

Constructing Meaning Through Communication Strategies in the Digital Transformation of MSMEs: A Case Study of a Business Incubator Program in Makassar, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT:

Digital transformation is widely promoted as a strategic pathway for improving the productivity and competitiveness of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), yet most scholarship still frames it primarily as a technical or economic process, leaving the communicative and meaning making dimensions underexplored. This study examines how communication strategies within a business incubator program construct meaning around digital transformation among MSME actors in Makassar, Indonesia. Using a qualitative case study design informed by social constructionist and diffusion of innovation perspectives, data were collected through in depth interviews with incubator managers, mentors, and MSME participants, complemented by participatory observation and documentation, and analyzed thematically following Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model. The findings show that communication within the incubator operated through three interlocking modes interpersonal mentoring, group based learning, and digital platform interaction that together functioned not merely as information channels but as sites of meaning construction. MSME actors initially equated digitalization with social media use, but through sustained dialogic interaction with mentors and peers they came to reinterpret digital transformation as a strategic necessity for business survival and market expansion. The incubator thus operated as a communicative ecosystem that combined technical training with relational sense making, accelerating both digital readiness and attitudinal change. The study contributes a communication centred, meaning construction perspective to digital transformation research and offers practical implications for incubator design, mentoring practice, and MSME policy in emerging economies.

Keywords: communication strategy; digital transformation; MSMEs; business incubator; meaning construction.

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1. Introduction

Digital transformation has become a strategic agenda in the development of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) across the globe, including Indonesia. The shift is understood not merely as the adoption of digital tools, but as an organizational transformation encompassing new business models, new ways of working, and new patterns of communication within enterprise activity. International bodies such as the OECD emphasize that digitalization offers MSMEs significant opportunities to increase productivity, broaden market access, and strengthen competitiveness amid an increasingly digitalized global economy (OECD, 2021, 2025).

Nevertheless, a substantial body of research indicates that MSMEs continue to face a persistent digital divide. Limited access to technology, low digital literacy, and weak internal capacity remain the principal barriers to digital transformation (Hardi & Arifin, 2023; Anatan & Nur, 2023). Constrained human resources and limited organizational adaptive capacity further prevent many MSMEs from integrating digital technology optimally into their business operations (Nugraha et al., 2025). At a broader level, these disparities echo the concerns raised in global human development discourse regarding uneven access to the capabilities needed to participate in a digitalizing economy (UNDP, 2023). Within this context, digital transformation cannot be regarded solely as a technical matter; it is equally a social process that is profoundly shaped by communication. Communication plays a constitutive role in forming understanding, disseminating innovation, and building the readiness of MSME actors to embrace change. Prior studies show that the success of MSME digitalization is strongly determined by how communication strategies are designed, delivered, and interpreted through interaction among the actors involved (Irawan & Alamsyah, 2023; Octory et al., 2025). Recent work extends this argument by showing that digital transformation strategy itself must be treated as a communicative accomplishment rather than a purely managerial decision, since strategic intent only becomes organizationally meaningful once it is articulated,

negotiated, and enacted through ongoing communication (Cosa, 2024).

One approach that has gained traction in supporting MSME digital transformation is the business incubator program. Incubators function as learning and mentoring spaces that integrate training, coaching, and business facilitation. Within this setting, communication among mentors, facilitators, and MSME actors becomes a critical element in the transfer of knowledge and the formation of digital capability (Sugiono, 2021; Hajar et al., 2025). Mentoring within incubators is not solely technical; it also involves a communicative process that builds understanding of, and meaning around, digital transformation itself. Comparative evidence from mentoring and incubation research corroborates this view, showing that structured mentoring relationships accelerate learning, scaling, and profitability among disadvantaged entrepreneurs precisely because they combine technical guidance with sustained relational support (Assenova, 2020), and that support organization services of which incubators are one form shape start up survival and funding trajectories even in the absence of formal incubation (Clayton, 2024).

