

Building Brand Image through TikTok Influencer Communication: Evidence from AK Garden and Space, Garut

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed branding strategies among micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), particularly in the culinary industry. TikTok has emerged as one of the most influential digital communication platforms, enabling businesses to establish authentic interactions with consumers through influencer-generated content. Although previous studies have extensively examined influencer marketing, they primarily focus on celebrity influencers, national brands, or metropolitan markets. Limited attention has been devoted to how local influencers with strong cultural identities contribute to branding strategies for regional MSMEs. This study investigates the communication strategy employed by AK Garden and Space, a local café in Garut Regency, Indonesia, in developing its brand through collaboration with a local TikTok influencer, Mang Epul Si Tukang Dahar. Using an inductive qualitative case study approach, Data were collected between November 2024 and February 2025 through in-depth interviews, observation of TikTok content, and documentation. Six informants participated in the study, consisting of the café owner, marketing administrator, collaborating influencer, and three customers. Data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model involving data reduction, data display, coding, thematic categorization, and conclusion drawing. Audience engagement was assessed through observed interaction indicators, including likes, comments, shares, and comment-content analysis. The findings reveal that the effectiveness of the branding strategy does not primarily stem from promotional intensity but from the perceived authenticity of communication. The influencer's use of local language, humor, storytelling style, and cultural familiarity generated substantial audience engagement as reflected in audience interactions, including likes, comments, and shares observed in the analyzed content. The study proposes that cultural authenticity functions as a strategic communication asset capable of enhancing digital branding effectiveness for local MSMEs. This research contributes to communication studies by extending influencer marketing literature beyond commercial promotion toward culturally embedded digital communication practices and offers practical insights for local businesses seeking sustainable branding strategies through social media.

Keywords: Communication strategy, TikTok influencer, digital branding, MSMEs, cultural authenticity, café branding.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of digital communication has transformed the way businesses develop branding strategies and interact with consumers. In increasingly competitive markets, branding is no longer limited to creating visual identities but has become a strategic communication process aimed at shaping public perceptions, building trust, and fostering long-term customer loyalty. For culinary businesses, effective communication strategies are essential because consumers' purchasing decisions are increasingly influenced by digital information and online experiences rather than conventional promotional activities (Putra et al., 2021)

According to DataReportal Indonesia (2025), TikTok remains one of the most actively used social media platforms in Indonesia, particularly among young adults who represent a major consumer segment of culinary businesses. The increasing adoption of digital marketing among Indonesian MSMEs has encouraged local businesses to utilize influencer-based communication strategies to enhance visibility, customer engagement, and brand recognition. In Garut Regency, the rapid growth of cafés and culinary destinations has intensified competition, requiring businesses to develop distinctive branding approaches beyond traditional promotional activities.

The advancement of social media has accelerated this transformation by providing businesses with interactive platforms to communicate directly with audiences. Among various social media platforms, TikTok has become one of the most influential communication channels due to its short-video format, algorithm-based content distribution, and high level of user engagement. Unlike traditional promotional media, TikTok enables businesses to present products through storytelling, visual experiences, and authentic interactions that encourage audiences to participate actively by commenting, sharing, and recommending content. Consequently, TikTok has evolved from an entertainment platform into an effective communication medium for branding and marketing activities (ELPARHA, 2022)

The increasing popularity of TikTok has also encouraged businesses to collaborate with influencers as strategic communication partners. Influencers function not only as promotional agents but also as communicators capable of delivering persuasive and credible messages to their followers. Their communication style, perceived authenticity, and close relationship with audiences often generate stronger engagement than conventional advertising. Previous studies have demonstrated that influencer-based communication contributes positively to brand awareness, consumer trust, and purchase intention, particularly within the culinary industry (Trisnawijaya et al., 2026)

