FROM CLICKS TO TRUST: THE ROLE OF DIGITAL MARKETING IN STRENGTHENING THE BRAND IMAGE OF LOCAL BUSINESSES

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Abstract. *The digital era has driven local businesses to adopt marketing strategies centered on consumer interaction and trust. This study analyzes the role of digital marketing in strengthening the brand image of Indonesian local businesses, using ECINOS, a rapidly growing social media based brand, as a case example. Using a qualitative literature review, the study examines ECINOS' digital practices, including branding consistency, storytelling, and authentic content to build emotional connections. The findings show that effective digital marketing can turn digital interactions into brand trust, enhance customer loyalty, and strengthen the position of local businesses in competitive markets. Strategies emphasizing sustainability and local authenticity also align with SDG 8 and SDG 9. Thus, digital marketing serves as a crucial bridge from "clicks" to "trust" in building a strong and sustainable brand image.*

Keywords: *Brand Image; Digital Marketing; ECINOS, Local Business; SDGs.*

1 INTRODUCTION

The development of the digital era has brought significant changes to the way businesses communicate and build relationships with consumers. In an increasingly competitive business environment, digital marketing no longer merely serves as a promotional tool but has become an essential strategy for strengthening brand image and building consumer trust. According to data published by We Are Social and Hootsuite (2024), more than 60% of the world's population is actively using social media, with an average usage time exceeding two hours per day. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook are now not only used as means of social communication but also function as primary channels for promotion, marketing, and interaction between brands and customers. This global trend indicates that brand strength is no longer determined solely by product quality, but also by the brand's ability to build emotional connections and trust with consumers in the digital space. This trust is built through delivering content that is authentic, consistent, and relevant to the social values embraced by modern consumers.

In Indonesia, this digital transformation has a substantial impact on local businesses and micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which play an important role in the national economy. Although this sector makes a significant contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employment absorption, many local business actors still face challenges in adapting to the digitalization process. Limited digital literacy and a lack of strategic understanding often become major obstacles in competing with large-scale brands. Along with the shift in consumer behavior increasingly oriented toward online activities, the ability to maintain brand consistency and authenticity across various digital channels has become a determining factor for business success in the modern era.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Digital Marketing Strategy in the Local Business Context

Digital marketing is defined as a strategic process of delivering brand value through digital channels to shape consumer perceptions and behaviors (Ilmi et al., 2023). In the context of local businesses, digital marketing not only functions as a promotional tool but also as a comprehensive approach to building brand identity and maintaining consumer engagement. Recent research shows that digital marketing provides a competitive advantage for local businesses through cost-efficient promotions, message personalization, and community- based two-way interactions (Cindrakasih et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies depends on the consistency of brand identity, the selection of the right platforms, and the ability to adapt communication styles according to the characteristics of the target audience (Rizkita, 2025). Researchers also emphasize that digital marketing allows local businesses to bridge transactional goals with emotional relationships, thereby driving both sales growth and cultural engagement among consumers. From this perspective, local SMEs like ECINOS use social media not only as a commercial space but also as a symbolic space that represents their brand's cultural identity and authenticity. This dual role strengthens the brand's emotional resonance and enhances consumer trust in local products rooted in culture.

2.2 Brand Image and Brand Trust in the Digital Era

Brand image is understood as a collection of perceptions, associations, and interpretations of consumers formed through direct experiences as well as symbolic exposure to the brand (Mandung, 2024). Meanwhile, brand trust arises when consumers believe that a brand is consistent, credible, and capable of delivering the promised value (Ilmi et al., 2023). Several empirical studies indicate that digital marketing plays a significant role in shaping brand image and trust, as interactions through digital media are considered more personal, transparent, and participatory compared to traditional advertising (Cindrakasih et al., 2024). In the context of local businesses, brand trust becomes a key differentiator, especially when consumers compare local products with global brands. This interconnectedness clarifies that digital marketing strategy is not just about promotion, but also about efforts to build emotional relationships that foster brand credibility. In the case of ECINOS, visual consistency, authentic brand storytelling, and interactive responses are key elements in strengthening brand image while also building consumer trust.

