



Examining Hybrid Communication Practices among Micro-Enterprise Owners in Brunei's Event Based Business Environment

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received Jun 04, 2026

Revised Jul 10, 2026

Accepted Jul 20, 2026

Keywords:

Brunei Darussalam,
Hybrid Communication
Practices,
Micro-Enterprise Owners,
Micro-Enterprise,
Social Capital

Conflict of Interest:

None

Funding:

None

ABSTRACT

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play an important role Brunei's economic development, with micro-enterprises forming the largest business subgroup and contributing significantly to employment, economic diversification, and community-based activities. This study examines how owners of seasonal and event-based micro-enterprises in Brunei employ hybrid communication strategies, defined as the integration of digital and offline communication approaches within their business operations. The study aims to explore how micro-enterprise owners utilised hybrid communication practices to engage with consumers, build relationships, and navigate operational challenges within Brunei's socio-cultural and economic landscape. Guided by Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) Theory, Attribution Theory, and Bourdieu's concept of Social Capital, this study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, overt observations, and artefact analysis of micro-enterprise owners operating within Brunei's pop-up event sector. The findings of this study reveal that participants strategically integrated digital and offline communication practices to maximise visibility, sustain customer engagement, and support business operations. The findings further demonstrate that communication extends beyond customer engagement by facilitating the development of social capital through vendor networks, event organisers, and informal community groups that provide access to information, support, and business opportunities. However, participants also experienced challenges related to communication workload, financial constraints associated with event participation and emerging concerns regarding artistic authenticity within an increasingly digitalised environment. Overall, the study highlights hybrid communication as an ongoing and culturally embedded process through which micro-enterprise owners support business sustainability while continuously negotiating between communication demands, financial limitations, and evolving business environments.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Micro enterprises constitute a significant subgroup within Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) which is widely recognised as an integral driver in generating employment, supporting the local economic activities and development in both developed and developing economies (Harvie, 2019). Although MSMEs as a broader category have been extensively acknowledged in various academic and policy discourses particularly for their contribution in generating employment opportunities (Harvie, 2008; Harvie & Lee, 2005), alleviating poverty for an equitable wealth distribution (Asasen et al., 2003, as cited in Harvie, 2019), and driving various aspects of economic growth and development (Harvie, 2008; Harvie & Lee, 2005). However, micro-enterprises remain less examined in comparison, despite constituting the largest proportion in many national contexts.

In the ASEAN region, depending on varying definitions, there are over 70 million MSMEs, which constitute for approximately 97.2% to 99.9% of total enterprises in ASEAN member states, which reflects their key role in both regional economic development and growth for long-term sustainability (ASEAN, 2021). Meanwhile, in Brunei Darussalam, active MSMEs accounts for an estimated 97.6% of total enterprises in 2022, substantially contributing to not only the private sector employment but also the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the nation (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics, 2023). Within this context, micro enterprises represent the largest subgroup which accounts for 43.1% of all enterprises according to the statistical report in 2022 (DEPS, 2023). This demonstrates the prominent role of micro enterprises in supporting the national economic diversification agenda particularly its alignment with the Wawasan Brunei 2035. The Brunei Vision 2035 specifically aims to strengthen the diversification of the economic landscape and ensure its alignment with broader long-term sustainability goals. This aligns with the ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office (AMRO, 2023) Annual Consultation Report for 2022, which suggest that further efforts to enhance economic diversification are important for promoting a low-carbon and sustainable economic growth in the longer term, thereby supporting Brunei's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Therefore, understanding micro-enterprises is crucial especially in how small-scale economies contribute to Brunei's national development.

In an era of an increasingly digitalised economy, effective communication practices are essential for organisational survival, engagement with their consumers and enhancing overall business performance (Schlagwein & Hu, 2017). In Brunei, MSMEs are progressively adopting both digital and non-digital approaches for enhancing visibility and operational success. This shift is also supported by government initiatives such as the Digital Economy Masterplan 2025, which aims to transform Brunei into a 'Smart Nation' in adherence to the country's economic diversification agenda (Ministry of Transport and Infocommunication, 2025). However, while these developments support and encourage digital transformation, the ways in which micro-enterprises combine digital and traditional communication practices in their everyday business operations remain relatively underexplored.

Existing research has largely examined digital strategies as a distinct area of study (Yuwono et al., 2024; Probahudono et al., 2025), but limited attention has been given to how micro enterprises integrate both digital and non-digital approaches through what can be understood as hybrid communication practices, particularly within localised contexts such as Brunei. Hybrid communication practices, in this study, refer to the integration of digital and non-digital communication methods used by micro-enterprises to engage with consumers, build trust, and maintain business operations within their socio-cultural context.

Furthermore, much of the literature prioritises SMEs and often overlooks the experience of micro enterprises despite their significant presence in the local economy. Existing studies also tend to generalise communication behaviours by focusing on digital adoption while overlooking culturally embedded offline communication practices (Bouargan et al., 2020). These include word-of-mouth and community-based interactions. For instance, Bouargan et al. (2020) survey-based study found that small and medium enterprises' food vendors in Brunei utilise social media platforms as their communication approach due to the cost-effectiveness, yet it does not examine how these businesses integrate online and offline practices, nor does it capture how owners' lived experiences and interpret these communication processes in their business operations.

This reveals a critical gap in understanding how micro-enterprise owners in Brunei utilise hybrid communication and how these practices are applied by micro-enterprises, especially within Brunei's social-cultural and economic landscape. This study addresses this gap by examining how owners of seasonal and

event-based micro-enterprises in Brunei utilise hybrid communication practices in their business operations and particularly exploring how these practices are used to interact with consumers, build trust and navigate everyday operational challenges.

Using a qualitative approach, this study focuses on the lived experiences of micro-enterprise owners, which provides insights into how they utilise both digital and non-digital communication practices, how they make sense of the effectiveness of these practices, as well as the overall challenges and opportunities. The findings of this study contribute to academic contributions, particularly in offering context-specific insights into the utilisation of hybrid communication practices within small-scale economies such as Brunei and contribute to the growing field of communication studies. At a societal level, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the culturally embedded realities faced by owners of micro enterprises, which also contribute to supporting the national economic diversification goals under Wawasan Brunei 2035 and sustainable development goals.

1.2 Research Aim and Objectives

Aim:

This study aims to explore how owners of micro enterprises in Brunei utilise hybrid communicative practices (digital and offline approaches) in their business operations, such as building trust, engaging with consumers and navigating challenges within a socio-cultural context.

Objectives:

1. To explore how owners of seasonal and event-based micro-enterprises in Brunei Darussalam describe and understand the utilisation of digital and non-digital communication practices in their business activities.
2. To examine micro-enterprise owners' lived experiences of integrating hybrid communication practices in engaging consumers, maintaining stakeholder relationships, and building brand trust.
3. To understand how owners of micro-enterprises interpret the role of hybrid communication practices in shaping their operational experiences, sustainability, and business growth.
4. To explore the challenges and opportunities associated with employing hybrid communication practices within Brunei's socio-economic and cultural landscape.

1.3 Research Questions

Central Research Questions (RQs)

How do owners of micro enterprises in Brunei Darussalam use hybrid communication practices to operate, engage consumers and navigate business challenges?

Sub-Research Questions (SRQs)

RQ 1. How do micro-enterprise owners in Brunei Darussalam describe and utilise digital and non-digital communication practices in their day-to-day business operations [identifies the 'hybrid' practices used by owners of micro-enterprises in Brunei]?

RQ 2. What are the lived experiences of micro-enterprise owners in integrating hybrid communication practices to engage consumers and sustain relationships? [focuses on how owners of micro-enterprises make sense of their use of hybrid communication strategies influencing consumer engagement, and brand trust].

RQ 3. How do micro-enterprise owners experience and interpret the role of hybrid communication practices in shaping their business operations, sustainability, and growth? [Investigating the operational experiences in using hybrid communication practices and their outcomes].

RQ 4. What challenges and opportunities do micro-enterprise owners face when employing hybrid communication practices within Brunei's socio-economic and cultural context? [Examining how social, cultural, and economic factors shape the barriers, opportunities, and future prospects of micro-enterprise owners' experiences with hybrid communication practices in Brunei].

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by three complementary theoretical frameworks, namely Attribution Theory, Integrated Marketing Communication Theory and Bourdieu's Theory of Social and Cultural Capital. By combining these theoretical perspectives, this study provides a holistic or multidimensional lens in understanding how owners of micro enterprises in Brunei utilise hybrid communication strategies in a culturally embedded economic context.

2.1.1. Attribution Theory

Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958) and later expanded by Kelley (1967), explains how individuals assign causes to events and behaviours. In the context of micro enterprises, it can help analyse how micro enterprise owners and their stakeholders interpret communication practices. For owners, Attribution theory helps explain how they assess whether hybrid communication practices which includes digital and offline approaches, are effective in influencing consumer engagement and trust. For consumers and the wider public, Attribution Theory can demonstrate how enterprise behaviours are interpreted and attributed to internal factors such as effort and competence or external factors such as cultural norms, informal reputation, and environmental constraints, which shapes the perceptions of credibility and trustworthiness. This is particularly relevant in Brunei because community-based trust as well as social and cultural expectations often influence consumer decision-making.

2.1.2. Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) Theory

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) Theory offers a framework for understanding how micro enterprises operate and integrate communication practices across multiple communication channels (Kliatchko, 2008). IMC theory often emphasises the strategic use of digital and offline methods in creating a consistent business message, enhancing engagement, and maintaining rapport with consumers or the public. By applying IMC Theory, this study can examine how micro-enterprises incorporate hybrid communication practices to engage with customers effectively and maintain a coherent brand identity, especially businesses with limited resources. This IMC theory also aligns with the study's focus on hybrid communication practices, providing a practical and theoretical framework to understand the experiences of micro enterprises.

