

Research Article

Bridging the Digital Divide: Corporate-Rural Partnerships in MSMEs Transformation through Shopee Center

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Abstract: This qualitative study investigates the corporate e-commerce strategy implemented by Shopee through its Shopee Center program to empower Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Bangunharja Village, Indonesia. Employing a descriptive case study methodology, the research engaged 11 key informants comprising Shopee representatives, local MSME actors, and BUMDES (Village-Owned Enterprise) leadership. Data collection incorporated in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentary analysis, with subsequent examination following the interactive model of Miles and Huberman. The findings demonstrate that Shopee's strategic approach effectively catalyzed initial digital adoption among rural MSMEs through multifaceted interventions: comprehensive digital literacy training, enhanced internet infrastructure via affordable WiFi partnerships, and robust collaboration with local institutions. Notably, the program facilitated product innovation and market expansion for various MSMEs, enabling traditional businesses to access digital marketplaces. However, the research identifies persistent challenges including declining participation rates over time, ongoing digital literacy gaps, and infrastructural limitations in internet connectivity. The study concludes that while corporate-led initiatives significantly advance digital inclusion, sustainable transformation necessitates continuous program adaptation, advanced skill development modules, and strengthened multi-stakeholder cooperation to address systemic barriers in rural digital ecosystems.

Keywords: Corporate Strategy; E-commerce Ecosystem; MSME Digitalization; Rural Entrepreneurship; Shopee Center Program.

1. Introduction

The global business landscape has been fundamentally reshaped by the proliferation of digital technologies, with electronic commerce (e-commerce) emerging as a dominant force in the 21st-century economy (Cenamor et al., 2019). In emerging economies like Indonesia, the growth of e-commerce is a critical driver of economic inclusion, offering Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) unprecedented access to broader markets (Sari & Kurniawan, 2025). However, the digital divide between urban and rural areas often leaves rural MSMEs struggling to harness these opportunities (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a stark catalyst, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and forcing a rapid, often unplanned, digital transition for businesses worldwide (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). MSMEs, which form the backbone of the Indonesian economy, were disproportionately affected. Lockdowns and social distancing measures disrupted traditional supply chains and physical customer interactions, pushing many to the brink of collapse (Gupta & Kumar Singh, 2022). This crisis underscored a specific dilemma: while digital platforms offered a lifeline, a significant segment of MSMEs, particularly in rural locales, lacked the necessary digital literacy, infrastructure, and resources to adapt effectively (Elia et al., 2020).

In response to this pressing need, global e-commerce corporations have increasingly initiated programs that blend market development with corporate social responsibility (CSR).

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Shopee, a leading Southeast Asian e-commerce platform, launched the "Shopee Center" initiative. This program represents a strategic corporate move to build an inclusive digital ecosystem by providing rural MSMEs with training, marketing support, and logistical assistance (Shopee, 2021). Such corporate-led empowerment strategies are posited as a viable approach to bridge the digital divide and foster resilient local economies (Goyal & Sergi, 2015).

Despite the proliferation of similar corporate-led digitalization programs, a critical problem remains unresolved: ensuring sustained engagement and long-term impact. Many initiatives report high initial participation but struggle with maintaining momentum post-intervention (Prasetyo et al., 2023). The reasons for this drop-off are multifaceted, including a mismatch between training content and the practical, evolving needs of MSMEs, a lack of ongoing support, and insufficient attention to the foundational barriers like digital literacy and infrastructure (Kennedy et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is a scarcity of in-depth, qualitative research that critically examines the implementation of these corporate strategies from the multi-stakeholder perspective of the platform, the local institutional partners, and the MSMEs themselves (Abdillah et al., 2023).

This study is designed to address this gap by presenting a comprehensive case study analysis. Our approach investigates the corporate strategy not as a top-down intervention but as a dynamic process co-created with local actors. Therefore, this research poses the following question: How is Shopee's corporate business strategy implemented through the Shopee Center to foster 'go-digital' MSMEs, and what are the ensuing responses, barriers, and adaptive measures from the perspective of multiple stakeholders in Bangunharja Village?

