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Analysis of the influence of buzzer marketing, E-WOM, and customer perception on the readiness to build the image of MSMEs in Aek Nauli Village

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted in response to the urgent need to strengthen the reputation of rural Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) through digital promotion strategies and the shaping of public perception. This study aims to examine the extent to which Buzzer Marketing, Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM), and Customer Perception contribute to the readiness of MSMEs to build their image in Aek Nauli Village, Hulu Sihapas Subdistrict, North Padang Lawas Regency. A quantitative approach was applied in designing the study, in which primary data collection was conducted by distributing questionnaires to respondents who met the sampling criteria. Data analysis was performed using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) method with SmartPLS software, which included testing the outer model, inner model, and hypothesis testing. The analysis results demonstrate that Buzzer Marketing has a positive and significant impact on the readiness to build an image for MSMEs, with a path coefficient of 0.423, a T-statistic of 5.970, and a P-value of 0.000. Similarly, E-WOM showed a positive and significant effect, yielding a path coefficient of 0.498, a T-statistic of 8.682, and a P-value of 0.000. Meanwhile, Customer Perception recorded the most dominant contribution with the highest path coefficient of 0.518. This study strengthens the image of rural MSMEs through effective marketing and positive customer perceptions. Thus, the combined application of Buzzer Marketing, E-WOM, and Customer Perception plays a crucial role in supporting efforts to enhance the image of MSMEs in Aek Nauli Village.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) sector plays a vital role as a pillar of national financial resilience, as evidenced by Indonesia's ability to weather the turmoil of an economic crisis. The existence of these business units makes a substantial contribution to accelerating economic growth, particularly in rural areas that possess abundant potential for local commodities. Nevertheless, the majority of small business owners still face obstacles in effectively optimizing promotional activities and product commercialization (Imsar et al., 2026). Business operations

rooted in the local community, the utilization of local resources, and simple production schemes targeting the domestic market have, in fact, become adaptive strengths that sustain business viability amid the shocks of a crisis. Based on this reality, strengthening support systems and collaboratively developing community entrepreneurial capabilities with various stakeholders has become a strategic priority. The expansion of these small businesses both in quantity and quality continues to spread to various corners of the archipelago, including the village of Aek Nauli in the Hulu Sihapas subdistrict. On the other hand, the rapid advancement of information and communication technology is fundamentally transforming the commercial landscape. As we enter the digital age, marketing strategies are no longer confined to conventional approaches but are shifting toward the utilization of social media networks and digital channels. This dynamic opens up new opportunities for business owners in remote villages to expand their market reach while boosting the competitive advantage of their products (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Consequently, business managers are required to formulate adaptive marketing tactics to win in the competitive marketplace and respond to shifts in the preferences and behavioral orientations of modern consumers (Nainggolan, 2021).

The rapid development of the digital era has fueled the explosive growth of e-businesses, such as Shopee, Lazada, and Tokopedia. The trend of online shopping is gaining popularity among the general public because it offers convenience; consumers can simply select items from home without having to travel. Time efficiency and the flexibility to access products anytime and anywhere are the main attractions that are shifting preferences away from conventional shopping (Nurbaiti, 2022). On the other hand, the use of digital media presents a strategic opportunity for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) to strengthen their brand image and expand their market reach. Unfortunately, the optimization of these digital strategies has not yet been fully implemented by MSME operators in rural areas, including in the village of Aek Nauli. In fact, social media platforms have proven to be one of the most effective tools for building product image (Disastra et al., 2022) while efficiently expanding business networks (Dharma, 2022). The use of digital marketing strategies such as influencer marketing, Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WoM), and managing customer perception provides tangible competitive advantages and enhances business reputation. Nevertheless, most SME operators still face challenges in adopting information technology due to a lack of understanding of the immense potential offered by digital media (Jannatin et al., 2022).

Brand/product image building has a significant impact on customer perceptions and how they interact with the brand. By shaping this image and strengthening relationships with customers, brands/products can create a long-term effect on customer loyalty and open up new opportunities (Anonymous, 2022). Based on a preliminary online survey conducted in May 2026, only 25% of MSMEs were aware of Buzzer Marketing, E-WOM, and Customer Perception, while 75% were not. However, even those MSMEs that were aware of these concepts were not yet able to implement them optimally. This is because digital product marketing presents its own challenges for SME owners, particularly in terms of time and the ability to produce engaging social media content given that social media marketing will not be effective without compelling content.

Researchers observed two MSMEs in the village of Aek Nauli: a food-related MSME operating a bamboo café and a roadside food stall. Both MSMEs have begun using digital marketing, but they reported facing difficulties when transitioning from conventional marketing to digital marketing. Both MSMEs acknowledged that, after adopting digital marketing, their products have become increasingly well-known.

Buzzer marketing can be considered one of the most popular methods in marketing promotion today, as it can quickly raise a business's profile (Muhajir et al., 2022). It is widely regarded as a key factor in the success of digital marketing. Research conducted by Indriani (2023) on the effectiveness of buzz marketing strategies in increasing sales in the digital era shows that by leveraging the potential of buzzers or "buzz marketing," as it is termed in her study a company can expand its brand reach, build deeper engagement with consumers, and strengthen its brand image online. Not only that, but a strong brand image built around a product will increase direct feedback

from its consumers (Pertiwi et al., 2024). This theory is supported by Pasaribu et al. (2023), who demonstrated that viral marketing and influencers have a positive impact on purchase intent.