2.1.3. Bourdieu's Theory of Social and Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's (1986) Theory of Social and Cultural Capital offers a sociological perspective on how communication practices are shaped by and contribute to informal networks, trust and shared cultural and social norms. Social capital refers to the accumulation of resources obtained through the interaction of people or social networks, while cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions an individual or group possesses through the exposure of their cultural environment (Bourdieu, 1986). For micro enterprises in Brunei, strong community ties and understanding of social and cultural norms play a significant role in influencing business communication strategies, whether it is through digital or offline practices. Therefore, by incorporating Bourdieu's theory, this study highlights how hybrid communication practices are not merely shaped by strategic or technical decisions but also influenced by the embeddedness of Brunei's social and culturally specific landscape.

2.1.4. Integrated Conceptual Framework

In this context of micro-enterprises, understanding how communication strategies are implemented and perceived requires an integrated theoretical approach. This study combines Attribution Theory, IMC Theory, and Bourdieu's Theory of Social and Cultural Capital to provide a comprehensive framework for data analysis. Attribution Theory explains how micro-enterprise owners interpret and assess the effectiveness of their communication practices particularly on building trust, credibility, and engagement. While Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) theory explains how communication is strategically utilised in both digital and non-digital channels, which is crucial in understanding hybrid communication practices. In addition, Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital offers a broader socio-cultural lens by examining how these communication practices are shaped by social networks, relationships, and cultural norms. This is particularly relevant in the context of Brunei Darussalam because community ties and shared cultural and social values play a significant influence in business interactions. The integration of these frameworks allows the study to capture an in-depth interaction between owners of micro-enterprises with communication practices, their perception, and the socio-cultural influences.

2.2 *Micro-Enterprises in Brunei Darussalam*

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are widely recognised as significant contributors in driving Brunei's economic growth, especially in its role in economic diversification beyond the carbon industry and providing employment. According to RTB News (2024), MSMEs are estimated to contribute more than 60 per cent of employment and generate about 40 per cent of Brunei's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Similarly, in the recent 2019 statistics published by the Department of Economic Planning and Statistics (DEPS), active MSMEs account for 97 per cent, which is an estimated 5,990 of the 6,157 enterprises. This highlights the dominance of MSMEs in the private sector especially in generating employment and facilitating economic diversification as according to the national agenda (DEPS, 2020).

The definition of MSMEs varies across global regional contexts, with most classifications often relying on thresholds of economic activity and employment size and total assets of enterprise. The ASEAN Strategic Action Plan for SME Development 2016-2025 (SAP SMED 2025), updated in 2019, acknowledges that ASEAN members adopt distinct thresholds to reflect their unique economic structures (ASEAN, 2019). In the context of Brunei Darussalam, MSMEs are classified based on criteria outlined by the Ministry of Finance and Economy, which include annual revenue, employment size and total assets (MOFE, n.d.). For instance, micro-enterprises are specifically defined as those generating an annual revenue of less than B\$100,000, fewer than 10 employees and total assets below B\$60,000. Small enterprises have annual revenue above B\$100,000 but under B\$1 million, 10-29 employees and total assets exceeding B\$60,000. Medium enterprises are categorised as those with revenue above B\$1 million, 30-99 employees and total assets ranging from B\$600,000 to less than B\$3 million (MOFE, n.d.).

This operational definition provides the framework for the selection of the enterprises for this study and situates the research within Brunei's national development strategies under the 2035 Vision, emphasising on entrepreneurship, innovation and sustainable development. National initiatives, particularly those led by Darussalam Enterprise (DARE), aim to strengthen MSME competitiveness by offering training, digital capacity-building, and market access (DARE, n.d.). However, despite these initiatives, limited empirical research has explored how micro-enterprises communicate with their consumers or how they integrate non-digital and digital communication practices.

2.3 *Hybrid Communication Strategies for Micro and SMEs*

In an increasingly competitive and digitalised economy, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) often face the expected pressure to adopt strategic communication approaches to effectively attract consumers and build a favourable public perception, especially in garnering public brand loyalty and trust (Wang et al., 2021). Hybrid communication refers to the strategic integration of both digital and non-digital communication channels (ScienceDirect, n.d) have been highlighted as an effective way to enhance consumer engagement and brand perception (Deku et al., 2024). Recent literature highlights the importance of integrated communication strategies that utilise both online and offline forms of communication to create cohesive brand messaging and maintain consumer engagement (Wu, 2024; Deku et al., 2024; Alwi et al., 2022).

Digital strategies such as social media engagement, customer feedback, interactive content, and promotions allow SMEs to reach a wider audience and maintain brand visibility (Sagala & Öri, 2024). However, systematic reviews indicate that most research focuses primarily on digital communication tools in isolation, often within developed economies and with limited exploration of how hybrid communication is integrated in smaller, culturally specific contexts (Sagala & Öri, 2024).

Meanwhile, offline communication, including face-to-face interactions, word of mouth, and community engagement, remains vital for micro-enterprises operating in culturally embedded economies such as Brunei, where consumer trust and engagement are influenced by social and local norms, such as localised messaging. For instance, Bourargan et al. (2020) study that uses quantitative methods such as surveys, showed that food vendors in Brunei adopt social media platforms due to cost-effectiveness. However, the study did not capture how these vendors explore the culturally specific and informal methods of communication, such as word of mouth, community reputation and direct messaging in fostering brand trust among consumers. This recent study also did not capture the enterprises' experiences, opportunities and challenges of utilising hybrid communication channels. While literature emphasises the power of digital platforms, especially the use of social media in enhancing consumer engagement (Wang et al., 2021; Yuwono et al., 2024; Probahudono et al., 2025). SMEs operating in smaller, culturally distinct economic markets such as Brunei may rely on both the integration of digital and non-digital, interpersonal and culturally embedded communication strategies, but this hybrid approach remains underexplored.

For this study, the focus is narrowed to micro enterprises in Brunei, the smallest yet prevalent among SMEs. Micro enterprises often possess similar constraints in communication needs due to limited resources, smaller teams, and a strong reliance on local consumer networks for their enterprise operation (ScienceDirect, n.d.). Investigating and addressing this gap in how these enterprises adopt hybrid communication practices will provide valuable insight into micro enterprises' operational experiences, practices, challenges, and strategies in sustaining customer engagement and fostering trust in a culturally specific context like Brunei.

2.4 Research Gap

Despite increasing attention on the communication strategies of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), limited research has examined micro enterprises, the smallest yet most prevalent business category in Brunei, especially on the strategic adoption of both digital and traditional communication practices. Much of the existing literature focuses on digital marketing adoption and social media engagement, often within larger SME contexts or developed economies (Wang et al., 2021; Sagala & Öri, 2024). However, these studies on how hybrid communication practices operate within culturally embedded and community-based economies like Brunei, where interpersonal trust, local reputation, and social norms significantly shape consumer relationships, are underexplored. Furthermore, existing quantitative studies (e.g., Bouargan et al., 2020) offer limited insight into the lived experiences and challenges faced by micro enterprises in navigating resource constraints and integrating offline and online communication methods. Therefore, there remains a crucial gap in understanding how micro enterprises in Brunei adopt, negotiate, and sustain hybrid communication practices within their local socio-cultural context.

3. Method

3.1 Design of the Study

This study is grounded in an interpretivist philosophical paradigm, which emphasises an in-depth understanding of the social and cultural phenomena by exploring how individuals construct and attribute meaning to their lived experiences and practices (Crewell & Poth, 2018). This philosophical paradigm acknowledges that knowledge is a fluid process, where it is socially constructed and influenced by specific cultural, social and situational contexts. For this study, the interpretivist paradigm provides a critical lens in understanding how micro-enterprise owners in Brunei construct meaning around their hybrid communication practices, especially within their everyday business operations. This approach aligns with constructivist principles, which recognise that meaning making is jointly developed through the interactions between the researcher and the participants during the research process (Schwandt, 1994).

Therefore, this study will adopt a qualitative research design to explore how micro-enterprise owners perceive, utilise, and interpret hybrid communication practices that use both digital and non-digital methods. The study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach, as there is limited research examining how micro-enterprise owners in Brunei utilise hybrid communication practices within their everyday business operations. An exploratory is particularly chosen when investigating under-explored phenomena as it allows emerging patterns, meanings and themes to surface and develop, drawn from participants' lived experiences (Flick, 2018), which enables an in-depth understanding of how meaning is constructed within their everyday business practices within their specific social and business contexts.

Although the study draws on phenomenological elements such as exploring owners of micro-enterprises' lived experiences, it is not positioned as a purely phenomenological study but instead adopts a broader interpretivist qualitative design which utilises multiple data sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of hybrid communication practices (Moustakas, 1994).

3.2 Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The study is focused within the context of micro-enterprises in Brunei Darussalam, especially focusing on seasonal and event-based businesses such as pop-up vendors and festival-based entrepreneurs. These selected settings are chosen because they provide an environment where both digital and non-digital communication practices are actively utilised.