The findings aim to provide actionable insights for corporations, policymakers, and community leaders seeking to design more effective, sustainable, and contextually relevant digital empowerment programs for rural MSMEs.

2. Literature Review

The digital transformation of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) has emerged as a critical domain of scholarly inquiry, positioned at the intersection of information systems, strategic management, and development economics (Civelek et al., 2023; Rondović et al., 2019). Understanding the mechanisms that enable or hinder this transformation requires a synthesis of literature exploring the evolving nature of corporate strategy in the platform economy, the empowering potential of e-commerce, and the grounded realities faced by MSMEs in rural contexts. This review synthesizes existing international research to construct a conceptual framework for analyzing corporate-led digital empowerment initiatives, thereby situating the present case study within the broader academic discourse.

Corporate Strategy in the Digital Economy

In the contemporary digital economy, corporate strategy has evolved beyond mere profit maximization to encompass creating shared value and ecosystems that benefit a wider range of stakeholders (Teece, 2018). For digital platform corporations, strategy involves not only optimizing their own operations but also nurturing the network of users and partners that constitute their ecosystem (McIntyre & Srinivasan, 2017). This is particularly relevant for e-commerce platforms, whose value is directly proportional to the number and activity of sellers and buyers on their platform. A key strategic imperative is, therefore, to onboard and empower sellers, especially MSMEs, which form a vast and critical segment in emerging markets (Onete et al., 2019). Corporate-led initiatives aimed at MSME digitalization can be viewed as a strategic investment in ecosystem development, which enhances the platform's competitive advantage while simultaneously contributing to socio-economic development (Gurpreet, 2025).

E-Commerce as a Tool for MSME Empowerment

A substantial body of literature affirms the transformative potential of e-commerce for MSMEs. Adoption of digital platforms can lead to increased market reach, enhanced competitiveness, and improved financial performance (Bai et al., 2021). E-commerce reduces the traditional barriers of geography and capital, allowing even the smallest businesses to access a global customer base (Nasution et al., 2021). However, the mere availability of e-commerce platforms is insufficient. The successful integration of MSMEs into the digital economy is contingent upon their digital readiness, which includes technological infrastructure, digital skills, and a supportive regulatory environment (Zhu & Luo, 2024). In developing countries, the lack of these enabling conditions often results in a low adoption rate or sub-optimal use

of e-commerce platforms by MSMEs, a phenomenon often referred to as the "digital divide" (Guglya & Maciel, 2020).

Barriers to MSME Digitalization in Rural Contexts

The path to digital adoption for rural MSMEs is fraught with a complex array of interconnected barriers that extend beyond simple access to technology. Scholarly research consistently highlights a confluence of infrastructural, human capital, and operational challenges. A primary obstacle is the precarious technological infrastructure, characterized by unreliable and costly internet connectivity, which fundamentally undermines the consistent online engagement required for e-commerce (Guglya & Maciel, 2020). Compounding this is a significant human capital deficit; many MSME owners in rural areas lack the foundational digital literacy and specific skills needed to effectively manage an online store, optimize product listings, and execute digital marketing campaigns (Elia et al., 2020). Furthermore, operational and logistical hurdles present substantial challenges, as MSMEs must adapt their production for online sales, master new packaging standards, and navigate often complex and expensive last-mile delivery systems (Mishra & Singh, 2022). Underpinning these tangible barriers are often deeper cognitive and trust-related issues, including a preference for traditional business methods and skepticism towards digital transactions, which can further inhibit adoption (Hoang et al., 2024).