This phenomenon is evident in the growing culinary sector of Garut Regency, where cafés compete not only through product quality but also through communication strategies that differentiate their brands. One example is AK Garden and Space, a local café that combines a modern garden concept with digital branding through collaboration with a local TikTok influencer, Mang Epul Si Tukang Dahar (The Eater). Known for his humorous storytelling, authentic culinary reviews, and use of local Sundanese expressions, the influencer presents the café in a manner that feels natural and culturally relevant to local audiences. The collaboration attracted public attention and became a relevant example of influencer-based communication within the local culinary sector, making it a suitable case for investigating digital branding practices.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that TikTok-based marketing and influencer collaboration contribute positively to brand awareness, consumer engagement, trust, and purchase intention, particularly within the culinary sector. Existing research has highlighted the effectiveness of influencer-generated content, visual storytelling, and social media interaction in strengthening brand communication and attracting potential consumers. However, most studies have focused on national brands, urban-based businesses, celebrity influencers, or quantitative measurements of marketing outcomes. As a result, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how local influencers with strong cultural identities contribute to branding communication among regional micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Furthermore, previous research has largely emphasized outcomes such as brand awareness and purchase intention, while providing less insight into the communication processes through which communicator characteristics, message construction, media utilization, audience feedback, and communication effects interact to shape brand image. This gap is important because local culinary businesses operate within distinctive socio-cultural environments where cultural familiarity, local language, and community trust may influence communication effectiveness differently from metropolitan or national branding contexts. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the communication strategy employed by AK Garden and Space in Garut Regency through collaboration with a local TikTok influencer, Mang Epul Si Tukang Dahar. Using a qualitative single-case study approach and guided by Effendy's communication strategy framework, this research contributes contextually by examining a regional culinary MSME, theoretically by exploring the role of cultural authenticity in influencer communication, and methodologically by providing an in-depth qualitative analysis of communication processes underlying digital branding practices.

Based on the research objective, this study seeks to answer the following research questions. First, how does AK Garden and Space design and implement its communication strategy through collaboration with a local TikTok influencer in building brand image? Second, how do the communication elements of communicator, message, media, audience feedback, and communication effects interact within the influencer-based branding process? Third, how does cultural authenticity, reflected through local language, storytelling style, and cultural familiarity, contribute to the effectiveness of TikTok-based branding communication? By addressing these questions, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how local influencer collaboration functions as a strategic communication approach for strengthening brand image in the context of regional culinary MSMEs.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design. The case examined was the collaboration between AK Garden and Space and the TikTok influencer Mang Epul Si Tukang Dahar. The unit of analysis was the communication strategy embedded in influencer-generated

TikTok content. A single-case design was considered appropriate because the phenomenon represented a unique example of local influencer-based branding rooted in regional cultural identity.

A total of six informants participated in this study and were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in or experience with the communication activities under investigation. The key informants consisted of the owner of AK Garden and Space, the marketing administrator responsible for managing the café's digital communication, and Mang Epul Si Tukang Dahar as the collaborating TikTok influencer. In addition, three customer informants were recruited as supporting informants to provide audience perspectives. The customer informants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) they had watched the collaborative TikTok content featuring AK Garden and Space, (2) they had interacted with the content through likes, comments, or shares, and/or (3) they had visited or expressed an intention to visit the café after viewing the content. These criteria ensured that the selected participants possessed relevant experiences and insights regarding the communication strategy being examined. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, indicated by the absence of substantially new information or emerging themes in subsequent interviews. Therefore, six informants were considered sufficient to provide rich and comprehensive data for understanding the communication processes underlying the influencer-based branding strategy.

Data were collected using three complementary techniques: in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain comprehensive information regarding communication planning, message construction, media utilization, and audience responses. Observation focused on communication practices presented in TikTok content, including message delivery, communication style, audience interaction, and the use of TikTok features. Documentation included screenshots of TikTok content, engagement statistics, promotional materials, and other supporting documents relevant to the research objectives. Data collection was conducted from November 2024 to February 2025. Interviews lasted approximately 45–90 minutes. Observation focused on five collaborative TikTok videos uploaded between November and December 2024. Documents were selected based on their direct relevance to the influencer collaboration and audience engagement indicators. The combination of these techniques allowed the researcher to obtain rich and comprehensive qualitative data while facilitating data triangulation (Sugiyono, 2023).

