
	<p>Solo International Collaboration and Publication of Social Sciences and Humanities E-ISSN: 2988-3512 Vol.4, No.2, 2026, pp. 789-806 DOI: https://doi.org/10.61455/sicopus.v4i02.574</p>	
<p>Received January 07, 2026</p>	<p>Revised May 30, 2026</p>	<p>Accepted June 12, 2026</p>

Local Businesses to Global Digital Presence: Building Authentic Online Identities among Small Businesses in Surakarta

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Abstract

Objective: This study examines how small batik businesses in Surakarta build authentic online identities while entering the global digital marketplace. **Theoretical framework:** Guided by the concept of *Digitally Mediated Authenticity*, the study explains how authenticity is created through digital communication, cultural storytelling, transparency, and customer engagement. **Literature review:** The study addresses the limited research on how cultural SMEs translate local heritage, craftsmanship, and brand authenticity into digital formats that global consumers can understand and trust. **Method:** A qualitative case study approach was employed using semi-structured interviews with nine informants representing batik businesses and related stakeholders. Data were analysed through thematic analysis to identify key patterns and themes. **Results:** The findings reveal four key practices for building authentic online identities: visual transparency, narrative grounding, interactive co-construction, and platform alignment. Export-oriented SMEs also rely on digital communication tools, although challenges remain in visibility, financial integration, and logistics. **Implications:** The study enriches the literature on brand authenticity, cultural branding, and SME digitalisation by demonstrating that authenticity is continuously negotiated and sustained through digital practices and trust-based relationships. **Novelty:** This research provides a new perspective on how cultural SMEs digitally construct and communicate authenticity in global markets. It highlights authenticity as a dynamic and digitally mediated process rather than a fixed organisational attribute.

Keywords: authentic online identity, batik smes, digital marketplace, cultural branding, digitally mediated authenticity.

INTRODUCTION

Digital marketplaces have reshaped how small businesses enter, compete, and survive in global markets. Online platforms enable small firms to reach customers beyond local boundaries, present their products to international audiences, and build market visibility without relying only on conventional distribution channels. This shift is significant because global e-commerce continues to expand rapidly. UNCTAD reports that business e-commerce sales across 43 economies grew by nearly 60% between 2016 and 2022, reaching USD 27 trillion in 2022 [1]. For small businesses, this growth creates new opportunities to access wider markets. At the same time, it creates pressure to build credible, distinctive, and trustworthy online identities in increasingly crowded digital marketplaces [2].

However, digital market access does not automatically create a competitive advantage for small businesses. Digitalisation can improve SME performance, innovation, productivity, and competitiveness, but smaller firms often face barriers related to low awareness, limited internal resources, skill deficiencies, and financial constraints [3]. These challenges become more complex for small businesses that sell cultural products. They not only need to promote products online [4]. They also need to communicate cultural meaning, origin, craftsmanship, and trust to customers who may have limited knowledge of the product's cultural background. In this context, online identity becomes a strategic issue because it shapes how global customers understand who the business is, what values it represents, and why its products deserve trust [5].

The batik industry in Surakarta, Indonesia, offers a rich context for examining this issue. Indonesian Batik is internationally recognised by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage that carries techniques, symbolism, and cultural meanings embedded in social life [6]. Surakarta is also home to historic batik clusters, including Kampung Batik Laweyan, where batik enterprises are closely linked to local heritage, community development, and cultural tourism [7]. For small batik businesses in Surakarta, digital platforms create opportunities to reach broader and potentially global audiences. Yet these platforms also require entrepreneurs to translate local heritage into visual content, captions, product descriptions, marketplace profiles, customer interactions, and trust signals that can be understood across cultural and geographic boundaries [8].

Prior studies have examined brand identity, brand authenticity, cultural branding, digital branding, and SME branding. Brand identity research explains how firms define and communicate the attributes, values, and meanings that distinguish them from competitors [9]. Brand authenticity research shows that consumers value brands perceived as genuine, credible, consistent, and true to their values. SME branding studies also show that small firms often build brands through founder values, informal practices, resource constraints, and close relationships with customers. Meanwhile, cultural branding highlights how brands gain meaning through cultural narratives, symbols, and identity resources [10].

Despite these important contributions, the literature still offers a limited explanation of how small cultural businesses construct authentic online identities while adapting to global digital marketplace expectations [11]. Existing studies tend to examine brand identity, authenticity, digitalisation, and cultural branding as separate domains. This leaves an important gap in understanding how these dimensions interact in the everyday digital practices of small businesses that sell heritage-based products. This gap matters because cultural SMEs do not simply move products from offline to online markets. They translate heritage, craftsmanship, local values, and trust into digital forms that must remain culturally credible and globally understandable [12].