The Role of Corporate-Led and Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives

Recognizing these barriers, corporations, governments, and NGOs have initiated various programs to support MSME digitalization. Corporate-led initiatives, such as the one examined in this study, are unique in that they leverage the platform's core resources (technology, market access, and data analytics) to provide targeted support (Onete et al., 2019). The effectiveness of such programs, however, is heavily dependent on their design and implementation. Literature suggests that successful initiatives are those that are context-specific, provide holistic support (combining training with access to resources), and foster local partnerships (Lin et al., 2024). Collaboration with local institutions, such as Village-Owned Enterprises (BUMDes) in Indonesia, is critical. These local entities possess contextual knowledge, community trust, and can provide ongoing, on-the-ground support that a remote corporation cannot, thereby enhancing the sustainability of the intervention (Destrilia et al., 2022).

Conceptual Framework and Research Gap

Synthesizing the literature, this study is framed by the understanding that corporate e-commerce strategy for MSME empowerment is a multi-dimensional process. It involves the interplay of corporate resources (training, platform access, infrastructure support), MSME capabilities and constraints (digital literacy, resources, local context), and local institutional collaboration (BUMDes, local government). The dynamic interaction between these dimensions determines the level of participation, the barriers encountered, and the ultimate outcomes of digital adoption.

While existing research has explored MSME digitalization and corporate CSR separately, there is a scarcity of in-depth, qualitative studies that critically examine a corporate e-commerce platform's strategy as an integrated ecosystem-building effort in a specific rural context. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a granular analysis of Shopee's corporate strategy in action, illuminating the perspectives of all key actors involved (the corporation, the local partner, and the MSMEs themselves) to derive nuanced insights for theory and practice.

3. Methode

Study Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design with a single, in-depth case study approach. This design was deemed most appropriate to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complex social phenomena surrounding the implementation of a corporate strategy within a specific rural context (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The study focused on the Shopee Center program in Bangunharja Village as the primary unit of analysis.

Subjects and Setting

The research was conducted in Bangunharja Village, Cisaga District, Ciamis Regency, West Java, Indonesia. The data collection period spanned from September 2023 to July 2024, covering the post-initial-implementation phase of the Shopee Center.

Participants were selected using a purposive (judgment) sampling technique to ensure the inclusion of informants who possessed rich information relevant to the research questions (Etikan et al., 2016). The inclusion criteria for informants were: (1) direct involvement in the Shopee Center program, and (2) the capacity to provide detailed insights into its strategy, implementation, or impact. Based on these criteria, a total of 11 informants were recruited, comprising:

Table 1. Informan.

Informan	Total	Detail
Shopee Expert	1	A representative directly involved in designing or managing the Shopee Center program
MSME Actors	9	Owners of MSMEs in Bangunharja Village who were active participants in the Shopee Center program. These MSMEs represented diverse product sectors, including food, snacks, and handicrafts
Director of BUM-DES Raharja Makmur	1	The head of the Village-Owned Enterprise, the key local institutional partner for the Shopee Center.

Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality in the reporting of findings.

Data Collection and Measurements

Data were collected through triangulation of methods to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings (Flick, 2017).

1. In-depth Interviews: This was the primary data collection technique. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide, allowing for flexibility to explore emerging themes. The interviews focused on understanding the corporate strategy, the participants' experiences, perceived barriers, and mitigation efforts. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.
2. Participant Observation: The researcher engaged in direct observation of the Shopee Center's activities and the MSMEs' operational environments. This provided contextual data on the practical challenges and the actual use of digital tools, which complemented the interview data.
3. Documentary Analysis: Supplementary data were gathered from program documents, training materials, and official reports related to the Shopee Center initiative to corroborate evidence from interviews and observation.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process followed the interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2019), which consists of three concurrent flows of activity: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

1. Data Condensation: This involved the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the raw data (transcripts, field notes, documents). This was achieved through open coding, where data were broken down into discrete parts and categorized.
2. Data Display: Organized, compressed assemblies of information were created in the form of thematic matrices and narrative summaries. This display allowed for the identification of patterns and relationships between categories, such as linking specific corporate strategies to MSMEs' reported barriers.
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: Initial conclusions were drawn from the displayed data. These conclusions were then verified by continually referring back to the raw data, checking for consistency across different data sources (triangulation),

and searching for rival explanations to ensure the findings were credible and well-supported (Miles et al., 2020).