Contemporary development communication literature affirms that social and economic change unfolds through communicative processes involving participation, collaboration, and knowledge exchange among social actors confronting technological change (Servaes, 2020; Manyozo, 2021). In the MSME context, digital transformation should therefore be understood not only as a process of technology adoption but also as a process of meaning construction, through which business actors come to understand, accept, and enact digital change within their business practices. Communication is thus a central element in building the readiness, adaptation, and sustainability of MSME digital transformation.

1.1 Digital Transformation of MSMEs

Digital transformation among MSMEs constitutes a fundamental change that extends beyond the use of digital technology to

encompass shifts in business models, organizational processes, and value creation. Anatan and Nur (2023) explain that MSME readiness for digital transformation is strongly influenced by organizational capacity to adopt technology, digital literacy, and the support of the external ecosystem. In a similar vein, Sitorus et al. (2025) argue that MSME digitalization constitutes a process of economic inclusion that demands structural adaptation and strong managerial capability.

Kahveci (2025) contends that digital transformation in MSMEs can be understood as part of the strengthening of dynamic capabilities the organization's capacity to integrate and reconfigure resources in order to remain competitive. Putri et al. (2025) add that digital transformation cannot be separated from an organization's capacity to build sustainable, technologybased innovation. Gyamerah, Afshari, and Asante (2025) extend this dynamic capability perspective by demonstrating, through survey evidence from SMEs, that digital transformational leadership drives digital transformation indirectly through its influence on organizational digital capability and digital strategy, underscoring that leadership and communication practices not technology alone determine transformation outcomes. In a systematic review, Egodawe, Sedera, and Bui (2022) show that digital transformation is a multidisciplinary phenomenon that simultaneously involves technological, organizational, and social dimensions.

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that MSME digital transformation is a multidimensional process shaped by organizational readiness, dynamic capability, and ecosystem support, and is therefore not merely technical but also structural and social in nature as MSMEs confront a changing digital economy.

1.2 Communication Strategy in Digital Transformation

Communication strategy in the context of MSME digitalization serves as the primary mechanism bridging technological innovation with the understanding of business actors. Checchinato et

al. (2025) explain that communication in digital transformation functions not only as a medium for transmitting information but also as an interactive process that shapes perception and technology adoption decisions. This is reinforced by Winarko et al. (2023), who find that digital marketing communication strategy plays an important role in strengthening the effectiveness of social media adoption and MSME brand building.

Rozaq et al. (2025) show that the growth of digital platforms such as TikTok and Instagram creates new communicative spaces that enable MSMEs to build more personal and participatory interaction with consumers. Irawan and Alamsyah (2023) similarly demonstrate that CSR based and marketing based digital communication strategies contribute to strengthening MSME actors' digital competence. Consistent with this, Raharjo, Afrianty, and Prakasa (2024) show, through a social cognitive learning lens, that digital literacy and business transformation among small enterprises are mutually reinforcing, mediated by observational learning and self efficacy that are themselves built through communicative interaction with more digitally capable others.

Taken together, this literature suggests that communication strategy in MSME digital transformation functions not merely as a tool for disseminating information but also as an interactive process that shapes the perception, behaviour, and digital engagement of business actors.

1.3 Business Incubator Programs for MSMEs

Business incubator programs constitute an institutional instrument designed to accelerate business growth through mentoring, training, and business facilitation. Hajar et al. (2025) state that incubation programs play a significant role in accelerating MSME digital transformation through structured and sustained mentoring. Persada et al. (2024) add that incubators not only improve business performance but also strengthen innovation capacity and managerial competence among MSME actors.

From a communication perspective, Sugiono (2021) argues that business incubators constitute a strategic communicative space that enables knowledge transfer between mentors and MSME tenants. This process is not purely technical; it also forms social relations that strengthen understanding of digital innovation. Evidence from entrepreneurial support research further indicates that the value of incubation lies less in the physical resources it provides than in the communicative relationships mentoring conversations, peer exchange, and feedback loops that it enables (Assenova, 2020; Clayton, 2024).

It can therefore be concluded that MSME incubator programs function as a learning and communication ecosystem that accelerates digital transformation through mentoring, knowledge transfer, and the strengthening of business actors' capacity.