This study addresses this gap by asking: How do small batik businesses in Surakarta build authentic online identities in the global marketplace? Using a qualitative case study approach, this research explores how small batik entrepreneurs define authenticity, translate cultural values into digital brand identity, communicate trust through online platforms, and adapt to global marketplace expectations. The study focuses on practices, meanings, and tensions involved in online identity building rather than treating digital branding as a purely promotional activity [13].

This article makes three main contributions. First, it contributes to brand identity and brand authenticity literature by explaining how authenticity is constructed through the interaction of cultural heritage, digital storytelling, visual consistency, production transparency, and customer engagement [14]. Second, it extends SME branding research by showing how resource-constrained cultural businesses use online platforms to build legitimacy beyond their local setting [15]. Third, it contributes to cultural branding and digital marketplace research by conceptualising authentic online identity building as a process of cultural translation, where local heritage is transformed into digital narratives,

visual symbols, and trust-building interactions for global audiences. These insights also offer practical value for batik entrepreneurs, SME development agencies, and cultural industry policymakers seeking to strengthen the global visibility of heritage-based small businesses without weakening their cultural identity [16].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Small Cultural Businesses and Online Identity

Small businesses increasingly rely on digital platforms to build visibility, reach wider markets, and communicate brand value. Yet digital access does not create equal opportunities for all firms. Large firms usually enter digital marketplaces with professional branding teams, paid promotion, market analytics, and formal communication systems. Small businesses often depend on limited resources, founder-driven decisions, informal knowledge, and direct customer relationships [17].

This condition becomes more complex for culturally small businesses. They do not only sell products with functional value. They sell products that carry cultural meanings, craft knowledge, local identity, and symbolic value. For this reason, their online presence cannot be reduced to product display or digital promotion. It must also communicate cultural credibility, trust, and authenticity to audiences who may not understand the cultural background of the product [18].

Research on SME digitalisation shows that digital tools can support market access, productivity, and competitiveness, but small firms still face constraints in digital skills, finance, strategic capacity, and platform knowledge. Research on small business branding also shows that digital branding involves brand orientation, brand identity, brand marketing, and brand performance [19]. However, this literature gives limited attention to how cultural SMEs translate heritage, craft, and local values into authentic online identities.

This study, therefore, positions small batik businesses as cultural actors, not only digital sellers. Their key challenge is not simply how to sell batik online, but how to remain culturally authentic while becoming visible, credible, and understandable in the global marketplace.

Brand Identity and Digital Authenticity

Brand identity refers to the meanings, values, attributes, and associations that a firm seeks to communicate to its audiences. Classical branding literature views brand identity as a strategic foundation for differentiation, recognition, and customer trust. This view remains important for small businesses because identity clarity helps them explain who they are, what they represent, and why customers should choose them [20].

However, digital marketplaces change how brand identity is constructed. Identity is no longer expressed only through names, logos, packaging, or physical stores. It is enacted through platform profiles, product photographs, captions, videos, customer reviews, seller responses, marketplace descriptions, and visual consistency across channels. In this setting, online identity becomes an ongoing process of meaning construction. It is shaped by seller practices, platform formats, customer interaction, and market expectations [21].

For small batik businesses, online identity is crucial because customers often encounter the business digitally before they encounter the product physically. A customer may judge quality, professionalism, cultural meaning, and trust through an Instagram feed, marketplace thumbnail, WhatsApp catalogue, product description, or online review. These digital traces shape how the business is understood [22].

Brand authenticity strengthens this process. Earlier studies define authenticity as the perception that a brand is genuine, sincere, consistent, and faithful to its origins. These studies show that authenticity can be built through heritage, quality commitment, sincere stories, and symbolic meaning. Yet this view becomes incomplete in digital marketplaces because customers cannot directly touch the fabric, observe the production process, or verify cultural claims. They rely on digital signals [23].

Grayson and Martinec distinguish between indexical authenticity and iconic authenticity. Indexical authenticity refers to evidence of real connection, while iconic authenticity refers to symbolic resemblance or expected cultural fit. In online batik selling, a video of artisans applying wax may signal indexical authenticity. A visual style that reflects traditional batik aesthetics may signal iconic authenticity. Both cues matter, but both can also be staged, simplified, or misunderstood [24].