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings from the field study, organized to systematically address the research questions. The data, derived from in-depth interviews, observations, and documentary analysis, are presented to illuminate the implementation of Shopee's corporate strategy, the subsequent responses from MSMEs, the challenges encountered, and the emergent outcomes within the unique context of Bangunharja Village. The findings are structured to first establish the baseline characteristics of the participants, followed by the core results pertaining to the strategic implementation, and concluding with secondary findings and unexpected observations that provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

Baseline Characteristics of Participants

The study involved 11 participants strategically selected from three stakeholder groups. The demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1. The sample consisted of 6 males (54.5%) and 5 females (45.5%), with the majority (7 participants, 63.6%) falling within the 30-65 years age bracket, indicating experienced business operators. In terms of educational background, 8 participants (72.7%) had completed senior high school (SLTA), while 3 participants (27.3%) held bachelor's degrees (S1). This distribution reflects the typical educational profile of MSME owners in rural Indonesia and underscores the importance of tailored digital literacy interventions.

Table 2. Characteristic Participants (N=11).

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Role	Shopee Expert	1	9.1
	MSMEs Actor	9	81.8
	BUMDES Director	1	9.1
Gender	Male	6	54.5
	Female	5	45.5
Age	20-30 years	4	36.4
	30-65 years	7	63.6
Education	Senior High School	8	72.7
	Bachelor Degree	3	27.3

Source: study (2024).

Main Findings: Implementation of Corporate Strategy

Strategic Vision and Multi-stakeholder Collaboration

The Shopee Center program was implemented as a direct corporate response to the economic challenges faced by MSMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic. A Shopee expert stated: "Our vision is to create an inclusive e-commerce ecosystem where MSMEs have equal access to technology and digital markets... We established Shopee Centers across various villages in Indonesia to help MSMEs with digitalization." The program's implementation relied on a robust collaboration between Shopee, the local BUMDES (Raharja Makmur), and the village government. The BUMDES director confirmed: "We provide the facility and our staff were trained by Shopee to become trainers themselves, creating a sustainable local capacity."

Comprehensive Training and Capacity Building

The core of the strategy involved intensive training modules covering platform usage, online store management, digital marketing, and the use of analytical tools. MSME participants widely acknowledged the value of this support. The owner of "Diafishy" reported: "I got the idea to create a new product, Crispy Fish, from the training, utilizing small fish that previously didn't sell well." Similarly, the owner of "Mitra Sauyunan" was guided to process fresh vegetables into crispy spinach chips to overcome logistical challenges, demonstrating adaptive product innovation.

Secondary Findings: MSME Participation and Challenges

High Initial Engagement and Digital Adoption

Initial participation in the program was high, with MSMEs actively engaging in training sessions, which were adapted to online platforms (Zoom) during the pandemic. The owner of "Seblak Fadhil" noted: "I was really helped by the Shopee Center... I believe with the training, I can now sell online." This sentiment was echoed across multiple participants who successfully established their online stores on the Shopee platform.

Emerging Barriers to Sustained Participation

Despite strong initial uptake, a significant challenge emerged regarding the sustainability of engagement. A Shopee expert acknowledged: "We have seen a significant decline in participation... the sustainability and updating of training materials are key." MSMEs cited ongoing hurdles, including persistent gaps in digital marketing expertise and unstable internet connectivity. The owner of "Keripik Rispik" mentioned: "The internet access here is still slow and lags when we open the Shopee app," highlighting a critical infrastructural barrier.

Unexpected Observation: Community-Wide Ripple Effects

An unexpected but positive outcome was the role of successful MSMEs as informal digital ambassadors within the community. The researcher's observation notes indicated that MSMEs who benefited from the program began actively encouraging others in their social circles to use the Shopee platform, both for selling and buying. This organic, peer-to-peer promotion extended the program's impact beyond its direct participants.