1.4 Diffusion of Innovation and Technology Acceptance

Diffusion of innovation theory explains how new technology spreads within a social system through communication among individuals. Octory et al. (2025) find that the diffusion of innovation among MSMEs is strongly influenced by interpersonal communication, social networks, and community participation, indicating that technology adoption is not purely rational but also social in nature.

Further, Hidayat et al. (2025) explain that technology acceptance among MSMEs is shaped by perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and a supportive social environment. Lokuge and Duan (2021) add that the principal enabler of digital transformation is an organization's capacity to manage internal knowledge and communication effectively. Nugroho et al. (2025), examining a rural digital village initiative in Indonesia, similarly show that targeted digital communication and literacy interventions delivered through sustained community interaction rather than one off training significantly improve MSMEs' capacity to use online marketing, networking, and sales platforms.

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that the diffusion of innovation and technology acceptance among MSMEs are strongly shaped by social communication processes, interactional networks, and perceptions of technological benefit.

1.5 Meaning Construction in Communication

The meaning construction approach to communication emphasizes that social reality is formed through interaction and individual interpretation. Gonzalez Varona et al. (2024) explain that, in the MSME context, understanding of digital transformation is formed through organizational learning and social interaction. Checchinato et al. (2025) similarly affirm that communication in digital transformation functions as a meaning making process rather than a mere transfer of information.

Within MSME incubators, the communicative process between mentors and business actors creates a learning experience that shapes how digital technology is perceived. Digital transformation is thus not merely technical but is also the outcome of a social construction formed through sustained interaction. Rahman et al. (2025) reinforce this point by showing that MSMEs' digital competitive advantage is built on digital creativity and digital culture both of which are cultivated through ongoing communicative and learning processes rather than through technology deployment alone.

It can therefore be concluded that the meaning construction perspective shows MSME digital transformation to be a social process formed through interaction, experience, and interpretation occurring within a communicative ecosystem.

1.6 Research Gap and Objectives

Despite this growing body of work, studies specifically addressing the construction of meaning in communication strategies within MSME digital transformation through incubator programs remain relatively limited. Most existing research focuses on technology adoption and its

impact on business performance, while the communicative dimension as a process of social construction remains comparatively underexplored (Checchinato et al., 2025; Lokuge & Duan, 2021).

Building on this gap, the present study aims to examine how communication strategies construct meaning within MSME digital transformation through a business incubator program in Makassar City. A qualitative approach is employed to gain an in depth understanding of the experiences, interactions, and meaning making processes occurring among the actors involved in this transformation. Specifically, the study addresses three research questions: (1) what communication strategies are enacted within the incubator program; (2) how MSME actors construct meaning around digital transformation through these communicative processes; and (3) what role the incubator plays in strengthening MSME digital readiness as a communicative ecosystem.

2. Methodology

2.1 Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to gain an in depth understanding of the construction of meaning in communication strategies within MSME digital transformation through a business incubator program in Makassar City. A qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to explore the experiences, interactions, and subjective meanings that MSME actors attach to the digital transformation process they underwent. Creswell and Poth (2024) explain that qualitative research is used to understand the meaning that individuals or groups construct around a particular social phenomenon, while Yin (2021) affirms that case study designs are appropriate for examining contemporary phenomena within complex, real world contexts.

Marshall, Rossman, and Blanco (2021) note that a case study design enables researchers to understand the relationships among actors, processes, and social context in greater depth. A qualitative approach combined with a case study design was therefore judged appropriate for

uncovering the communicative and meaning construction processes underlying MSME digital transformation.

2.2 Research Setting

The study was conducted within an MSME incubator program operating in Makassar City. The site was selected purposively on the consideration that the program offers digital mentoring, business coaching, technology training, and communication facilitation directly relevant to the study's focus. The incubator was chosen because it constitutes a social space of interaction bringing together mentors, program managers, and MSME actors in the process of digital transformation. In qualitative research, the research setting plays an important role because it forms the primary context in which participants' experience and social interaction take shape; Creswell and Poth (2024) note that site selection should be guided by the contextual relevance of the setting to the phenomenon under study, enabling the researcher to obtain data that is both rich and deeply meaningful.

