

MICRO-COMMUNITIES AND THE CREATOR ECONOMY: COMMUNITY-BASED MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR INDONESIAN LOCAL BRANDS

Pahrul^{1*}, Andi Anggi Kemalasari²

^{1*,2)}Program Studi Kewirausahaan, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Makassar
E-mail: pahrul@unm.ac.id^{1*}, andi.anggi.kemalasari@unm.ac.id²

Abstract

The rapid growth of the creator economy has transformed digital marketing from transactional promotion toward community-based engagement. In this context, micro-communities have emerged as strategic spaces where consumers interact, share experiences, and develop emotional connections with brands and creators. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of consumers participating in creator-led micro-communities surrounding Indonesian local brands. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with consumers actively involved in online communities on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Discord. The findings reveal that consumers perceive micro-communities not merely as marketing spaces but as emotionally meaningful environments that foster belongingness, identity affirmation, and relational interaction. Authenticity emerged as a key factor influencing trust and long-term engagement, while creator-led communication strengthened emotional proximity and participatory experiences among community members. The study also indicates that consumers increasingly prefer interactive and community-centered brand relationships over conventional promotional communication. This research contributes to the literature on the creator economy and consumer engagement by integrating phenomenological perspectives into digital marketing studies. Practically, the findings provide insights for Indonesian local brands in developing sustainable community-based marketing strategies through authentic creator collaboration.

Keywords: Creator Economy, Micro-Communities, Consumer Engagement, Authenticity, Local Brands

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of the digital economy has transformed the way brands interact with consumers, particularly through the emergence of creator-driven ecosystems and online micro-communities. The creator economy has evolved beyond traditional influencer-centered promotion into participatory digital environments where consumers actively engage in community-based interactions, co-create meanings, and develop emotional attachments toward brands (Peres et al., 2024). Contemporary digital marketing increasingly emphasizes relational engagement, authenticity, and participatory experiences rather than merely transactional communication (Voorveld, 2019).

The emergence of micro-communities has become highly significant within the contemporary digital marketing landscape. Unlike mass audiences, micro-communities are characterized by specific interests, stronger interpersonal interactions, and higher levels of trust among their members. These communities are often formed around shared lifestyles, cultural identities, consumption values, or collective interests facilitated through platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Discord, Telegram, and online forums. Previous studies indicate that virtual brand communities encourage consumer trust, engagement, loyalty, and value co-creation through user-generated interactions and social participation (Brodie et al., 2013; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Within the creator economy ecosystem, creators no longer function merely as promotional intermediaries but also as community facilitators who shape collective narratives and social relationships. The expanding creator economy has encouraged creators to perform relational labor in order to maintain

authenticity, emotional connection, and trust among audiences (Hofstetter & Gollnhofer, 2024). Similarly, Tafesse and Dayan (2023) argue that creator interaction intensity and content-sharing behavior significantly influence audience engagement and community participation on digital platforms.

In developing countries such as Indonesia, the growth of digital platforms and social media adoption has accelerated the development of community-based marketing strategies among local brands. Indonesian local brands increasingly rely on micro-creators, community engagement, and user-generated content to strengthen visibility and sustain consumer loyalty within highly competitive markets. Rather than emphasizing one-way advertising communication, local brands seek to foster emotional closeness and collective identity through participatory digital interaction. This phenomenon reflects a broader transformation from audience-based marketing toward community-centered branding strategies (He et al., 2022).

The increasing importance of online communities also aligns with the concept of brand co-creation, in which consumers actively contribute to shaping brand identity and value (Black & Veloutsou, 2017). Through social interaction and participatory engagement, consumers no longer act solely as passive audiences but become collaborative actors in constructing brand meaning and experiences. Kozinets et al. (2017) further explain that digital networks strengthen consumers' emotional attachment and social desire for collective consumption experiences within online communities.