In addition to the use of buzzer marketing, electronic word of mouth (E-WOM) plays a crucial role in solidifying the reputation of SMEs. According to Thurau et al. (2021), E-WOM encompasses interactions among consumers in digital spaces where they share their experiences using goods or services, thereby potentially influencing the preferences of other prospective buyers. The dissemination of reviews and positive information on social media platforms and marketplaces has proven effective in fostering public expectations and trust in business operators. The spread of positive reviews and information on social media platforms and marketplaces has proven effective in fostering public expectations and trust in small businesses.

From a consumer behavior perspective, customer perception serves as a key foundation in shaping a business entity's image. Schiffman and Wisenblit (2020) note that customer perception is the process by which an individual selects, organizes, and interprets data stimuli to form an evaluation of a specific product or business unit. Positive public assessments built on quality standards, service reliability, affordable prices, and clear marketing communication directly boost the standing of MSMEs in the eyes of their audience. Consequently, the synergy between influencer marketing, E-WOM, and customer perception emerges as a crucial strategic formula for strengthening the image of MSMEs, particularly in rural areas that are beginning to adapt to the digital ecosystem.

The urgency of this study stems from the fact that most MSMEs in Aek Nauli Village do not yet understand or make optimal use of buzzer marketing, E-WOM, and customer perception, even though digital marketing can help enhance the recognition and image of MSMEs. A preliminary survey indicated that only 25% of MSMEs are aware of these three aspects, while 75% are not. Therefore, this study is important to determine the extent to which these three variables influence the formation of MSME image in Aek Nauli Village.

Previous studies examining the role of Buzzer Marketing, Electronic Word of Mouth, and Customer Perception in shaping brand image have primarily focused on large corporations or MSME entities in urban areas. Furthermore, the empirical literature on the contribution of these three variables still appears to yield inconclusive findings. Given the inconsistency of these findings, further exploration is crucial to test the influence of buzzer marketing, electronic word-of-mouth, and customer perception on the readiness to build the image of MSMEs in rural areas, which reflect specific consumer profiles and levels of technology adoption. Previous studies have rarely examined the combined influence of buzzer marketing, E-WOM, and customer perception on rural MSMEs' readiness to build their business image. In Aek Nauli Village, only 25% of MSMEs were familiar with these concepts, while 75% were not. Local MSMEs also faced difficulties transitioning from conventional to digital marketing. Therefore, this study examines the influence of these three factors on the readiness of rural MSMEs to build their business image.

Considering the range of arguments presented in the background section and the overview of digital media usage by local business owners, this study aims to analyze the extent of the influence of buzzer marketing, electronic word-of-mouth, and customer perception on the readiness to build the image of MSMEs in Aek Nauli Village. The use of digital marketing by MSMEs in Aek Nauli Village is believed to still be hampered by limited digital knowledge, insufficient social media management skills, promotional costs, and suboptimal internet access.

The benefits of this study include serving as a reference for effective and efficient promotional tools. It also aims to provide the best advice and solutions for MSME entrepreneurs to build the image of their products or services. The hope is that, in the future, even better promotional methods will emerge, with high success rates, so that MSME entrepreneurs particularly those in Aek Nauli Village can further support the local economy.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a quantitative approach combined with an explanatory survey design to map and describe the causal relationships among variables through the distribution of questionnaires. A

causal model was implemented to verify and quantify the extent of the influence of buzzer marketing, electronic word of mouth (E-WOM), and customer perception on the readiness to strengthen the image of MSMEs. The buzzer marketing indicators frequently used in this study include: 1) buzzer credibility, which refers to the audience's level of trust in the information conveyed; 2) the buzzer's appeal, which refers to the buzzer's ability to capture the audience's attention; 3) the buzzer's expertise, which refers to the buzzer's knowledge and ability to convey product information; 4) and the reach of information dissemination, which refers to the buzzer's ability to reach a wide audience through social media (Shimp, 2014). These four indicators demonstrate the extent to which buzzers are effective in influencing consumers' acceptance of information. The widely used E-WOM indicators, as referenced in the study by Goyette et al. (2010)), are: 1) intensity, which describes the frequency and volume of communication occurring in online media; 2) positive valence, which refers to consumers' tendency to post positive comments or reviews; 3) negative valence, which refers to consumers' tendency to post negative comments; 4) and content, which refers to the quality and completeness of the information conveyed in reviews or comments. These indicators reflect the quality of electronic communication that can influence consumer decisions and perceptions.

The commonly used metrics for measuring the dimension of customer perception include: 1) perceived quality, which is the customer's evaluation of the level of excellence in a product's quality; 2) perceived price, which is the assessment of price affordability weighed against the balance of benefits; 3) perceived value, which is consumers' estimation of the overall utility of a product; and 4) perceived trust, which is the degree of customers' confidence in the integrity and reliability of a business entity (Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2019). The more positive the perception formed in the eyes of the audience, the greater the public's motivation to support the sustainability of MSMEs. The indicators of MSME Image-Building Readiness, based on the Technology Acceptance Model [TAM] and previous research, are measured through the following four dimensions: 1) Willingness, which refers to the public's intention to support and engage in the implementation of buzzer marketing strategies; 2) Support, which refers to the approval of the public and village government regarding digital marketing programs for MSMEs. 3) Trust: Trust is the belief that buzzer marketing can enhance the image of MSMEs. From the consumer's perspective, digital marketing strategies must be given greater attention in order to effectively attract attention and win consumer trust. 4) Expectation: Expectation refers to the public's positive anticipation of the impact of digital marketing on improving the image and sales of MSMEs. Based on this description, this study identifies Buzzer Marketing (X1), E-WOM (X2), and Customer Perception (X3) as independent variables, each of which is directed toward the Image of MSMEs (Y) as the dependent variable.