5. Discussion

This study reveals that Shopee's corporate strategy, executed through the Shopee Center, has successfully initiated the digital transformation of MSMEs in Bangunharja Village through a tripartite collaboration model. The findings demonstrate that corporate-led digital ecosystem development can effectively bridge the digital divide for rural MSMEs when implemented through strategic local partnerships (Guglya & Maciel, 2020). The program's success in creating initial digital access aligns with established literature on the importance of corporate social responsibility in emerging markets (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2019).

Our findings regarding high initial participation followed by declining engagement resonate with previous studies on digital platform initiatives in developing contexts (Kennedy et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023). This pattern underscores the challenge of maintaining long-term engagement in corporate-led digital transformation programs (Prasetyo et al., 2023). The innovative aspect of this study lies in its documentation of the BUMDES co-trainer model, which represents a significant advancement in sustainable digital literacy programs (Abdillah et al., 2023). This approach effectively addresses the sustainability gap identified in earlier corporate social responsibility initiatives (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2019).

The emergence of organic peer-to-peer digital diffusion represents a novel finding that extends current understanding of social learning in digital transformation (Cenamor et al., 2019). This phenomenon demonstrates how corporate initiatives can trigger community-level behavioral changes beyond their immediate targets. However, the persistence of infrastructural barriers highlights the limitations of corporate-led solutions in addressing fundamental digital divide issues (Colding et al., 2024; Elia et al., 2020).

The methodological approach of this study, employing multi-stakeholder qualitative analysis, provided rich insights into the implementation dynamics of corporate digital strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2016). However, the single-case study design limits generalizability, a common challenge in qualitative research exploring complex social phenomena (Flick, 2017). Future research could benefit from mixed-methods approaches to quantitatively measure the economic impact of such initiatives.

This research contributes to the evolving literature on corporate strategy in the digital economy by demonstrating how platform companies can operationalize ecosystem-building through embedded local partnerships (McIntyre & Srinivasan, 2017; Teece, 2018). The study extends the concept of "shared value" by providing empirical evidence of its implementation at the grassroots level (Goyal & Sergi, 2015). Furthermore, it addresses the research gap identified by Bai et al. (2021) regarding the need for more studies on post-pandemic digital transformation strategies for MSMEs.

The practical implications of this study are significant for multiple stakeholders. For corporations, it emphasizes the need for long-term engagement strategies rather than short-term

interventions. For policymakers, it underscores the necessity of complementary infrastructure development to maximize the impact of corporate digital initiatives. For local institutions, it demonstrates their crucial role as sustainable anchors for digital transformation in rural communities.

The findings demonstrate that Shopee's corporate strategy through Shopee Center has made significant contributions to digital inclusion among rural MSMEs. However, its long-term success depends on addressing sustainability challenges through continuous innovation in program design and stronger public-private partnerships to overcome infrastructural limitations. Future initiatives should build upon the collaborative model established while incorporating mechanisms for ongoing support, advanced skill development, and adaptation to the evolving digital landscape and MSME needs. This approach will ensure that corporate-led digital transformation programs achieve lasting impact and effectively bridge the digital divide for rural entrepreneurs.

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that Shopee's corporate strategy through the Shopee Center has successfully initiated digital transformation among MSMEs in Bangunharja Village. The program's effectiveness stems from its collaborative approach involving BUMDES and local government, which enabled comprehensive digital literacy training and created sustainable local capacity. The initiative successfully addressed the initial barrier of digital access, empowering MSMEs to establish online presence and generate new market opportunities through e-commerce.

However, the study reveals that sustaining this digital momentum requires addressing fundamental challenges. The decline in ongoing participation and persistent infrastructural limitations, particularly unstable internet connectivity, highlight the need for more robust engagement strategies and public-private partnerships. Future corporate-led digital empowerment programs should evolve from short-term interventions to long-term partnerships that combine continuous skill development with infrastructural support to ensure lasting impact on rural MSME ecosystems.

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Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants. All interview transcripts and observational notes have been anonymized to protect the confidentiality of the informants.

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