Inclusive Branding and Visual Communication for Disability-Led MSMEs: Strategies for Social Empowerment and Market Competitiveness

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ABSTRACT

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a vital role in fostering economic inclusion, particularly for marginalized communities such as persons with disabilities. However, limited access to effective branding and visual communication strategies often hinders the competitiveness of disability-led or disability-inclusive MSMEs. This study aims to explore how strategic branding and visual communication can enhance the market competitiveness of products developed by disability communities under social empowerment programs. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and visual documentation from selected MSMEs supported by social empowerment initiatives. The findings reveal that consistent visual identity, inclusive branding narratives, and audience-oriented packaging design significantly contribute to consumer trust and product differentiation in the market. Moreover, the collaboration between designers and community members proved essential in ensuring that the branding reflects both the values and capabilities of the disability community. This research highlights the transformative role of visual branding in economic empowerment and offers practical insights for inclusive design practices and policy formulation. The study contributes to the interdisciplinary discourse between design, social entrepreneurship, and disability inclusion by emphasizing the strategic integration of visual communication in community-based enterprises.

1. Introduction

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)[1] represent a vital sector in national economic growth, particularly in generating employment and reducing social inequality. Within this context, the disability community emerges as a potential actor that is often marginalized in

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economic development processes. Despite possessing entrepreneurial spirit and various skills[2], persons with disabilities continue to face structural and social barriers that limit their access to markets and resources. This inequality creates a gap between their potential and actual contribution to the economy. This study addresses these issues as part of a broader effort to promote a more inclusive and equitable economy.

MSMEs involving persons with disabilities are often outcomes of social empowerment programs[3] initiated by governmental or private institutions. These programs typically emphasize production skills or basic business management training. However, product visual design and communication strategies are frequently overlooked. As a result, products from disability communities tend to be visually less appealing compared to those from other MSMEs, directly affecting market interest despite the products' intrinsic value and quality[4].

Challenges related to branding and visual communication within the disability community[5] are closely tied to limited resources, including knowledge, technology, and access to professional expertise. Many MSME actors with disabilities lack the capacity or opportunity to develop a strong and consistent brand identity. Consequently, their products often appear generic and undifferentiated. In an increasingly visual and competitive marketplace, this situation hampers market penetration and brand reinforcement—making it a strategic and systemic issue that demands attention.

Visual communication design[6] plays a central role in shaping consumer perception, building brand image, and enhancing product appeal. For MSMEs run by people with disabilities, compelling visual representation is not merely about aesthetics—it is a means of conveying the values and narratives of the community to the broader public. When community narratives[7] are effectively translated into visual form, their uniqueness becomes a differentiating value. Unfortunately, many empowerment programs still view design merely as a technical

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[4] Bert De Munck, 'Guilds, Product Quality and Intrinsic Value. Towards a History of Conventions?', *Historical Social Research*, 2011.

[5] Dena Hassouneh, Amana Alcala-Moss, and E. Mcneff, 'Practical Strategies for Promoting Full Inclusion of Individuals with Disabilities in Community-Based Participatory Intervention Research', *Research in Nursing and Health*, 34.3 (2011) <https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.20434>; Rupa S. Valdez and others, 'Engaging the Disability Community in Informatics Research: Rationales and Practical Steps', *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association*, 2022 <https://doi.org/10.1093/jamia/ocac136>.

[6] Fedric Kujur and Saumya Singh, 'Visual Communication and Consumer-Brand Relationship on Social Networking Sites - Uses & Gratifications Theory Perspective', *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, 15.1 (2020) <https://doi.org/10.4067/S0718-18762020000100104>.

[7] Karyn Stapleton and John Wilson, 'Telling the Story: Meaning Making in a Community Narrative', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 108 (2017) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2016.11.003>; Louis D. Brown, Joseph C. Berryhill, and Eric C. Jones, 'Integrating Journalism Into Health Promotion: Creating and Disseminating Community Narratives', *Health Promotion Practice*, 20.4 (2019) <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839918781334>.

complement, rather than as a tool for social transformation. This perspective must shift to enable design to serve as a strategic component of economic empowerment.

Strategically crafted branding can serve as a catalyst to enhance the competitiveness of MSMEs within disability communities. Such an approach goes beyond mere logos or brand names and includes message packaging that reflects the identity and values of the community. The uniqueness of disability communities can be transformed into brand strengths that distinguish their products in the market. Translating community narratives into strong communication elements requires designers and branding facilitators[8] who understand the social context. This calls for a multidisciplinary collaboration and active participation from the community itself.