The use of TAM-informed readiness indicators is justified because this study examines the public's willingness to accept and support digital marketing as a means of strengthening MSME image. Drawing on TAM and previous research, the dimensions of willingness, support, trust, and expectation capture stakeholders' readiness to support these initiatives in the rural MSME context.

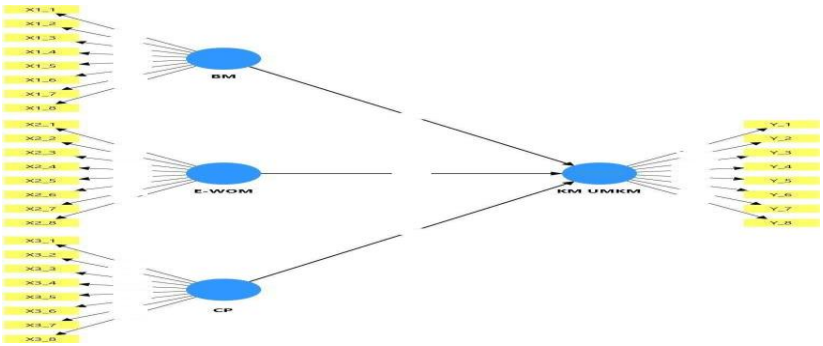


Figure 1. Conceptual framework
Source: Researcher (2026)

The empirical data were collected using a questionnaire with a 1-to-5 interval Likert scale and through a review of the literature. The statement items were constructed based on the criteria for the variables of buzzer marketing, electronic word of mouth, and customer perception, as formulated in the operationalization of the variables. The use of the Likert scale in the quantitative design proved effective in transforming respondents' qualitative perceptions into numerical data ready for statistical testing.

The entire target population for this study comprises all micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Aek Nauli Village, totaling 91 MSMEs, as referenced in the village monograph and the 2016 publication by the Central Statistics Agency of North Padang Lawas Regency. Subject selection employed the simple random sampling technique, a method of random sampling that does not consider stratification levels within the population, ensuring that every element of the population has an equal probability of being selected as a unit of analysis (Sugiyono, 2019). The sample size calculation was based on the Slovin formula with a precision tolerance margin of 5 percent, using the mathematical expression $n = N/(1 + N(e)^2$, where N = 91 and the deviation level e = 0.05. The calculation of this percentage resulted in a sample size of 74 respondents. Based on this figure, out of a total population of 91 MSMEs, 74 business owners were selected as research subjects through simple random sampling. The eligibility criteria for respondents included individuals who owned or managed MSMEs registered within the population of Aek Nauli Village, Hulu Sihapas Subdistrict, North Padang Lawas Regency; were actively operating at the time of the study; and voluntarily agreed to participate as respondents. [Reviewer 1] The study selected 74 respondents from a population of 91 MSMEs to obtain representative data while considering the feasibility of data collection. This sample size represents approximately 81.32% of the total population.

The data processing procedure in this study utilized the SmartPLS 4.0 software within the framework of Structural Equation Modeling with Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). The selection of the SEM-PLS method was based on its ability to map and analyze complex interactions among latent variables with multiple indicators, while not requiring the data to follow a normal distribution.

This quantitative analysis process is structured into two main levels. The first level focuses on evaluating the measurement model or outer model which is used to verify the validity and reliability of the instrument. The degree of convergent validity is evaluated based on the outer loading values, with a test threshold exceeding 0.70, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value required to exceed 0.50. Meanwhile, discriminant validity is confirmed by calculating the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, with a benchmark value below 0.90. In terms of instrument reliability, reliability tests are measured using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability estimates, which require a score above 0.70.

The second stage focuses on testing the structural model or inner model to verify the validity of the research hypotheses. The estimation of the inner model is assessed using the R-Square coefficient to measure the extent to which exogenous variables can predict the variance of endogenous variables. The F-Square value is used to calculate the specific contribution of exogenous variables to endogenous variables, while the Q-Square value is used to verify the predictive relevance of the constructed model. Hypothesis testing is then performed using the bootstrapping procedure. A hypothesis is concluded to be accepted and statistically significant when it yields a P-value less than 0.05 accompanied by a T-statistic value exceeding 1.96.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Evaluation of the Measurement Model (Outer Model)

Based on empirical computations using SmartPLS 4, this study examines the causal relationships between buzzer marketing, electronic word of mouth, and customer perception regarding the readiness to support MSMEs. The research model configuration integrates three independent variables buzzer marketing, electronic word of mouth, and customer perception and one dependent variable: readiness to support MSMEs. The output from the raw data processing provides information on the outer loadings of each component indicator, estimates of path coefficients between constructs, and the R-squared values for the endogenous variables.