Although studies on the creator economy and online brand communities have grown rapidly, existing literature has largely focused on influencer effectiveness, engagement metrics, electronic word-of-mouth, or monetization models (Peres et al., 2024; Voorveld, 2019). Limited academic attention has been directed toward understanding how consumers subjectively experience participation in micro-communities surrounding local brands, particularly within developing-country contexts. Existing research also tends to prioritize quantitative perspectives while overlooking the lived experiences, meanings, emotions, and social interactions shaping community-based consumption behavior.

This study addresses the gap by employing a phenomenological approach to explore consumers' lived experiences within micro-communities associated with Indonesian local brands. Phenomenology is highly relevant because it enables researchers to understand the essence of participants' experiences, including how community interactions shape perceptions of authenticity, trust, emotional attachment, and brand engagement. Through this approach, the study seeks to uncover how creator-led and community-driven interactions influence consumers' interpretations of local brands within the creator economy ecosystem.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing discourse on the creator economy, brand communities, and consumer engagement by integrating experiential and phenomenological perspectives into community-based marketing research. The study also extends the application of phenomenological inquiry within digital marketing studies, which remains relatively underexplored. Practically, the findings are expected to provide strategic insights for local brands, digital creators, and marketing practitioners regarding the development of authentic and sustainable community-based marketing strategies within the evolving digital economy. This study aims to analyze the lived experiences of consumers participating in micro-communities surrounding Indonesian local brands and to understand how these experiences shape engagement, trust, and emotional connection within the creator economy ecosystem.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of consumers participating in micro-communities surrounding Indonesian local brands within the creator economy ecosystem. Phenomenology is appropriate for understanding how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their experiences, particularly within contexts involving emotional engagement, social interaction, and community participation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this approach,

the study sought to uncover the essence of participants' experiences related to authenticity, trust, emotional attachment, and engagement within creator-led digital communities.

The phenomenological approach enabled the researchers to investigate subjective experiences from participants' perspectives rather than relying on predetermined quantitative measurements. This method is highly relevant for examining community-based digital interaction because consumer engagement within micro-communities is often shaped by emotions, identity construction, and interpersonal relationships within online environments.

Participants in this study consisted of consumers actively participating in digital micro-communities associated with Indonesian local brands. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they possessed relevant experience and sufficient familiarity with creator-led community interactions. Inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) actively follow local brands through social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Discord, or Telegram; (2) engage in community interactions including commenting, sharing content, participating in discussions, or attending online/offline community activities; and (3) have previous experience interacting with creators or community-driven campaigns related to local brands. A total of 10–15 participants were targeted, following phenomenological research recommendations emphasizing depth of experience rather than large sample sizes (Moustakas, 1994). Participants represented diverse demographic backgrounds and consumption interests, including fashion, beauty, lifestyle, culinary, and creative local brands.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted both online and offline, depending on participants' availability and preferences. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to freely describe their experiences, perceptions, emotions, and interpretations regarding their engagement within digital micro-communities. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. To enrich contextual understanding, the study also incorporated limited digital observation of community interactions across social media platforms, including comment sections, community discussions, and user-generated content.

The collected data were analyzed using phenomenological thematic analysis adapted from Moustakas (1994). The analysis process involved several stages. First, interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' original expressions and meanings. Second, the researchers conducted horizontalization by identifying significant statements related to participants' lived experiences. Third, meaningful units were clustered into themes representing shared experiences among participants.

The analysis then proceeded through textual descriptions focusing on what participants experienced and structural descriptions examining how participants experienced the phenomenon within digital community contexts. Finally, the researchers synthesized the findings to construct the essence of consumer experiences within creator-led micro-communities associated with Indonesian local brands. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the study applied member-checking techniques and peer discussions. Participants were given opportunities to review interview interpretations, while peer discussions were conducted to minimize subjective bias during thematic interpretation.