Changes in consumer behavior in the post pandemic era—marked by increased reliance on visual interactions through digital platforms—have added urgency to this issue. In this context, the visual appearance of a product has become one of the key factors influencing purchasing decisions[9]. Products from disability communities often lack visuals that are adaptive to digital media, resulting in limited reach in online markets. As competition intensifies and visuals become a primary communication tool, poorly presented products struggle to survive. This underscores the critical need for contextually designed visual communication strategies.

The primary aim of this study is to explore how branding strategies and visual communication can be effectively implemented to enhance the competitiveness of products from disability community MSMEs. This research seeks to understand the process of developing brand identity, product visualization, and communication strategies aligned with the community's characteristics. Additionally, it investigates the extent to which collaboration between designers and disability communities can generate inclusive branding solutions[10]. Emphasizing participatory design practices allows community members to actively engage in building their own brand identities. The outcomes of this process are expected to create both economic and social value simultaneously.

The central research question focuses on how branding strategies and visual communication impact the competitiveness of products from MSMEs within the disability community. Sub questions include: (1) which visual elements have the greatest impact on market perception, (2) how community narratives can be translated into visual media, and (3) to what extent consumers evaluate products from disability communities based on their visual presentation. These questions form the basis for developing an analytical framework that integrates design, marketing, and social studies—thus adopting a multidisciplinary approach. This study

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underscores the importance of understanding branding as a collaborative process that cannot be separated from the social context of its creators.

This research addresses the need for branding strategies that are not only effective from a business perspective but also ethical and contextually grounded[11]. The branding practices developed can serve as examples of how the values of inclusion can be translated into communicative visual forms. In a world increasingly driven by images and perceptions, the representation of marginalized communities in products becomes a crucial issue. When design successfully amplifies community voices, products become not just commodities but also instruments of social change. This perspective contributes conceptually to a discourse that has been relatively underexplored in previous research.

This study aims to encourage scholars, design practitioners, and policymakers to consider social dimensions in the development of MSME branding. When branding is designed inclusively and participatory[12], its impact extends beyond sales performance to broader social transformation. Strong, narrative based visual strategies have the potential to expand markets and strengthen the economic position of vulnerable groups[13]. This concept aligns with the vision of a sustainable and inclusive economy[14]. Therefore, the urgency of this research lies not only in the effectiveness of branding but also in its contribution to fostering a fair and sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem.

2. Theoretical Review

Branding is a strategic process aimed at shaping consumer perceptions of a product or organization's identity and value. In the context of brand positioning strategy, Keller (2008) emphasizes the importance of meaningful and relevant brand differentiation to ensure that a product occupies a distinct position in the consumer's mind. This strategy involves creating a unique value proposition and consistently communicating the brand message across multiple market touchpoints. For MSMEs, branding extends beyond mere logos or brand names; it encompasses shaping brand image and fostering emotional connections with consumers. This concept becomes particularly salient when branding is applied to disability communities, who carry strong social values that deserve to be communicated effectively.

Visual communication plays a fundamental role in reinforcing brand messages through design elements such as typography, color, composition, and imagery. Within the MSME context, effective visual communication principles can enhance product appeal and clarify business identity in a highly competitive marketplace. Good design must convey messages clearly, aesthetically, and in ways that resonate with the target audience. For disability community based MSMEs, an inclusive and participatory visual approach enables authentic representation

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[13] Jehane Simona-Moussa, 'The Subjective Well-Being of Those Vulnerable to Poverty in Switzerland', *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 21.5 (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-019-00143-5>.

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of collective identity[15], thereby enhancing credibility and consumer engagement. Visual communication also serves as a vital bridge for building market trust in products originating from marginalized groups.

Theory of competitive advantage[16] outlines three primary strategies: cost leadership, differentiation, and focus. For disability community MSMEs, differentiation emerges as the most relevant strategy, given their capacity to offer unique social value and storytelling that can be transformed into brand strengths. Competitiveness in this context is not solely determined by price or technical quality, but also by perceived value constructed through visual narratives and brand identity. The application of Porter's framework in this study aids in understanding how community based MSMEs can compete by leveraging uniqueness and social relevance. This strategy also facilitates a shift from purely productive approaches to value based strategies.

Previous studies have shown that empowering disability communities through the creative economy can enhance both economic capacity and self-esteem among persons with disabilities. The importance of active community engagement[17] in creative processes to ensure contextual and sustainable outcomes. Moreover, local studies have demonstrated that design interventions can improve market access and product visibility for vulnerable groups. However, most existing studies remain focused on production aspects or access to capital, and have yet to comprehensively integrate branding and visual communication strategies. This gap in the literature provides an opportunity for this research to contribute.