Thus, strengthening brand image and trust in the digital era depends not only on visual strategies and messaging, but also on the brand's ability to convey meaningful stories. This leads to the concept of storytelling and authentic content as key instruments in forming an emotional connection between the brand and consumers.

2.3 Storytelling and Authentic Content as Emotional Branding Tools

Storytelling in marketing is seen as a strategic communication technique that conveys brand values through emotional narratives and human experiences, rather than just functional information (Mandung, 2024). Authentic content — that is, content that is relevant, transparent, and not artificially created — has been proven to increase the emotional engagement between consumers and brands (Yin, 2023). Recent research emphasizes that consumers are more likely to build loyalty when they experience the human side of a brand, not just its products (Tristandinata, 2024). In a digital context, storytelling serves a dual function: as a persuasive tool and as a means of shaping consumers' social identity through shared experiences in online communities.

This strategy is implemented by ECINOS through local cultural narratives, the use of real-life models, and participatory content that invites the audience to interact. This approach strengthens emotional bonds and serves as the foundation for building digital consumer loyalty.

Loyalty built through emotional engagement demonstrates that social media functions not only as a channel for message distribution but also as a relational space that supports the sustainability of the relationship between the brand and consumers.

2.4 Social Media and Customer Loyalty

Social media is now seen as a relational and community space, not just a promotional space, where interactions between brands and consumers shape closeness, engagement, and loyalty (Cindrakasih et al., 2024). In the digital ecosystem, consumer loyalty is determined not only by product quality but also by social experiences, a sense of belonging to the community, and the alignment of personal values with brand identity (Rizkita, 2025). Research shows that community-based engagement, such as comments, reposts, and direct interactions, has a greater impact on loyalty compared to conventional promotions (Ilmi et al., 2023).

ECINOS implements this principle through an inclusive digital community, collaboration with local influencers, and dialogic communication that emphasizes emotional rather than transactional relationships. This approach fosters long-term loyalty while expanding the brand's social network. Such sustainable loyalty underscores the importance of local identity and sustainability values as core elements of digital marketing strategy for businesses seeking to maintain long-term legitimacy.

2.5 Digital Marketing, Local Identity, and Sustainable Development

Digital marketing that focuses on local identity and sustainability values plays a crucial role in strengthening the competitiveness of domestic brands while supporting the growth of a sustainable creative economy (Rizkita, 2025). Cross-disciplinary studies show that branding strategies emphasizing local values and sustainability principles are directly linked to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 — Decent Work and Economic Growth — and SDG 9 — Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure (Tristandinata, 2024). In the context of local businesses, brand authenticity functions as social capital that strengthens trust, while a sustainability orientation builds long-term legitimacy. ECINOS implements this paradigm by highlighting local cultural identity, applying sustainable production ethics, and fostering community relationships based on moral and economic responsibility.

Thus, the integration of digital marketing, local identity, and sustainability not only strengthens the brand's position in the market but also contributes to the development of an inclusive and ethical creative economy.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study was designed with a qualitative-exploratory approach, focusing on a single case study analysis of the local clothing brand ECINOS. The choice of a qualitative design is based on the goal of obtaining a deep interpretative understanding (rich insight) of the top-of- mind brand associations generated by digital marketing strategies. This approach is relevant for validating the success of brand communication in conveying core values to the target audience. Since digital marketing (particularly Social Media Marketing or SMM) has been proven to have a significant impact on Value Co-Creation (VCC) at ECINOS, qualitative analysis of consumer perceptions serves to identify the substance of the value that has been successfully co-created.

This study positions itself as an initial exploratory analysis, aimed at mapping branding success through digital narratives. Although it involves a limited sample (N=17), the depth of the narrative responses collected allows for comprehensive thematic analysis, providing an empirical basis for hypothesis development in future causal research. This exploratory focus enables researchers to identify ECINOS's success in executing emotional branding functions (Yang) that complement their functional positioning (Yin).

The population of this study consists of ECINOS brand consumers who actively interact with the brand through digital platforms, particularly Instagram. Demographic analysis of the primary

data shows that the respondents are dominated by Generation Z (Gen Z), aged between 15 and 25 years. This age group is part of ECINOS's main target market and represents the most intensive social media users, making their perceptions crucial in assessing the effectiveness of the brand's digital marketing.