This study adhered to ethical research principles throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the study objectives, confidentiality procedures, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. All participant identities were anonymized to protect privacy and maintain confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained prior to conducting interviews and recording conversations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Emergence of Emotional Attachment within Micro-Communities

The findings indicate that consumers participate in creator-led micro-communities not merely for transactional purposes but primarily to experience emotional belongingness and social connection. Most participants described digital communities surrounding local brands as “comfortable spaces” where they could interact with individuals sharing similar lifestyles, preferences, and values. Participants emphasized that interactions within these communities felt more personal and intimate compared to broader social media environments.

Several participants explained that community engagement reduced the psychological distance between consumers, creators, and brands. Through routine interactions in comment sections, live-streaming sessions, community discussions, and user-generated content activities, participants developed feelings of familiarity and emotional closeness toward creators and local brands. These findings support the argument of Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) that brand communities are characterized by shared consciousness and the formation of collective identity among members.

This study also found that emotional attachment became stronger when creators actively facilitated two-way communication. Participants appreciated creators who responded to comments, acknowledged followers’ contributions, and interacted casually with community members. Such interactions enhanced participants’ perceptions of intimacy and inclusiveness within the community. These findings align with Brodie et al. (2013), who argue that consumer engagement in virtual brand communities is strengthened through interactive participation and relational experiences.

From a phenomenological perspective, participants interpreted community participation as an emotionally meaningful experience rather than merely a commercial interaction. Many participants described feelings of being “understood,” “part of something,” and “sharing similar values” when engaging within creator-led communities. These experiences demonstrate that micro-communities function as social spaces where consumers seek identity affirmation and emotional resonance.

Authenticity as the Foundation of Trust

Authenticity emerged as one of the most dominant themes throughout the interviews. Participants consistently emphasized that they trusted creators and local brands perceived as genuine, transparent, and emotionally relatable. Rather than preferring highly polished promotional content, participants expressed stronger attachment toward creators who communicated naturally and shared personal experiences honestly. Several participants stated that excessive commercial promotion reduced their trust and emotional interest in creators. In contrast, creators who balanced promotional activities with authentic storytelling and interactive communication were perceived as more credible. These findings support Audrezet et al. (2020), who explain that audiences value authenticity when creators maintain honest self-presentation despite commercial pressures.

Participants also associated authenticity with the perceived “humanity” of creators and brands. Local brands openly sharing behind-the-scenes processes, founder stories, production challenges, and community values were viewed more positively. Consumers interpreted such openness as evidence that brands genuinely cared about their audiences rather than merely pursuing profit-oriented objectives. These findings reinforce the argument of Hofstetter and Gollnhofer (2024) that authenticity has become a strategic asset within the creator economy. Within the context of Indonesian local brands, authenticity appeared to strengthen trust formation because consumers perceived local brands as culturally relatable and emotionally accessible compared to larger commercial brands.

Phenomenologically, authenticity was experienced not only as a communication strategy but also as an emotional experience shaping participants’ feelings of trust and psychological safety within communities.

Participants frequently associated authentic communication with comfort, honesty, and emotional closeness, suggesting that trust within digital communities is highly experiential and relational.

Community Participation and Consumer Identity

The findings further reveal that participation in micro-communities contributes to consumer identity formation. Participants explained that community engagement allowed them to express personal values, lifestyles, and social identities aligned with specific local brands. In many cases, consumers viewed their consumption practices as symbolic representations of creativity, local pride, sustainability, or cultural awareness. This phenomenon was particularly visible among participants involved in fashion and lifestyle communities. Several participants reported that supporting local brands generated a sense of pride because it reflected support for domestic creativity and local entrepreneurship. Consequently, community participation extended beyond product consumption and became part of participants' self-expression and identity performance.

These findings support Black and Veloutsou's (2017) argument that consumers actively co-create brand identity through participatory interactions within brand communities. Consumers are not passive recipients of marketing messages but active contributors who collectively negotiate and reproduce brand meanings. Kozinets et al. (2017) further explain that digital communities intensify symbolic consumption experiences by encouraging collective emotional participation. In this study, participants frequently described community engagement as "more meaningful" than ordinary online shopping because it involved emotional interaction, social recognition, and shared cultural values.

