

MARKETING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING BRAND IMAGE: A STUDY OF CAFE GALIH IN MEDAN

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the marketing communication strategies implemented by Cafe Galih in building its brand image in Medan City, identify the communication media utilized, and examine the supporting and inhibiting factors affecting their implementation. This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach, with data collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving the owner, employees, and customers of Cafe Galih. The data were analyzed through the stages of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that Cafe Galih builds its brand image through a combination of internal communication, reflected in team cohesiveness and consistency in product quality, and external communication, particularly through the use of Instagram as a medium for promoting and introducing the business. The supporting factors include team cohesiveness, product quality, good customer service, and the use of Instagram, while the main inhibiting factor involves occasional negligence in product preparation, which is promptly addressed through product replacement as a form of responsibility toward customers. These findings demonstrate that brand image is not solely shaped by promotional activities on social media but also by customers' direct experiences with product and service quality. Therefore, maintaining consistency between external communication and internal service quality is essential to the success of marketing communication strategies among small- and medium-sized culinary businesses.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The food and beverage industry in Indonesia has become increasingly dynamic and competitive, particularly in the café and coffee shop sector in urban areas. Changes in people's lifestyles, the growing demand for comfortable social spaces, and the rapid development of digital technology have transformed cafés from merely places to consume food and beverages into spaces for socializing, working, studying, and fostering social interaction. These conditions require café businesses to develop strategies that rely not only on product quality but also on the ability to create a distinctive identity and image that differentiates them from competitors. In this context, brand image has become an important element because it influences how consumers recognize, evaluate, trust, and ultimately choose a particular brand (Rizki & Mulyanti, 2023).

The formation of brand image is closely associated with the marketing communication strategies implemented by a business. Marketing communication serves to convey product-related information, build brand awareness, establish relationships with consumers, and create specific

associations in the minds of target audiences. The development of digital media has further expanded the forms of marketing communication, as businesses are now able to integrate face-to-face communication with social media and various other marketing communication channels. An integrated marketing communication strategy enables companies to deliver more consistent messages, thereby strengthening the relationship between brands and consumers (Habibah et al., 2023). In practice, social media also provides small- and medium-sized enterprises with opportunities to introduce and promote their brands to wider audiences at relatively efficient costs (Putra & Iskandar, 2023).

In the culinary business, brand image is shaped not only through promotional communication but also through consumers' experiences with products, services, the atmosphere of the establishment, and direct interactions with employees. Brand image is formed through various associations stored in consumers' memories, including perceptions related to quality, characteristics, benefits, and emotional experiences associated with a particular brand (Hafsari, 2024). Therefore, effective marketing communication requires consistency between the messages communicated to consumers and the actual experiences they receive. A positive brand image can ultimately enhance customer trust, strengthen loyalty, and create a competitive advantage over rival businesses (Putri et al., 2024).

A number of previous studies have examined marketing communication and brand image formation. Habibah et al. (2023) demonstrated that the implementation of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) can contribute to the formation of brand identity and brand equity through the integration of various marketing communication activities. Mukhyidin (2023) similarly found that the IMC approach enables companies to integrate multiple communication channels in order to build brand image more effectively. Meanwhile, research on digital marketing communication has shown that the use of digital media can expand communication reach and strengthen relationships between businesses and their consumers (Aisyah et al., 2025). These findings indicate that marketing communication plays an important role in shaping consumers' perceptions of a brand.

Nevertheless, previous studies have tended to emphasize the effectiveness of promotional media or the implementation of IMC elements primarily as forms of external communication. Relatively limited attention has been given to examining the relationship between external marketing communication and internal business factors, such as team coordination, service quality, product consistency, and direct customer experience, as integral components of brand image formation. Therefore, the research gap in this study does not merely concern differences in the research object, but rather the need to understand brand image as the outcome of interactions between marketing messages communicated to consumers and the actual experiences they encounter when engaging with a business.

Cafe Galih provides a relevant context for examining this issue because it is a local culinary business operating amid the competitive coffee shop industry in Medan City and utilizes Instagram as one of its marketing communication channels. Preliminary observations indicate that Cafe Galih also offers a comfortable, vintage-style environment and relies considerably on direct service interactions with customers. These characteristics provide an empirical context for examining how a local-scale business develops its brand image despite having more limited marketing communication resources than large companies or national brands. Accordingly, an investigation of Cafe Galih may provide a more contextual understanding of marketing communication strategies applicable to small- and medium-sized culinary enterprises.