More recent authenticity literature treats authenticity as socially constructed rather than objectively fixed. Lehman argues that authenticity depends on meanings, audiences, and evaluations. Morhart also show that perceived brand authenticity involves credibility, integrity, symbolism, and continuity. This perspective fits the present study because batik authenticity does not exist only in the fabric. It also emerges from how sellers present cultural meanings, how customers interpret those meanings, and how platforms shape the visibility of authenticity cues [25].

For small batik businesses, authenticity may appear through stories of motifs, Surakarta identity, production processes, artisan involvement, customer testimonials, and consistent visual presentation. The main tension is that authenticity must also be adapted for global audiences. Sellers may simplify motif meanings, use English captions, standardise product photos, and follow marketplace conventions. These adaptations can make batik more accessible, but they can also weaken cultural depth. This study, therefore, treats authenticity as a negotiated digital process, not as a fixed product attribute [26].

Cultural Branding, SME Constraints, and Digitally Mediated Authenticity

Cultural branding explains how brands gain meaning through symbols, stories, traditions, and identity resources. Holt argues that brands become culturally meaningful when they connect with broader cultural narratives and identity tensions. This view is relevant for batik because batik carries visual, social, historical, and philosophical meanings. Motifs, colours, production techniques, and regional styles can communicate values beyond fashion [27].

In the context of Surakarta batik, cultural meaning may relate to local history, palace traditions, family business heritage, craft knowledge, and community identity. These meanings are valuable, but they are not automatically understood by global customers. This creates the problem of symbolic translation [28]. Small batik businesses must decide which meanings to explain, which meanings to simplify, and which meanings to visualise. If they explain too much, the message may become too dense for digital platforms. If they simplify too much, batik may become only an attractive visual product without cultural depth [29].

Branding in small businesses also differs from branding in large corporations. SMEs often build brands through founder values, personal reputation, informal networks, product quality, and close customer relationships. Centeno shows that SME brand building develops gradually through phases rather than through a fully formalised brand system. This means that small business branding is embedded in everyday practice [30].

Digital marketplaces create a tension for cultural SMEs. On one side, platforms allow small firms to show uniqueness, tell personal stories, and build direct relationships with customers. On the other side, platforms pressure them to appear professional, polished, fast, and standardised. This pressure may push cultural SMEs to imitate larger brands. They may gain a professional appearance, but they risk losing the local distinctiveness that gives them value [31].

To integrate these debates, this study uses Digitally Mediated Authenticity as a conceptual lens. This concept is adapted from the proposed framework in the uploaded draft, but is refined here for qualitative inquiry. Digitally Mediated Authenticity refers to the process through which small cultural businesses construct, communicate, and negotiate authenticity through platform-based narratives, visual cues, production transparency, and customer interactions [32].

This concept has four analytical dimensions. First, visual transparency refers to the use of images and videos to show production processes, materials, artisans, and product details. Second, narrative grounding refers to the practice of linking product stories to motif meanings, local identity, family history, or craft traditions. Third, interactive co-construction refers to the way authenticity is shaped through comments, direct messages, reviews, testimonials, and repeated customer interaction. Fourth, platform alignment refers to the ability to adapt cultural identity to the format and expectations of platforms without losing the core meaning of the brand [33].

These four dimensions are not variables for statistical testing. They are sensitising concepts for qualitative research. They guide data collection and analysis while allowing new themes to emerge from the field. This is important because the study seeks to understand meanings, practices, tensions, and processes.

The literature reviewed above shows that brand identity, brand authenticity, cultural branding, and SME branding provide useful insights, but they remain fragmented. Brand identity literature does not fully explain how identity is built through everyday platform practices. Brand authenticity literature does not fully explain how authenticity is translated for global audiences. Cultural branding literature often focuses on large brands or broad cultural narratives. SME branding literature explains resource constraints, but gives less attention to cultural responsibility and symbolic translation [34].

This fragmentation creates the central research gap of this study. Existing literature has not adequately explained how small cultural businesses build authentic online identities while adapting to global marketplace expectations. This gap matters because cultural SMEs do not simply transfer offline products into online stores. They translate heritage, craftsmanship, local values, and trust into digital forms that must remain culturally credible and globally understandable [35].

This study addresses that gap through a qualitative case study of small batik businesses in Surakarta. It argues that authentic online identity is not merely a branding output. It is a process of digitally mediated cultural translation shaped by heritage resources, platform practices, customer interaction, and resource constraints.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative case study design to examine how small batik businesses in Surakarta build authentic online identities in the global marketplace. This design was appropriate because the study explored meanings, experiences, practices, and challenges within a real cultural and business context. A qualitative case study helps researchers examine a bounded phenomenon in depth, while qualitative research design supports the study of participants' interpretations, actions, and social settings [36].

