

Grassroots Advertising Strategies and Local Brand Equity Development: A Qualitative Study on Franchise-Based Culinary Businesses in Central Java, Indonesia

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JBEEM
February 2026

Received 3 February 2026
Revised 2 March 2026
Accepted 14 April 2026

Abstract

The culinary franchise sector in Indonesia, particularly in Central Java, is experiencing unprecedented competitive pressure, with most national brands relying on large-scale advertising campaigns and centralized promotional budgets. However, a number of local franchise brands have demonstrated resilience and growth by employing simple, adaptive, and community-rooted advertising approaches. This study investigates how Hisana Fried Chicken outlet managers in Semarang Regency independently develop brand equity through grassroots advertising strategies without centralized promotional support. Using a qualitative descriptive case study methodology, data were gathered from five purposively selected outlets that had operated for more than one year with an established regular customer base. Primary data collection involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with outlet branch managers (Kepala Cabang), supplemented by direct field observation and documentation of both online and offline promotional activities. Thematic analysis was applied to interpret the data. Findings reveal that outlets successfully cultivated customer loyalty and strong local brand recognition through active use of social media platforms specifically WhatsApp Business, Instagram Reels, and TikTok combined with conventional offline tools such as banners, discounted promotions, and direct verbal communication. The outlet manager's personal engagement with consumers emerged as the most influential factor in constructing an emotionally resonant brand image. The study concludes that in the context of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), low-cost, adaptive, and relationship-centered advertising strategies constitute powerful mechanisms for local brand equity building. Theoretical implications for integrated marketing communications (IMC) and consumer-brand relationship theory are discussed.

Keyword Advertising Strategy, Local Brand Equity, Franchise, Social Media Marketing, Consumer Loyalty

Introduction

The rapid expansion of the franchise-based culinary industry in Indonesia has created a highly dynamic and competitive market environment. The growing urbanization of mid-sized cities in Central Java including Semarang, Solo, and surrounding districts has accelerated consumer demand for accessible and affordable fast food options. Within this context, franchise models have emerged as the dominant business structure enabling rapid brand proliferation with relatively low capital investment from individual franchise partners (Hitt, Ireland & Hoskisson, 2020). Among the most critical factors driving franchise brand performance is the effectiveness of advertising strategy. According to Kotler, Keller & Chernev (2022), advertising represents one of the most prominent tools in the marketing communication mix, capable of reaching broad audiences, building awareness, and shaping brand perceptions. However, within the context of franchise culinary businesses targeting the middle-to-lower income segment, most empirical research has focused on large-scale national brands that possess substantial advertising budgets and centralized marketing infrastructure.

An understudied phenomenon exists in the landscape of grassroots franchise outlets local brand players that operate without centralized advertising support yet manage to

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Journal of Business Evolution
and Economic Management
Vol. 1, No. 2
pp. 67-76
PT. Cendekia Mandiri Nusantara
E-ISSN:
DOI:

cultivate loyal consumer bases through adaptive, community-oriented promotional approaches. Hisana Fried Chicken represents a compelling example of such a phenomenon. Founded in 2005 under a sharia-based partnership model by Tatang Suharta, Hisana has grown to operate more than 630 outlets across Indonesia (Hardiyanti, 2016), primarily targeting the lower-middle income segment with affordable pricing and a street-food positioning. Despite the significant presence of Hisana in regional markets, academic investigation into its advertising mechanisms at the outlet level remains scarce. Prior studies have predominantly examined social media marketing (Dwivedi et al., 2021), word-of-mouth (WOM) dynamics (Cheung & Thadani, 2012), and brand equity dimensions (Keller, 2020) in isolation or within large corporate contexts. There is a notable gap in understanding how individual franchise outlets with minimal resources construct and sustain brand equity through independent, localized advertising activities.

This study addresses that gap by examining the advertising strategies employed by Hisana Fried Chicken outlet managers in Semarang Regency, Central Java. Specifically, it investigates: (1) the forms, channels, and messages of advertising implemented at the outlet level; (2) how these strategies contribute to brand identity formation and consumer loyalty; and (3) the extent to which personal interaction and social media serve as complementary instruments of brand communication. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of literature on SME marketing communication and grassroots brand-building, with practical implications for franchise operators and policymakers supporting local culinary entrepreneurship in Indonesia.