The sampling procedure used a purposive sampling technique. The main inclusion criteria applied were experience as an ECINOS consumer, being active within the age range of Gen Z to early adulthood, and active use of social media. A total of 17 respondents met these criteria and participated in the online survey. Data collection was conducted via Google Forms, ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of qualitative responses. Respondent participation was considered a form of implied informed consent, adhering to research ethics standards that protect data privacy.

The primary data collection method was conducted through an online questionnaire with an open-ended format. Respondents were asked to list "three words that come to mind when you hear the name ECINOS." This question design was intended to minimize bias and capture the strongest and most immediate brand associations, namely top-of-mind brand associations. This qualitative data was then processed to produce 51 keywords that formed the basis of a thematic analysis.

Secondary data is integrated through a systematic literature review. This data includes academic findings on the impact of ECINOS' SMM on VCC, the role of customer engagement, and brand narrative strategies used by ECINOS, such as the Fall Collection 2024 campaign. Secondary data serves as a theoretical framework and a benchmark to validate why certain brand associations appear. For example, the finding that digital marketing significantly affects online purchase decisions, mediated by brand trust, is used to contextualize the 'Trusted' finding in the primary data.

Qualitative thematic analysis was applied to 51 brand association keywords. This technique allows for the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) in the data. The analytical steps were carried out as follows:

1. All 51 keywords were reviewed to gain an initial understanding of the perception spectrum.
2. Similar words were grouped together. For example, 'cool', 'modern', and 'trendy' were coded as 'contemporary aesthetics'. Keywords such as 'local', 'basic', and 'timeless' were coded as 'internalized positioning'.
3. These codes were grouped into larger value domains, namely Aspirational & Aesthetic Values (Domain A), Identity & Brand Position Values (Domain B), and Functional & Trust Values (Domain C).
4. The absolute frequency and percentage proportion of each domain were calculated to show the dominance of perceptions, providing a quantitative-qualitative dimension to the findings, and strengthening the validity of thematic interpretation.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic analysis results show that ECINOS successfully reached its main market segment, which is Generation Z. The data indicates that all respondents (N=17) are between the ages of 15 and 25 (born between 1999 and 2009).

Birth Year Range	Age Range (2024)	Generation Group	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
2005 - 2009	15-19 Years	Gen Z (Late Teens)	6	35.3%

1999 - 2004	20 -25 Years	Gen Z (Early Adults)	11	64.7%
Total			**17**	**100.0%**

This demographic structure emphasizes that the findings regarding brand associations represent the views of young consumers who are highly influenced by digital trends and social media. The presence of Gen Z respondents who are intensive users of digital platforms supports the hypothesis that the brand's Social Media Marketing strategy plays a central role in shaping these perceptions.

From the 51 brand association keywords collected, thematic analysis identified three main value domains. Domain A dominates the findings, accounting for 39.2% of total associations, with keywords such as 'Cool,' 'Modern,' and 'Trendy.' The presence of associations related to a premium lifestyle, such as 'Old Money Outfit' and 'Elegant,' is very significant. This indicates the brand's success in elevating the perceived value of their basic products to an aspirational level. Although ECINOS' core products are everyday basic wear, the digital branding strategy has successfully imbued them with high emotional value, making them a symbol of the lifestyle desired by Gen Z. This transformation is evidence of the effectiveness of SMM in creating luxury signaling through visual aesthetics and digital narratives.

Domain B, with 33.3% association, demonstrates a strong internalization of the brand's positioning message. One respondent fully mentioned the brand's core values: "local, basic, and timeless. Local: ECINOS is a local Indonesian clothing brand... Basic: The brand focuses on making versatile everyday basic clothing. Timeless: Their clothing designs are timeless (not outdated)...". The repetition of this core narrative indicates that Value Co-Creation mediated by customer engagement has resulted in the internalization of the brand's philosophy. Consumers not only remember the brand but also understand and reproduce ECINOS's core message.