The research was conducted in Surakarta, Indonesia, with a focus on Laweyan as a historic batik business area. Laweyan was selected because it connects family businesses, artisans, cultural heritage, digital promotion, community identity, and market adaptation. The study also included export-oriented batik business owners and managers because the research examined how local batik identity enters wider international markets through digital communication and buyer relations [37].

The study involved nine informants selected through purposive sampling. The informants were chosen because they had direct knowledge of batik production, business management, digital promotion, customer interaction, export activities, or the wider batik SME ecosystem. Purposive sampling was suitable because this study required information-rich participants, while sample adequacy in qualitative research depends on study aim, participant specificity, data quality, and analytic depth, not only the number of participants [38].

Table 1. Informant Profile

Code	Informant Type	Selection Rationale	Expected Information
I1	Batik business owner	Owns and manages a small batik business in Laweyan	Business identity, brand values, market positioning, and strategy for maintaining authenticity
I2	Social media manager	Handles online promotion, customer communication, or digital content	Platform use, content strategy, customer interaction, and online brand presentation
I3	Batik artisan	Directly involved in batik production	Craftsmanship, production process, material use, and the technical meaning of authenticity
I4	Batik artisan	Knows motifs, techniques, or production traditions	Motif meanings, cultural values, production routines, and heritage preservation
I5	Reseller, export partner, or customer with international market experience	Has experience with wider markets beyond local buyers	Customer expectations, trust-building, global market adaptation, and cross-cultural interpretation
I6	Batik community actor, SME support actor, or local batik stakeholder	Understands the broader batik ecosystem in Laweyan	Community identity, institutional support, collective branding, and challenges faced by batik SMEs
I7	Batik business owner/manager	Manages a family-owned batik business and handles international market activities	Export strategy, international buyer relations, digital platform use, payment process, logistics, trust-building, and challenges in the global digital market ecosystem
I8	Batik business owner/manager	Manages export-oriented batik business activities and coordinates with buyers, staff, and shipping agents	Export market access, customer communication, order management, digital visibility, payment system, logistics coordination, and business sustainability
I9	Batik business owner/manager	Has long experience in batik export activities and manages business connections with international buyers	Export experience, buyer consultation, market searching, digital communication, production challenges, trust, payment system, and limitations of digital finance and logistics networks

The informant structure followed the verbatim interview data, which coded the researcher as H and the informants as I1 to I9. I1 was a batik business owner, I2 was a social media manager, I3 and I4 were batik artisans, I5 represented an actor with wider market experience, I6 represented a batik community actor, and I7 to I9 represented batik business owners or managers with export-related experience. This structure supported role-based data collection and strengthened the depth of qualitative inquiry [39].

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This method allowed the researcher to use guiding questions while giving informants space to explain their experiences in their own words. Semi-structured interviews were suitable because the study required focused but flexible data from participants with direct experience of batik production, digital promotion, customer interaction, export activities, and local SME ecosystems [40].

The interview questions were adjusted to each informant's role. Business owners and managers were asked about business identity, customer trust, digital platform use, export strategy, payment systems, logistics, and buyer relations. The social media manager was asked about content strategy, online communication, storytelling, and platform use. Artisans were asked about production, motifs, craftsmanship, materials, and authenticity. Community actors were asked about collective identity, institutional support, and SME challenges [41].

The interview topics included product honesty, batik tulis and batik cap differentiation, production transparency, motif storytelling, customer trust, Instagram, WhatsApp, marketplaces, email communication, export transactions, logistics tracking, bank transfers, and international customer expectations. The data from I7, I8, and I9 show that email and WhatsApp were used to coordinate production, orders, invoices, payments, shipping, and delivery. This interview focus supported the study's aim to examine authentic online identity and global digital market practices among batik SMEs [42].

Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The researcher read the verbatim transcripts repeatedly, identified meaningful statements, coded the data, and grouped the codes into broader themes. Thematic analysis was appropriate because it supports systematic identification and interpretation of patterns in qualitative data, while recent qualitative analysis literature also stresses the need for transparent and consistent analytic procedures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The thematic analysis identified six main themes that explain how small batik businesses in Surakarta build authentic online identities and connect with the global digital market. The findings show that authenticity is not only attached to the batik product. It is built through honest product claims, visible production processes, cultural storytelling, customer interaction, platform adaptation, and export-based digital coordination.