This study seeks to address that gap by examining branding and visual communication as integral strategies for enhancing the competitiveness of MSMEs run by disability communities. While previous literature has predominantly emphasized technical and economic aspects, this research integrates perspectives from communication design, social entrepreneurship, and inclusion. This approach offers a novel contribution by positioning community narratives as a central element in brand strategy. Emphasizing community involvement and the translation of social values into visual elements introduces a new dimension to creative economic empowerment. Thus, this study is not only practically oriented but also offers theoretical contributions to the development of socially just design practices.

[15] Jakoba Sraml Gonzalez and Magnus Gulbrandsen, 'Innovation in Established Industries Undergoing Digital Transformation: The Role of Collective Identity and Public Values', *Innovation: Organization and Management*, 24.1 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1080/14479338.2021.1938578>; Brian Kavanagh, Markus Perkmann, and Nelson Phillips, 'Collective Identity and the Limits of Innovation: A Review and Research Agenda', *Innovation: Organization and Management*, 23.1 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.1080/14479338.2020.1742127>.

[16] Hui-Ling Wang, 'Theories for Competitive Advantage', *Being Practical with Theory: A Window into Business Research*, 2014; Roland Bel, 'A Property Rights Theory of Competitive Advantage', *Strategic Management Journal*, 39.6 (2018) <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.2707>; Robert M. Grant, 'The Resource-Based Theory of Competitive Advantage: Implications for Strategy Formulation', *California Management Review*, 33.3 (1991) <https://doi.org/10.2307/41166664>.

[17] Nancy Russell and others, 'The Active Community Engagement Continuum', *The ACQUIRE Project*, 1.7 (2008); Monica J. Barratt and Alexia Maddox, 'Active Engagement with Stigmatised Communities through Digital Ethnography', *Qualitative Research*, 16.6 (2016) <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794116648766>.

3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach[18] using a case study method[19] to gain an in-depth understanding of branding and visual communication practices implemented by disability community based MSMEs. This approach was selected for its capacity to facilitate rich contextual exploration of the social, cultural, and visual dynamics surrounding branding processes within marginalized communities. The case study method is deemed appropriate for uncovering local narratives and participatory practices that are not easily quantifiable. The research focuses on the interpretation and symbolic construction emerging from interactions among MSME actors, designers, and the market. Through this approach, the study aims to capture the complexity of branding practices rooted in social values.

The research subjects include MSME actors who are part of social empowerment programs managed by government institutions or NGOs and who actively involve the disability community in both production and business management. Research sites were purposively selected based on the presence of business activity, the extent of community involvement, and the completeness of branding and visual communication elements. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with MSME actors, empowerment facilitators, and designers engaged in the creative process. Additionally, participatory observation was employed to understand the working context and social interactions within day-to-day business operations. Visual documentation—such as logos, packaging, brochures, and digital promotional media— was also collected for further analysis.

The analytical techniques used include thematic analysis to identify patterns within participant narratives, and visual semiotic analysis to examine the symbolic meanings embedded in branding design elements. This includes identifying visual signs, message structures, and the relationship between visual representations and community identity. Data validity was ensured through source and technique triangulation by cross referencing interview findings, observations, and visual documentation from multiple stakeholders. This approach is expected to yield a comprehensive and credible understanding of branding practices that are not only technical in nature but also deeply embedded in cultural and social contexts. The findings will serve as the foundation for developing contextually relevant and competitive visual communication strategies.

4. Results and Discussion

The branding strategies adopted by disability community based MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises) demonstrate diverse approaches, yet share a common emphasis on social values and collective identity. Most entrepreneurs construct their brand identity elements around personal or community narratives rooted in the struggles of persons with disabilities in producing creative works. Brand identities are shaped through storytelling that highlights values such as inclusivity, perseverance, and independence. Verbal elements such as brand names and slogans typically reflect the spirit of empowerment and solidarity. This strategy reflects a conscious effort to differentiate disability community products from mainstream offerings through a value driven approach.

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[19] Arum Priadi, 'The Analysis of Ellipsis within The Jakarta Post Cartoons: A Case Study', *Ahmad Dahlan Journal of English Studies (ADJES)*, 1.2 (2014); Arum Priadi, 'A Discourse Analysis on Dialogues in Novels and Its Implication to Improve Students' Reading Comprehension', *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, 3.2 (2015).