The measurement model, or outer model, was examined to confirm the validity and reliability of the indicators in representing each research construct. The outer model testing procedures in this study were conducted through the verification of convergent validity, discriminant validity, and construct reliability. Convergent validity was evaluated based on outer loading values, while construct reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE). An indicator was deemed to meet the criteria for convergent validity when it recorded an outer loading value above 0.70. A detailed breakdown of the estimated outer loading values for each indicator item is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Outer loading test results

Indicator	Outer Loading	Information
X1_1	0.892	Valid
X1_2	0.871	Valid
X1_3	0.871	Valid
X1_4	0.835	Valid
X1_5	0.908	Valid
X1_6	0.913	Valid
X1_7	0.862	Valid
X1_8	0.832	Valid
X2_1	0.895	Valid
X2_2	0.907	Valid
X2_3	0.905	Valid
X2_4	0.903	Valid
X2_5	0.884	Valid
X2_6	0.890	Valid
X2_7	0.906	Valid
X2_8	0.910	Valid
X3_1	0.916	Valid
X3_2	0.878	Valid
X3_3	0.904	Valid
X3_4	0.919	Valid
X3_5	0.917	Valid
X3_6	0.899	Valid
X3_7	0.940	Valid
X3_8	0.931	Valid
Y_1	0.722	Valid
Y_2	0.767	Valid
Y_3	0.751	Valid
Y_4	0.755	Valid
Y_5	0.753	Valid
Y_6	0.812	Valid
Y_7	0.825	Valid
Y_8	0.789	Valid

Source: Data analysis (2026)

Based on the presentation in Table 1, it was identified that all indicator items in the constructs of buzzer marketing, electronic word of mouth, customer perception, and readiness to support MSMEs recorded outer loadings exceeding 0.70. Specifically, the indicators comprising the buzzer marketing variable ranged from 0.832 to 0.913. Next, the electronic word-of-mouth instrument showed estimates ranging from 0.878 to 0.940, while the customer perception indicators fell within the range of 0.884 to 0.910.

Consistent with this, the indicator items reflecting the construct of readiness to strengthen MSMEs recorded outer loadings ranging from 0.722 to 0.825. These quantitative results confirm that all indicators have met the threshold for convergent validity criteria, as they are above the minimum

threshold of 0.70. Thus, all measurement instruments used in this study are deemed valid and reliable in representing the observed constructs. Therefore, all indicator items should be retained for the next stage of analysis. These findings collectively demonstrate that the measurement model developed has successfully and optimally met the requirements for convergent validity.

Construct Validity and Reliability Testing

Following the demonstration of convergent validity based on outer loadings, the analysis proceeded to verify the reliability and construct validity. This procedure was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the instrument in exploring each research variable. Construct reliability was assessed based on Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability, while the confirmation of construct-level convergent validity was supported by the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The research constructs were deemed consistent and reliable when both Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability exceeded 0.70. In addition, the construct validity criteria are considered to meet the requirements when the cumulative AVE is above the threshold of 0.50. A summary of the computational results of the construct validity and reliability tests is presented explicitly in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of validity and reliability tests

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (rho_a)	Composite Reliability (rho_c)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Influencer Marketing	0.956	0.967	0.963	0.763
E-WOM	0.967	0.968	0.972	0.810
Customer Perception	0.971	0.973	0.976	0.834
Readiness to Establish MSMEs	0.903	0.904	0.922	0.597

Source: Data analysis (2026)

Based on the computational results in Table 2, all variables tested in this study confirm a very high level of reliability. The buzzer marketing construct recorded a Cronbach's Alpha estimate of 0.956, a Composite Reliability score of 0.963, and an AVE of 0.763. Furthermore, the electronic word-of-mouth construct recorded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.967, a Composite Reliability value of 0.972, and an AVE of 0.810.

As for the customer perception variable, it achieved a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.971, a Composite Reliability estimate of 0.976, and an AVE of 0.834. On the other hand, the variable "readiness to support MSMEs" recorded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.903, a Composite Reliability of 0.922, and an AVE of 0.597. All of these parametric values successfully exceeded the required qualification standards, namely a Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability threshold above 0.70 and an AVE value exceeding 0.50.

Based on these empirical calculations, all constructs in this study were found to be valid and reliable. These findings confirm that the operationalized indicator instruments possess adequate internal consistency when reflecting each variable. Therefore, it is concluded that the measurement model configuration meets the criteria for proceeding to the structural equation modeling (SEM) phase.

Discriminant Validity Test

The next evaluation stage focuses on testing discriminant validity, which is used to determine the extent to which a construct differs in detail from other constructs within the research model framework. In this investigation, discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) indicator. A construct is deemed to meet the criteria for discriminant validity when its HTMT estimate falls below the threshold of 0.90. The computational details of the discriminant validity test are summarized in full in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of the discriminant validity test

	Buzzer Marketing	Customer Perception	E-WOM
Influencer Marketing			
E-WOM	0.109		

	Buzzer Marketing	Customer Perception	E-WOM
Customer Perception	0.173	0.189	
Readiness to Establish MSMEs	0.409	0.689	0.562

Source: Data analysis (2026)

Based on the data in Table 3, all estimated inter-construct correlations fall below the maximum threshold of 0.90. The HTMT coefficient between buzzer marketing and customer perception was 0.109, while the interaction between buzzer marketing and electronic word of mouth was 0.173. In addition, the correlation coefficient between customer perception and electronic word of mouth reached 0.189.

Furthermore, the relationship between buzzer marketing and readiness to support MSMEs yielded an estimate of 0.409. The relationship between customer perception and readiness to support MSMEs yielded a value of 0.689, while the interaction between electronic word of mouth and readiness to support MSMEs was recorded at 0.562. These cumulative values consistently fall below the 0.90 threshold, leading to the conclusion that each construct in this study exhibits an adequate degree of differentiation from the other constructs.

Thus, the research model configuration has been shown to meet the criteria for discriminant validity. This confirms that buzzer marketing, customer perception, electronic word of mouth, and readiness to support MSMEs are constructs that can be empirically and clearly distinguished from one another. Therefore, the model framework is deemed valid for proceeding to the structural equation modeling phase.