The target population comprises micro-enterprise owners that actively operating in Brunei. In accordance with the Ministry of Finance and Economy (MOFE) definition, micro-enterprises are characterised as businesses with fewer than ten employees, operating on a small scale. For the purpose of this study, participants included both formally registered and informally registered operated micro-enterprises that were actively engaged in business activities and utilised hybrid communication practices within their operations. This inclusion was considered appropriate because the study focuses on communication practices rather than

business registration status. Including both formal and informal micro-enterprises enabled the researcher to capture a broader range of communication experiences that reflect the current realities of Brunei's micro-enterprise landscape where many micro businesses operate through online platforms, home-based operations and temporary pop-up market events. This approach is consistent with qualitative purposive sampling techniques that are employed to ensure that participants are relevant to the phenomenon of the research rather than their representativeness of a defined population (Patton, 2015). This approach allows for the intentional selection of participants who meet specific inclusion criteria relevant to the research objectives. Furthermore, scholars have noted that informal enterprises constitute a significant entrepreneurial activity which is commonly found among small-scale business operation that relies on a flexible business practice which also utilises digital operations (Saunders et al., 2019). Therefore, including both formal and informal micro-enterprises allow the study to generate a better understanding of hybrid communication practice across diverse business contexts.

The inclusion criteria for participants are as follows: (1) owners of micro enterprises employing fewer than ten employees (2) owners are aged 18 and above; (3) enterprises must have been in operation for at least one year to ensure sufficient experience with communication practices and overall business operations; and (4) businesses that actively utilise hybrid communication practices which includes combination of digital and non-digital approaches. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria include: (1) medium- or large-sized enterprises with formal communication departments; (2) micro enterprises that rely solely on a single communication practice; and (3) inactive businesses with no consistent operational activity.

Table 3.2 provides an overview of the participants included in this study. The participants represented a range of micro-enterprises operating within sectors such as arts and crafts and food and beverage businesses. All participants met the inclusion criteria and actively utilised both digital and non-digital communication methods within their business operations. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants.

Table 3.2 Participant Profile

Participant	Business Sector	Years of Operation	Number of Employees	Observation Conducted	Artefact Analysis Conducted
Amelia	Arts & Crafts	5 Years	1	Yes	Yes
Yasmin	Arts & Crafts	4 Years	1	Yes	Yes
Jannah	Food & Beverage	1.5 Years	4	Yes	Yes
Mary	Arts & Crafts	5 Years	1	Yes	Yes
Safaa	Arts & Crafts	11 Years	1	Yes	Yes
Claudia & Finn	Food & Beverage	1 Years	3	Yes	Yes
Alya	Arts & Crafts	2.5 Years	1	Yes	Yes

Note. All participant names are pseudonyms used to protect participant confidentiality.

The final sample size for this qualitative study is seven participants. This range is considered appropriate for achieving data saturation where few or no new themes or insights are expected to emerge from the data, while still allowing in-depth and detailed accounts of participants' experiences. This is supported with empirical evidence, which suggests that saturation is considered reached in interview-based data collection, especially within a relatively similar group of participants (Guest et al., 2006; Hennick & Kaiser, 2022). In addition, this study utilises non-interview data, which includes observations and artefact analysis such as social media posts, which act to complement and triangulate the findings from the interview.

3.3 Data Collection & Analysis

This study adopts methodological triangulation by combining semi-structured interviews, overt observation, and artefact analysis to respond to the research questions and provide a comprehensive understanding of hybrid communication practices among micro-enterprise owners in Brunei. This multi-method approach enables an in-depth understanding and exploration of participants' perspectives and practices across different contexts which helps enhance the credibility of the findings.

For this study, the data collection begins with the preparation of a semi-structured interview which serves as the primary method of data collection guided by the study's theoretical framework which focuses on key themes such as how micro-enterprise owners make sense and navigate hybrid communication practices, engage with their consumers, build trust, and manage operational challenges within their everyday business practices. In other words, the study aims to capture the nuances behind communication practices, such as the motivations, challenges, and meanings attributed to digital and offline engagement, especially how socio-cultural factors influence their approaches to maintaining relationships with customers and the public. Prior to the interview, participants are provided with the participant information sheet and consent form and the interviews are then conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on the participant's preferences. The interview will last approximately 30 to 60 minutes and will be audio-recorded with prior consent for accurate transcription and analysis. Meanwhile, the interview questionnaires are designed to allow flexibility for participants to share their lived experiences while also allowing emerging insights to surface from probing. This approach offers an in-depth exploration of their experiences intended for this research while still allowing participants to introduce topics that are significant to them (Mason, 2002).

In addition to interviews, overt observation is conducted during participants' business operations or if they participate in public events such as pop-up markets to examine the utilisation of hybrid communication practices. The observation session is conducted for approximately 30 to 60 minutes, with the researcher observing real-time communication practices, including customer interactions, promotional activities, and the use of digital tools such as social media within their business activities. For this specific study, only one session of observation is collected due to the event-based nature of the businesses and practical considerations such as time and access. This duration is considered appropriate for capturing meaningful patterns to maintain a focus and manageable observation, especially within event-based and time-specific business environments (Flick, 2018).

Observation alongside the use of field notes provides a rich collection of insights into the contextual details, non-verbal cues, and behavioural patterns that may not be fully captured in the interviews. This method enables a deeper understanding of how communication practices are utilised and experienced in practice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, the utilisation of artefact analysis on publicly available materials such as social media posts, promotional content and digital advertisements enables the researcher to examine how hybrid communication practices are demonstrated and maintained across digital platforms.

All interviews are fully transcribed and analysed using the framework method (Ritchie, Spencer & O'Connor, 2003), which involves the process of familiarising oneself with the data collected, coding, categorisation, as well as the development of themes. The data collected will then be organised and managed to allow patterns to emerge from the data. This is then followed by refining the codes into broader themes manually. The initial NVivo software that was supposedly used for coding is unable to be accessed by the researcher. To minimise researcher bias, coding and theme development will be reviewed by a second researcher or supervisor. Through these developing themes, it will then be interpreted in alignment with the study's theoretical framework, such as Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), Attribution Theory, and Bourdieu's Theory of Social and Cultural Capital, to address the research questions and explore how communication practices, owner perceptions, and socio-cultural influences micro-enterprises' operations.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings that are obtained through semi-structured interviews, overt observations, and artefact analysis of participants' social media platforms. This chapter will go through thematic analysis of the collected data, whereby five major themes have emerged with regard to the utilisation of hybrid communication practices among micro-enterprise owners in Brunei Darussalam.

The findings section will follow themes which presents the 'Digital Communication Practices' and 'Offline Communication Practices'. This is done to firstly demonstrate the participants' preferred hybrid communication methods and clearly show how the participants utilise them in their business before looking

into participants' overall perception towards their chosen hybrid communication practices. The final theme, 'Emerging Challenges in Hybrid Communication Practices' explores the participants' lived experiences as owners of micro-enterprises, especially in managing hybrid communication while navigating practical, financial, and operational challenges.

The findings presented are derived and supported by triangulated data sources. Interview data will provide insights into participants' experiences and perceptions towards the utilisation of hybrid communication practices, and observation data will capture communication practices within event settings, while artefact analysis provides evidence of participants' digital communication strategies such as using their preferred social media platforms to operate their business.

4.2 Digital Communication Practices

4.2.1. Instagram as A Primary Platform for Visibility, Promotion & Engagement

The findings demonstrated that Instagram emerged as the primary digital communication platform utilised by all participants. Participants consistently described Instagram as an important social media tool to increase their business visibility, promote their products, communicate with their audience about their event participation, and maintain and broaden their business presence in the digital landscape. For instance, Amelia explained that Instagram is primarily utilised to increase her business's visibility to the public: *"I only used IG (Instagram) and WhatsApp. IG is for visibility. And also for people to follow us more, get to know us more and know what new merch is coming"*

Similarly, Mary identified Instagram as the preferred business platform she utilises to communicate with her customers and promote her products, despite acknowledging that *"TikTok is a more famous platform"* at the moment. Mary mentioned that Instagram is deemed *"easier to manage"* because it requires less *"active posting"* to seek and broaden visibility to the audience. She utilises mostly through her Instagram stories and direct message feature to interact and promote products to her customers. The same sentiment towards the utilisation of Instagram was expressed by micro-entrepreneur owners of a food and beverage business, Claudia and Finn, who claimed that Instagram was their primary social media platform for business communication. Claudia has described Instagram as a more consistent platform to engage with customers, access their business website, and a site to interact with paid promotional content. In contrast, TikTok was described as a secondary platform used mainly for mainly entertainment and to increase visibility.

As Claudia explained:

"Instagram is more of a consistent, like, customers will ask questions through there. Customers will visit our page to order through...our website and we also boost ads there. TikTok is more of like for fun... for viral" (Claudia)

Furthermore, Mary and Amelia mentioned that they have occasionally utilised Instagram's paid-advertisement feature that helps boost their business post especially when they produce seasonal products to reach new and wider audiences to further gain brand awareness and generate sales for their business. For example, Amelia stated that utilising IG Boost strategically in collaboration with a local artist to promote their products during the month of Ramadan and had successfully generated a significant amount of online engagement from the Instagram paid advertisement. Mary has also expressed that utilising the Instagram Boost feature as an additional effort to increase visibility is focused on its convenience compared to other social media platforms such as TikTok, as according to her: *"Instagram ads, you just pay around how much and how many viewers you want. Then they will market for you, advertise for you"*.

Participants frequently described Instagram as functioning as a digital storefront where customers could view products, communicate with customers, and share any business announcements. Social media artefacts analysed during the study supported these findings. As illustrated in Figure 4.1, Claudia and Finn's Instagram profile commonly combined product photographs, event participation announcements, business information and links for customer enquiries or orders. This presentation allowed Instagram to function as a digital storefront where customers can learn more about their business, view their products and its availability as well as access further communication channels.