Theoretical Framework

Advertising Strategy and the IMC Framework

Advertising strategy constitutes a systematic approach to designing and delivering persuasive messages to target audiences through appropriate media channels. Belch & Belch (2021) define advertising strategy as encompassing creative strategy what message is communicated and media strategy how and where that message is delivered. In the contemporary marketing landscape, the concept of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) provides the overarching framework within which advertising strategy is situated. IMC posits that all forms of communication and messages must be carefully linked and coordinated to produce a consistent, clear, and compelling brand message (Schultz & Schultz, 2018).

For small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the IMC framework offers a particularly relevant lens because it emphasizes message consistency and media synergy rather than sheer advertising volume. Kliatchko (2021) argues that the effectiveness of IMC is not merely a function of budget but is contingent upon the alignment of message strategy with consumer needs, channel relevance, and relational credibility. This is especially salient in franchise contexts where central brand standards may not be enforced uniformly at the outlet level.

Brand Equity and Local Brand Identity

Brand equity refers to the differential effect that brand knowledge has on consumer response to marketing activities (Keller, 2020). Aaker (1996) conceptualizes brand equity as composed of four core dimensions: brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations. Strong brand equity provides competitive advantages including consumer preference, willingness to pay premium prices, and resistance to competitive actions. In local

and SME contexts, however, brand equity is often built through experiential and relational pathways rather than mass media exposure. Yoo, Donthu & Lee (2020) demonstrate that consistent brand experiences at the point of interaction including service quality, personal engagement, and environmental cues are significant antecedents of consumer-based brand equity. For local franchise outlets, these micro-level brand encounters may carry greater weight than centralized advertising campaigns, particularly when serving community-embedded consumer segments.

Furthermore, Veloutsou & Guzmán (2017) propose the concept of brand community resonance, suggesting that strong local brands emerge from the co-creation of meaning between brand representatives and consumers in a shared social context. This theoretical lens is highly applicable to the Hisana franchise model, where outlet managers function not merely as commercial operators but as community anchors.

Social Media Marketing in SME Contexts

Social media platforms have fundamentally altered the advertising landscape for small businesses by providing low-cost, high-reach communication channels. Dwivedi et al. (2021) identify social media marketing (SMM) as a set of activities involving the creation, distribution, and exchange of value-laden content through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Facebook. For SMEs, SMM offers the capacity to build parasocial relationships with consumers interactions that simulate personal connection and foster emotional attachment to the brand (Labrecque, 2014). In the Indonesian culinary sector, TikTok and Instagram have emerged as dominant platforms for food content marketing. Hidayat & Wahyuni (2022) demonstrate that short-form video content on TikTok particularly food preparation and promotion videos significantly increases brand engagement and purchase intent among younger consumer segments. WhatsApp Business, meanwhile, functions as a direct communication channel enabling personalized promotional delivery, order management, and customer relationship maintenance.

The concept of user-generated content (UGC) is also pertinent here. When consumers share food experiences, reviews, and promotional content on their personal social media accounts, they effectively amplify brand reach at zero incremental cost to the outlet (Christodoulides, Jevons & Bonhomme, 2012). Encouraging and leveraging UGC constitutes a powerful low-cost advertising mechanism for franchise outlets.

Consumer-Brand Relationship and Loyalty

Consumer loyalty in the culinary sector is increasingly understood not merely as repeat purchase behavior but as a relational outcome of emotional bonding between consumers and brands (Fournier & Alvarez, 2019). Berry (2002) introduces the concept of relationship marketing, positing that businesses that invest in long-term relational bonds with consumers through personalized service, trust, and emotional resonance generate superior loyalty outcomes compared to those relying exclusively on transactional incentives. In SME contexts, these relational bonds are frequently mediated by interpersonal dynamics at the service encounter level. The outlet manager or frontline staff member becomes, in effect, a human embodiment of the brand. Palmatier et al. (2022) confirm that interpersonal relationships at the point of sale are among the strongest predictors of consumer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth, particularly in service industries characterized by high personal interaction.

The theoretical integration of these frameworks IMC, brand equity, social media marketing, and consumer-brand relationships provides the analytical foundation for understanding how Hisana Fried Chicken outlets in Central Java construct and sustain brand equity through independent advertising activities.

Methods

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a descriptive case study design. Qualitative methodology is appropriate because the study seeks to explore complex social phenomena specifically, the advertising strategies and brand-building practices of franchise outlet managers that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study design enables in-depth contextual investigation of a bounded system Hisana Fried Chicken outlets in Semarang Regency within the natural setting of their operations (Yin, 2018).

