

Participatory Branding Design Model for Small and Medium Enterprises: A Case Study in Indonesia

Taufik Murtono

Department of Visual Communication Design, Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta, Indonesia

ABSTRACT: Participatory branding has emerged as an innovative alternative to overcoming the obstacles SMEs face in traditional branding, exceptionally high costs, and top-down approaches. This study aims to analyze the responses of SMEs actors to the concept of participatory branding, identify the obstacles faced, and evaluate the effectiveness of this method in strengthening brand identity. The collaboration system model approach is used to understand the interaction between designers and SMEs actors. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and closed surveys of 10 SMEs participants in Java, Indonesia. The results showed that all respondents responded positively to participatory branding, feeling greater involvement in developing brand identity. The main obstacles are more technical understanding, resource access, and participation time. Participatory branding has proven effective in strengthening brand identity and increasing brand recognition and sales. This research strengthens the participatory design theory in visual communication design, emphasizing the importance of collaboration and contextualization in creating relevant and authentic designs.

KEYWORDS: *Participatory branding, SMEs, brand identity, visual communication design, collaboration*

I. INTRODUCTION

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are essential in the global and national economy. In Indonesia, SMEs contribute significantly to domestic income and labor absorption. However, in the face of increasingly fierce competition in domestic and international markets, many SMEs are experiencing difficulties increasing their competitiveness. One of the critical factors that can support the competitiveness of SMEs is their ability to carry out effective branding. Branding, which is essentially the process of creating a unique identity for a product or service, not only serves as a marketing tool but also as a way to build added value for consumers [1], [2]

However, many SMEs actors still face significant obstacles in implementing strong branding. Traditional branding involves complex processes that require a lot of money. This process involves professional designers, marketing agencies, and in-depth market research to create a brand identity that suits the target audience. High costs are often the main barrier for SMEs in traditional branding[3]. The traditional branding process is often top-down, where third parties make design decisions and strategies without involving SMEs owners in-depth[4]. This action can cause a disconnect between the brand identity created and the vision and values the SMEs actors want to convey.

In recent years, a new trend has emerged in branding strategies known as participatory branding[5]. This concept emphasizes the active involvement of SMEs actors in the branding process, from design to marketing strategy preparation. Participatory branding offers a more inclusive and lower-cost solution than traditional branding methods. In this context, branding is not only the domain of professionals but also provides space for small businesses to play an active role in determining their brand image and identity.

Branding has a strategic role in increasing the competitiveness of SMEs in a competitive market[6]. A strong brand can create a clear differentiation among similar products in the market[7], thus providing a competitive advantage for the company concerned. The differentiation generated through branding allows SMEs products or services to be more recognizable to consumers and more likely to be remembered, which in turn can increase customer loyalty and sales volume. Furthermore, a strong brand can create emotional value for consumers that is not simply based on the price or quality of the product but also on the emotional bonds and loyalty that are formed. Along with globalization and technological advancements, competition in the SMEs market is intensifying. SMEs compete with other small business actors and companies with much larger resources, including branding and marketing[8]. In a situation like this, effective branding can be a tool to "balance the playing field" for SMEs. However, without a clear branding strategy, SMEs' products or services are vulnerable to sinking into market crowds, making it difficult to get consumer attention.

In addition, in a modern market filled with similar products and services, consumers often make purchasing decisions based on non-functional factors such as brand image, reputation, and the values represented by the brand [9]. In this case, SMEs that can develop consistent and relevant brands for their target audience will be more successful in attracting attention and building long-term consumer relationships.

Although the importance of branding has been widely recognized, many SMEs still face challenges in implementing effective branding. One of the main obstacles is the cost associated with traditional branding [10]. The brand development process--from logo design and color selection to developing a communication strategy--requires a significant financial investment. For many SMEs operating with limited capital, these costs often cannot be accommodated within their budgets.