2.3 Participants/Sample

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique used to identify participants with direct experience of, and involvement in, MSME digital transformation through the incubator program. Participants comprised the incubator manager, business mentors, and MSME actors enrolled in the incubation program. In total, twelve participants were involved: one program manager, four mentors, and seven MSME tenants representing the food and beverage, fashion and craft, and service sectors.

Creswell and Poth (2024) explain that purposive sampling is used in qualitative research to obtain depth of information from individuals who directly understand the phenomenon under study. Silverman (2021) adds that the selection of informants in qualitative research must consider the relevance of participants' experience to the research focus, so that the resulting data is both rich and reflective.

The program manager was selected for their role in designing program strategy and mentoring communication; mentors were selected because of their direct involvement in the transfer of knowledge and digital learning; and MSME actors were selected because they are the party who directly experience and interpret the process of digital transformation within their business activity.

2.4 Instruments

Data were collected using a semi structured in depth interview guide developed around the study's three research questions, an observation protocol for recording mentoring sessions, group training, and digital platform interaction, and a documentation checklist covering activity archives, digital communication media, program reports, and training materials. The interview guide was piloted with one mentor and one MSME actor outside the final sample to check clarity and relevance before being used in the main data collection.

2.5 Procedure

Data collection was conducted through indepth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation across a period of eight weeks. In depth interviews were used to elicit participants' experience, understanding, and interpretation of communication strategies within MSME digital transformation; Kvale and Brinkmann (2021) explain that qualitative interviews aim to understand participants' social world from their own perspective and experience.

Participatory observation was conducted to directly witness communication processes, mentoring activity, and social interaction occurring within the incubator program. Marshall et al. (2021) note that observation enables researchers to understand social behaviour and interactional context in a natural setting. Documentation comprising activity archives, digital communication media, program reports, and training materials was used as supporting data to strengthen the study's findings.

By combining these data collection techniques, the study sought to produce data that is deep,

comprehensive, and contextual regarding the construction of meaning in communication strategies within MSME digital transformation.

2.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted interactively through the processes of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020) explain that qualitative data analysis is conducted continuously from the beginning of data collection through to the completion of the study. Data reduction involved selecting and grouping data according to the study's themes, namely communication strategy, digital mentoring, and the construction of meaning around digital transformation.

The next stage involved displaying data in descriptive narrative form to facilitate interpretation of the relationships among categories. Conclusions were then drawn by identifying the patterns, relationships, and meanings emerging from the research data. Gillies et al. (2022) explain that thematic analysis in qualitative research helps researchers understand the interconnection among social themes and participants' interpretation of meaning.

2.7 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the data was established through source triangulation, method triangulation, and time triangulation. Patton (2021) explains that triangulation is used to strengthen the credibility and consistency of qualitative research findings through the comparison of multiple sources and methods of data.

Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from the incubator manager, mentors, and MSME actors. Method triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of interviews, observation, and documentation. In addition, time triangulation was conducted by collecting data at different points in time to ensure the stability of the information obtained.

Silverman (2021) affirms that validity in qualitative research does not depend solely on the volume of data but also on the depth of interpretation and consistency across sources of information.

3. Results

3.1 Communication Strategy within the MSME Incubator Program

The findings show that the communication strategy applied within the MSME incubator program in Makassar City operated through three interlocking modes: interpersonal communication, group communication, and digital communication. Interpersonal communication was evident in the intensive mentoring process between mentors and MSME actors, conducted through business consultation, digital marketing coaching, and discussion around the use of digital technology in business. Mentors served not only as content deliverers but also as facilitators who helped MSME actors understand digital change gradually and at their own pace.

Alongside interpersonal communication, group communication took place through training sessions, workshops, and discussion forums among incubator participants. These activities created a space for the exchange of experience among MSME actors, enabling them to learn from one another about digital marketing strategy, social media use, and digitally based business management. Within this process, communication unfolded participatively, such that participants were not merely recipients of information but active co constructors of shared understanding regarding digital transformation.