The descriptive nature of the study aims to provide a rich, nuanced portrayal of the advertising strategies, their rationale, implementation, and perceived effects on brand outcomes, as articulated by outlet managers and consumers. This approach is consistent with interpretivist epistemology, which prioritizes the subjective meanings and lived experiences of participants in constructing knowledge about social realities (Bryman, 2022).

Research Site and Participant Selection

The research was conducted across five Hisana Fried Chicken outlets located in the Semarang urban and peri-urban area, including outlets in Tembalang, Banyumanik, Pedurungan, Genuk, and Mijen districts. Outlets were selected purposively based on the following criteria: (1) minimum operational period of twelve months; (2) active engagement in promotional activities; (3) identifiable regular customer base; and (4) manager's willingness to participate in the study.

Primary informants consisted of five Kepala Cabang (branch managers/outlet managers) who are directly responsible for planning and executing local advertising strategies. Secondary informants included twelve regular consumers and five local community members who frequent the outlets, selected through convenience sampling to triangulate managerial perspectives with consumer perceptions. Data collection was conducted from February 1 to March 31, 2025.

Data Collection

Three complementary data collection methods were employed to ensure triangulation and enhance the credibility of findings. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with primary and secondary informants using open-ended interview guides designed to explore advertising practices, media channel selection, message strategies, and perceived brand outcomes. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Second, direct observation was conducted at each outlet on multiple occasions to document physical advertising materials (banners, posters, signage), social media content, and service interaction patterns. Third, documentation analysis was performed on social media accounts (Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp Business), promotional flyers, discount announcements, and menu design materials.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis following the framework of Braun & Clarke (2022) was employed to analyze the qualitative data. The six-phase process involved: (1) data familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes; (2) initial coding of meaningful units; (3) theme generation by clustering related codes; (4) theme review and refinement; (5) theme naming and definition; and (6) report production. Member-checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with two outlet managers to validate interpretations. Researcher reflexivity was maintained through regular journaling throughout the data collection and analysis phases.

Results

Profile of Hisana Fried Chicken Outlets in Semarang

The five research outlets share several common characteristics. All are operated under the Hisana franchise system with independent local management, meaning that promotional activities are entirely self-directed by the Kepala Cabang without mandated advertising support from the franchise head office. The outlets target families, daily wage workers, office employees, and university students seeking affordable fast food at price points between IDR 8,000 and IDR 15,000 per serving. Each outlet has operated for between 18 months and 4 years and maintains a loyal customer base of between 50 and 150 regular visitors per day.

A defining characteristic of these outlets is their deliberate positioning as community dining spaces rather than mere transactional food service points. Outlet managers actively cultivate personal relationships with regular customers, recall individual preferences, and treat promotional communication as an extension of social interaction rather than commercial broadcasting.

Offline Advertising Strategies

All five outlets employ a combination of offline advertising tools adapted to their local environments. Banners and large-format posters represent the primary outdoor advertising medium, positioned at strategic locations adjacent to main roads, campus gates, and residential area entrances. Banner content is regularly updated approximately every two to four weeks to reflect current promotions, seasonal offerings (e.g., Ramadan packages, school holiday deals), and new menu items. Outlet managers reported that banner freshness is consciously managed to prevent advertising habituation among passersby.

Verbal promotion by cashiers and outlet managers constitutes a significant informal advertising channel. During customer interactions, cashiers are trained to communicate ongoing promotions, suggest complementary menu items, and inform customers of upcoming discount events. The outlet managers themselves engage in direct conversation with customers, often addressing regular visitors by name and sharing promotional information in a naturalistic, conversational manner. Several outlet managers described this practice as *membangun silaturahmi* (building community ties), reflecting a culturally embedded approach to consumer relationship management.

Discount promotions on specific days of the week typically Fridays or Saturdays and bundle meal packages (*paket hemat*) are consistently employed to drive footfall during slower trading periods. These promotions are communicated through a combination of in-store signage and social media posts announced one to two days in advance, creating anticipation and driving repeat visitation.