In addition, the traditional branding process is often top-down, where SMEs leave the creative and strategic process to an external agency or consultant. While this approach may be able to produce a visually appealing brand, there is often a mismatch between the brand image created and the vision and core values of SMEs actors [11]. As a result, the resulting branding may not be authentic and fail to reflect the unique character of the venture, which can ultimately affect the brand's appeal to consumers.

Participatory branding has emerged as an innovative alternative that offers solutions for SMEs actors to overcome the obstacles faced in traditional branding [12]. This concept emphasizes the active involvement of SMEs actors in every stage of the branding process, from design to marketing strategy development. Participatory branding involves SMEs actors directly and creates a more authentic brand identity relevant to the company's vision and mission.

One of the main advantages of participatory branding is the reduction in costs associated with the branding process [13]. By involving SMEs actors directly in the creative process, the costs usually incurred to hire the services of designers or agencies can be significantly reduced. In addition, the active participation of business actors in branding also creates a greater sense of ownership of the resulting brand, which can increase their commitment to the developed marketing strategy. Furthermore, participatory branding also allows SMEs to be more responsive to market changes [14]

SMEs actors can quickly adjust their brand image according to consumer needs or emerging market trends by being directly involved in the branding process. This flexibility is an added advantage that allows SMEs to remain relevant in an ever-changing market [12]. In an era of increasingly fierce global competition, branding has become a critical element that can increase the competitiveness of SMEs in the market. However, the challenges associated with cost and the top-down approach in traditional branding often hinder SMEs actors from developing solid and authentic brands.

Participatory branding offers a more inclusive solution by involving SMEs actors directly in the branding process, thereby creating a more authentic brand identity relevant to market needs. Thus, participatory branding not only allows SMEs to be more competitive in the market but also provides opportunities for small businesses to be more actively involved in shaping the future of their brands.

II. METHODS

1. Research Approach

This study uses a collaboration system model [15], as presented in figure 1. The model aims to describe the components that form a collaborative partnership between designers and participants during a participatory design project. This model is carried out by recognizing that designers and participants have knowledge and experience valuable to collaboration and that this knowledge is contributed through different mechanisms. It then places this collaboration in both the broader socio-cultural environment and the controlled design environment where the project occurs. The cyclic arrow in the model's center shows the two-way knowledge exchange during collaboration and capacity building in participatory design. This collaborative approach is applied in the branding design project [16] with the stages of 1) conducting research, 2) clarifying strategy, 3) designing identity, 4) creating touchpoints, and 5) managing assets.

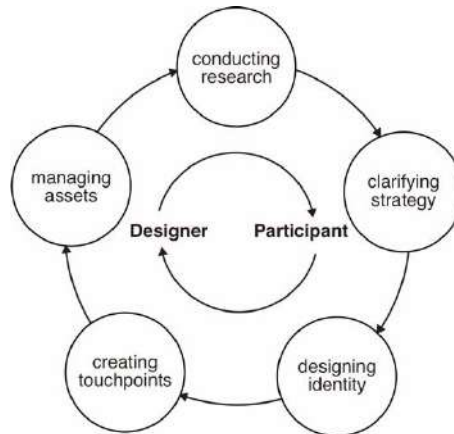


Figure 1. collaboration system model

Conducting research is the initial stage of joint research with SMEs to understand each business's vision, mission, and values. The design team and SMEs owners actively collaborate in identifying the market, target audience, industry trends, and existing brand strengths and weaknesses. This participatory approach allows SMEs owners to deliver critical insights about their business while design teams direct the process with more in-depth analysis.

The clarifying strategy is carried out by combining the research results into a strategic foundation for branding. Together, designers and SMEs identify positioning, unique selling propositions, and key messages to be conveyed. Through intensive discussions, the brand vision was clarified to ensure that the entire team had the same understanding of the branding goals.

Designing identity is carried out with a design target that can represent the character and goals of SMEs. SMEs owners brainstorm logos, colors, typography, and other visual elements in participatory design. The design is made in several iterations, where every input from SMEs is considered and tested so that the brand truly reflects the values it wants to convey.