Based on this research gap, this study aims to analyze the marketing communication strategies implemented by Cafe Galih in building its brand image in Medan City, identify the communication media employed, and examine the supporting and inhibiting factors affecting their implementation. The novelty of this study lies in its more integrative perspective on brand image formation by linking external marketing communication activities, particularly the use of social media, with the quality of internal interactions and customers' actual experiences with the business. Theoretically, this study is expected to extend the literature on marketing communication within the context of local culinary enterprises. Practically, the findings may serve as a reference for café businesses in developing communication strategies that maintain consistency between brand messages and customer experiences.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the marketing communication strategies implemented by Cafe Galih in building its

brand image in Medan City. A qualitative approach was selected because the study focuses on interpreting communication processes, the use of marketing media, service experiences, and the supporting and inhibiting factors that emerge in marketing communication practices within a natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Judijanto et al., 2024). The research was conducted at Cafe Galih, located at Jalan Ketapang No. 17, Sekip, Medan Petisah District, Medan City, North Sumatra, from May to June 2026. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement in and knowledge of Cafe Galih's marketing communication activities. The informants consisted of the owner, who was considered knowledgeable about marketing communication planning and policies; employees, who were directly involved in service delivery and communication with customers; and customers, who had first-hand experience with Cafe Galih's products, services, and communication activities. Informant selection was guided by the principle of information adequacy, whereby data collection continued until the information obtained demonstrated recurring patterns and no longer generated substantively new themes, indicating that data saturation had been reached (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research data consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to ensure that the data collection remained focused while still providing informants with sufficient flexibility to explain their experiences and perspectives concerning marketing communication strategies, the use of Instagram, service quality, customer experience, and brand image formation. Observations were conducted on service activities, interactions between employees and customers, the café atmosphere, and forms of marketing communication occurring at the research site. Documentation was used to complement the data through photographs, activity archives, promotional materials, and content published on Cafe Galih's Instagram account. Secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, previous studies, and other scholarly sources relevant to marketing communication, Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), social media, and brand image. The use of multiple data collection techniques was intended to facilitate an understanding of the research phenomenon from different sources and perspectives, thereby producing a more comprehensive description (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data analysis was conducted interactively throughout the data collection process by referring to the stages of data condensation or reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2014). During the data reduction stage, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentation were selected, categorized, and grouped according to the main research focuses, namely marketing communication strategies, communication media, supporting and inhibiting factors, and brand image formation. The data were subsequently presented in the form of thematic descriptions to enable systematic analysis of the relationships between empirical findings, the concept of IMC, and brand image indicators. Conclusions were drawn through an iterative process of interpretation and verification of the collected data. Data trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing information obtained from the owner, employees, and customers, as well as methodological triangulation by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documentation. These procedures were employed to enhance the credibility and consistency of data interpretation, thereby ensuring that the research findings were methodologically rigorous and scientifically accountable (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2014).

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Product as an Internal Foundation of Brand Image

The findings indicate that team cohesiveness constitutes one of the internal factors supporting the formation of Cafe Galih's brand image. Based on the interviews, coordination among team members is essential because each employee performs interrelated tasks within operational processes and customer service activities. Effective teamwork enables service delivery to run more systematically, accelerates responses to customer needs, and reduces errors in task execution. One employee explained,

"We have to help one another because our tasks are interconnected. For example, when the café is crowded, employees from other sections also help so that customers do not have to wait too long and the service can continue to run smoothly" (Interview, Employee Informant 1, 2026).

This finding demonstrates that team cohesiveness not only supports operational efficiency but also influences customer experience through the quality of interaction received while visiting Cafe Galih.

Thus, internal coordination indirectly contributes to the formation of consumers' impressions of the brand because customers experience the brand not only through promotional messages but also through the behavior and service demonstrated by organizational members.