Authenticity as Alignment Between Product Claim, Process, and Origin

Informants understood authenticity as the match between what the seller claims, how the product is made, and where the product comes from. I1 linked authenticity with honesty, quality, and heritage. The informant explained that sellers must clearly state whether a product is batik tulis or batik cap because online customers cannot directly touch the fabric. This shows that authenticity begins with accurate product information.

I1 stated: "If the product is batik tulis, we say batik tulis. If it is a batik cap, we say batik cap. We do not say all is handmade tulis, because that is not honest." Artisans also defined authenticity through the technical process of batik-making. I3 explained that authentic batik must involve real batik processes such as malam, canting or cap, colouring, washing, drying, and finishing. I4 added that authenticity must keep its "root," which includes process, motif, intention, and honesty. These findings show that authentic online identity depends on the consistency between digital claims and production reality [43].

Cultural Meaning as Digital Translation

The findings show that batik SMEs do not treat motifs as decorative patterns only. Motifs carry cultural values, hopes, prayers, identity, and local stories. I4 explained that motifs such as *sido mukti*, *truntum*, *parang*, and *kawung* have meanings related to prosperity, love, guidance, strength, continuity, purity, and self-control. This shows that motif meaning forms an important part of batik identity.

I4 stated: “Motif is like the identity of batik. It can show hope, prayer, status, place, or story. Motif is not just a gambar cantik. There is a message inside.” However, cultural meanings must be simplified for online and international audiences. I2 explained that deep Javanese meanings need to be translated into simple language without changing the core meaning. I5 confirmed this from the global market perspective by stating that selling batik abroad is not only about shipping products, but also about helping customers understand the culture behind the product [44].

Visual Transparency as Digital Evidence of Authenticity

Visual evidence became a key strategy for building customer trust. Informants used product photos, close-up fabric images, videos of production processes, artisan images, and natural-light videos to show that the batik was real and handmade. I explained that customers often ask about material, technique, motif meaning, and production method. Sellers respond by sending photos, short videos, and detailed explanations.

I2 explained that visual content helps customers verify authenticity: “We show close-up kain, the back side of the fabric, sometimes a video of the process, so the customer can see, not only believe our words.”

I3 also emphasised the need to show the hand process, including *canting*, *malam*, fabric, colour, and artisans. These findings show that visual transparency works as digital proof. It helps customers understand the labour, time, skill, and cultural value behind batik [45].

Customer Interaction and Platform-Specific Identity Building

The findings show that authentic online identity is shaped through interaction with customers. WhatsApp chats, Instagram direct messages, reviews, testimonials, and repeated questions help sellers understand what customers need to know. Customers often ask whether a product is handmade, what material is used, how to wash the fabric, what the motif means, and whether the seller can ship abroad.

I2 explained that different platforms have different roles. Instagram supports visual identity and storytelling. TikTok helps show movement, process, and behind-the-scenes content. Marketplaces support practical information such as price, size, stock, shipping, and ratings. WhatsApp supports personal explanation and trust-building.

I2 stated: “Instagram is more visual and emotional. TikTok is more movement, process, and behind the scenes. Marketplace is practical, like price, size, stock, and shipping. WhatsApp is personal.” This shows that batik SMEs adjust their identity presentation across platforms. However, they still try to keep the same core values: honesty, quality, authenticity, and cultural meaning.

Global Market Access Through Email, WhatsApp, Exhibitions, and Buyer Trust

The interviews with I7, I8, and I9 show that export-oriented batik businesses rely on a practical digital system rather than a fully integrated digital marketplace. Email and WhatsApp became the main tools for communication with international buyers. These

platforms support order confirmation, design communication, invoice preparation, payment coordination, shipping updates, and customer follow-up.

I7 reported that the business began selling online in 2010 and used email for official communication and WhatsApp for follow-up. I7 sold batik to Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa, the USA, and Cambodia. Around 90% of sales came from international buyers. International buyers were reached mainly through exhibitions, and some buyers visited the company premises in Indonesia to verify business credibility [46].

I8 also showed a strong export orientation. The business exported all batik products and used email and WhatsApp to connect business functions from production to final delivery. The main market was the USA, with buyers from different cities. The business used shipping agents and received payments through bank transfers.

I9 confirmed that the export market was mainly the USA and Canada. I9 stated that email and WhatsApp connected business functions from production to the final customer. Trust became the key factor for maintaining the existing market. This finding shows that small batik exporters use simple digital tools to sustain global business relationships [47].

Structural Gaps in the Global Digital Market Ecosystem

The findings also reveal several weaknesses in the global digital market ecosystem for small batik businesses. The most repeated problem was limited digital visibility. I7, I8, and I9 explained that small businesses still need to search for markets by themselves. They do not have a strong digital platform where international customers can easily find verified small batik producers.