Structural Model Evaluation (R-Square)

After validating the measurement model in terms of validity and reliability, the next step involves evaluating the structural model or inner model. One of the testing parameters examined includes an analysis of the R-square coefficient. The R-squared estimate is used to measure the extent to which the variables of buzzer marketing, customer perception, and electronic word of mouth can explain the variance in the variable of readiness to establish MSMEs. The higher the R-squared value, the greater the explanatory power of the independent variables over the dependent variable. The results of the R-squared test are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. R-squared test results

	R-square	R-square adjusted
Readiness to Establish MSMEs	0.764	0.754

Source: Data analysis (2026)

Based on the statistical data presented in Table 4, the R-squared value for the construct of MSME readiness recorded a coefficient of 0.764, while the adjusted R-squared value recorded an estimate of 0.754. These results confirm that buzzer marketing, customer perception, and electronic word of mouth collectively account for 75.4% of the variance in MSME readiness.

On the other hand, the remaining 24.6% is attributed to other determinants outside the scope of this study. Based on these quantitative estimates, the model's explanatory power in describing the variable of MSME readiness falls within the "very strong" category. Consequently, the three independent variables operationalized in this study make a highly substantial contribution to predicting fluctuations and dynamics in MSME readiness.

F-Square Test

In addition to observing the model's explanatory power simultaneously through R-square estimates, the verification of the structural model also utilizes the F-square coefficient. The F-square test is intended to map the magnitude of the individual effects contributed by exogenous variables on endogenous variables. The F-square value quantifies the proportion of sensitivity to changes in the dependent variable when an independent variable is included in the analysis. The results of the F-square test in this study are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. F-square test results

	Readiness to Establish MSMEs
Buzzer Marketing	0.729
E-WOM	0.986
Customer Perception	1.084

Source: Data analysis (2026)

Based on the data description in Table 5, the buzzer marketing variable recorded an F-square coefficient of 0.729 regarding the readiness to strengthen MSMEs. The electronic word-of-mouth construct recorded an estimate of 0.986, while customer perception achieved an F-square value of 1.084. The cumulative F-square value for these three variables consistently far exceeded the threshold of 0.35. These statistical findings confirm that the three independent variables have a highly substantial impact on predicting the readiness to establish MSMEs. Among the variables tested, customer perception recorded the highest F-square estimate, at 1.084. This empirical result demonstrates that customer perception contributes the most dominant effect on the readiness to establish MSMEs compared to the contributions of buzzer marketing and electronic word of mouth, based on the effect size calculations in this study.

Q-Square Test

The analytical verification process continued with a Q-square test aimed at assessing the predictive capability and the degree of predictive significance of the structural equation model. The Q-square parameter value indicates the accuracy of the research model in estimating the distribution of data on the dependent construct. The research model is considered to have valid predictive relevance when the Q-square coefficient is positive and greater than zero. The summary of the statistical results from the Q-square test for the construct of MSME readiness is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Q-square test results

	Q^2predict	RMSE	MAE
Readiness to Establish MSMEs	0.737	0.527	0.435

Source: Data analysis (2026)

As shown in Table 6, the Q-square predict coefficient for the construct of MSME consolidation readiness was recorded at 0.737. This value confirms the validity of the research design, indicating that it possesses adequate estimative power since it exceeds the positive zero threshold. Furthermore, this finding implies that the model architecture possesses strong predictive relevance for the "readiness to consolidate MSMEs" variable.

The coefficient value of 0.737 indicates that the research model accounts for 73.7% of the predictive power for the endogenous construct under examination. Thus, the structural model configuration supported by the causal relationships between buzzer marketing, customer perception, and electronic word-of-mouth regarding the readiness to establish SMEs is recognized as having precise estimative capabilities. This empirical evidence also confirms that the research model fully meets the criteria for proceeding to the hypothesis testing stage.

Hypothesis Testing

Following the completion of the examination of the measurement model and structural model architectures, the next crucial stage focuses on testing the research hypotheses. The procedure for estimating the hypotheses was carried out using the bootstrapping computational technique via the SmartPLS application. The validation of whether a hypothesis is accepted or rejected is calculated based on the magnitude of the path coefficients and significance indicators reflected by T-statistics and P-values. A hypothesis is deemed to have a significant effect if it yields a P-value less than $o\text{,}o5$. A comprehensive tabulation of the hypothesis testing results is summarized in Table 7.

Table 7. Hypothesis test results

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Buzzer Marketing -> Readiness to Build	0.423	0.425	0.071	5.970	0.000
SMEs	0.498	0.496	0.057	8.682	0.000
E-WOM -> Readiness to Build SMEs	0.518	0.518	0.056	9.231	0.000

Source: Data analysis (2026)

Based on the statistical description in Table 7, all independent variables were found to have a positive and significant contribution to the readiness to formalize MSMEs. The computational results confirm that buzzer marketing recorded an estimated path coefficient of 0.423, accompanied by a T-statistic of 5.970 and a P-value of 0.000. Since the P-values are below the 0.05 threshold, it can be concluded that buzzer marketing has a positive and statistically significant impact on the readiness to establish MSMEs. Consequently, the first hypothesis is accepted.

Next, the electronic word-of-mouth construct also showed a positive and significant contribution to the readiness to strengthen MSMEs, as indicated by a path coefficient of 0.498, a T-statistic of 8.682, and a P-value of 0.000. P-values below 0.05 confirm the existence of this significant effect, so the second hypothesis is officially accepted. This finding clarifies that the more optimal the dissemination of information and digital reviews received by the public, the more business owners are motivated to improve the performance of their SMEs.