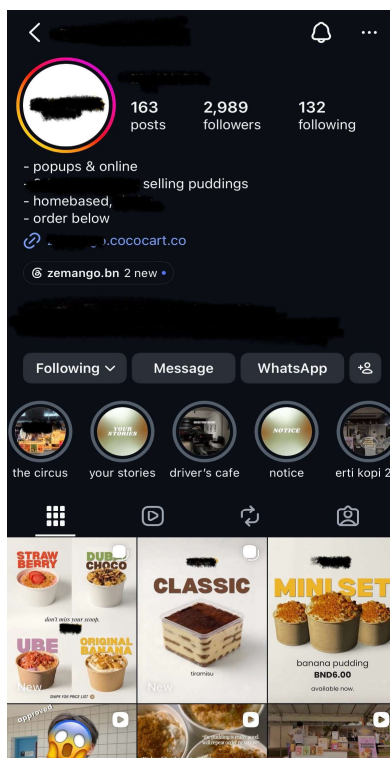


Figure 4.1. Claudia and Finn's Instagram Profile functioning as a digital storefront

Note: identifying information has been obscured

These findings also suggest that participants utilise different social media platforms for different purposes, with Instagram being used more frequently for customer engagement and business-related communication. Observation data further reinforced the significant usage of Instagram for owners of micro-enterprises. For instance, during the pop-event, most of Mary's customers would frequently ask for her business Instagram handle.

4.2.2. Instagram Stories for Customer Engagement and Continuous Visibility

Apart from promoting their business and products, participants mentioned that maintaining an active digital presence is a crucial communication practice for their business. Some participants have viewed regular updates through Instagram Stories as necessary to demonstrate business activity and to build and maintain relationships with their audiences. Amelia highlighted the importance of consistent posting for her micro-enterprise: "Stories really must be there every day. If it's not like that, people will think the business is not active."

This demonstrates for some participants the need to post every day on their Instagram Stories, as it communicates to their audience that despite inactivity on their Instagram Feed, other Instagram features show their business is still operating. Unlike feed posts, which were often reserved for business-related content, Stories enabled participants to share more informal and personal content. For instance, Amelia explained that she intentionally shares aspects of her everyday life to allow followers to connect and relate with her as an individual rather than solely as a business owner:

"Sometimes, I post things to my IG. So, like, they know I'm also a normal person like them. It's like it doesn't mean I'm just business. I also have kids. I have to cook. I have to do all the house chores and everything." (Amelia)

She further differentiates Instagram feed posts and Stories:

"Because, if it's on the feed, it's like, more for the business itself. It's not like something that they easily engage with. If there's a story, people easily engage with you through that. Like, they give love, or like, or comment, or DM (Direct Message)." (Amelia)

For Amelia, Stories provided opportunities for interaction that extended beyond commercial communication. She described regularly posting daily activities, local cafe visits and personal recommendations to share a part of her life which encourages engagement with followers. This communication interaction interestingly appeared to add a sense of familiarity between business owners and customers where some of her followers would later reference her Stories during a pop-up event such as asking her if she had her coffee already. For Amelia, Instagram Stories functioned as a means to build a sense of familiarity and to maintain interpersonal relationships with her followers. This choice of sharing some aspects of herself and her everyday life, according to her, was intentionally shared to allow audiences to connect with her on a personal level:

"Sometimes, I post things to my IG. So, like, they know I'm also a normal person like them. It's like it doesn't mean I'm just business. I also have kids. I have to cook. I have to do all the house chores and everything." (Amelia)

In contrast, Claudia and Finn have described Instagram Stories as an important part of their marketing strategy. For instance, Stories were utilised to provide continuous updates regarding business activities, promotions, and participation in pop-up events. For Claudia and Finn, their content was shared throughout the duration of an event compared to being limited to a single post regarding their event participation. As Claudia explained, *"We don't just post once a day. For a pop-up and then call it a day. We will do it during the pop-up, before the pop-up, after the pop-up."* For Claudia and Finn, Stories functioned as a form of real-time communication update, allowing customers to follow their business activities and update their product availability during an event: *"Day two, sold out. Day three, sold out. So, it's just like... live updates. It keeps going. It keeps running."* Moreover, for some participants like Claudia and Finn, posting their content across multiple Instagram features, including Stories, Reels, and feed posts, is a marketing strategy that aims to increase their brand visibility in the digital landscape.

Artefact analysis supported these findings by demonstrating how Instagram Stories were used to communicate at different stages of their event participation. As illustrated in Figure 4.2, Claudia and Finn posted Stories announcing their participation before the pop-up, sharing product updates during the event, and communicating their event outcomes.

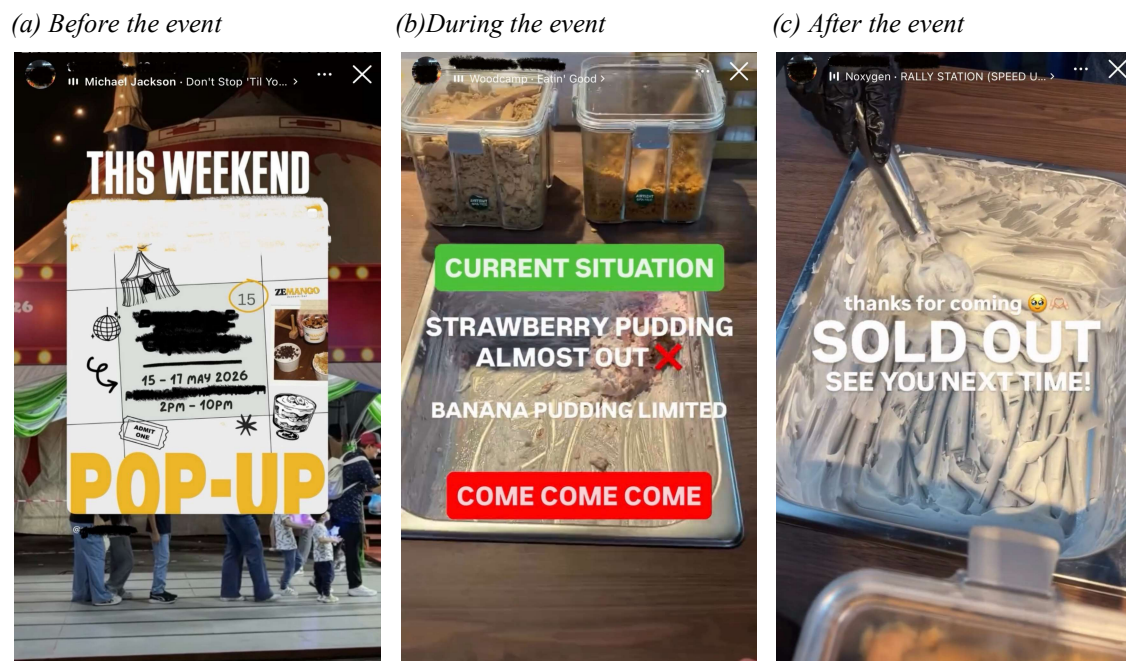


Figure 4.2. Claudia and Finn's Instagram Story updates before, during and after a pop-up event.

Note: Panel (a) announces the upcoming event, panel (b) provides an update during the event, and panel (c) communicates the event outcome. Identifying information has been removed.

Observational data further demonstrate that some participants, such as Claudia and Finn, are producing content creation for Instagram Stories occasionally throughout their business operations. Similarly, the majority of participants have demonstrated the frequent utilisation of Stories to promote event participation updates, announce product availability and reminders of their ongoing promotion.

In contrast, Mary adopted a different approach towards Instagram Stories. While she openly acknowledges the importance of maintaining an online presence, she did not rely heavily on frequent content posting and continuous audience engagement. For Mary, she preferred to have a simple communication approach to maintain visibility that focused mainly on displaying her products and updating event participation. Mary explained that she relied more on the quality of her products and the visual presentation of her pop-up booth to attract customers' attention because she *"don't really know how to do marketing"*. Unlike other participants, Mary viewed social media as a supporting communication tool that is used to complement her offline interactions and showcase her products instead of an engagement strategy. The deliberate communication approach is reflected in the observation data, where Mary spent more time arranging her product displays and interacting with customers who approached her directly rather than actively creating content during the pop-up event.

The findings reveal different usage of Instagram Stories among participants. While some participants utilise Stories heavily to increase customers' engagement and give real-time updates of their business operations, others deliberately chose to maintain a more limited online presence and mainly used Instagram as a support for promoting their products and announcing their event participation.

4.2.3. Threads as an Emerging Communication Platform for Community Engagement

Apart from Instagram, participants described utilising other digital platforms to support communication with customers and to broaden their business visibility. Some participants such as Claudia and Finn, Jannah as well as Amelia have highlighted that they value reaching a broader audience and encouraging customer engagement by complementing their already existing communication practices such as Instagram.

For Claudia and Finn, Threads have been used as an additional engagement tool that allowed them to interact with their customers and increase business awareness. Claudia expressed that Threads allows a more conversational form of interaction which enables them to engage in discussions and communicate more directly with individual customers, especially in responding to enquiries related to their business. She specifically used Threads because she perceived the platform as an opportunity for potential interaction beyond the visual and promotional focus of Instagram:

"We're mostly there because a lot of customers are asking, what's the best banana pudding in town? So, we want to be answering their questions. We want to be active because it's a way to connect with them digitally as well." (Claudia)

She further explained the differences between Threads and Instagram by emphasising its discussion-like environment:

"It's not just like Instagram, you know. You're just posting videos and photos. But in Threads, it's mostly text. So, it turns into a discussion. You can interact with them. It becomes like some sort of community."

