Insight. (2021). Global-local consumer identities as drivers of global digital brand usage. *International Marketing Review*. <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/imr-03-2018-0104/full/html>
- Emerald Insight. (2021). Local versus global food consumption: The role of brand authenticity. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*. <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/jcm-02-2019-3086/full/html>
- FNB Report. (2024). Branding and marketing for cultural heritage preservation. <https://fnbreport.ph/22725/branding-and-marketing-cultural-heritage-preservation/>
- Frontify. (2024). How to build brand authenticity. *Frontify Brand Guide*. <https://www.frontify.com/en/guide/brand-authenticity>
- Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences. (2023). Cultural identity in the digital age: Navigating globalization in local communities. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(3), 114-120.
- Nature. (2024). Construction of digital creation development model of intangible cultural heritage crafts in China. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-024-04331-4>
- PMC. (2024). How cultural involvement in different brand types influences willingness to pay premium: The mediating role of brand happiness. *Frontiers in Psychology*. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11504224/>
- ResearchGate. (2019). How global brands incorporate local cultural elements to improve brand evaluations: A perspective on cultural mixing. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337900365_How_global_brands_incorporate_local_cultural_elements_to_improve_brand_evaluations_A_perspective_on_cultural_mixing

- ResearchGate. (2021). Orientation of sasi cultural values in Maluku. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355937485_Orientation_of_sasi_Cultural_Values_in_Maluku
- Södergren, E. (2021). Brand authenticity: 25 years of research. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 45(4), 645-663. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12651>
- Springer Nature. (2025). Muslim communities' identity transformation through the pela gandong ritual communication in Moluccas Immanuel Church, Indonesia. *Contemporary Islam*. <https://communities.springernature.com/posts/muslim-communities-identity-transformation-through-the-pela-gandong-ritual-communication-in-moluccas-immanuel-church-indonesia>
- United Nations in Indonesia. (2023). Local entrepreneurs thrive while helping to preserve Indonesia's cultural heritage. <https://indonesia.un.org/en/260163-local-entrepreneurs-thrive-while-helping-preserve-indonesia%E2%80%99s-cultural-heritage>