The brand personality emerging from this study tends to portray characteristics that are warm, sincere, and inspiring. MSME actors position their brands as symbols of struggle, rather than merely commercial entities. Consistent delivery of social messages strengthens the brand's position as a representation of the community rather than that of an individual. This contributes to the development of emotional bonds with consumers who support the products for moral and affective reasons. Such a brand personality adds value in attracting market segments that are socially conscious.

Visual communication implemented by disability focused MSMEs spans a variety of media, from product packaging to digital presence via social media. Packaging design is typically simple but meaningful, with bold colour usage aimed at increasing shelf visibility. Logos often incorporate symbols related to courage, hard work, or local culture. Social media serves as a primary channel for promotion, customer testimonials, and education about production processes. Digital catalogues are also increasingly utilized, although technical limitations still pose challenges.

Analysis of visual documentation reveals a tendency toward authentic and personal visual storytelling. Photographs of disabled workers engaged in production, along with motivational quotes in promotional materials, are used to build emotional connections with consumers. However, not all MSME actors possess a deep understanding of visual communication design principles, resulting in inconsistent visual quality and coherence. The lack of access to professional design support is a key factor behind this suboptimal execution, despite the strong narrative value.

Interviews with consumers indicate that public perceptions of disability community MSME products are generally positive, particularly due to the social values embedded in them. Consumers evaluate products not only for their functional quality but also for the stories behind their production. These products are seen as uniquely valuable because of their direct social contribution. Nonetheless, some consumers expressed expectations for improved visual quality and packaging to enhance perceived professionalism. These perceptions highlight the importance of balancing social value with visual aesthetics.

The branding strategies employed have proven effective in distinguishing disability community products from other MSME products in a competitive market. A strong social identity offers a unique differentiating factor that is difficult for other businesses to replicate. The use of community narratives in visual communication enhances customer loyalty and supports story based marketing strategies. Competitive advantage is not built solely through pricing or technical quality, but also through perceived value and consumer sentiment. This validates the relevance of Porter's differentiation strategy in this context.

However, the effectiveness of branding efforts is heavily influenced by several enabling factors, such as support from empowerment institutions, involvement of designers, and access to digital training. Development programs that offer training in design, marketing, and social media use significantly improve branding quality and visual communication. Collaborations between disability communities and professional designers have proven successful in creating strong and focused visual identities. The availability of digital infrastructure and internet connectivity also plays a critical role in increasing product visibility in online markets. Local community support and customer loyalty serve as valuable social capital that further strengthens competitiveness.

Conversely, there are also significant barriers, such as limited visual literacy among MSME actors, restricted access to design technologies, and insufficient funding for professional packaging. Some entrepreneurs struggle with concepts like brand positioning and communicative design. These challenges lead to inconsistencies in visual elements and weak

brand recognition. In addition, societal stigma against people with disabilities continues to hinder their access to marketing opportunities and distribution networks. These obstacles highlight the need for a more holistic and sustainable empowerment approach.

A comparison with branding practices among no disability MSMEs reveals notable differences in brand image development. Mainstream MSMEs tend to prioritize efficiency, market appeal, and visual professionalism as their primary strategies. In contrast, disability focused MSMEs emphasize social values and storytelling, sometimes at the expense of technical execution. This contrast suggests that value driven branding[20] has its own strengths, though it still requires technical reinforcement. It underscores that branding is not merely an aesthetic matter, but one of identity and values.

These findings align with Keller's theory of brand equity, wherein strong brand identity, message consistency, and emotional association contribute to positive consumer perceptions. Community involvement in shaping visual identity reinforces brand meaning in the eyes of consumers and builds trust. Moreover, visual semiotic analysis reveals that the symbols and colours used carry deep meanings that reflect community spirit and the values of struggle. These findings strengthen the argument that design is not merely about form, but also a vessel of meaning. The combination of narrative and visual elements creates an emotionally resonant and authentic brand experience.

Within Porter's theoretical framework, the differentiation strategy pursued by disability focused MSMEs has been effectively implemented by leveraging social values as a core strength. Products are not merely sold as commodities but as representations of struggle and social solidarity. In this context, competitiveness is built not only through products themselves, but also through identity communication that touches the social and emotional dimensions of consumers. This offers a theoretical contribution by suggesting that differentiation strategy can be extended to encompass community based values within the realm of social entrepreneurship[21]. These findings enrich the literature on community based competitive advantage.