Creating touchpoints is realized after the visual identity is agreed upon. The next step is to develop various touchpoints that include communication materials such as packaging, business cards, signage, and social media. SMEs play an active role in choosing touchpoints relevant to their business, and designers help create consistent and functional designs across each platform.

Managing design assets is the final stage. Designers work with SMEs to manage design assets to be used effectively in the long term. This stage includes creating brand guidelines that cover how to use logos, colors, typography, and other visual elements. The design team also trains SMEs to utilize these assets independently, ensuring that the consistency and quality of branding are maintained as the business grows.

2. Research Subject

The subjects of this study are ten minor and medium enterprises (SMEs) involved in various business fields, including culinary, fashion, handicrafts, and services. The selection of subjects is carried out using the following criteria. 1) SMEs that have been established for at least three years to ensure that they have business experience and may have made previous branding efforts. 2) SMEs with employees between 3 and 12 people, so the research focuses on small businesses still in the growth stage but are pretty stable operationally. 3) SMEs actors located in Java, Indonesia, namely Surakarta, Yogyakarta, and Jepara, to get a variety of business contexts and customer demographics. The characteristics of the participants in this study include business actors from various industry sectors and their level of involvement in branding activities. With venture periods ranging from 3 to 10 years, the research subjects offer a diverse view of the challenges and opportunities in participatory branding.

3. Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was carried out using semi-structured interview methods and closed surveys. Both methods were chosen to collect rich and detailed data on the experiences of the research subjects and simple quantitative data related to the effectiveness of participatory branding. Semi-structured interviews are conducted face-to-face or online, depending on the location and availability of respondents. This interview allows researchers to delve deeply into the experiences of SMEs actors in the branding process, the obstacles they face, and their perception of the concept of participatory branding. Closed surveys are used to quantitatively measure several variables, such as the level of satisfaction with the participatory branding process, whether they feel the method is effective, and the technical obstacles often faced. This survey complements the interview data by providing a statistical overview of the respondents' responses.

4. Data Analysis

The analysis technique used in this study is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used to identify critical patterns and themes from interview and survey data. The analysis process involves several stages as follows. 1) Transcript of the interview recording for easy analysis. 2) Coding based on emerging themes, such as positive or negative responses to participatory branding, obstacles faced, and used' effectiveness. 3) Theme grouping: from codings, such as active participation themes, technical constraints, and increased brand recognition. 4) Preparation of findings: The themes identified are then compiled into the main findings of the research that explain the relationship between the experiences of SMEs actors and the effectiveness of participatory branding.

In addition, the data from the survey is processed descriptively to provide a simple statistical picture, such as the number of respondents who state that participatory branding is adequate and the types of obstacles faced by SMEs actors the most. This analysis complements the thematic analysis by providing quantitative data that supports qualitative findings.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following is the data of research respondents consisting of ten SMEs participants (table 1). Meanwhile, the research process for the ten SMEs was carried out collaboratively with designers (table 2). The results of the study are related to the response of SMEs actors to the concept of participatory branding (table 3), the obstacles that they faced (table 4), and the effectiveness of the methods used (table 5).

Table 1. Participant data

No	ID	Business Field	Length of Business (year)	Number of Employees	Location
1	SME1	Culinary	5	4	Yogyakarta
2	SME2	Fashion	7	7	Yogyakarta
3	SME3	Processed Food	3	3	Yogyakarta
4	SME4	Handicrafts	6	6	Yogyakarta
5	SME5	Furniture	8	10	Surakarta
6	SME6	Retail	4	5	Surakarta
7	SME7	Fashion	5	3	Surakarta
8	SME8	Culinary	10	12	Surakarta
9	SME9	Furniture	6	4	Jepara
10	SME10	Fashion	8	8	Jepara