Similarly, Finn described Threads as a platform that provides a more direct interaction with customers: *"I would say Threads is more actively interacting lah to individual customers."* Although Claudia and Finn positively view Threads as a relatively good platform for adding more visibility and engagement digitally, Claudia acknowledges that they are still relatively new with Threads, especially incorporating it within their communication strategy, as they are still continuously navigating and exploring its potential.

The use of Threads can also be found in the ways Jannah's approach to her preferred communication platform. For instance, she explained that although Instagram is her primary communication tool for sharing business-related content, Threads also plays an important role in increasing her business presence, especially through community engagement. Jannah explained that customers online would discover her business through her interactions on Threads:

"Usually, for information-based, we use Instagram as our main platform to give information to the customers that, 'Oh, we're joining a pop-up next week.' Since Instagram is also linked to Threads, it will automatically post on our Threads. That's how online customers find us, through Threads and their community engagement." (Jannah)

Moreover, Jannah also viewed Threads as a space where she can openly converse and document her experiences about being a micro-business owner in Brunei, especially among other business owners and

customers. She describes the platform functions as her “*diary*” which also acts as a “*conversation starter*” among other business owners. Jannah also explained that participating in trending discussions on Threads often increased her visibility as a micro-enterprise owner and subsequently contributed in garnering business recognition during physical events, especially upon meeting her in person. She recalled instances where customers and even influencers would approach her booth and purchase her products during her pop-up events, especially after recognising her active discussion participation on Threads. She expressed that her recognition online has caused conversations among customers to continue physically.

Amelia also described a similar encounter with a customer on Threads, which showcases how online engagement can be extended beyond the digital space and has influenced customer behaviour in a physical setting. She recalled encountering a textual and visual post made by a customer on Threads who had previously visited her pop-up booth and purchased Pokémon-themed products but could no longer remember the business name. Upon recognising the post, it prompted Amelia to respond and engage with the customer’s inquiries regarding character design availability, which eventually resulted in a return purchase from an interested customer physically the following day.

These findings demonstrate the function of Threads as a conversational platform that enables further engagement between micro-enterprise owners and individual customers at the community level. By participating in discussions, responding to community discussions, as well as sharing personal accounts of their business experiences, participants were able to increase their business visibility, develop and support relationships that transcend the digital space into face-to-face engagements at pop-up events.

4.2.4. Supplementary Digital Communication Channels: WhatsApp and TikTok

In addition to Instagram and Threads, some participants also utilised platforms such as WhatsApp and TikTok that act as supplementary communication channels to support their business operations online. For instance, Instagram and Threads, these platforms are generally used for sharing business content, promoting products, and engaging with the audiences meanwhile WhatsApp was commonly used by some participants for enquiries, discussing the availability of the product, managing customer orders, and maintaining communication.

For instance, Amelia explained that her customers would often transition from Instagram or encountering her business at a pop-up event to WhatsApp, especially for requesting specific products and custom orders. This is supported by artefact analysis, as shown in *Figure 4.3*. Amelia linked her WhatsApp contact channel to her Instagram profile to allow customers to continue their enquiries and custom orders through WhatsApp. According to Amelia, she utilised WhatsApp more frequently on a daily basis, so when customers request a more immediate response from her, they are able to contact her on WhatsApp.

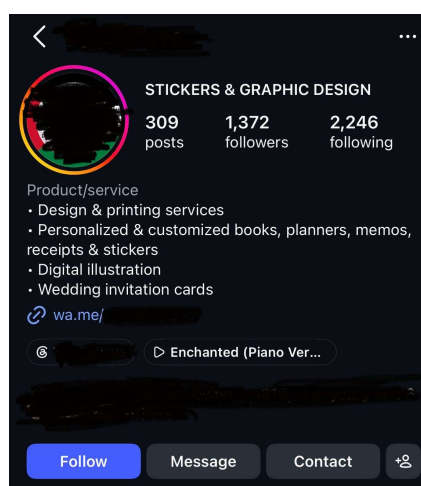


Figure 4.3. WhatsApp contact channel linked to Amelia’s Instagram profile.

Note: The profile provided customers with access to WhatsApp for enquiries and custom orders. Contact details and identifying information have been removed.

Similarly, participants Claudia and Finn utilised WhatsApp in their communication practices as a complementary channel within their business operations. Claudia explained that although Instagram is where they gain visibility and generate sales for their business, WhatsApp functioned as the main channel for continuing communication with their customers such as enquiring about the availability of their products and facilitating customers' orders. From artefact analysis, their Instagram page had linked a business website that facilitated customer orders which subsequently connected them to WhatsApp for further enquiries and order-related interactions.

A similar pattern was evident in Jannah's experiences, where she explained that customers frequently contacted her through WhatsApp or Instagram Direct Messages when enquiring about future pop-up participation and availability of her products. Similarly, Mary also expressed that the interactions with customers often began through Instagram before transitioning to WhatsApp once her customers became more familiar with her: *"Usually, mostly it's Instagram. Then, if regular customers, mostly they will get my contact, they will WhatsApp me."*

However, the use of WhatsApp was not consistent across all participants. While several participants utilised WhatsApp to support business operations such as responding to enquiries and managing orders, others preferred limited access to their personal contact information. For example, both Safaa and Alya explained that WhatsApp was often utilised mainly for art commissions involving close friends and family members rather than for general customers. Alya stated she *"don't give them my phone numbers. Unless if it's like families and friends, if they want to commission me, they can contact me."* Similarly, Yasmin primarily relied on Instagram when communicating with her customers and did not emphasise WhatsApp as part of her communication practices. These findings demonstrate the differences in the usage of WhatsApp for managing direct communication across all participants.

Besides WhatsApp, some participants also utilised TikTok occasionally as part of their digital communication practices or strategies. Participants such as Claudia and Finn utilised the platform as an additional means to increase visibility and reach a wider audience through short video content. Claudia and Finn have expressed the need to maximise exposure of their business across multiple digital platforms, including TikTok, as a communication strategy to maintain an active presence. Claudia and Finn further described TikTok as a platform utilised mainly for entertainment and virality, such as to get their *"name out there"* and overall increase brand exposure.

Claudia explained:

"We do our best to post as much as we can. As much content as we can on like IG Reels, IG Story, posts, feed, everything. And we also try to post on TikTok. Of course, like TikTok, not as much as Instagram. But we also try our best to post it there."

Another participant such as Amelia, has recalled a positive outcome from occasionally utilising the platform. Amelia mentioned that she did not regularly post content on TikTok and primarily focused on Instagram and WhatsApp for business communication. However, she recalled experimenting with TikTok on one occasion and was genuinely surprised by the level of interest generated by customers. Following the post, she mentioned receiving increased enquiries and orders for her products.

4.3 Offline Communication Practices

4.3.1. Different Approaches to Face-to-Face Customer Interaction

Participants demonstrated varying approaches towards face-to-face communication during pop-up events. Observation data have shown that for most participants, they did not immediately approach or greet customers when they arrived at their booth, but rather, the interaction generally occurred when customers displayed interest towards their products in the form of body language. For example, customers browsing their merchandise, observing the booth displays, asking questions or making eye contact with participants. Throughout several observations, this is evident where the majority of arts and crafts vendors often allowed customers to examine their products independently before any communication took place. Once customers have demonstrated their interest towards their products, participants would then provide additional information regarding the products, prices, or Instagram accounts when it is needed. This pattern was particularly evident among participants within the arts and crafts sector, where customers frequently spent time viewing products before initiating conversation with vendors. Several participants described adopting a cautious approach towards initiating customer interactions. Amelia explained that she often waited for customers to show interest before engaging in conversation because she wanted to avoid overwhelming and scaring the visitors away who were simply browsing. Similarly, observation data revealed that customers

frequently approached booths independently before participants provided assistance or responded to their enquiries.

In contrast, Claudia and Finn, a dessert-focused vendor, described utilising a more proactive communication approach during events. They explained that face-to-face interactions provided valuable opportunities to introduce products, explain promotions, and engage potential customers. Observational data supported this with both participants actively greeting passers-by, announcing promotional offers, and initiating conversations with visitors approaching their booth. The observation data also demonstrated that customers were often provided with product recommendations and information regarding available options before making purchasing decisions.

A similar pattern was observed at Jannah's booth, where once customers approached the booth and expressed interest in the products, Jannah's part-time employee became more actively engaged in communication. Staff members responded to the customer enquiries, explained available options, provided product recommendations, and occasionally offered free samples to customers to encourage them to try their products.

Different forms of engagement were also evident among participants. Mary described relying more heavily on product quality and visual presentation rather than verbal communication. During observations, customers were frequently observed browsing her crochet products independently before approaching her for the prices or her Instagram account. Communication generally occurred after customers had already expressed interest in the displayed products. For Yasmin, an arts and crafts vendor mentioned that wearing cosplay as part of her participation at events has garnered customer engagement at her booth, as some customers would recognise her character and draw attention to her booth. From observation data, it was revealed that some customers would notice her costume initially before interacting with her merchandise and that some customers would engage in conversations and purchase her products.

Observation data also showed that short greetings such as *'hello'*, *'hi'* and *'welcome'* were commonly used by participants when customers approached their booths, but the extent of the interaction differed between participants. For some participants, the interactions with customers are kept at a minimal level through brief greetings to a more focused conversation on product information, interests, hobbies, and previous purchases. These findings demonstrate the varying levels of customer engagement conducted by participants during physical events. While some participants actively initiated conversations with visitors, others often relied on customer interest, the display of products, and the visual presentation of the booth to start a face-to-face interaction.