Digital communication also formed an important part of the incubator program. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Zoom, Instagram, and online marketplaces were used as media for coordination, learning, and digital marketing practice. MSME actors reported that the use of digital media within the incubator program helped them understand more modern and flexible patterns of business communication.

Table 1. Communication Strategy within the MSME Incubator Program

No.	Focus Area	Key Finding	Scientific Interpretation
1	Interpersonal communication in mentoring	Interpersonal communication was implemented through intensive mentoring between mentors and MSME actors, comprising business consultation, digital marketing coaching, and technology use discussion.	Interpersonal communication functions as a mechanism of knowledge transfer and understanding formation, operating through interaction that is at once persuasive and educative.
2	Role of the mentor	Mentors functioned not only as content deliverers but also as facilitators supporting MSME actors' gradual digital adaptation.	The mentor's role indicates that digital transformation unfolds through participatory communication that fosters mindset change and digital readiness.
3	Group communication in the program	Group communication took place through training, workshops, and discussion forums among incubator participants.	Group communication creates a space of collective learning that enables the exchange of knowledge and experience among MSME actors regarding digital transformation.

No.	Focus Area	Key Finding	Scientific Interpretation
4	Participation of MSME actors	MSME actors were actively engaged in communicative and learning processes throughout the incubator program.	Active participation shows that communication within the incubator is dialogic and fosters the co construction of shared meaning regarding business digitalization.
5	Use of digital communication	Digital communication was used as a medium for coordination, learning, and digital marketing implementation.	The use of digital media reflects an adaptation toward more flexible, interactive, and technology based business communication.

Source: Researcher's field data, 2026.

These findings align with Checchinato et al. (2025), who argue that communication in digital transformation functions not merely as an information channel but as a process that builds understanding and technological adaptation. Rozaq et al. (2025) similarly note that digital platforms create interactive communicative spaces that strengthen business actors' engagement within the digital ecosystem. Communication strategy within the incubator program is thus both informative and transformative in shaping MSMEs' digital readiness.

3.2 The Process of Meaning Construction around Digital Transformation

The findings show that MSME actors initially perceived digital transformation as a difficult undertaking, but subsequently came to understand it as an essential requirement for business development. In the early stage, most

MSME actors equated digitalization narrowly with social media use or marketplace listing. Following participation in the incubator program, however, their understanding broadened to encompass changes in how they communicated with customers, managed their businesses, and designed data informed marketing strategies.

This process of meaning construction was formed through participants' interactional experience with mentors and fellow incubator participants. Discussion, hands on practice, and sustained mentoring enabled MSME actors to grasp the benefits of digital technology in improving business efficiency and market reach. In addition, the success of fellow participants in implementing digital strategy shaped how MSME actors came to interpret digital transformation as an opportunity rather than a threat.

Table 2. Meaning Construction of Digital Transformation among MSME Actors

No.	Focus Area	Key Finding	Interpretation
1	Initial understanding	MSME actors initially equated digitalization solely with social media and marketplace use.	Digital understanding was initially limited in scope.
2	Shift in understanding	Following incubation, MSME actors came to understand digitalization more broadly.	The incubator program broadened MSME actors' digital understanding.
3	Learning process	Understanding was formed through discussion, hands on practice, and mentoring.	Communication and learning jointly shape digital understanding.

No.	Focus Area	Key Finding	Interpretation
4	Role of the mentor	Mentors helped MSME actors understand digital technology.	Mentors strengthened MSME digital readiness.
5	Digital practice	Hands on practice improved MSME actors' digital capability.	Experience strengthens digital adaptation.
6	Peer interaction	Participants exchanged experiences of business digitalization with one another.	Social interaction fosters shared learning.
7	Meaning of transformation	MSME actors began to view digitalization as a business opportunity.	Digital transformation strengthens MSME competitiveness.

Source: Researcher's field data, 2026.