From a phenomenological perspective, identity construction emerged through lived experiences of participation, recognition, and social interaction. Participants interpreted their involvement in micro-communities as part of their broader social identity, demonstrating how digital communities shape consumers' self-perceptions and relationships with brands.

Dynamics of Creator-Led Interaction and Engagement

This study found that creators play a central role in maintaining engagement dynamics within micro-communities. Participants perceived creators not merely as influencers but also as facilitators shaping interaction quality, emotional atmosphere, and collective narratives within communities. Participants highlighted several creator characteristics that strengthened engagement, including responsiveness, humor, emotional openness, consistency, and interactive communication styles. Creators who frequently interacted with followers through live sessions, comments, polls, or casual discussions were perceived as more approachable and trustworthy.

These findings align with Tafesse and Dayan (2023), who state that the frequency and responsiveness of creator communication significantly influence audience participation behavior. Similarly, Peres et al. (2024) explain that the creator economy increasingly depends on relational engagement rather than one-way promotional communication. Interestingly, participants emphasized that small-scale creators or micro-creators often generated stronger emotional engagement than celebrity influencers. Participants perceived micro-creators as more authentic, relatable, and accessible. These findings suggest that intimacy and relational closeness may become more influential than popularity within community-based marketing ecosystems.

Implications for Community-Based Marketing Strategies

The findings indicate that community-based marketing strategies are becoming increasingly important for local brands operating within the creator economy ecosystem. Traditional advertising approaches prioritizing visibility and mass exposure appear less effective in fostering long-term emotional attachment compared to participatory community engagement. This study demonstrates that consumers value authenticity, emotional interaction, and relational communication more highly than highly commercial promotional content.

Therefore, local brands should focus on developing sustainable micro-communities that encourage dialogue, participation, and collaborative interaction among consumers.

These findings support He et al. (2022), who argue that contemporary branding strategies increasingly rely on collaborative meaning-creation processes between brands and consumers. Community-based engagement enables brands to strengthen trust, emotional attachment, and consumer loyalty through shared experiences rather than merely transactional exchanges. For Indonesian local brands, creator collaborations should prioritize value alignment and community closeness rather than focusing solely on follower counts or engagement metrics. Micro-creators with strong relational communication skills may provide greater strategic value because they cultivate deeper emotional resonance within niche communities.

Phenomenologically, the findings demonstrate that consumers experience community participation as emotionally meaningful and socially valuable. Therefore, successful marketing strategies within the creator economy should not merely target consumer attention but also facilitate belongingness, recognition, and emotional connection within digital communities.

The findings of this study also reflect a broader transformation in contemporary digital consumption culture, where consumers are no longer positioned merely as passive audiences but increasingly function as active community actors within participatory digital ecosystems. In creator-led micro-communities, consumers continuously negotiate meanings, identities, and emotional relationships through ongoing interaction with creators and fellow members. This transformation suggests that the value of digital marketing no longer depends solely on message exposure or promotional persuasion, but increasingly on the ability of brands to facilitate relational experiences and symbolic participation.

The study demonstrates that community interaction creates emotional infrastructures that sustain long-term consumer attachment beyond transactional exchange. Such dynamics indicate that marketing relationships within the creator economy are becoming increasingly experiential, collaborative, and socially embedded. Consumers seek not only products or services, but also recognition, emotional resonance, and social belongingness within digital communities. Consequently, local brands that successfully cultivate participatory micro-communities may develop stronger emotional loyalty and cultural relevance compared to brands relying primarily on traditional advertising visibility. These findings reinforce the argument that the future of digital branding lies in relationship-centered ecosystems where authenticity, interaction, and collective meaning creation become central sources of competitive advantage.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of consumers participating in creator-led micro-communities surrounding Indonesian local brands within the creator economy ecosystem. Using a phenomenological approach, the findings demonstrate that micro-communities function not merely as marketing channels but also as emotionally meaningful social spaces where consumers experience belongingness, authenticity, trust, and identity affirmation. The study reveals that emotional connection plays a central role in shaping consumer engagement within digital communities. Participants perceived creator-led interactions as more personal, interactive, and relatable compared to conventional advertising communication. Authenticity emerged as a crucial factor influencing trust formation, as consumers preferred creators and local brands that communicated transparently, emotionally, and consistently. The findings also indicate that community participation contributes to consumer identity construction, in which supporting local brands becomes part of symbolic self-expression and collective cultural values.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of micro-creators' strategic role in fostering relational engagement and sustaining community intimacy. Unlike celebrity-centered promotional strategies, micro-community interactions emphasize emotional closeness, recognition, and participatory communication.