4.3.2. *Visual Communication Through Booth Presentation*

Beyond verbal interactions, participants also utilised various visual elements as part of their communication practices during physical events. According to observation and interview data, booth presentation played an important role in garnering customers' attention and increasing booth engagement. The majority of participants had frequently relied on product displays and the visual aesthetics of their booth, including banners and signage. While some participants also incorporated interactive elements and product sampling to communicate about their businesses before direct interactions even occurred.

The importance of visual presentation was particularly evident during the observed pop-up event. All participants were operating within temporary booth spaces as part of an event that ran for three days, although observations for this study were done on a single day of the event. The observation data shows that a considerable amount of attention was given to the overall booth aesthetics, product placements, branding materials, signage, and other decorative parts. For example, customers were frequently observing the booth, and some customers would engage with the visual features before and after initiating a conversation with the business owners or staff.

For instance, among food and beverage micro-enterprise owners, visual branding and booth overall presentation were viewed as important in attracting customers. Jannah recalled a time when she had made a deliberate choice to change her business branding after recognising that her previous dark green colour scheme for her logo and overall business aesthetics did not reflect the image she wanted to portray. She explained that the colour change to a pink and white palette was the right decision as she perceives it to be a more cheerful appearance suited to target her audience, which mostly comprised of young woman as the age of 20-30 years old. She reflected on the importance of visual appeal by mentioning that: *"How you display yourself, display your brand, actually matters to the public eye."* Jannah further explained that gaining visibility was particularly important during pop-up events where businesses frequently compete for

customers' attention. Observation data also revealed its effectiveness, where most passersby and customers are interacting with the signage by having customers point to the promotional content and converse with their company, as well as customers who take pictures of their purchased products along with the background of the booth. This observation data, where customers are interacting with the visual elements of the pop-up booth, can also be found with Claudia and Finn.

A similar emphasis on visual presentation was evident among arts and crafts micro-enterprise owners. Mary described relying heavily on booth and product presentation rather than verbal communication to attract her customers. She explained: *"I'm not really talking. I let the product talk. And the way your product talks is how you arrange it."* Mary further described regularly rearranging her products throughout the event day to maintain organised product placements and gain visibility. As illustrated in *Figure 4.4*, Mary's crochet products formed the main visual focus of the booth.



Figure 4.4 Arrangement of crochet products at Mary's pop-up booth

Note: Photograph taken by the researcher during the researcher during overt observation. Identifying information has been removed.

She explained that this practice was influenced by personal cultural beliefs as a Chinese person that products should occasionally be moved to different locations within the booth, especially when certain items were not receiving any attention from customers. According to Mary, relocating products allowed them to become more visible to visitors who are looking at different areas of the booth, which increased the opportunities for customers to notice the products that may have been previously overlooked. Observation data supported this statement, where Mary would be seen arranging and moving her products as well as switching which products were to be displayed before putting them in a box. While Mary was occupied with the product arrangements, customers would frequently observe browsing the newly displayed crochet products independently before approaching her with enquiries regarding the pricing and social media accounts. Mary also explained that she was not always physically present at the pop-up events due to her full-time employment and would occasionally rely on a booth partner to assist with her operations, but she explained that it doesn't affect her business.

Another participant, Yasmin, also described newly introducing free custom stamps as part of an interactive element in her booth to engage with her booth. She explained that she adopted this practice after observing similar practices among international artists. For Yasmin, she viewed the stamps as a more interesting way of encouraging visitors to approach her booth and increase visibility for her customers rather than relying on traditional business cards. Observation data revealed that some visitors would interact with her stamp station before browsing through her booth and products. She explained that the stamps helped create a memorable experience for visitors and encouraged greater interaction with her booth.

Additionally, another form of strategy was also observed among participants such as Jannah. At Jannah's booth, free product samples were occasionally offered to customers who expressed interest in the products. From the observation data, the samples offered to customers were encouraged by staff members, which helped encourage further interaction between their customers. The interactions would involve staff members mentioning product recommendations and prices. Overall, findings suggest that participants utilised a range of visual and experience-based elements as part of their offline communication practices.

4.3.3 Pop-Up Events as Spaces for Community Building and Opportunity Creation

Interview and observation data revealed that pop-up events served as important sites for gaining visibility, networking, and community engagement among participants. Beyond serving as temporary locations for sales, participants described pop-up events as opportunities for them to connect with customers, establish relationships with micro-enterprise owners, engage with event organisers and increase awareness of their businesses within the wider community.

Participants described pop-up events as one of the primary ways customers discovered their businesses. Observation data among all participants indicated that visitors often browsed multiple booths, took photographs of displays and some even returned after initial visits. In several instances, customers were observed to revisit their booths with friends and family members after being previously interested in their products. For participants operating seasonal and event-based businesses, the event provides an opportunity to introduce their products to audiences who may not have previously encountered their businesses online.

According to the majority of participants, they described how interactions that originated online frequently continued within physical event spaces. For instance, Jannah explained that customers often recognised her through her activity on Threads and which resulted in them approaching her booth during pop-up events. Similarly, Amelia recalled customers would occasionally recognise her from previous media appearances including interviews conducted by Brunei's national radio and television broadcaster such as Radio Television Brunei (RTB) and Kristal Fm a radio station, through MSME event initiatives. She explained that being a participant pop-up vendor of the event has generated an increased awareness of her business and contributed to customers recognising her during pop-up events.

Pop-events also enabled interactions among other business owners themselves. For example, both Amelia and May have mentioned that they both have found their current booth partner through physical pop-up events as participating vendors. All arts and crafts vendors have expressed that they all share booth spaces with other similar vendors, to each other, especially on accommodating the rental price and it's crucial for the long-term sustainability of their business operations. Through observation, it was found that the majority of arts and crafts vendors were frequently seen interacting with neighbouring vendors, discussing their products and purchases from neighbouring vendors, their experiences as well as supporting one another's businesses. According to Yasmin, towards the end of a pop-up event, there is a practice among arts and crafts vendors where they swap their art stickers with other vendors without any monetary transaction as a means of supporting one another. Through artefact analysis, some participants would post their swapped stickers on Instagram Stories along with their tagged business name which further increases visibility for both.

Amelia described the importance of maintaining connections with other micro-enterprise owners and explaining that mutual support was common practice within Brunei's small micro-business community. She perceived other businesses not as competitors but as fellow entrepreneurs who are valuable contacts for exchanging information, opportunities, and support. For example, the majority of vendors described that sharing information regarding upcoming events and participation opportunities is often done through informal communication channels such as WhatsApp groups. These specific group chats according to Yasmin, are created by past or current event management from their previous participations which have enabled some participants to remain informed about future opportunities and, in some cases, identify booth partners when the rent prices for the booth spaces were high, as participants may interact with other vendors beyond the group chat. The majority of arts and crafts vendors explained that sharing booth spaces often made participation in a pop-up event more financially feasible and overall supported their business operations.

For some participants, pop-up events are also a site where opportunities to obtain direct feedback from customers. Yasmin explained that conversations with visitors frequently transcend beyond product purchases and often include suggestions for future artwork, character designs, and creative ideas. Similarly, Alya expressed the importance of customer suggestions and observation because an artist, she wants to cater to specific customers who are looking for something different from other vendors to gain engagement towards her business. Both arts and crafts vendors such as Yasmin and Alya have described that these social interactions are valuable source of feedback that helped them understand current interests and preferences among customers.

Overall, findings suggest indicating that pop-up events functioned as important communication spaces for participants which provided opportunities for customer to explore their products and enabled networking

among micro-enterprise owners and created access to future business opportunities through connections with vendors, organiser or management and local communities.

4.4 Emerging Challenges in Hybrid Communication Practices

While participants identified multiple benefits associated with digital and offline communication practices, several challenges also emerged from the interview and observation data such as relating to producing and maintaining online presence, participating in physical events, and adapting to new changes within the artist and business environment.

Among participants that operates their business alongside other full-time employment commitments, balancing business responsibilities with work and personal life presented a significant challenge. Claudia described managing her micro-enterprise while working full time from home and expressed that the increasing demands of the business had begun to affect her full-time employment, which caused her to reassess how the responsibilities should be managed to seek a balance for both. The increasing demands of operating a micro-enterprise, she stated:

“That’s the biggest challenge as a business owner. It’s time.” (Claudia)

Claudia further described how business activities often go beyond physical events and day-to-day operations which includes constant customer interactions, content creation, planning and generating ideas outside of working hours, as their business relied heavily on continuous content creation. Similarly, Amelia also shared the same sentiment as she mentioned wanting to post more content and produce more products for her business, but time was the factor for not being able to do so. Jannah also mentioned that she was “*bad*” at making content such as designing posters to be posted on her Instagram and Threads accounts, so she initially struggled until she hired a staff member to help with digital content creation.

The participant also highlighted the challenges with event participation. Some participants expressed concerns that pop-up booth rental fees have become increasingly more expensive over recent years. The rise in rent fees presents a significant challenge for arts and craft vendors as micro-businesses often operate on limited resources. As a result, most participants would often collaborate with other similar vendors to share spaces to reduce financial costs. Alya has expressed this concerning issue in an interview, whereby she emphasises the need for event organisers or management to become more aware and considerate of the rent booth fees for local arts and crafts vendors to participate and sustain their business in Brunei. The rising rent fees were also a topic of concern mentioned by food and beverage micro-enterprise owners like Claudia and Finn, and Jannah as they expressed the need to meticulously select event participation because of rent prices.