This finding shows that the meaning of digital transformation is not formed instantaneously but through an ongoing process of communication and social experience. Gonzalez Varona et al. (2024) explain that understanding of digital transformation is built through organizational learning and social interaction among actors. This is corroborated by Octory et al. (2025), who note that the diffusion of innovation among MSMEs is shaped by interpersonal communication and social networks that enable the exchange of experience and knowledge. Nugroho et al. (2025) similarly show, in the context of a rural Indonesian digital village, that digital communication capacity is strengthened progressively through sustained community interaction rather than through a single training episode. Meaning construction around digital transformation among MSME actors in the incubator program is therefore formed through social interaction, learning processes, and sustained communicative experience.

3.3 The Role of the Incubator in Strengthening MSME Digital Readiness

The findings indicate that the incubator program plays an important role in strengthening MSME digital readiness through training, mentoring, and digital capacity building. MSME actors reported that prior to joining the incubator program, they had limited capability in the use of digital technology, particularly with respect to online marketing, digital content creation, and the use of e commerce platforms. Through the incubator program, MSME actors gained practical knowledge of digital marketing strategy, digital branding, social media use, and online transaction management. The mentoring process also helped MSME actors build confidence in using digital technology for business development. The incubator further created a learning environment that supported the process of digital adaptation; interaction among participants enabled the formation of social networks and the exchange of experience that accelerated digital learning. These conditions indicate that the incubator functions not solely as a training institution but also as a learning communication ecosystem.

Table 3. The Role of the Incubator in Strengthening MSME Digital Readiness

No.	Focus Area	Key Finding	Meaning
1	Digital readiness of MSMEs	MSME actors had limited digital technology capability prior to incubation.	MSME digital readiness was initially low.
2	Role of the program	The incubator provided digital training and mentoring.	The incubator helped strengthen MSME digital capacity.
3	Digital knowledge	MSME actors gained knowledge of digital marketing and social media.	The program improved MSME digital competence.
4	Mentoring process	Mentoring strengthened MSME actors' confidence in using digital technology.	Mentoring strengthened MSME digital adaptation.

No.	Focus Area	Key Finding	Meaning
5	Learning environment	The incubator created a space for shared learning and experience exchange among participants.	Social interaction accelerated digital learning.
6	Function of the incubator	The incubator functioned not only as a training venue but also as a communicative learning space.	The incubator serves as a supporting ecosystem for MSME digital transformation.

Source: Researcher's field data, 2026.

This finding is consistent with Hajar et al. (2025), who explain that mentoring programs within incubators can accelerate MSME digital transformation through knowledge transfer and sustained mentoring. Persada et al. (2024) likewise note that business incubators contribute to strengthening MSMEs' innovation capacity and digital readiness. Assenova (2020) further shows that structured mentoring accelerates learning and scaling among under resourced entrepreneurs, a pattern mirrored in the present incubator's function as a sustained communicative support structure rather than a one off training intervention.

The incubator program thus plays a strategic role in building MSME digital readiness through communicative learning, mentoring, and the strengthening of digitally based business capacity.

3.4 Digital Transformation as a Social and Communicative Process

The findings show that MSME digital transformation is understood not only as a technological change but also as a social process involving shifts in mindset, work culture, and the way business actors communicate. MSME actors experienced changes in how they built relationships with customers, promoted products, and managed their businesses after participating in the incubator program.

Digital transformation also influenced how MSME actors constructed their business identity within the digital space. The use of social media and digital platforms made MSME actors more active in creating content, building interaction with consumers, and expanding their market network. In this context, communication becomes a central component of digital transformation because it determines how business actors understand and enact digital change within their business.

Table 4. Digital Transformation as a Social and Communicative Process

No.	Focus Area	Key Finding	Meaning
1	MSME digital transformation	Digitalization changed not only technology use but also MSME actors' mindset.	MSME actors experienced change in both working practice and communication.
2	Digital business communication	MSME actors changed how they promoted products and related to customers.	Digitalization influences business communication.
3	Use of social media	MSME actors became more active in using social media and digital platforms.	Digital media help expand MSMEs' market reach.
4	Digital business identity	MSME actors began building their business image within the digital space.	Digital media strengthen business identity.
5	Role of communication	Communication helped MSME actors understand business digitalization.	Communication is a central element of digital transformation.