Table 2. Collaborative design process

No	ID	Conducting research	Clarifying strategy	Designing identity	Creating touchpoints	Managing design assets
1	SME1	a culinary business, explored local food trends and customer preferences.	Defined a strategy to emphasize local food heritage with a modern twist.	Designed a traditional yet sleek logo with natural colors to highlight authenticity.	Created touchpoints such as packaging and digital menus that showcase cultural roots.	Ensured consistency across food packaging, social media, and in-store displays.
2	SME2	a fashion brand, researched the integration of batik into modern styles.	Focused on maintaining cultural heritage while appealing to younger audiences.	Designed a fusion logo blending traditional batik patterns with minimalist elements.	Created touchpoints, including product labels, storefront design, and Instagram visuals.	Digital asset management for marketing campaigns and e-commerce.
3	SME3	a processed food business,	Aimed to differentiate the	Developed a fun, vibrant identity	Designed eco-packaging and	Managed digital templates for

		analyzed packaging trends and consumer demands.	brand with playful and eco-friendly packaging.	using bright colors and an eco-friendly symbol.	social media banners to highlight sustainability efforts.	online promotions and physical packaging materials.
4	SME4	a handicraft business, studied the unique appeal of handmade items.	Clarified a strategy to emphasize artisanal craftsmanship and locality.	Created a logo symbolizing craftsmanship with earthy tones and rustic fonts.	Designed touchpoints like product tags, business cards, and online shop visuals.	Asset management included coordinating online store visuals and physical displays.
5	SME5	a furniture maker, researched market needs for custom, locally sourced furniture.	The strategy centered on promoting sustainability and quality.	Designed a minimalist logo with earthy tones, representing strength and eco-friendliness.	Created brochures, catalogs, and social media content focused on craftsmanship.	Managed all design assets for catalogs, online marketing, and in-store displays.
6	SME6	a retail business, explored branding trends in local retail markets.	Focused on creating a welcoming and familiar brand identity for local shoppers.	Designed a logo with friendly, approachable fonts and warm colors.	Created signage, digital ads, and product packaging to enhance brand recognition.	Organized digital and physical assets for consistent application in retail stores.
7	SME7	a fashion brand, researched online retail and how to stand out in e-commerce.	Clarified a strategy to create a premium yet affordable fashion brand.	Designed an elegant, sleek logo with bold typography to attract online customers.	Created website banners, product packaging, and influencer marketing touchpoints.	Managed website visuals and social media assets for product launches and promos.
8	SME8	a culinary business, analyzed tourist preferences and local cuisine appeal.	Aimed to appeal to tourists through modern yet authentic branding.	Designed a contemporary logo with vibrant colors and local culinary elements.	Created menus, takeaway packaging, and tourist-friendly promotional materials.	Ensured consistent branding across all customer touchpoints in-store and online.
9	SME9	a furniture business, researched how to balance modern and traditional designs.	A strategy focused on preserving traditional craftsmanship in modern products.	Designed a timeless logo with a blend of modern lines and traditional motifs.	Created brochures, catalogs, and website visuals to showcase custom furniture.	Managed both print and digital assets for marketing and customer presentations.
10	SME10	a fashion brand, explored premium branding strategies for high-end clients.	Clarified a luxury branding strategy emphasizing exclusivity and quality.	Designed an elegant, sophisticated logo with gold accents and premium typography.	Created high-end packaging, promotional videos, and VIP customer touchpoints.	Managed premium asset portfolios for consistent branding across all customer interactions.

SME1 researched local food trends and customer preferences in Yogyakarta. Interviews with customers revealed that they prefer dishes that highlight local culture with modern presentations. The branding strategy is focused on preserving local culinary heritage while incorporating modern elements. It aims to attract local consumers and tourists. Traditional logo designs are produced with a modern twist, using natural colors such as brown and green to highlight the authenticity of local ingredients. The design stage of touchpoints resulted in innovative packaging designs and digital menus that incorporate elements of local culture, enhancing the overall consumer experience. Consistency is applied across all channels, from packaging to digital promotions on social media, to attract new customers.