Among arts and crafts participants, there were also emerging concerns regarding artificial intelligence (AI). Yasmin expressed concern that AI-generated artwork was becoming more visible within creative spaces which she believed could affect the artist community in Brunei. She recalled a time where she participated in a pop-up event where among the arts and crafts vendors, she found a vendor who utilised AI-generated content which she believed was not appropriate and disrespectful to be grouped among the artist booths. She believed that some consumers may perceive AI-generated products as a cheaper alternative to the artist-produced work and explained that such appearances could undermine the value of artists’ skills, labour, and original artwork.

A similar concern was reflected in Safaa’s communication practices, whereby during observation, non-AI-generated signage was displayed at her booth as shown in *Figure 4.5* to indicate that her artwork is all from her original artistic skills and labour.



Figure 4.5. Safaa's no-AI signage displayed at her physical booth.

Note: Photograph taken by the researcher during overt observation. Identifying information has been removed.

During the interview, Safaa described the signage as a precautionary measure, which she explained was due to her personal experience and the influence of emerging discussions within the artist community, including instances where artists had been wrongfully accused of using AI-generated content. According to Safaa, the signage acts as a visible marker to her customers and visitors of her artist authenticity during pop-up events.

Overall, the findings indicate that participants have varying levels of communication-related challenges alongside their business operations, which include balancing employment and business responsibilities, maintaining online presence and managing participation costs, and a new concern regarding the use of AI-generated artwork, which challenges the authenticity of the artist community's artwork.

4.4 Discussion

4.4.1 Understanding Hybrid Communication Practices Among Micro-Enterprise Owners

The findings demonstrate that micro-enterprise owners do not rely on a single communication channel to engage with customers and manage their business operations but instead adopted hybrid communication practices by strategically combining both digital and offline communication. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Instagram Stories, Threads and WhatsApp were utilised with face-to-face interactions, booth presentations and participation at pop-up events. These offline and digital communication channels act as a complementary practice that allows business owners to strategically maximise the usage and its associated benefits of each communication method as according to their respective purposes. For instance, digital platforms can support in increasing visibility, sharing valuable information, and supporting ongoing customer interactions meanwhile, offline engagements allow a more personalised and direct engagement and foster relationships or social connections. This demonstrates that micro-enterprises are increasingly blending online and offline communication practices which reflects contemporary business communication.

The finding has supported existing literature that suggest that contemporary businesses have increasingly utilised and incorporate both online and offline communication practice as a strategy to maintain consumer engagement. Wu (2024) argues that integrated communication strategies allow businesses to have a consistent presence across various communication channels which enables customers to interact with the brands in multiple ways. Similarly, Deku et al. (2024) suggests that combining both digital and non-digital communication methods strengthen the engagements with customers because consumers are getting more exposure to the business across both virtual and physical settings. These arguments are reflected in the present study where participants frequently moved between digital and offline channels rather than relying on one platform to engage with costumers.

The findings also support the Integrated Marketing Communication Theory (IMC) which emphasised the strategic coordination of all communication channels to create a consistent and coherent message for consumers (Kilatchko, 2008). However, it is important to note that although IMC is often used in association with larger organisations and formal marketing campaigns, the experiences of participants demonstrate a

similar observation of micro-enterprises owners as they must strategically plan their communication practices with limited resources. Participants have demonstrated frequently using different functions to different communication channels while also ensure that these channels combined can consistently support their business operations. For example, across all the participants, Instagram was commonly utilised for promoting their business and products as well as to announce upcoming pop-up events, Instagram Stories supported a more immediate and informal interactions with customers, Threads have enabled a more informal discussion-based engagement, and WhatsApp provided a platform for direct communication related to enquiry-based interactions and managing orders. Offline communication practices such as face-to-face interactions, booth presentation and visual displays as well as interactive elements have attracted customers to directly engage between business owners, staff members and consumers.

This suggests that participants did not simply adopt multiple communication platforms at random or based on their availability but rather reflected the careful selection of communication channels and its usage based on their perceived preferences, strengths, and functions. The deliberate choice adopting both digital and non-digital approaches and its perceived functionality allows participants to maximise visibility, increase engagement and maintain ongoing relationships with limited resources.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that hybrid communication is not merely a matter of adopting multiple communication tools simultaneously but rather it involves coordinating and integrating digital and non-digital communication practices throughout their business operations. The integration of these communication practices are reflected by customers as they frequently moved between the digital and physical spaces throughout their interactions with businesses. For example, Jannah explained that customers often discovered her business through Instagram and Threads before approaching her during pop-up events. Similarly, Amelia described instances where online engagement has transferred to physical visits and repeat purchases. These examples illustrate how customer communication frequently extends across multiple communication channels such as digital and offline channels which allows businesses to enhance their visibility and maintain a cohesive presence across various consumer touchpoints.

It is important to note that the movement between two communication spaces was not always one-directional. Although some participants described customers discovering their businesses online before engaging through physical events, the reverse process was equally evident. For instance, Jannah explained that pop-up events often also served as initial points of contact where customers first encountered her products before continuing their interaction through social media platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp to stay informed about future events. Similarly, Mary noted that many customers initially discovered her business during pop-up events and subsequently requested her business Instagram account to maintain contact and follow business updates. These findings suggest that hybrid communication functioned as a complementary manner that reinforces and enhances the effectiveness of the other communication practices before, during and after physical interactions.

The findings extend previous research that has focused on digital communication tools as a means for facilitating customer engagement and visibility of businesses (Sagala & Ōri, 2024). While social media platforms were significantly regarded as important for participants, the findings suggest that digital communication alone was often insufficient for micro-enterprises that are operating within Brunei's event-based business environment. Physical interactions remained equally important in allowing customers to interact directly with the products, business owners and establish a sense of familiarity with the businesses. Participants such as Claudia and Finn, Mary, Yasmin, Jannah, Amelia, and May consistently combined digital communication with offline interactions which demonstrates to showcase how they engage and attract with customers throughout multiple communication sites rather than just online interaction alone.

Overall, hybrid communication functioned as more than a marketing strategy, but it represents the perceived operational choice made by micro-enterprise owners to maintain customer relationships, maximising exposure with limited resources and sustain business visibility across both digital and physical spaces. Therefore, this study demonstrates that not just the integration of communication channels but also demonstrated how these hybrid communication practices are actively utilised by micro-enterprise owners within Brunei's event-based business environment.

4.4.2. Building Visibility, Trust and Customer Relationships Through Communication Practices

The findings revealed that communication practices transcend product promotion and frequently contributed to the development of visibility, trust, and ongoing interactions with customers. Participants utilised both digital and offline communication strategies not only to share information about their businesses but also to increase awareness of their business and maintain engagement with customers. These findings can be

understood through Attribution Theory, where it argues that individuals actively seek explanations for observed behaviours and use these interpretations to interpret meanings to their actions, which then shape their perceptions towards an individual's credibility, intentions, and trustworthiness (Heider, 1958). In the context of micro-enterprises, customers may draw their perceptions about business owners based on their communication behaviours and visible communication practices but for the context of this study, customers appeared to form impressions of micro-enterprise owners based on their communication practices across both digital and physical environments.

One notable finding was the role of communication in increasing business visibility and customer recognition. According to Attribution Theory, it suggests that individuals rely on observation cues and available information to form perceptions of others (Heider, 1958). This was evident in the experiences of Amelia and Jannah. For instance, Amelia described instances where customers would recognise her during pop-up events through previous exposure on social media platforms as well as appearances on Brunei's radio and television station. Similarly, Jannah explained that customers would recognise her from discussions on Threads which transcend to her business Instagram account before approaching her booth. From an Attribution Theory perspective, repeated exposure with a business provides customers with observable information that helps form perceptions and expectations about the business along with its owner which reflected in customer's behaviour in recognising and engaging with them during later interactions.

The findings also suggest that communication contributes to perceptions of authenticity and trustworthiness. This was particularly evident in the ways whereby participants communicated apart from conventional promotional activities. For example, Jannah described Threads as a platform where she openly shared experiences about being a micro-enterprise owner and her business, participating in discussions with other business owners and customers. Similarly, Amelia utilising Instagram Stories to share a glimpse of her daily activities to her customers. Both Jannah and Amelia demonstrated the usage of social media platforms are not limited to their business but also includes their day-to-day business realities which may encourage customers to perceive business owners as relatable and approachable.

Moreover, Amelia's experiences demonstrated how responsiveness and interaction could influence customer perception and behaviours. For example, a customer who initially discussed Pokémon-themed products online before returning to make a purchase at a physical event. This interaction suggests that customers may interpret responsiveness as indicators of reliability which contributes to a positive behaviour from the customer which contribute to a positive image to the business.

The findings further indicate that customer perception was not only influenced by digital communication but also by offline communication practices. Attribution Theory argues that individuals may draw conclusions based on observable information but for this study, majority of participants frequently relied on consistent physical interactions and booth presentation to communicate their brand identity and quality. For Mary's approach, she places greater importance on product presentation and booth arrangement. She described allowing her products to "*speak*" for themselves which relies on visual appeal and product quality to attract customers. Through observation, it was evident that many customers have shown interest to her booth by initiating conversations first such as asking for product pricing and her business Instagram account, as well as purchasing her products. This reflected the importance of visual presentations and product quality in order to enhance business credibility even with less verbal communication.

In addition, Claudia and Finn through observation are seen as proactive in their communication approach during physical events which aligns with their behaviours online such as in their short-video content on Instagram which is supported by their artefact analysis. According to Attribution Theory, such interactions play a significant impact on customers' views especially on their business and its owners as their portrayed brand identity which focused on approachable and friendly behaviours are consistent across both offline and online communication practices. A similar form of attribution can be observed in Safaa's use of signage that indicates that her artwork was not AI-generated as it functioned not just to display the initially emerged concern regarding AI-generated art within the creative community but also function as a visible communication marker directed towards customers. By openly communicating that her work was created authentically, Safaa provided customers with information that could influence how customers evaluated the value of her artwork, her integrity as an artist and shows her overall credibility. This demonstrates how communication practices can also shape customer perceptions through symbolic cues such as a signage placed within the business environment.