I8 stated that digital visibility remains a challenge because small businesses still need to look for buyers, unlike large businesses. I9 also stated that digital visibility is still low because small businesses continue to search for the market manually [48].

The second problem was the lack of integrated digital finance. Payments were mostly made through bank transfers. I7 used banks such as BNI and BCA. I8 used bank transfers through OCBC Malaysia. I9 also used bank transfers and US dollars. However, the businesses did not have digital financial networks that connected them directly with international banks and final customers.

The third problem was the lack of integrated digital logistics. Businesses used shipping agents, but they did not have a digital logistics network that connected sellers, logistics companies, and final customers in one system. I7 used shipping agents such as AMB Cargo, FedEx, and DHL. I8 used agents such as Scan Global, North Star, and Kuehne Nagel. I9 stated that there was no digital logistical network connected to logistics companies and shipping agents [49].

The fourth problem was production disruption. I8 and I9 mentioned rainy seasons as a major challenge because batik production needs sunlight for drying. I9 explained that rain slows production and affects the whole digital market ecosystem. However, customers remain patient when the seller maintains trust and timely communication.

Collective Identity and Place-Based Trust

The findings show that authentic online identity is not only built by individual businesses. It is also shaped by Laweyan's collective identity as a historic batik area. I6 described Laweyan as a batik kampung with old houses, family businesses, production stories, community memory, and artisans. This collective identity strengthens the credibility of individual SMEs.

I6 stated: “Laweyan is not only a place where people sell batik. It is a kampung with a batik identity.”

I6 also explained that Laweyan’s online identity is still fragmented. Some businesses promote products, prices, and discounts, but they do not always connect their content with Laweyan as a heritage place. This shows that collective branding can strengthen global visibility if businesses, artisans, community actors, government, and young people work together. Overall, the findings show that small batik businesses in Surakarta build an authentic online identity through six connected practices. First, they align product claims with real production processes and cultural origins. Second, they translate motif meanings and heritage values into simpler digital narratives. Third, they use photos, videos, and artisan visibility as evidence of authenticity. Fourth, they build trust through customer interaction across Instagram, WhatsApp, marketplaces, and other digital channels. Fifth, export-oriented businesses use email, WhatsApp, exhibitions, bank transfers, and shipping agents to connect with international buyers. Sixth, Laweyan’s collective identity supports place-based trust, but it still needs stronger digital coordination [50].

The results also show that the digital market ecosystem remains incomplete. Small batik businesses have adopted digital communication, but they still face weak digital visibility, limited digital finance integration, limited digital logistics integration, production delays, language barriers, and a lack of coordinated global promotion. These findings indicate that authentic online identity and global market participation depend not only on digital tools but also on trust, cultural clarity, production credibility, buyer relationships, and collective ecosystem support.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how small batik businesses in Surakarta build authentic online identities while entering wider digital and international markets. The findings show that authentic online identity is not created through product display alone. It is built through honest product claims, visible production processes, cultural storytelling, customer interaction, platform adaptation, and trust-based export coordination. The verbatim data show that I1 and I2 explain authenticity through product honesty, process visibility, storytelling, and customer trust, while I7, I8, and I9 add an export perspective through email, WhatsApp, exhibitions, bank transfers, and shipping agents.

Authenticity as Verifiable Practice

The first finding shows that authenticity is understood as the alignment between product claims, production process, and cultural origin. Informants did not define authenticity as a simple marketing image. They connected it with honesty in naming the product, especially in distinguishing batik tulis, batik cap, and printed textile. I1 stated that sellers must clearly explain whether a product is batik tulis or batik cap because online customers cannot directly touch the fabric. I3 also linked authenticity to the real batik process, including malam, canting, colouring, washing, and drying.

This finding supports recent brand authenticity literature. Campagna argues that brand authenticity remains important in markets shaped by social media use, changing consumer behaviour, and growing demand for credible brand meanings. However, this study extends that argument by showing that authenticity in batik SMEs is not only symbolic. It is also technical and ethical. A batik business becomes authentic when its online claims match its actual production practice.

For batik SMEs, authenticity requires proof. Product photos, production videos, fabric details, artisan images, and clear explanations help customers assess whether the seller’s claims are credible. This means that authenticity is not only something a business says. It is something the business must demonstrate through consistent digital evidence.

Cultural Meaning as Digital Translation

The second finding shows that batik SMEs build online identity by translating cultural meanings into simple digital narratives. Batik motifs carry values such as hope, harmony, blessing, strength, dignity, and continuity. However, these meanings are not always understood by younger customers or international buyers. I1 and I2 explained that motif meanings need to be simplified, but not falsified. For example, complex Javanese meanings can be translated into clearer ideas such as prosperity, harmony, protection, or good life.