Meanwhile, the customer perception variable yielded a path coefficient of 0.518, with a T-statistic of 9.231 and a P-value of 0.000. This empirical verification confirms that customer perception has a positive and significant impact on the readiness to consolidate MSMEs. In other words, the more positive consumers' assessments and perceptions of a business entity are, the higher the level of readiness to consolidate the existence of MSMEs. Based on these results, the third hypothesis is accepted.

Variables with the Most Dominant Influence

To identify which variable exerts the most dominant influence on the readiness to establish SMEs, the analysis focused on the magnitude of the path coefficients (original sample). The higher the positive value of the path coefficient, the more significant the variable's influence on the dependent construct. Based on the hypothesis testing results, a comparison of the path coefficient estimates for the three independent variables is presented in Table 7.

Referring to the original sample results, customer perception ranks as the variable with the most dominant influence on the readiness to establish SMEs, with a coefficient of 0.518. Next, electronic word-of-mouth ranks second with a coefficient of 0.498. On the other hand, buzzer marketing has a coefficient of 0.423 and ranks third.

These statistical findings demonstrate that, when compared to buzzer marketing and electronic word-of-mouth, the construct of customer perception has the strongest impact on the readiness to support MSMEs in this research framework. In other words, the positive affective and cognitive responses demonstrated by customers regarding the quality, value, price level, and credibility of MSMEs are the most essential drivers in stimulating the readiness to solidify the existence of MSMEs. Nevertheless, buzzer marketing and electronic word of mouth were found to continue making positive and significant contributions, meaning that these three exogenous variables simultaneously play a crucial role in accelerating the readiness to establish SMEs.

Analysis of the Influence of Buzzer Marketing on the Readiness to Establish SMEs

The test results confirm that buzzer marketing has a positive and significant influence on the readiness to establish the image of MSMEs, as evidenced by a path coefficient of 0.423, a T-statistic estimate of 5.970, and a P-value of 0.000. These empirical findings demonstrate that the more effectively buzzer marketing is optimized, the more the level of readiness to shape the image of

MSMEs is boosted, based on the research model configuration. Buzzer marketing strategies have proven effective in accelerating product recognition among a broad audience through the dissemination of persuasive commercial narratives and massive audience reach.

In the practical context of the MSMEs in Aek Nauli Village, this strategy can be implemented through four types of activities. First, MSME owners can collaborate with local social media managers to promote the culinary products, beverages, and services they offer. Second, business owners can produce visual content such as photos and videos that highlight the products' unique features, pricing, business locations, and ordering processes. Third, SME managers can leverage the persuasive influence of reputable local figures trusted by the community to expand market penetration. Fourth, business owners can schedule integrated promotional activities via social media posts at specific times to make product information more accessible to potential customers. The execution of these programs must prioritize the credibility of the promotional communicators and the authenticity of the narratives presented to ensure that public trust in the business's integrity is sustainably maintained.

The results of this study are consistent with the research by Nisa et al. (2025), which examined the role of buzzer marketing in branding MSMEs in Banda Aceh. That study found that buzzers can serve as branding managers, communication liaisons, and promotional channels that help increase potential consumers' attention and interest in MSME products. Related findings are also present in the study by Putri et al. on the influence of buzzer content on purchasing decisions through consumer engagement, which examined the role of viral content in the marketing of SME culinary products. Additionally, Jasin's study on social media marketing and E-WOM regarding the brand image of small and medium-sized enterprises highlights the importance of digital marketing activities in brand image formation. Research by Suryani et al., (2021) also indicates that the quality of digital media can contribute to brand image through the processes of increasing brand awareness and E-WOM. Although the context and variables studied are not entirely the same, the results of this research support the understanding that digital marketing communication can help increase brand recognition and build a business's image. Therefore, the findings from the study in Aek Nauli Village reinforce the importance of utilizing Buzzer Marketing as one strategy to support SMEs' readiness to build their business image.

From an Islamic perspective, customer perception relates to how consumers evaluate the quality, price, and trustworthiness of a product. This is in line with Quranic Surah Al-Mutaffifin, verses 1–3, which prohibit fraud in trade. Therefore, MSME operators should maintain product quality, set reasonable prices, and provide honest information to foster positive consumer perceptions and a good image for MSMEs.

Analysis of the Influence of E-WOM on the Readiness to Build an SME Image

In addition to influencer marketing, the electronic word-of-mouth variable has also been proven to have a positive and significant influence on the readiness to strengthen the SME image, as evidenced by a path coefficient of 0.498, a T-statistic estimate of 8.682, and a P-value of 0.000. These empirical findings demonstrate that the transmission of information and the articulation of consumer experiences through digital networks play an essential role in supporting the readiness to shape the image of SMEs. Manifestations of electronic word of mouth can take the form of feedback, narrative responses, informal recommendations, and records of satisfaction disseminated via social media or other virtual channels.

In the context of its implementation in the Aek Nauli Village area, electronic word-of-mouth can be operationalized through four types of activities. First, MSME owners can encourage actual buyers who have purchased their products to voluntarily share their experiences via social media channels. Second, business owners can request permission from customers to repost positive reviews addressing product quality or service performance. Third, MSME managers can respond to every customer comment or complaint politely and with a focus on solutions so that the public perceives the business as highly receptive to feedback. Fourth, business owners can transparently present product details including pricing, product variations, locations, and operating hours so that

consumers have comprehensive information when sharing recommendations on their social media networks. These strategic practices are believed to foster more constructive interactions between producers and consumers while strengthening the credibility of MSMEs in the eyes of the public.