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by (Miles et al., 2014), consisting of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting and organizing information relevant to the research questions. The organized data were subsequently presented systematically to facilitate interpretation before conclusions were formulated based on recurring themes and relationships identified throughout

the analysis. Analysis began with open coding to identify recurring concepts emerging from interviews, observations, and documentation. Similar codes were grouped into categories and subsequently developed into broader themes. Effendy's communication strategy model was employed as a sensitizing framework rather than a rigid coding template, allowing new themes to emerge inductively from the data. Coding and interpretation were conducted by the researcher and reviewed through peer discussion to reduce interpretive bias.

To ensure research trustworthiness, credibility was strengthened through member checking, whereby summaries of interview interpretations were returned to key informants for verification. An audit trail documenting coding decisions and analytical memos was maintained throughout the research process. Peer debriefing with fellow communication researchers was also conducted to improve dependability interpretation (Moleong, 2011).

The analytical framework of this study was based on Effendy's communication strategy model, which emphasizes five interconnected communication elements: communicator, message, media, feedback, and communication effects (Uchjana Effendi, 2011). The study adopted a hybrid inductive–deductive analytical approach. While Effendy's framework guided the initial organization of data, themes were not restricted to predefined categories. New patterns, particularly those related to cultural authenticity and local identity, emerged inductively during analysis.

Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the objectives of the study and voluntarily agreed to participate. The identities of the participants were treated confidentially, and all collected data were used solely for academic purposes. Here is the list of informants of this research.

Table 1. Characteristics of Key Informants

Informant	Position	Role in the Study
Informant 1	Owner of AK Garden and Space	Determines branding strategy
Informant 2	Marketing Administrator	Manages TikTok communication
Informant 3	Mang Epul Si Tukang Dahar	TikTok influencer
Informant 4–6	Customers	Audience perspectives

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Communicator Strategy in TikTok-Based Branding

The findings indicate that the success of AK Garden and Space's branding strategy is closely associated with the selection of an appropriate communicator. Rather than relying solely on the café's official social media account, the management collaborated with a food vlogger called Mang Epul Si Tukang Dahar, a local TikTok influencer widely recognized for his authentic culinary reviews, humorous storytelling, and frequent use of Sundanese expressions. This collaboration enabled promotional messages to be delivered naturally, thereby reducing audiences' perceptions of commercial advertising.

Interview findings revealed that the café management deliberately selected Mang Epul because of his credibility among local audiences and his ability to communicate using cultural expressions familiar to the people of Garut. Café owner says "We chose Mang Epul because people in Garut trust his reviews and feel that he represents local culinary culture." Instead of emphasizing direct promotional messages, the communication strategy highlighted genuine culinary experiences, allowing audiences to construct their own perceptions regarding the quality of the café. This is in line with what Mang Epul says "I do not promote the café formally. I simply tell my experience as I normally do."

This finding demonstrates that communicator credibility is not merely determined by popularity or the number of followers but also by cultural proximity and audience trust. The local identity embodied by Mang Epul strengthened the persuasive power of the communication because audiences perceived the reviews as personal recommendations rather than paid advertisements. Such findings support (Uchjana Effendi, 2011) argument that communicators play a central role in determining communication effectiveness, as the success of message delivery depends largely on the communicator's credibility, attractiveness, and ability to establish audience trust.

Furthermore, the communication strategy reflects (Panuju, 2019) perspective that communication strategies should integrate message planning with audience characteristics. By selecting a communicator who shares cultural similarities with the target audience, AK Garden and Space successfully reduced the psychological distance between the brand and potential consumers. The communication process therefore became more persuasive and interactive.

These findings are also consistent with the study conducted by (Trisnawijaya et al., 2026), which reported that influencer credibility significantly contributes to strengthening brand awareness within the culinary sector. However, unlike the study of Liem et al (Lim et al., 2025) which primarily examined influencers with broad commercial appeal using a quantitative approach, the present study demonstrates that local cultural identity itself functions as an important communication resource. In the context of Garut Regency, the effectiveness of branding communication is influenced not only by influencer popularity but also by cultural authenticity, linguistic familiarity, and emotional closeness to the audience.