Source: Researcher's field data, 2026.

This finding reinforces Checchinato et al. (2025), who argue that communication in digital transformation functions as a process of meaning making, or social meaning formation. Lokuge and Duan (2021) similarly explain that MSME digital transformation success is strongly influenced by an organization's capacity to build internal communication and learning. Rahman et al. (2025) further show that MSMEs' digital competitive advantage rests on digital creativity and digital culture, both of which are cultivated through ongoing communicative practice rather than technology adoption alone.

MSME digital transformation within the incubator program can therefore be understood as a social and communicative process that unfolds through interaction, learning, and the sustained construction of meaning.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study extend current understanding of MSME digital transformation by demonstrating that communication is not an ancillary support function but a constitutive mechanism through which digital transformation is enacted and made meaningful. Three interpretive threads emerge from the data that merit discussion: the layered structure of communication strategy within the incubator, the process through which meaning around digital transformation is constructed, and the incubator's function as a communicative ecosystem rather than a purely technical training institution.

4.1 Communication as a Layered, Interlocking Strategy

The finding that communication within the incubator operated simultaneously through interpersonal, group, and digital modes supports and extends the argument of Checchinato et al. (2025) that communication in digital transformation is interactive rather than merely informational. Where much of the existing literature treats communication channels as functionally separate interpersonal mentoring for skill transfer, group training for scale, and digital platforms for coordination the present findings show these three modes operating as a mutually

reinforcing system. Interpersonal mentoring supplied the trust and individualized pacing needed for MSME actors to engage with unfamiliar technology; group communication converted individual learning into shared, socially validated knowledge; and digital platform communication extended both processes beyond the physical bounds of the incubator into MSME actors' daily business routines. This layered structure is consistent with Cosa's (2024) contention that digital transformation strategy is a communicative accomplishment requiring continual articulation and negotiation across organizational levels, and it echoes Gyamerah et al.'s (2025) finding that digital transformational leadership shapes transformation outcomes indirectly, through its effect on organizational digital capability and strategy rather than through technology provision alone.

4.2 Meaning Construction as a Progressive, Relational Process

The second key finding that MSME actors' understanding of digital transformation shifted from a narrow equation with social media use toward a broader recognition of digitalization as encompassing customer communication, business management, and data informed marketing illustrates meaning construction as a progressive and relational, rather than instantaneous, process. This finding resonates with Gonzalez Varona et al.'s (2024) argument that understanding of digital transformation is built through organizational learning and social interaction, and it substantiates Checchinato et al.'s (2025) claim that communication in digital transformation functions as meaning making rather than simple information transfer. The present study adds specificity to this claim by showing the mechanism through which such meaning making occurs: sustained dialogic interaction with mentors, structured opportunities for hands on digital practice, and exposure to peers' successful digitalization experiences jointly functioned as a scaffold within which MSME actors reconstructed digitalization from a threat into an opportunity. This pattern is consistent with diffusion of innovation accounts emphasizing the social,

rather than purely rational, character of technology adoption (Octory et al., 2025; Hidayat et al., 2025), and it parallels Nugroho et al.'s (2025) finding that sustained community level digital communication interventions rather than isolated training events are what durably reshape MSME digital capacity in the Indonesian context.

4.3 The Incubator as a Communicative Ecosystem

The third finding that the incubator functioned not solely as a training institution but as a learning communication ecosystem offers a communication centred elaboration of the incubation literature, which has predominantly framed incubators' value in terms of resource provision, mentoring intensity, or performance outcomes (Persada et al., 2024; Hajar et al., 2025). The present data suggest that the incubator's contribution to MSME digital readiness lay specifically in its capacity to sustain relational communication over time a pattern consistent with Assenova's (2020) finding that structured, sustained mentoring accelerates learning and scaling among under resourced entrepreneurs, and with Clayton's (2024) observation that entrepreneurial support organization services shape venture trajectories through the relationships they enable rather than through capital alone. Within this ecosystem, mentors functioned less as one way instructors and more as communicative facilitators, consistent with Sugiono's (2021) characterization of incubators as strategic communicative spaces for knowledge transfer between mentors and tenants.