In addition to team cohesiveness, product quality was identified as an important element influencing consumers' experiences with Cafe Galih. The interview findings show that consistency of taste, product appropriateness, and the presentation of food and beverages receive considerable attention because customers evaluate not only the concept and atmosphere of the café but also the quality of the products they consume. The owner of Cafe Galih stated,

"We try to maintain the taste and quality of our food and beverages so that they remain consistent every time customers visit. In our view, if the taste keeps changing, customers may become disappointed, and this can certainly affect how they perceive Cafe Galih" (Interview, Owner Informant, 2026).

This statement was reinforced by a customer who explained, "In my opinion, besides having a comfortable place, the food and drinks also need to remain enjoyable. If the quality is consistent, we as customers become more confident and are more willing to return" (Interview, Customer Informant 1, 2026). These data indicate that products that meet customer expectations tend to generate positive experiences, whereas inconsistency in quality may reduce customers' evaluations of Cafe Galih. Therefore, product quality serves as an important point of convergence between what Cafe Galih communicates to the public and the actual experiences consumers encounter after making a purchase.

Theoretically, the findings concerning product quality and service experience can be explained through the concept of brand image, particularly the dimension of favorability of brand associations. Brand image is formed through associations stored in consumers' memories and develops on the basis of the information and experiences they acquire when interacting with a brand (Hafsari, 2024). These associations become increasingly positive when consumers receive benefits and experiences that correspond to their expectations. In the context of Cafe Galih, consistent product quality and well-coordinated service can generate favorable evaluations that subsequently strengthen consumers' positive associations with the brand. A positive brand image also contributes to consumer trust and increases the likelihood that consumers will select a particular brand over available alternatives (Rizki & Mulyanti, 2023). Accordingly, this study extends the understanding that brand image in culinary businesses is not solely the result of promotional communication but is formed through an accumulative process involving both the information received by customers and the actual experiences they obtain when consuming products and interacting with service providers.

The finding regarding team cohesiveness should also be positioned more precisely within the framework of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC). Team cohesiveness is not a direct element of IMC; rather, it represents an internal organizational capability that enables brand promises to be consistently realized through customer experience. The principle of IMC emphasizes the importance of consistency between messages and experiences so that various points of contact between an organization and its consumers can contribute to the development of coherent brand perceptions (Habibah et al., 2023). From this perspective, employee service can be understood as one of the brand touchpoints through which external messages concerning the quality of Cafe Galih are validated at the level of customer experience. When marketing communication presents a positive image but the service or product quality fails to correspond with that message, consumers' brand associations may weaken. Conversely, when team coordination, service quality, and product quality are aligned with the identity communicated to the public, such experiences can reinforce positive perceptions and provide a point of differentiation from competitors (Putri et al., 2024). Therefore, the principal contribution of this finding lies in demonstrating the relationship between internal organizational capabilities, the quality of customer experience, and the formation of brand image.

The Use of Instagram as an External Marketing Communication Medium

The findings indicate that Instagram serves as one of the external marketing communication media used by Cafe Galih to introduce the business, disseminate product information, and establish connections with existing and potential customers. The use of Instagram is considered helpful in enabling Cafe Galih to deliver information more rapidly and reach a broader audience without relying solely on face-to-face communication. One informant from Cafe Galih explained, "We use Instagram to introduce Cafe Galih to people who may never have visited us before. We usually upload information about our food, beverages, the atmosphere of the café, and various activities so that people can get an

idea of what Cafe Galih is like before they come" (Interview, Owner Informant, 2026). This statement shows that Instagram functions not only as a channel for conveying information but also as a space for visual representation through which Cafe Galih introduces its identity to the public. Through the content presented, potential customers are able to form an initial impression of the products, atmosphere, and overall character of the business before visiting the café in person.

From the consumers' perspective, Instagram also facilitates the process of obtaining information about Cafe Galih. One customer stated, "I usually check Instagram first if I want to know what the place looks like, what menu items are available, or what the atmosphere is like. From the posts, we can get an idea before actually visiting the café" (Interview, Customer Informant 2, 2026). This finding demonstrates that social media constitutes one of the initial brand touchpoints between Cafe Galih and its consumers in the process of forming perceptions of the brand. Nevertheless, the research data also indicate that Instagram needs to be managed more actively and consistently so that information concerning products, the café atmosphere, and business activities can be continuously updated. Therefore, the effectiveness of Instagram is determined not merely by the existence of a social media account, but also by the consistency of content management, the relevance of the information communicated, and the ability of such content to generate audience interest in the brand.