4.3 Online Advertising Strategies

All outlet managers operate independent social media accounts on WhatsApp Business, Instagram, and TikTok. Content production is conducted personally by the Kepala Cabang or delegated to a trusted employee, without reliance on professional content creators or celebrity endorsements. The content strategy is characterized by simplicity, consistency, and authenticity. Typical content includes: food photography of new menu items, daily discount announcements, short TikTok videos documenting food preparation, and consumer testimonials reposted from satisfied customers. WhatsApp Business groups and broadcast lists are used to deliver promotional messages directly to loyal customers who have consented to join outlet-specific communication channels. This direct-to-consumer messaging is particularly effective for time-sensitive promotions such as same-day discounts or end-of-day clearance pricing. Outlet managers noted that WhatsApp messages typically generate immediate responses and footfall within one to two hours of delivery.

Instagram is used primarily for brand image building through visually consistent photo content, while TikTok functions as a reach-expansion platform. Several outlets reported organic viral moments when their food preparation videos or promotion announcements were shared widely within local community networks. One outlet in the Tembalang district reported a 40% increase in first-time customer visits following a TikTok video that generated over 15,000 views within 72 hours achieved without paid promotion or influencer collaboration.

The Role of Personal Interaction in Brand Building

A convergent theme across all interview data was the primacy of personal interaction between the outlet manager, staff, and consumers as the foundational mechanism of brand equity construction. Regular customers consistently referenced the warmth of service, recognition by name, and the manager's personal communication style as key reasons for their loyalty to a specific outlet. As one consumer informant articulated:

"I could buy fried chicken anywhere, but here the owner always knows what I like and tells me about new deals before I even ask. It feels like a neighborhood place, not a brand."

Outlet managers similarly framed their promotional activities as relational rather than transactional. The absence of centralized advertising infrastructure was not perceived as a limitation but as an opportunity to develop differentiated, hyperlocal brand identities. Several managers independently developed loyalty mechanisms such as punch cards, birthday promotions, and WhatsApp-exclusive deals that reinforced the sense of consumer belonging to a community rather than mere patronage of a franchise outlet.

SWOT Analysis of Hisana Fried Chicken Advertising Strategy in Central Java

The following SWOT matrix synthesizes the strategic position of Hisana Fried Chicken outlets in Semarang Regency with respect to their independent advertising and brand-building activities:

STRENGTHS (S)	WEAKNESSES (W)
✓ Distinctive product quality with halal certification	X Absence of centralized advertising support

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Strong personal relationships with local consumers ✓ Flexible franchise system with low entry cost ✓ Community-embedded brand identity ✓ Adaptive social media content management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> X Limited marketing budget at outlet level X Inconsistent brand standards across outlets X Informal employee recruitment system X Dependency on outlet manager's initiative
OPPORTUNITIES (O)	THREATS (T)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Growing demand for affordable fast food in Central Java ✓ Increasing social media penetration in semi-urban areas ✓ Potential for community-based marketing partnerships ✓ Rising middle-lower income consumer segment ✓ Digital platform evolution (TikTok Shop, WhatsApp Business) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> X Intensifying competition from national and local brands X Rapid technological change in food delivery platforms X Rising raw material costs affecting price competitiveness X Changing government food safety regulations X Growing consumer sophistication and switching behavior

The SWOT analysis reveals that the primary competitive strength of Hisana outlets lies not in resource abundance but in relational depth and community embeddedness. The identified weaknesses primarily concern scalability and brand standardization challenges that arise precisely from the decentralized advertising model that constitutes its core strength. Opportunities are largely digital in nature, with TikTok Shop integration and WhatsApp Business API features offering accessible technological upgrades to existing promotional practices.

Discussion

Grassroots Advertising as a Brand Equity Driver

The findings of this study provide robust empirical support for the proposition that grassroots, low-cost advertising strategies can serve as powerful drivers of local brand equity in SME culinary contexts. This conclusion challenges the prevailing assumption in marketing literature that brand equity building requires significant financial investment in mass media advertising. The Hisana case demonstrates that when advertising strategy is calibrated to community scale prioritizing message relevance, interpersonal authenticity, and channel appropriateness over reach and frequency consumer-brand relationships of considerable emotional depth can emerge.

This aligns with Keller's (2020) customer-based brand equity model, which emphasizes consumer feelings, brand imagery, and brand resonance as the highest-order dimensions of brand equity. The personal interaction mechanisms documented in this study named recognition, proactive promotion sharing, spontaneous service gestures directly cultivate the feelings and resonance dimensions of Keller's model without requiring the brand awareness investments typically associated with formal advertising campaigns.