SME2 researched the integration of batik fabrics in modern fashion and interviewed consumers about the desired style. The strategic focus is on preserving the cultural value of batik and modern fashion trends to

attract the younger generation's attention. The agreed logo design uses a simplified batik pattern with minimalist elements to give a contemporary impression. The application of touchpoints on product labels, storefront design, and social media visuals reflects the balance between tradition and modernity.

SME3 researched to understand consumer needs regarding attractive and environmentally friendly food packaging. It was establishing a strategy highlighting healthy products with environmentally friendly packaging, targeting ecologically conscious consumers. The resulting identity design is a cheerful logo with bright colors and recycling symbols to reflect the fresh and sustainable nature of the product. Touchpoints focus on eco-friendly packaging, social media banners, and stickers that support healthy product narratives.

SME4 research with an analysis of the appeal of local handicrafts and interviews with consumers to understand their expectations for handmade products. The strategy emphasizes local handicraft skills with authentic elements that depict local creativity. This process results in a logo design with hand symbols representing manual skills and warm colors reflecting natural materials. Implement touchpoints like business cards, product labels, and visuals in online stores, demonstrating product authenticity and expertise.

SME5 research to understand the market need for high-quality, local furniture that is environmentally friendly. The branding strategy focuses on high-quality furniture that is environmentally friendly by prioritizing local skills. The identity design produces a minimalist logo with the color of the earth that symbolizes the strength and sustainability of the environment. Touchpoints include brochures, catalogs, and social media content highlighting local products and sustainable furniture manufacturing processes.

SME6 research to understand branding trends in the local retail market and local consumer preferences. The strategy is focused on building a brand identity that is friendly and familiar to local consumers. Design the logo identity with friendly fonts and warm colors to create a cozy and attractive impression. Touchpoints focus on store signage, digital advertising, and product packaging design that enhances brand recognition.

SME7 researched how fashion brands can compete in the e-commerce market with a prominent appearance. Establish an affordable premium branding strategy targeting middle-class consumers. An elegant logo identity design with bold typography to attract the attention of online consumers. Touchpoints on website banners, product packaging, and influencer marketing touchpoints to attract the attention of digital consumers.

SME8 researches to analyze tourist preferences for local food and a survey on consumer desires. The branding strategy focuses on local culinary offerings that can attract tourists and regional consumers. Produce a modern logo identity design with brightly colored local elements to attract attention. Touchpoints are limited to menus, takeaway packaging, and tourist-friendly promotional materials that promote local specialties.

SME9 runs research to find a balance between modern and traditional furniture design. Branding strategies are focused on promoting traditional craftsmanship with modern designs. The resulting logo identity design is combined with contemporary elements combined with conventional motifs to highlight the uniqueness of the product. Touchpoints are designed on catalogs, brochures, and website visuals that showcase custom furniture products.

SME10 researches premium branding strategies to attract the attention of high-end consumers. The approach is focused on luxury branding with an emphasis on quality and exclusivity. The logo is elegantly designed with gold accents and premium typography reflecting exclusivity. Touchpoints for Premium packaging, promotional videos, and VIP customer service that accentuate a touch of luxury.

Table 3. Response to the concept of participatory branding

No	ID	Do you know the concept of participatory branding beforehand?	Response to the Concept of Participatory Branding (positive/negative)	Reason for Response
1	SME1	No	Positive	This concept has made me more involved in developing my business identity.
2	SME2	Yes	Positive	Helping to express the cultural value of batik in our branding.
3	SME3	No	Positive	Give new ideas when branding my cake products to be more creative.
4	SME4	No	Positive	Engaging us directly as owners will make the results more relevant to our products.
5	SME5	Yes	Positive	Participatory branding accommodates local creativity previously not accommodated by the old methods.

6	SME6	No	Positive	It's easier to understand what fits the character of my business.
7	SME7	No	Positive	They are more involved in the branding process and can develop designs closer to consumers.
8	SME8	Yes	Positive	It is very relevant to our local food industry.
9	SME9	No	Positive	Increase engagement in visual design and marketing.
10	SME10	No	Positive	It helps strengthen the unique character of local products and increase competitiveness.