This finding is consistent with recent heritage branding research. Rindell and Santos explain that authenticity in heritage brands depends on uniqueness, credibility, consistency, and the relationship between the brand and its community. This fits the Surakarta batik context because batik authenticity depends not only on the product but also on family history, Laweyan identity, artisan knowledge, and community memory.

The main challenge is the balance between cultural depth and digital simplicity. Long explanations can preserve cultural detail, but they may not fit social media habits. Short captions are easier to read, but they can reduce the batik to a decorative pattern. Therefore, cultural storytelling for batik SMEs should be short, accurate, and respectful. The goal is to make cultural meaning understandable without removing its value.

Trust as a Co-Constructed Digital Process

The third finding shows that trust is built through interaction between sellers and customers. Trust does not come only from the seller's claim. It is shaped through WhatsApp chats, Instagram messages, customer questions, reviews, testimonials, repeated orders, and service reliability. I2 explained that customers often ask about price, material, stock, production technique, motif meaning, handmade process, and shipping. Sellers then respond with real photos, videos, close-up fabric details, and explanations.

This finding shows that authenticity is co-constructed, customers question, compare, verify, and interpret. Sellers respond, clarify, educate, and adjust content. This process creates a more interactive form of brand authenticity. Campagna emphasises that brand authenticity must be understood in a broader and more relevant way for today's consumers. The findings support this view because batik authenticity is shaped through continuous communication, not only through brand identity statements.

Trust also depends on operational reliability. Cultural storytelling alone is not enough. Batik SMEs must provide accurate product information, honest colour representation, safe payment, clear shipping updates, and responsive customer service. In this study, trust works as both a cultural and business mechanism.

Platform Alignment and SME Resource Constraints

The fourth finding shows that different digital platforms support different parts of online identity building. Instagram supports visual identity and storytelling. TikTok supports process videos and behind-the-scenes content. Marketplaces support price, stock, size, ratings, and transaction details. WhatsApp supports personal explanation and sales conversion. I2 explained that each platform requires different communication, but the business identity must remain consistent.

This finding supports recent studies on SME digital transformation. Zhang shows that SME digital transformation depends on technological, organisational, and environmental factors, while employee skills strengthen the relationship between organisational capability and digital transformation success. Kergroach also reports that SMEs often lag behind larger firms because digital adoption faces barriers such as limited skills, weak managerial capacity, financing gaps, and limited use of advanced digital tools.

These barriers appear clearly in this study. I1 and I2 identified content creation, photography, English communication, platform consistency, and digital storytelling as key challenges. The problem is not only access to platforms. The deeper issue is the ability to use platforms strategically while preserving cultural identity. Batik SMEs must look professional, but they should not lose the human touch, workshop process, artisan presence, and Laweyan identity that make their products distinctive.

Export-Oriented Digital Ecosystem: Strong Communication, Weak Integration

The interviews with I7, I8, and I9 show that export-oriented batik SMEs already use digital tools in international business activities. Email and WhatsApp are central tools for communicating with buyers, confirming orders, sharing designs, preparing invoices, coordinating payments, arranging shipping, and giving delivery updates. I7 sold most products to international buyers, while I8 and I9 also relied on email, WhatsApp, bank transfers, and shipping agents to manage export activities.

However, the export ecosystem remains fragmented. Digital communication has developed, but digital visibility, digital finance, and digital logistics are still weak. I7, I8, and I9 reported that small batik businesses still need to search for buyers through exhibitions, Google, and existing networks. They do not yet have a strong digital platform where international buyers can easily identify verified small batik producers. They also rely mainly on bank transfers and external shipping agents, without integrated digital financial and logistical networks.

This finding strengthens current SME digitalisation literature. Kergrach notes that SME digital adoption often remains limited to basic services, while more advanced digital integration remains difficult. Zhang also argues that digital transformation requires organisational capability, employee skills, and environmental support. In this study, email and WhatsApp show basic digital adoption, but the absence of integrated finance, logistics, and market visibility shows that the digital ecosystem is not yet complete.

Collective Identity and Place-Based Trust

The findings also show that an authentic online identity is not only built by individual businesses. It is shaped by Laweyan's collective identity as a historic batik area. I1 described batik as family history, kampung history, and culture. I2 also explained that process videos, motif stories, and Laweyan atmosphere make online content feel more real.