Consumers interpreted such interactions as meaningful experiences that strengthened long-term attachment toward creators and brands.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on the creator economy, consumer engagement, and brand communities by integrating phenomenological perspectives into digital marketing research. The findings extend previous studies by emphasizing the experiential and emotional dimensions of community participation rather than focusing solely on engagement metrics or transactional outcomes. Practically, the findings suggest that Indonesian local brands should prioritize community-centered marketing strategies that encourage authentic interaction, emotional resonance, and collaborative engagement. Brands are encouraged to develop sustainable micro-communities by collaborating with creators possessing strong relational communication abilities and value alignment with community members. Building trust and emotional belongingness may provide greater long-term competitive advantages than relying solely on mass promotional exposure.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The research primarily focused on selected digital communities associated with Indonesian local brands, which may limit broader generalization across industries and cultural contexts. In addition, the phenomenological approach emphasizes subjective experiences and therefore does not aim to generate statistical generalizations. Future research may extend this study by employing comparative approaches across industries, digital platforms, or cultural settings. Quantitative or mixed-method studies may also examine relationships between community participation, emotional engagement, and consumer loyalty within larger populations. Further exploration of creator-brand collaboration dynamics and algorithmic platform influence may deepen understanding of the evolving creator economy landscape.

REFERENCES

- Audrezet, A., de Kerviler, G., & Moulard, J. G. (2020). Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation. *Journal of Business Research*, 117, 557–569. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.008>
- Black, I., & Veloutsou, C. (2017). Working consumers: Co-creation of brand identity, consumer identity and brand community identity. *Journal of Business Research*, 70, 416–429. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.07.012>
- Brodie, R. J., Ilic, A., Juric, B., & Hollebeek, L. (2013). Consumer engagement in a virtual brand community: An exploratory analysis. *Journal of Business Research*, 66(1), 105–114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2011.07.029>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- He, J., Wang, Y., & Zha, D. (2022). Dynamic brand positioning: A firm-customer synergistic strategy of brand meaning cocreation in a hyperconnected world. *European Journal of Marketing*, 56(9), 2487–2515. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-10-2020-0782>
- Hofstetter, R., & Gollnhofer, J. F. (2024). The creator's dilemma: Resolving tensions between authenticity and monetization in social media. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 41(3), 430–438. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2024.03.002>
- Kozinets, R. V., Patterson, A., & Ashman, R. (2017). Networks of desire: How technology increases our passion to consume. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 43(5), 659–682. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucw061>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage Publications.
- Muniz, A. M., Jr., & O'Guinn, T. C. (2001). Brand community. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27(4), 412–432. <https://doi.org/10.1086/319618>

- Ørmen, J., & Gregersen, A. (2023). Towards the engagement economy: Interconnected processes of commodification on YouTube. *Media, Culture & Society*, 45(2), 348–365. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221111951>
- Peres, R., Schreier, M., Schweidel, D. A., & Sorescu, A. (2024). The creator economy: An introduction and a call for scholarly research. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 41(3), 403–410. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2024.07.005>
- Tafesse, W., & Dayan, M. (2023). Content creators' participation in the creator economy: Examining the effect of creators' content sharing frequency on user engagement behavior on digital platforms. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 73, 103357. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2023.103357>
- Voorveld, H. A. M. (2019). Brand communication in social media: A research agenda. *Journal of Advertising*, 48(1), 14–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2019.1588808>