This study also underscores the importance of inclusive and contextual visual communication principles in designing promotional materials for marginalized groups. Visual communication serves not only to convey information but also as a medium for representation and empowerment. Visuals created by the communities themselves offer space for expression

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[20] Galina Biedenbach and Tomas Biedenbach, 'CO-CREATING CONSCIENTIOUS CORPORATE BRANDS INSIDE-OUT THROUGH VALUES-DRIVEN BRANDING', in *The Routledge Companion to Corporate Branding*, 2022 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003035749-35>; Chen Tsang Simon Tsai and Yao Chin Wang, 'Experiential Value in Branding Food Tourism', *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management*, 6.1 (2017) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2016.02.003>.

[21] Mohammed Faiz Kamaludin, Jesrina Ann Xavier, and Muslim Amin, 'Social Entrepreneurship and Sustainability: A Conceptual Framework', *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, 15.1 (2024) <https://doi.org/10.1080/19420676.2021.1900339>; Gisele Hidalgo, Jefferson Marlon Monticelli, and Ingridi Vargas Bortolaso, 'Social Capital as a Driver of Social Entrepreneurship', *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, 15.1 (2024) <https://doi.org/10.1080/19420676.2021.1951819>; Shawn M. Carraher, Dianne H.B. Welsh, and Andrew Svilokos, 'Validation of a Measure of Social Entrepreneurship', *European Journal of International Management*, 10.4 (2016) <https://doi.org/10.1504/EJIM.2016.077421>; Andrea Rey-Martí, Domingo Ribeiro-Soriano, and Daniel Palacios-Marqués, 'A Bibliometric Analysis of Social Entrepreneurship', *Journal of Business Research*, 69.5 (2016) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.10.033>.

and narrative control[22], which is often absent in conventional branding practices. The participatory design principle becomes a strategic approach that is not only inclusive but also strengthens brand attachment to community identity. This suggests that participatory design can serve as a model for value driven MSME development.

The experiences of disability communities in independently managing their brands also reflect a transformative shift from being aid recipients to active participants in the creative economy[23]. Branding becomes a tool for articulating aspirations and gaining recognition for their productive capacity. This process affirms that branding is not only a commercial instrument but also a social one that advocates for the legitimacy of group identity. Through strong branding, communities gain new platforms to challenge stigma and openly showcase their capabilities. This broadens our understanding of the social function of branding and communication design.

These conditions carry important implications for designers, facilitators, and policymakers involved in empowering disability community MSMEs. A multidisciplinary approach is required—combining design expertise, social understanding, and context sensitive marketing strategies. Designers must adapt their approaches to the needs, abilities, and visual cultures of the communities to ensure that branding outcomes genuinely reflect their identities. Empowerment policies should incorporate aesthetic and communicative elements as integral parts of economic intervention. Inclusivity in design is key to building fair and sustainable competitiveness.

The findings of this research demonstrate that branding and visual communication strategies play a central role in building the competitiveness of disability community MSMEs[24]. Value and identity based approaches have proven effective in creating differentiation and fostering market trust. However, success is highly dependent on the presence of a supportive ecosystem, including training, design access, and ongoing assistance. This study reinforces the importance of synergy between visual communication design and social empowerment practices within the creative economy. Thus, it offers both theoretical and practical contributions to the development of inclusive and equitable branding.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that the branding and visual communication strategies implemented by disability community MSMEs significantly contribute to product competitiveness through a value based approach, community narratives, and authentic visual representation. Brand identity is built not only as a marketing tool but also as a medium for social articulation and collective struggle. These findings reinforce Porter's theory of differentiation based competitive advantage and extend the discourse of visual communication design into the domains of social

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representation and empowerment. Practically, this research highlights the importance of community involvement in the design process to ensure that the resulting brand is not only aesthetically strong but also truly reflective of their identity. This strategy has proven effective in transforming access limitations and stigma into distinctive and competitive branding opportunities.

For visual communication design practitioners, this study emphasizes the urgency of participatory and contextual approaches in designing visual elements for marginalized groups. Designers are expected not only to possess technical skills but also social sensitivity and the ability to build meaningful dialogue with communities. Social empowerment institutions are encouraged to integrate digital based design and marketing training into their programs to strengthen branding capacity among disability focused MSMEs. Meanwhile, policymakers need to develop regulatory frameworks and infrastructure support that foster an inclusive entrepreneurship ecosystem, including access to creative capital, facilitation of intellectual property rights, and value based promotion. All stakeholders play a vital role in ensuring that branding functions not only as a market competition tool but also as a mechanism for social transformation.

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