Theoretically, Cafe Galih's use of Instagram can be analyzed through the framework of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC). IMC emphasizes the integration of multiple communication channels so that brand messages can be delivered consistently, strategically, and mutually reinforce one another in shaping consumer perceptions (Habibah et al., 2023). In this context, Instagram primarily functions as an advertising medium because it is used to introduce products and the business identity to a wider audience, while it may also support direct marketing when social media is employed to establish more direct communication with consumers (Mukhyidin, 2023). The use of social media further enables businesses to disseminate information rapidly and develop interaction with audiences, thereby transforming marketing communication from a predominantly one-way process into a more interactive form of communication (Putra & Iskandar, 2023). Accordingly, Instagram's position within Cafe Galih's communication strategy extends beyond its function as a publication channel; it also serves as a medium that connects marketing messages with the formation of consumers' knowledge and initial perceptions of the brand.

The use of Instagram is also associated with the formation of brand image, particularly the dimension of strength of brand associations. Strong brand associations emerge when information about a brand can be easily recognized, remembered, and consistently linked to particular characteristics in consumers' minds (Hafsari, 2024). In the context of Cafe Galih, content featuring products, the café atmosphere, and business activities can strengthen consumers' recognition of the brand identity when communicated consistently. However, the strength of such associations cannot be developed solely through the frequency of social media posts. The image presented on Instagram must correspond with consumers' actual experiences when visiting Cafe Galih, because inconsistencies between digital representations and direct experiences may undermine trust in the brand. This finding suggests that the effectiveness of digital marketing communication depends on the consistency between visual messages conveyed through social media and the quality of customer experiences delivered in the physical setting. Thus, Instagram functions as an initial gateway for shaping brand perceptions, while product and service quality provide tangible evidence that validates the image communicated to the public.

Cafe Galih's Marketing Communication Strategy within the Integrated Marketing Communication Framework

The findings indicate that Cafe Galih does not implement all elements of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) with equal intensity. Instead, its marketing communication strategy is more strongly characterized by the use of Instagram as a promotional and customer communication medium, combined with direct service interactions at the café. Based on the interviews, Instagram is used to introduce products, present the café atmosphere, and disseminate various forms of information to the public, while direct interaction with customers plays an important role in building relationships and creating positive experiences. One informant from Cafe Galih explained, "We mostly use Instagram to introduce the café and our products. Once customers come to the café, we try to provide good service so that they feel comfortable and develop a positive impression of Cafe Galih" (Interview, Owner Informant, 2026). This finding shows that Cafe Galih's marketing communication operates through a combination of digital channels and direct interpersonal communication. Instagram functions as a medium for establishing initial brand awareness, whereas on-site service serves as a point of convergence between the messages communicated through media and the actual experiences received by customers.

The findings also demonstrate that Cafe Galih's communication practices can be mapped onto several elements of the marketing communication mix. Advertising and direct marketing are reflected in the use of Instagram, while personal selling is evident in face-to-face communication between employees and customers when providing information, taking orders, and responding to customer needs. Public relations is particularly reflected in efforts to maintain positive relationships with customers, including when service problems arise. One employee explained, "If a customer makes a complaint, we try to handle it immediately. For example, if an order is not as expected, we communicate with the customer properly, and if the mistake is on our side, we replace the product so that the customer still feels appreciated" (Interview, Employee Informant 1, 2026). In contrast, sales promotion in the form of discounts, vouchers, or promotional packages has not become a dominant strategy. This condition indicates that Cafe Galih relies more heavily on social media engagement, the quality of personal interaction, and customer complaint handling than on short-term sales incentives in developing its brand image.

Theoretically, this pattern can be analyzed through the concept of Integrated Marketing Communication, which emphasizes the coordination of multiple communication channels to generate consistent and mutually reinforcing brand messages. IMC is not merely concerned with the use of multiple media, but also requires alignment between messages communicated through media channels, direct customer interactions, and consumers' actual experiences when engaging with an organization (Habibah et al., 2023). In the context of Cafe Galih, Instagram contributes to building initial awareness and recognition of the brand, while direct service provided by employees strengthens interpersonal communication and the customer experience. The use of digital media as part of marketing communication strategies also enables businesses to reach consumers more rapidly and interactively (Putra & Iskandar, 2023). Meanwhile, direct communication with customers can be understood as a form of personal selling that allows immediate feedback between the business and its consumers (Mukhyidin, 2023). Therefore, the effectiveness of Cafe Galih's strategy does not depend on the number of IMC elements employed, but rather on its ability to integrate the communication channels that are most relevant to the characteristics and resources of the business.