In the reorientation of Islamic ethical values, electronic word-of-mouth must be grounded in the principles of integrity, trustworthiness, and moral accountability when disseminating product reviews. This foundation is theologically consistent with the doctrine of Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 6, which instructs the practice of tabayyun or factual verification of information before it is disseminated to the public. Therefore, reviews of product performance must be conveyed accurately, without narrative distortions, in order to preserve consumer trust and maintain the reputation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

The empirical findings of this study align with the research by Purwantoro & Rohmah, (2026) on the influence of electronic word of mouth on MSME consumer purchase decisions, as mediated by brand image and brand reliability. This exploration confirms that electronic word of mouth exerts a strong influence on brand image and brand reliability, which in turn are directly associated with consumer purchase decisions. In line with this, the study by Suryani et al., (2021) indicates that electronic word of mouth, along with brand awareness, serves as an essential pillar bridging the quality of digital media with brand reputation among small and medium-sized business entities in Indonesia. Furthermore, an analysis by Qolbi & Cahyaningdyah, (2026) demonstrates the involvement of electronic word of mouth in the construction of brand perception, although its direct impact on purchase intent did not yield a significant coefficient within the scope of their research. Meanwhile, the study by Paskah & Nugrahani, (2023) on the impact of electronic word of mouth on the brand reputation of Es Teh Indonesia further reinforces the existence of a significant connection between online reviews and product image.

A comparison of these four literature references crystallizes the understanding that users' electronic communications are closely linked to image management and the accumulation of trust in a business entity. Thus, the findings of the investigation in Aek Nauli Village reinforce the necessity of integrating consumer reviews as a core strategy in the image-building architecture of MSMEs, without neglecting product quality and service excellence, which serve as the primary foundation for shaping the consumer experience.

Analysis of the Influence of Customer Perception on Readiness to Build the Image of MSMEs

The "customer perception" variable also demonstrates a positive and significant influence on the readiness to establish an SME image, as evidenced by a path coefficient of 0.518, an estimated T-statistic of 9.231, and a P-value of 0.000. Among the three variables investigated, customer perception has the highest path coefficient, thereby serving as the determinant with the most dominant relative influence in this research model's configuration. These empirical findings underscore the critical importance of customers' affective and cognitive assessments of product quality, price levels, the relevance of value received, and the accumulation of trust in SME entities.

In the practical context of Aek Nauli Village, a strategy focused on customer perception can be implemented through four key initiatives. First, MSME owners must maintain consistent product quality, including taste, hygiene standards, packaging reliability, and the quality stability of the commodities they market. Second, business owners need to set prices that are reasonable and commensurate with the quality and perceived value to buyers. Pricing can reflect a product's brand quality, as consumers tend to assume that relatively high prices correlate with superior quality (Rahmani & Islami, 2024). Third, MSME managers need to offer added-value advantages, such as emphasizing friendly service, flexible ordering mechanisms, product variety that aligns with consumer preferences, and transparency regarding product details. Fourth, business owners must foster public trust through transparent communication, timely order fulfillment, consistent service quality, and a willingness to accommodate feedback and suggestions. These four practices effectively build a positive consumer experience, giving the public solid reasons to express appreciation for SMEs. This is consistent with the teachings of Surah Al-Mutaffifin, verses 1–3, regarding the

prohibition of manipulative actions, as well as Surah An-Nisa, verse 29, concerning the importance of reliability and integrity in contractual transactions.

These findings align with the scientific extrapolation by Syahlan et al. regarding pricing, commodity quality, branding, promotional activities, and customer perception within the context of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Indonesia, which outlines the conceptual relationship between these variables and business entity performance. An empirical exploration of quality perception, price perception, and digital marketing's impact on purchase decisions through brand image among culinary-sector MSMEs in Demak Regency further demonstrates that quality perception and price perception make a tangible contribution to brand image. Furthermore, the investigation by Fasha et al. regarding sustainable marketing practices, customer credibility, satisfaction levels, product quality, and pricing among MSMEs in Batam City assessed the significance of factors correlated with customers' experience history and evaluations of loyalty through brand image. An analysis by Siahaan and Susanti on product quality, brand trust, and price perception regarding brand loyalty through brand image also confirms that product quality and brand trust have a significant influence on brand image among consumers in the footwear segment. Although the focus of the subject matter and the configuration of variables in previous studies differ from those in this research, their empirical conclusions reinforce the thesis that product quality, price perception, value assessment, and credibility are essential dimensions in shaping consumer evaluations of business entities. Consequently, the findings from the study in Aek Nauli Village confirm that efforts to strengthen the image of MSMEs must be supported by an impressive track record of customer experiences, rather than relying solely on persuasive promotional narratives.

However, influencer marketing also poses risks to consumer trust when promotional information does not reflect actual product conditions. Such inconsistencies may cause consumer disappointment, generate negative electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM), and damage the credibility and image of MSMEs. Therefore, influencers should provide honest, transparent, and accurate product information to maintain consumer trust and protect the reputation of MSMEs in Aek Nauli Village.