Domain C encompasses 27.5% of associations, focusing on quality and reliability, with keywords such as 'Comfortable,' 'High-Quality,' and 'Trustworthy.' This functional aspect provides a credibility foundation for the aesthetic claims of Domain A. Brand campaigns emphasizing comfort and confidence in dressing have generated the 'Comfortable' association. Additionally, the 'Trustworthy' association is crucial in the e-commerce context, where it is an important variable influencing online purchasing decisions. This underscores that ECINOS's digital strategy successfully balances emotional appeal with practical quality assurance.

Thematic analysis shows that ECINOS operates within a duality of positioning (functional) and branding (emotional). The brand's rational positioning is Yin—offering basic clothing that is versatile and timeless. However, the brand's digital marketing strategy successfully expresses the emotional and aspirational Yang side. This is evidenced by the dominance of Domain A (39.2%), which contains high aesthetic and aspirational associations. This process, in which basic products are elevated in value to be aspirational (for example, 'Old Money Outfit'), is proof of the success of digital image packaging.

The success in building this premium image is inseparable from the Value Co-Creation (VCC) strategy. SMM ECINOS positively and significantly influences VCC, with customer engagement serving as the main mediating mechanism. VCC does not only mean transactions but also the internalization of narratives. When consumers participate and engage, they become co creators of brand meaning. This is clearly seen in respondents' ability to accurately repeat the brand's core narrative. Strong and cohesive brand associations are the result of consumer advocacy that has internalized ECINOS's philosophy, not just advertising recall.

Furthermore, the success of ECINOS demonstrates that the successful formation of an aesthetic image (Domain A) provides causal support for the credibility of functional claims

(Domain C). In the fast-paced and uncertain digital market, a strong brand image (e.g., perceived as 'Cool' or 'Modern') implicitly convinces consumers that the product is 'High- Quality' and 'Reliable.' This trust is crucial for reducing perceived risk in e-commerce purchases, a condition consistent with study findings on the positive relationship between digital marketing, brand trust, and online purchase decisions.

Storytelling is the main driver behind the formation of emotional connections and brand trust. ECINOS leverages narratives that emphasize comfort and confidence, such as in the "For Every City" campaign. These narratives bridge the gap between physical products (t- shirts and sweatpants) and larger philosophical values, triggering emotional attachment.

High association in Domain A (Aesthetics) indicates that ECINOS's storytelling, which likely utilizes high-end visuals (Old Money look, K-style), triggers peripheral processing among Gen Z consumers. Peripheral processing involves more superficial engagement with narrative content but produces strong emotional and aesthetic associations, ultimately prompting perceptions of the product as "classy" and "elegant." Thus, effective digital narratives have successfully transformed basic products into a lifestyle experience, which forms the foundation of long-term brand loyalty.

ECINOS successfully overcame competition challenges from global brands by implementing a glocalization strategy. The brand is explicitly recognized as an Indonesian 'Local' brand, but this local identity is used as a source of authenticity rather than a rigid design constraint. Instead, ECINOS demonstrates high adaptability to global fashion aesthetic trends, such as adopting Korean-style clothing cuts. This analysis shows that a modern local brand can redefine 'Local' identity by leveraging the label as a guarantee of authenticity and a foundation (compare with cultural branding that uses cultural narratives), while quickly adopting and integrating universal aesthetics favored by the global market. This flexibility, supported by agile SMM channels, allows ECINOS to remain relevant in the eyes of Gen Z, who are global digital consumers. The ECINOS glocalization model enables them to compete effectively by providing global aesthetics supported by authenticity and local brand trust.

CONCLUSION

This study emphasizes the effectiveness of ECINOS's digital marketing strategy in building strong brand associations among Gen Z consumers. ECINOS's brand perception is dominated by aspirational and aesthetic values (39.2%), successfully transforming basic wear products into symbols of a premium lifestyle. This success is attributed to Social Media Marketing (SMM) generating Value Co-Creation (VCC), allowing consumers to internalize and reproduce the brand's core values (Local, Basic, Timeless). Brand storytelling ensures an emotional connection and strengthens functional Brand Trust, which is an important prerequisite for online purchasing decisions.

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