The multi-platform social media strategy employed by Hisana outlets integrating WhatsApp for direct communication, Instagram for brand imagery, and TikTok for viral reach constitutes a practical, organically developed form of IMC. While the outlet managers did not employ formal IMC frameworks in designing their communication strategies, the functional complementarity of the channels they selected closely mirrors the IMC principle of coordinated communication across touchpoints (Schultz & Schultz, 2018).

Particularly noteworthy is the emerging role of TikTok as a zero-cost reach amplification tool for local food businesses. The viral mechanics of TikTok's algorithm which can surface content from small accounts to large audiences based on engagement signals rather than follower count effectively democratize broadcast-scale advertising reach for resource-constrained outlets. This finding extends the observations of Dwivedi et al. (2021) regarding social media's role in SME marketing by documenting the specific mechanism through which TikTok creates asymmetric advertising value for local franchise operators.

The Manager as Brand Ambassador

Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding of this study is the emergence of the outlet manager as the primary brand communication agent. In the absence of centralized advertising, the Kepala Cabang functions simultaneously as operational manager, content creator, relationship manager, and brand ambassador. This multilayered role produces a form of brand communication that is inherently authentic, contextually responsive, and emotionally resonant qualities that are increasingly difficult to achieve through conventional paid advertising (Fournier & Alvarez, 2019).

Palmatier et al.'s (2022) framework of relationship marketing is particularly relevant here. The managers' investment in interpersonal relationships with consumers remembering preferences, personal communication, spontaneous loyalty rewards generates relationship-based trust that translates into behavioral loyalty. This loyalty, in turn, produces organic word-of-mouth propagation through consumer social networks, creating a virtuous cycle of community-embedded brand growth that requires minimal incremental advertising expenditure.

Implications for Franchise Management and SME Policy

The findings have significant implications for franchise management practice. The current model, in which franchise outlets operate without standardized advertising guidelines, produces considerable variance in brand presentation across the network. While this variance enables the hyperlocal adaptation that drives consumer loyalty in specific communities, it simultaneously creates challenges for network-level brand coherence. Franchise headquarters are recommended to develop flexible advertising guidelines that establish minimum brand standards while preserving outlets' capacity for local adaptation a principle consistent with the concept of think global, act local in international marketing literature.

For SME development policy in Indonesia, the study affirms the strategic importance of digital literacy programs for micro-franchise operators. The informal social media competencies developed by outlet managers in this study represent significant competitive assets. Systematic training in content creation, community management, and digital analytics delivered through Dinas Koperasi dan UMKM programs would substantially amplify the

advertising effectiveness of the low-cost strategies already being practiced by these entrepreneurs.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations. The qualitative design, while enabling deep contextual insight, limits the generalizability of findings to Hisana outlets in other regions or to other franchise brands with different organizational structures. Future research employing mixed-methods designs combining qualitative exploration with quantitative measurement of advertising effectiveness outcomes such as brand awareness scores, customer lifetime value, and net promoter scores would strengthen the empirical foundation for the theoretical propositions advanced here. Comparative studies examining grassroots advertising strategies across multiple franchise culinary brands in different Indonesian provinces would also yield valuable insights into the contextual contingencies of community-based brand-building.

Conclusion

This study investigated the independent advertising strategies employed by Hisana Fried Chicken outlet managers in Semarang Regency, Central Java, and their contribution to local brand equity development. The findings demonstrate that, despite the absence of centralized promotional support, outlets successfully constructed strong consumer-brand relationships through an integrated combination of offline tools banners, verbal promotion, and targeted discounts and digital platforms including WhatsApp Business, Instagram, and TikTok.

The central contribution of this study is the empirical validation of grassroots advertising as a viable and effective brand equity strategy in SME franchise contexts. The outlet manager's personal engagement with consumers was identified as the most influential factor in generating emotional brand resonance and behavioral loyalty. The social media strategies employed particularly TikTok's organic viral mechanics represent a practically significant model for low-cost advertising reach expansion in semi-urban Indonesian markets.

Theoretically, this study extends the IMC framework and consumer-brand relationship literature by demonstrating how small-scale, resource-constrained operators can achieve IMC synergies and deep relational brand equity through informal, community-embedded communication practices. Practically, it provides a replicable model for franchise operators, SME policymakers, and marketing educators seeking to understand and develop effective low-cost advertising strategies for the culinary sector.

In conclusion, brand strength in the SME culinary franchise sector is not an exclusive privilege of large budget holders. It is, rather, the product of consistent, authentic, and relationally grounded communication accessible to any motivated outlet operator willing to invest in community connection rather than advertising spend.

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