Therefore, this study extends previous research by demonstrating that local influencers are capable of functioning as strategic communicators whose persuasive influence derives from community trust rather than commercial visibility alone. Such findings enrich Effendy's communication model by illustrating that communicator effectiveness in digital communication is increasingly shaped by authenticity and cultural relevance.

3.2. Branding Message Construction in Influencer Collaboration

The findings further reveal that the branding messages communicated through TikTok emphasized authentic experiences instead of explicit promotional claims. Rather than focusing on discounts or persuasive advertising slogans, the collaborative content presented the ambience of AK Garden and Space, food presentation, dining experience, and interpersonal interactions occurring naturally throughout the video. These communication elements enabled audiences to experience the café virtually before making an actual visit.

Observation of the collaborative TikTok content indicates that visual aesthetics, storytelling, humor, and spontaneous interaction formed the dominant characteristics of the branding messages. In one video, Mang Epul introduced the café using the Sundanese expression “ieu tempatna nyaman pisan” (“this place is very comfortable”), followed by a sequence showing the garden atmosphere, menu presentation, tasting experience, and spontaneous reactions. This storytelling structure resembled an experiential narrative rather than direct advertising. Mang Epul consistently narrated his culinary experience using conversational language, local dialects, and humorous expressions that reflected everyday communication among Garut communities. Consequently, promotional messages appeared more credible and engaging because they resembled personal recommendations rather than formal advertisements.

This communication approach corresponds to Effendy's concept that effective messages should be understandable, attractive, relevant, and capable of generating desired communication effects. Instead of relying on persuasive commands, AK Garden and Space employed experiential communication that encouraged audiences to interpret the value of the café independently. Such an approach strengthened message acceptance because audiences actively participated in constructing meaning from the content they consumed.

The findings also support (Darus & Agung, 2022), who argue that communication strategies should prioritize audience-oriented message construction rather than organizational interests alone. By adapting message delivery to audience preferences, communication becomes more persuasive and capable of influencing attitudes and behavioural intentions. In this study, the integration of visual storytelling, local language, and authentic culinary

experiences effectively enhanced audience engagement while reinforcing the café's brand identity.

Moreover, the results are consistent with Elparha's research, which emphasizes TikTok's effectiveness in developing culinary branding through creative visual communication. Nevertheless, the present study provides an additional perspective by demonstrating that message effectiveness is not generated solely by platform features or visual presentation. Instead, communication effectiveness emerges from the integration of authentic storytelling, local cultural identity, and credible influencer communication. This combination transforms promotional content into an engaging narrative that audiences willingly consume and share.

Overall, the branding messages communicated by AK Garden and Space successfully integrated informational, emotional, and persuasive communication functions. Rather than merely informing audiences about products, the messages created positive emotional experiences that contributed to stronger audience engagement and a more favorable brand image. These findings reinforce the proposition that communication effectiveness in influencer marketing depends on the coherence between communicator credibility, message authenticity, and audience cultural expectations.

Table 2. Branding Message Analysis Based on Effendy's Communication Strategy

Communication Element	Findings	Interpretation
Communicator	Mang Epul	High credibility
Message	Culinary experience	Authentic branding
Media	TikTok	Interactive communication
Feedback	Likes, comments, shares	Positive engagement
Effect	Increased curiosity	Stronger brand image

3.3. TikTok as the Primary Communication Medium

The findings demonstrate that TikTok served not merely as a promotional platform but as the principal communication medium through which AK Garden and Space constructed and disseminated its brand identity. The decision to use TikTok was based on the platform's compatibility with the characteristics of the target audience, particularly young people aged 18–30 years in Garut Regency who actively consume culinary and lifestyle content. This strategic consideration aligns with Effendy's communication strategy model, which emphasizes that the selection of communication media should correspond to audience characteristics and communication objectives.