A similar pattern can be observed by Yasmin's interactive booth elements, particularly the use of her custom business stamps. The free stamps encourage customer to interact with her booth and create a memorable

experience. Yasmin explained that customers would then share the stamp and its experience on social media and tagged her business online which serves as cues where customers attribute creativity, and friendliness to the business owner.

These findings suggest that customer relationships were developed through a mixture of visibility, recognition, interpersonal interactions, and observational business practices. Through this study, micro-enterprise owners are utilising hybrid communication practices that showcase behaviours that may shape customers' perceptions of their authenticity, trustworthiness, and creativity regardless of whether these impressions are intentional or emerge as unintentional outcomes of their communication.

4.4.3. Social Capital and Community Networks Utilised in Micro-Enterprise Operations

This section focuses on interpreting the findings that revealed how communication played an important role in building relationships among micro-enterprise owners, event organisers, and broader business communities. These social connections frequently provided participants with access to valuable information, future opportunities and support their business operations and can be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital where it refers to the resources and benefits an individual can access through their social networks. Within the context of this study, communication practices transcend its purposes of business marketing and customer engagement whereby the accumulated social capital of micro-enterprise owners is seen as a valuable form of capital that assist their business operations.

The importance of informal networks in facilitating access to information and its associated business opportunities among micro-enterprise owners are one of the notable findings of the study. Several participants described the use of WhatsApp groups that were originally established through their previous participation in pop-up events created by event organisers. These groups act as a space for not only sharing information regarding upcoming events, booth availability, and event participation opportunities but also served symbolically as a inclusive membership to directly access to the wider micro-enterprise community. Through this social network it provides some participants' benefits such as not always having to independently search for event organisers or management teams when showing interest in event participation. From a Bourdieu's (1986) perspective, the value of these digital informal groups is not necessarily coming from the communication platform, but rather in the social connections it possesses within the network. In other words, the access to these informal groups served as a form of social capital to help ease the business participation of events within the micro-enterprise sector.

The findings further suggest that these informal networks facilitated the development of relationships among vendors. Apart from that, through the repeated exposure to interactions within these communities' participants can form relationships with other micro-business owners which sometimes developed into joint partnerships such as booth-sharing. For example, participants Amelia and Mary explained that through repeated participation in events, they become acquainted with other vendors which enabled them to contact each other digital from the informal network and resulted in opportunities for future collaborations. These relationships were particularly important for participants seeking partners to share rent fees in event which may have been a financial challenge. These findings demonstrate how social capital is accumulated and used by some micro-enterprise owners to gain access to future opportunities, social networks and support that may not be readily available.

The findings further suggest that social capital was also maintained through mutual support among vendors. For example, Amelia explained that other micro-enterprise owners should be viewed as "*links*" and not as competitors which demonstrate the importance of supporting one another within local business community. Through observation and artefact analysis participants of the arts and crafts vendors would share information regarding events, promote both their booth partners and neighbouring vendors through their Instagram Stories.

Apart from that, the findings indicate that event organisers also functioned as important opportunities for micro-enterprise owners. These event managers relationships, participants gained access to upcoming events within Brunei's pop-up event scene. This further highlights the importance of community networks within Brunei's micro-enterprise sector where certain opportunities are tied to social capital.

4.4.4. Challenges of Hybrid Communication Practices

The findings in this section presents a contrast from previous discussions which discussed about hybrid communication practices associated benefits where this section mainly discussed challenges related to time management, financial constraints, and emerging concerns surrounding artist's authenticity within an increasingly digitalised era.

One of the most significant challenges identified in this study was the significant increase of labour needed to balance maintaining hybrid communication practices. This involved constant content creation, responding to customer enquiries while also participating events and manage customer engagement across multiple communication spaces. Claudia's experiences illustrate how the responsibilities often goes beyond normal working hours and required continuous attention. Similarly, Jannah described how increasing business demand eventually required her to assign content creation to additional team members which suggest that sustaining communication activities may become increasingly difficult for business owner who are operating alone. These concerns are consistent with a previous study which suggest micro-enterprise frequently operate within limited resources (Alwi et al., 2022) and findings reflected that hybrid communication may caused additional pressures on micro-business owners who are already performing multiple business practices. Although, hybrid communication creates opportunities for engagement, but it may also increase workload to sustain communication practices over time.

The findings also suggest that the effectiveness of hybrid communication may be influenced by financial and resource constraints. Although physical participation through pop-up events remained important for increasing visibility and customer engagement, access to these offline communication spaces often required financial costs especially with rising booth rental costs. This highlights an important limitation of hybrid communication practices, as participation in offline communication spaces may not be equally accessible to all micro-enterprise owners. While for the majority of arts and crafts participants try to mitigate these challenges through booth sharing arrangements, the issue still presents a concern among micro-enterprise owners.

An emerging challenge identified in this study was the concern regarding the growing presence of some vendors that utilise of AI-generated content in producing their products. Although digital platforms provide various opportunities for artists and creative entrepreneurs such garnering attention, it also presents challenges that undermines the authenticity of artist artworks. The findings from Safaa and Yasmin suggest that technological advancements may confuse customers on how to evaluate originality, and artistic effort. As a result, authenticity have increasingly become an issue that may require some participants to actively negotiate and communicate clearly to their audience through symbolic cues such as Safaa's no-AI signage. This AI issue can also according to Yasmin's devalue the artistic labour which reflects the need to exert more effort to communicate their authenticity in order to differentiate their work. These findings suggest that hybrid communication is increasingly involved to communicate creative work within the evolving digital landscape.

Overall, the findings showed the benefits of hybrid communication are typically accompanied by practical challenges. Aligned with Wu (2024) and Deku et al. (2024), the findings indicate that integrating digital and offline communication strategies may enhance engagement and visibility but at the same time creates additional demands for smaller businesses. Therefore, hybrid communication should be treated not only as an opportunity for business growth but also as an ongoing process that requires micro-enterprise owners to balance their communication approaches with their business sustainability, resource limitations, and tackling emerging digital environment issues.

4.4.5. Limitations and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that event organisers consider the affordability and overall accessibility of participation opportunities for micro-enterprise owners in Brunei. The findings revealed that pop-up events remain an important component of hybrid communication practices for their business operations however several participants have highlighted especially among arts and crafts vendors the financial challenges with booth rental fees which may limit participation of smaller business operating with limited resources. Therefore, to support a more inclusive micro-enterprise environment, event organisers may consider implementing more flexible participation options such as shared booth arrangements, tiered pricing structures to accommodate emerging micro-enterprises because such measures may reduce barriers to event participation.

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. Firstly, the study involved a relatively small number of participants, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to the wider micro-enterprise sectors in Brunei. Secondly, although the study employed methodological triangulation through interviews observations, and artefacts analysis, observations were particularly conducted during a single event period which may cause variation in communication practices across different events or time periods that were not captured within the scope of this study. Finally, the participants

represented specific sectors particularly arts and crafts vendors and food and beverage businesses which may limit the findings applicability of other types of micro-enterprises.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how micro-enterprise owners in Brunei utilise hybrid communication practices within their business activities. The study is guided by Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) Theory, Attribution Theory and Bourdieu's concept of Social Capital. The study specifically examines how participants combine digital and non-digital communication methods to interact with customers, gain visibility and sustain business activities. Through semi-structured interviews and observations were conducted during pop up events. Meanwhile, artefact analysis on micro-enterprise social media platforms provided a thorough observation digitally such as social media content, business displays and promotional materials. The study provides an in-depth exploration into communication practices, opportunities and challenges experienced by micro-enterprise owners operating within Brunei's event-based business environment.

The findings revealed that hybrid communication was not limited to the use of different communication channels but instead participants used different communication methods together as part of one connected process. Participants frequently combined social media platform such as Instagram including Instagram Stories, Threads and WhatsApp with face-to-face interactions, booth presentation and participation in pop-up events. The study found that customers often moved between digital and physical environments while other customers discovered businesses through at physical setting before transcending engagement through social media platforms. These findings demonstrate that digital and offline communication practices often worked together to support customer engagement.

The study also found that communication practices played an important role in shaping customer perceptions and relationships with the micro-enterprise owners. Apart from promoting products, communication activities influenced how customer perceived authenticity, creativity, and trustworthiness. Participants utilised a range of communication approaches which includes sharing personal information, interactive activities, visual displays as well as cues to showcase authenticity of artistry. These communication approach contributed to customer engagement and business visibility.

Furthermore, the findings highlighted the significance of social capital within Brunei's micro-enterprise sector. Informal vendor networks, WhatsApp groups, relationships with event organisers and collaboration with other vendors provided participants with access to information, opportunities, and support. These social connections demonstrate that communications can functioned both as a marketing strategy but also a way to maintain valuable social relationships. Despite these benefits, the study also requires a substantial investment on time, effort and financial resources.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on hybrid communication by demonstrating that communication practices among micro-enterprise owners transcends beyond marketing and customer engagement. In Brunei, hybrid communication functions as a means to communicate various means such as supporting customer relationships, developing social networks in the form of social capital, and sustaining the business operations. As digital and physical communication continues to evolve, hybrid communication I argue will remain an important strategy for micro-enterprise owners seeking for maintaining visibility and engagement within an increasingly competitive business landscape.

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