The results of the structural equation model analysis also confirm that influencer marketing, electronic word-of-mouth, and customer perception collectively account for 75.4% of the variance in MSME readiness as indicated by an adjusted R-squared value of 0.754 while the remaining 24.6% is attributed to other determinants outside the scope of this study. This finding demonstrates that the combination of the three variables operationalized in this study possesses strong predictive power in identifying shifts in the readiness to establish the image of MSMEs. Consequently, the process of shaping the image of MSMEs can be accelerated by leveraging the synergy between digital marketing strategies and the engineering of consumer perceptions. Buzzer marketing helps accelerate the spread of narratives; electronic word-of-mouth supports the building of public trust through the articulation of track records and user recommendations; and customer perception consolidates the public's understanding of product quality, price justification, value creation, and the credibility of MSMEs. The adjusted R-squared value of 75.4% indicates that buzzer marketing, E-WOM, and customer perception strongly explain MSME image-building readiness. Therefore, MSMEs should combine digital promotion, positive customer reviews, and consistent product quality to strengthen their image.

The findings of this study are closely associated with the actual conditions of MSMEs in Aek Nauli Village, which based on the initial mapping still face challenges in understanding and implementing digital marketing tactics. Preliminary observations in this study identified that only 25% of MSME entities have a grasp of the concepts of buzzer marketing, electronic word of mouth, and customer perception, while the remaining 75% have not yet articulated these three concepts. Furthermore, even MSMEs that have understood the aspects of digital marketing still encounter technical obstacles when implementing them optimally. Consequently, the findings of this study provide evidence that SME owners in Aek Nauli Village need to significantly accelerate the development of their digital marketing capabilities. Business owners are not merely required to

promote their products via social media; they must also consistently maintain product quality, set appropriate prices, build buyer trust, and provide excellent service to foster positive customer perception and generate beneficial online word-of-mouth.

Overall, this empirical study confirms that buzzer marketing, electronic word-of-mouth, and customer perception serve as essential determinants in strengthening the brand image of MSMEs in Aek Nauli Village. The effective implementation of buzzer marketing broadens the reach of narrative dissemination; electronic word of mouth strengthens public acceptance through the articulation of consumer experiences; while customer perception plays the most dominant role in shaping impressions of MSMEs. Therefore, business owners in Aek Nauli Village are advised to integrate these three dimensions synergistically and in a balanced manner. A reliable digital marketing strategy must be balanced by superior product quality and service performance so that the positive narratives disseminated through virtual channels align with actual consumer experiences. Through this approach, a more solid image for MSMEs can be established, rooted in enhanced public credibility, while simultaneously strengthening the competitiveness of business entities amid the accelerating digital marketing landscape.

The findings of this study are conceptually linked to the analysis by Rahmayati et al., (2023), which examined the preferences and customer perceptions of MSME operators regarding the accessibility of QRIS services in the city of Medan. This exploration confirms that business owners' perceptions are rooted in their evaluation of the reliability of the information system, their level of knowledge, the level of credibility, and the quality of service. These findings explain that appreciation for a service channel or business activity is not solely determined by the information received but is also shaped by past experiences and confidence in the actual benefits gained.

Within the MSME sector in Aek Nauli Village, customer perception plays a crucial role because consumers form their evaluations of business entities based on the consistency of product quality, reasonable pricing, perceived value, and the level of trust in business managers. Therefore, accelerating promotion through influencer marketing and the dissemination of reviews via electronic word-of-mouth must be supported by superior product quality and service performance so that the image of MSMEs aligns with their actual track record of consumer satisfaction. Thus, the empirical findings of Rahmayati et al., (2023) can serve as a supporting reference for elaborating on the urgency of the perception dimension in the development of SMEs, even though that study did not explicitly examine the role of customer perception in shaping the image of SMEs.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it was concluded that buzzer marketing, electronic word of mouth, and customer perception significantly influence the readiness to build the image of SMEs and have a positive impact on SME operators, particularly in the rural area of Aek Nauli. This indicates that these three variables are highly efficient and effective in building the image of SMEs. Buzzer marketing was proven to have a significant influence on the readiness to build the image of SMEs. This strategy can enhance the image of MSMEs in the village of Aek Nauli, as such promotion helps shape their image and introduce them to a wider audience. Electronic word of mouth influences the image of MSMEs due to positive reviews on social media regarding a particular MSME, where information disseminated online can shape consumer perceptions and evaluations.

Of these three variables, Customer Perception is the most dominant factor, meaning that the public's positive perceptions of the quality, price, value, and trustworthiness of SMEs are the primary determinants in driving the readiness to build a brand image. Thus, the use of digital marketing strategies and the management of online reviews are crucial in increasing public trust in SMEs in rural areas.

MSME operators in Aek Nauli Village are advised to further optimize the use of influencer marketing by selecting credible influencers with a wide reach, as well as actively managing electronic word-of-mouth by encouraging consumers to post positive reviews on social media. However, the most important thing is to maintain and improve customer perception by enhancing product quality, ensuring prices are commensurate with benefits, and building consumer trust, as these factors have

the greatest influence. It is hoped that the village government and relevant parties will provide support in the form of digital marketing training and mentoring for MSMEs. This study contributes theoretically by integrating buzzer marketing, E-WOM, and customer perception into a model for building rural MSME image. The findings show that all three factors contribute positively, with customer perception having the strongest influence. This model provides a basis for understanding how digital marketing and consumer perceptions shape rural MSME image.

Future research should examine the long-term effects of digital marketing on MSME image and business performance, including sales growth, customer loyalty, and competitiveness. Further studies could also involve MSMEs from different regions and explore other factors, such as digital literacy and product quality, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital marketing effectiveness.

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