Table 4. Obstacles

No	ID	The main obstacle in the participatory branding process	
1	SME1	Lack of technical understanding of visual design.	
2	SME2	It isn't easy to harmonize cultural heritage with modern design, which the market wants.	
3	SME3	The time required to be actively involved in the process is quite a lot.	
4	SME4	Limited access to branding resources and training.	
5	SME5	Difficulties in developing a logo that is in accordance with the local identity but still modern.	
6	SME6	Difficulty communicating branding ideas to external design teams.	
7	SME7	Limited funds for more professional design consulting.	
8	SME8	Difficulty maintaining branding consistency across all digital products and platforms.	
9	SME9	Limited time to combine creative ideas and client requests.	
10	SME10	Limited knowledge about the branding trends that are emerging in the market.	

Table 5. The effectiveness of participatory branding methods

No	ID	Is Participatory Branding Effective in Enhancing Your Brand Identity? (yes/no)	Reasons for Effectiveness
1	SME1	Yes	The new logo design better reflects the character of the business and attracts new customers.
2	SME2	Yes	It helps accentuate a more modern batik identity without eliminating traditional elements.
3	SME3	Yes	Increase brand recognition among local and online customers.
4	SME4	Yes	Branding is more personal and relevant to our handicraft products.
5	SME5	Yes	Strengthen the visual appeal of our local furniture products.
6	SME6	Yes	It is easier for customers to recognize, and sales increase after rebranding.
7	SME7	Yes	Products look more character and exclusive, and sales in online stores are increasing.
8	SME8	Yes	It is easier to be accepted among tourists and physical store visitors.
9	SME9	Yes	It can offer value-added branding services to clients, which is more professional.

10

SME10

Yes

The new branding gives an elegant and professional feel suitable for the premium market.

From the data obtained, all respondents (100%) responded positively to the concept of participatory branding. They feel more involved in the process of developing a brand identity that is relevant to their business. The obstacles are mostly related to the lack of technical understanding, access to branding resources, and the time required for participation. All respondents (100%) stated that participatory branding effectively strengthens their brand identity, with a positive impact mainly in attracting more customers and increasing brand recognition.

These results show that participatory branding can be an effective method for SMEs to build a stronger brand identity if it is supported by adequate training and resources. From the data collected, a thematic analysis can be carried out by identifying several main themes related to the response to the concept of participatory branding, the obstacles faced, and the effectiveness of participatory branding methods.

1. Response to the Concept of Participatory Branding

All respondents gave positive responses to the concept of participatory branding. This fact confirms that the direct involvement of business owners in the branding development process creates a greater sense of ownership of the final result. Most SMEs (such as SME1, SME4, and SME7) stated that they are more involved in the creative process. This condition allows them to pour their business vision and values into the brand identity. Some respondents, such as SME2 and SME10, mentioned that participatory branding helps them create a brand identity that is more relevant to local products, especially in preserving local cultural heritage and adapting it to modern trends.

2. Obstacles

Most SMEs face challenges related to a lack of resources, both in technical knowledge, time, and funds to implement participatory branding optimally. Some respondents (SME1 and SME10) cited their limited expertise in visual design, which was a barrier to producing strong branding independently. SME8 faces difficulties in maintaining branding consistency across multiple platforms. This situation demonstrates the importance of further guidance in maintaining a consistent brand identity across all marketing channels. Some SMEs, such as SME3 and SME7, complained about the time required to be actively involved in the branding process and limited funds for more professional design consulting.

3. Effectiveness of Participatory Branding Methods

All respondents felt that participatory branding methods effectively improved their brand identity. The resulting branding reflects the character of their business and is more acceptable to customers. Many respondents, such as SME3 and SME7, reported increased brand recognition and sales after implementing the new branding. This situation shows that direct participation in the branding process can result in a real positive impact on their business. SME4 and SME5 stated that the branding results are more personal and relevant to their products, making them stand out more than competitors. Participatory branding allows them to present the unique value of their business more strongly.