4.4 Implications for Theory and Practice

Theoretically, the findings suggest that models of MSME digital transformation should more explicitly incorporate a communicative and meaning construction dimension alongside the technological, organizational, and dynamic capability dimensions already well established in the literature (Kahveci, 2025; Putri et al., 2025; Egodawele et al., 2022). Framing digital transformation as partly a communicative accomplishment, as proposed by Cosa (2024), helps explain why technically similar incubator interventions can produce divergent digital

readiness outcomes across different MSME cohorts: the difference may lie less in the technology introduced than in the quality and sustainability of the communicative relationships through which that technology is interpreted and internalized. This is consistent with Rahman et al.'s (2025) finding that MSMEs' digital competitive advantage rests on digital creativity and digital culture outcomes that are themselves communicatively constructed rather than technologically determined.

Practically, the findings suggest that incubator program design should deliberately cultivate the three communicative modes identified in this study as complementary rather than substitutable: interpersonal mentoring should be preserved even as group training and digital platform tools are scaled, since it is the interpersonal channel that appears to carry the relational trust necessary for MSME actors to reinterpret digitalization as opportunity rather than threat. Program managers and policymakers seeking to accelerate MSME digital transformation whether through incubators, government digitalization programs, or community based interventions such as that documented by Nugroho et al. (2025) should therefore invest as much in mentoring quality and peer learning structures as in the provision of digital infrastructure and tools.

4.5 Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. First, as a single site qualitative case study, its findings are context bound and may not generalize directly to incubator programs operating under different institutional, sectoral, or regional conditions; the transferability of the findings should therefore be judged by readers in relation to the contextual similarity of their own settings, following the logic of naturalistic generalization common in qualitative case study research (Yin, 2021). Second, data were collected within a relatively short eight week window, which may not fully capture longer term shifts in meaning construction or the durability of digital readiness gains after participants exit the program. Third, while triangulation across sources, methods, and

time strengthened the credibility of the findings, the study did not include a comparison group of MSMEs outside the incubator, limiting causal claims about the incubator's distinctive contribution relative to other possible drivers of digital readiness change.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how communication strategies construct meaning within MSME digital transformation through a business incubator program in Makassar City. The findings show that communication strategy occupies a central role in this process. Communication conducted through interpersonal, group, and digital modes functioned not merely as a means of information delivery but also as a process of social learning that shaped MSME actors' understanding of digital transformation. The interaction among mentors, program managers, and MSME actors created a communicative space that enabled knowledge transfer, experience exchange, and the formation of meaning around the importance of digitalization for business development.

The findings further show that the construction of meaning around digital transformation among MSME actors was formed through sustained communicative experience and mentoring within the incubator program. MSME actors who initially regarded digitalization as difficult and complex came to understand digital transformation as an essential requirement for strengthening business competitiveness. This process occurred through hands on practice,

mentoring, and social interaction that helped MSME actors internalize the use of digital technology within their business activity.

In addition, the incubator program proved to function as a learning ecosystem that supports the strengthening of MSME digital readiness. Mentoring, digital training, and coaching programs helped MSME actors improve their capability in digital marketing, social media use, and technology based business management. The incubator functioned not only as a training institution but also as a social communication space that strengthened the adaptation and behavioural change of business actors toward digitalization.

Taken together, MSME digital transformation within the incubator program can be understood as a social and communicative process formed through interaction, learning, and sustained meaning construction. This study affirms that the success of MSME digital transformation is determined not only by the availability of technology but also by the effectiveness of communication strategy and the mentoring process that build understanding and digital readiness among business actors. For future research, comparative studies across multiple incubator programs, longitudinal designs tracking meaning construction over longer periods, and mixed methods studies linking communicative processes to measurable business performance outcomes are recommended to extend and test the generalizability of the findings presented here.

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