This finding aligns with Rindell and Santos, who argue that heritage brand authenticity is shaped by continuity, credibility, and community-based meaning. For Laweyan batik SMEs, place-based trust strengthens individual brands. Customers do not only evaluate the seller. They also evaluate the cultural reputation of Laweyan as a batik area.

This means collective branding matters. Laweyan SMEs can benefit from shared storytelling, verified producer directories, online exhibitions, artisan visibility, and coordinated digital catalogues. These strategies can increase global visibility while protecting cultural depth. Collective branding does not replace individual business identity. It gives each SME a stronger cultural foundation.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to brand authenticity literature by showing that authenticity in cultural SMEs is built through verifiable practice. It is not only a consumer perception or symbolic claim. It depends on the consistency between product description, production process, visual evidence, and cultural origin.

This study also contributes to heritage branding literature by showing that cultural heritage must be translated for digital audiences. Batik SMEs simplify motif meanings, show

production processes, and use direct customer communication to make local values understandable for wider markets.

The study further contributes to SME digital transformation literature by showing that platform adoption does not automatically create a complete digital market ecosystem. Batik SMEs already use Instagram, WhatsApp, email, websites, marketplaces, bank transfers, and shipping agents. Yet they still face weak digital visibility, limited digital finance integration, and limited digital logistics integration. This shows that SME digital transformation should be viewed as an ecosystem issue, not only as the use of digital tools.

Practical Implications

The findings highlight several key practical implications for batik SMEs. First, they need to improve product transparency by clearly distinguishing between handmade batik, stamped batik (batik cap), combined techniques, and printed textiles. This classification is essential for maintaining customer trust and ensuring that the authenticity of cultural products is accurately communicated. Second, SMEs require practical digital skills training, including product photography, concise cultural storytelling, English-language product descriptions, video production, customer engagement, and effective marketplace presentation.

In addition, the study emphasises the importance of strengthening collective digital visibility through online exhibitions, verified digital catalogues, and shared platforms for Laweyan batik producers, which would improve access for international buyers. It also shows that institutional support must go beyond promotion to include integrated digital infrastructure such as payment systems, logistics coordination, export assistance, and trust-building mechanisms. Overall, the study concludes that global success for batik SMEs depends not only on digital tool usage but on building an integrated ecosystem that combines cultural authenticity, professionalism, technological capability, and trust to support sustainable international market access.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how small batik businesses in Laweyan, Surakarta, build authentic online identities in the global marketplace. The findings show that authenticity is not only embedded in the batik product. It is constructed through honest product claims, visible production processes, cultural storytelling, customer interaction, and platform adaptation. The study identifies authentic online identity as a process of Digitally Mediated Authenticity. Small batik businesses translate heritage, craftsmanship, motif meanings, and local values into digital forms that customers can see, understand, question, and trust. This process involves four main practices: visual transparency, narrative grounding, interactive co-construction, and platform alignment. Theoretically, this study contributes to brand identity, brand authenticity, cultural branding, and SME digital branding literature by showing that authenticity in cultural SMEs is not fixed. It is mediated, negotiated, and shaped through daily digital practices. Practically, the findings suggest that batik SMEs should communicate authenticity through clear product classification, process videos, artisan visibility, accurate motif stories, and consistent customer engagement. This study is limited to nine informants in Laweyan. Future research could include more batik regions, compare different cultural SMEs, or involve international customers to examine how global audiences interpret authenticity online. Overall, this study concludes that small batik businesses build authentic online identities by translating local heritage into trustworthy, culturally credible, and globally understandable digital expressions.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express his sincere gratitude to Allah for His guidance, support, and countless blessings throughout the research journey and the completion of this study. This research was supported by the *Kemitraan Negara Berkembang (KNB) Scholarship* provided by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Indonesia. The author acknowledges that this publication reflects only his views and research findings, and that the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia cannot be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained herein. The author also extends his sincere appreciation to the Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Indonesia, for providing an academic environment and institutional support that contributed to the successful completion of this study.

Author Contribution

Kyeyune Hamidu conceptualised the study, conducted the research, analysed the data, and wrote the manuscript. Anton Agus Setyawan and Muhammad Sholahuddin provided academic supervision, contributed to the review and editing of all chapters, and offered critical feedback throughout the research process. All authors discussed the findings, contributed to the refinement of the manuscript, approved the final version, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no financial, professional, institutional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the design, implementation, analysis, or reporting of this study. The research was conducted independently and objectively, without any external commercial sponsorship or funding that might affect the interpretation of the findings. All authors have reviewed and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for the accuracy and integrity of the work presented in this article.

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