Observation of the collaborative content revealed that TikTok enabled the integration of multiple communication elements, including visual storytelling, background music, conversational narration, and interactive features such as likes, comments, and shares. Rather than presenting formal advertisements, the videos portrayed authentic dining experiences, aesthetic café environments, and spontaneous reactions from the influencer. Such content encouraged audiences to perceive the promotional message as entertainment, thereby increasing message acceptance and reducing resistance toward commercial communication.

The findings support Effendy's proposition that communication media function as strategic channels for ensuring message effectiveness. In this study, TikTok facilitated not only one-way dissemination of information but also two-way communication through audience interaction. This interactive characteristic distinguishes TikTok from conventional advertising media because audiences actively participate in constructing brand meaning through comments, recommendations, and content sharing (Uchjana Effendi, 2011).

These findings are consistent with (ELPARHA, 2022), who argues that TikTok's algorithm and visual-oriented content significantly enhance digital branding effectiveness. Nevertheless, this study extends previous research by demonstrating that platform effectiveness is strengthened when visual communication is integrated with local cultural identity and influencer credibility. Therefore, communication success depends not solely on technological affordances but also on the strategic alignment between media characteristics, message design, and audience expectations.

Table 3. Utilization of TikTok Features in AK Garden and Space's Branding Strategy

TikTok Feature	Communication Function	Empirical Findings	Theoretical Interpretation
Short-form video	Visual storytelling	Displayed café ambience, menu presentation, and customer experience	Facilitates attractive message delivery (Uchjana Effendi, 2011)
Local language and humor	Emotional engagement	Sundanese expressions created familiarity with local audiences	Increased communicator credibility
For You Page (FYP)	Message dissemination	Expanded content reach beyond existing followers	Enhanced communication effectiveness

Likes, comments, and shares	Interactive communication	Encouraged audience participation and dialogue	Enabled two-way communication
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The findings indicate that TikTok was selected not only because of its popularity but also because its communication characteristics matched the branding objectives of AK Garden and Space. Consequently, TikTok functioned as a strategic medium capable of integrating visual communication, entertainment, and audience participation into a coherent branding strategy.

3.4. Audience Feedback and Communication Effects

Audience feedback constitutes an important indicator of communication effectiveness because it reflects how audiences interpret, respond to, and engage with branding messages. The findings reveal that the collaboration between AK Garden and Space and Mang Epul generated substantial audience engagement. The collaborative TikTok video uploaded on 9 November 2024 received 9,837 likes, 1,516 shares, and 198 comments, indicating high levels of audience interaction. Furthermore, approximately 72% of the comments contained questions regarding the café's location and dining experience, suggesting that the communication strategy successfully stimulated audience curiosity and purchase intention. Engagement data were collected on 15 January 2025. A total of 198 comments were manually reviewed and coded into thematic categories. Of these, 143 comments contained questions regarding the café's location, facilities, or dining experience. Therefore, 72% (143/198) of comments were categorized as information-seeking responses.

From the perspective of Effendy's communication strategy, audience feedback represents an essential component of communication evaluation because it indicates whether communication objectives have been achieved. Positive responses in the form of likes, comments, and shares demonstrate that audiences not only received the message but also actively participated in disseminating it through organic digital interaction (Uchjana Effendi, 2011).

Table 4. Audience Engagement and Communication Effects

Engagement Indicator	Empirical Findings	Communication Effect
Likes	9,837	Positive audience attention
Shares	1,516	Organic dissemination of branding messages
Comments	198	Active audience interaction

Dominant comment theme	72% asked about the café location	Increased curiosity and purchase intention
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Overall, the findings demonstrate that audience engagement extended beyond digital interaction and contributed to the formation of favourable brand perceptions. Consequently, communication effectiveness should be understood not merely in terms of message exposure but also through audiences' behavioural responses toward the promoted brand.

3.5. Integrated Discussion: Communication Strategy in Building Brand Image

The findings demonstrate that AK Garden and Space successfully implemented an integrated communication strategy by combining communicator credibility, authentic message construction, appropriate media selection, and active audience engagement. Rather than functioning independently, these communication elements interacted systematically to strengthen the café's brand image.