Given the main obstacles related to the lack of technical knowledge and resources, SMEs would benefit significantly from training or guidance in the participatory branding process. The mentoring program can help them understand the design concept and branding strategy more deeply. Participatory branding has proven flexible and can be adjusted to the specific needs of SMEs in various sectors. Respondents from multiple industries (such as culinary, fashion, and handicrafts) consider this method effective so that broader application can be carried out. To overcome time and cost constraints, digital platforms in participatory branding can be a solution. Online design tools and remote consultations can speed up the process while decreasing costs.

Overall, this thematic analysis shows that participatory branding is an approach that not only engages SMEs actors directly but also gives them more control over their brand identity, ultimately positively impacting market recognition and business growth.

4. The Impact of Research on Visual Communication Design Theory

This research on participatory branding in SMEs significantly impacts theory and practice in visual communication design. Thematic analysis of SMEs respondents shows that a participatory approach can be effectively applied to small and medium-sized enterprises. It updates how visual communication design can be developed more inclusively and collaboratively.

Participatory Design Theory, previously more widely applied in product and service design, is now increasingly expanded in visual communication design. This research shows that involving business owners directly in the design process strengthens the sense of ownership of the design results and creates a more

authentic brand identity. The active participation of SMEs owners emphasizes the importance of the contextualization aspect of design, where visual communication designs are not only made by professional designers based on briefs but are the result of collaboration between business owners and designers. It affirms design as a collaborative process that is more responsive to the specific needs and values of the business.

This research also contributes to the theory that visual communication design is a medium to preserve and express cultural identity. Respondents of SMEs engaged in local products, such as SME2 and SME10, indicated that their participation in branding allows them to maintain traditional cultural elements in design while adapting them into a more modern context. This situation reinforces the theory that visual design serves as a marketing tool expressing cultural values and identity.

In the context of visual communication design for SMEs, this study supports the theory that a user-centered design approach can create more effective and relevant design solutions. The resulting design becomes more appropriate to their business values, vision, and character by involving SMEs actors in every stage of the process. This approach emphasizes that good design should reflect the experience and needs of users, in this case, business owners and their consumers.

5. Impact on Visual Communication Design Practices

From a practical perspective, this study reveals that participatory branding produces a more personalized and authentic design, which follows the unique identity of each SMEs. Designs created collaboratively between business actors and designers tend to be more successful in reflecting the core values of the product or service. Visual communication design practitioners can take advantage of these findings by encouraging clients to be more involved in the creative process so that the design results align with business expectations and needs.

One of the obstacles SMEs face is the limited time and cost to be involved in the branding process. This situation creates opportunities for design practitioners to explore digital platforms that allow remote collaboration, online design tools, and other more efficient methods. With the development of technology, designers can create digital-based collaborative tools that make it easier for business owners to participate without sacrificing design effectiveness. This practice will make visual communication design more inclusive and adaptive.

This research also makes visual communication designers aware that SMEs have limited knowledge and technical and financial resources. Therefore, designers must develop a more straightforward yet effective design strategy that allows SMEs to engage without requiring time or significant costs. This practice encourages design simplicity and more sustainable solutions for SMEs, without compromising the aesthetic quality and functionality of the design itself.

Branding resulting from the participatory process has proven more acceptable to the market and can increase sales, as experienced by some respondents, such as SME7 and SME3. Visual communication design practitioners must understand that branding is about visual aesthetics and creating sustainable communication between a business and its consumers. In the context of SMEs, participatory branding allows businesses to build stronger relationships with customers through a consistent and relevant brand identity.

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IV. CONCLUSION

This research contributes to the theory and practice of visual communication design, especially in applying participatory branding in SMEs. Participatory design theory is reinforced by evidence that involving business actors results in more personalized and relevant designs. In addition, visual communication design practices need to adapt to the limited resources of SMEs, by prioritizing a collaborative approach that utilizes digital technology and methods. Visual communication designers must see branding as a collaborative process that empowers SMEs actors to shape their business identity actively.

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