These findings further suggest that the implementation of IMC in small-scale culinary businesses does not necessarily require the balanced use of all marketing communication elements. Cafe Galih tends to apply a selective communication pattern by maximizing Instagram, personalized service, and responsiveness to customer complaints. This pattern demonstrates that small businesses can adapt the composition of their marketing communication activities to their specific needs, customer characteristics, and available resources. From the perspective of brand image, consistency across these channels is particularly important because consumer perceptions are formed through the accumulation of information and experiences associated with the brand (Hafsari, 2024). When the image presented through Instagram is consistent with the service quality and customer experience delivered at the café, positive associations with Cafe Galih can become stronger. Conversely, inconsistencies between promotional messages and actual experiences may weaken consumer trust. Therefore, the contribution of this finding lies in demonstrating that Cafe Galih applies IMC in an adaptive and resource-based manner, emphasizing consistency among digital communication, interpersonal interaction, and customer experience as the foundation for building brand image.

Inhibiting Factors and Cafe Galih's Response to Service Failures

In addition to the supporting factors, this study also identified an obstacle in the process of building brand image, namely a service failure in which Cafe Galih unintentionally served fried rice that was no longer suitable for consumption. Such an incident had the potential to generate a negative impression among customers if it was not addressed promptly. However, Cafe Galih responded immediately by replacing the meal with a freshly prepared one as a form of responsibility toward the customer. This response demonstrates that brand image is shaped not only by a business's success in delivering quality products and services, but also by the manner in which it responds to and resolves problems when service failures occur.

The following table summarizes the field findings regarding the supporting and inhibiting factors influencing the formation of Cafe Galih's brand image, along with their respective roles within the marketing communication framework:

Factor	Form	Role in Brand Image Formation	Notes/Recommendations
Supporting	Team cohesiveness	Creates more organized service delivery, thereby contributing to a positive customer experience	Should be maintained through consistent internal communication
Supporting	Product quality	Serves as the foundation of customer satisfaction and positive brand associations	Consistency in taste and product presentation should be continuously maintained
Supporting	Use of Instagram	Expands brand exposure among the public and potential customers	Content management should be carried out more actively and consistently
Inhibiting	Product-serving negligence (fried rice case)	Has the potential to generate negative impressions if not handled appropriately	Addressed through product replacement; greater attention to accuracy and quality control in product preparation is required

Overall, these findings indicate that Cafe Galih's marketing communication strategy for building brand image is implemented through a combination of internal communication, particularly team cohesiveness and product quality, and external communication through Instagram. These two forms of communication complement each other: the messages conveyed through Instagram need to be supported by consistent product and service quality so that the brand image formed in consumers' minds corresponds with the actual experiences they encounter when visiting Cafe Galih

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that Cafe Galih's marketing communication strategy for building brand image in Medan City is implemented through the integration of digital communication, customer experience quality, and internal organizational capabilities. Instagram serves as the primary medium for introducing Cafe Galih's products, atmosphere, and brand identity to the public, while direct service, team cohesiveness, consistent product quality, and responsiveness to customer complaints strengthen customers' experiences with the brand. Within the Integrated Marketing Communication framework, Cafe Galih's strategy primarily emphasizes advertising, direct marketing, personal selling, and public relations, whereas sales promotion has not yet become a major focus. These findings demonstrate that brand image formation is determined not only by promotional activities conducted through social media but also by the alignment between communicated brand messages and consumers' actual experiences when interacting with Cafe Galih. Accordingly, the main contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that small-scale culinary businesses can build brand image adaptively through the integration of digital communication, interpersonal interaction, product quality, and consistent service delivery. Nevertheless, as this study focuses on a single business case, the findings should be interpreted specifically within the context of Cafe Galih and should not be generalized broadly without further comparative research.

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