From Effendy's communication strategy perspective, communication effectiveness depends on the integration of four strategic stages: identifying the target audience, selecting appropriate communication media, designing persuasive messages, and choosing credible communicators. The present findings indicate that these four stages were implemented consistently throughout the influencer collaboration process. AK Garden and Space identified young TikTok users in Garut as its primary audience, selected TikTok as the principal communication channel, developed experience-oriented branding messages, and collaborated with Mang Epul as a trusted local communicator.

The findings further indicate that local cultural identity constituted an important communication resource. The influencer's use of Sundanese expressions, humour, and authentic storytelling reduced the psychological distance between the brand and audiences, thereby enhancing message credibility. This finding extends previous studies on influencer marketing by demonstrating that cultural authenticity, rather than follower numbers alone, contributes significantly to communication effectiveness in local branding contexts.

Table 5. Synthesis of Findings Based on Effendy's Communication Strategy Framework

Communication Element	Empirical Findings	Branding Outcome
Communicator	Local influencer with high credibility and cultural proximity	Increased audience trust

Message	Authentic culinary storytelling and visual experience	Positive brand perception
Media	TikTok as an interactive communication platform	Wider message dissemination
Feedback	High audience engagement (likes, comments, and shares)	Two-way communication and participation
Communication Effect	Strong audience curiosity and positive responses	Enhanced brand image and potential customer visits

Based on these findings, this study proposes that the effectiveness of influencer-based branding for local culinary businesses depends on the integration of five communication components. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual relationship identified in this research.



Figure 1. Integrated Communication Strategy Model

The model should be interpreted as a conceptual representation derived from a single qualitative case rather than a tested causal model. Audience feedback may also influence future message design and communication strategies, suggesting the existence of iterative feedback loops.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that AK Garden and Space appeared to implement a communication strategy that was positively perceived by participants and reflected substantial audience engagement. Guided by Effendy's communication strategy framework, the findings indicate that branding effectiveness resulted from the integration of five communication elements: a credible communicator, authentic message construction, appropriate media

selection, active audience feedback, and positive communication effects. Rather than functioning independently, these elements operated synergistically to strengthen audience engagement and enhance positive perceptions of the cafe

The study further reveals that the credibility of a local influencer is shaped not only by popularity but also by cultural proximity and authenticity. Mang Epul's use of Sundanese expressions, humorous storytelling, and experiential culinary reviews enabled audiences to perceive the promotional content as trustworthy recommendations rather than commercial advertising. Such communication practices reduced the psychological distance between the brand and its target audience, thereby increasing communication effectiveness.

TikTok also proved to be more than a promotional platform; it functioned as an interactive communication medium that facilitated two-way engagement between the café and its audience. High levels of audience interaction, reflected in likes, comments, and content sharing, demonstrate that effective branding extends beyond message exposure to include active audience participation. These findings support the proposition that digital branding is strengthened when communication strategies integrate visual storytelling, local cultural identity, and audience-oriented communication.

Theoretically, this study enriches the application of Effendy's communication strategy model within the context of influencer-based digital branding by demonstrating that cultural authenticity constitutes an important factor influencing communication effectiveness. Practically, the findings provide strategic recommendations for local culinary businesses seeking to utilize influencer collaboration as a sustainable branding strategy. Rather than relying solely on influencers with large follower bases, businesses should prioritize communicators who possess credibility, cultural relevance, and close relationships with their target communities.

Practical Implications

The findings suggest that local culinary businesses can strengthen their competitive position by integrating influencer marketing into broader communication strategies. Collaboration with local influencers who share linguistic and cultural characteristics with target audiences can generate stronger engagement than conventional promotional approaches. Furthermore, businesses should prioritize authentic storytelling and interactive communication over explicit advertising messages to develop long-term consumer trust and positive brand image.

Research Limitations

This study focused on a single culinary business in Garut Regency and examined one influencer collaboration within the TikTok platform. Consequently, the findings may not be directly generalizable to other business sectors or social media platforms. Future studies are encouraged to compare multiple local brands, investigate different influencer characteristics, or employ mixed-method approaches to examine the relationship between communication strategy, audience engagement, and consumer purchasing behavior more comprehensively.

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