

## **A Qualitative Inquiry into The Perceived Impacts of Community Partnership at Polbeng Business Expo on MSME Sustainable Competitiveness**

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### **Abstract**

*This study argues that the experiences and perceptions of MSMEs participants provide a deeper understanding of impact and sustainability of business support programs unlike quantitative research that often dominate evaluations such programs. This research presents a qualitative evaluation of the Polbeng Business Expo, a student-led initiative at Politeknik Negeri Bengkalis designed to empower local Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). The study aimed to explore the expo's perceived role in enhancing technological and marketing capabilities and to understand the underlying challenges and enablers from the participants' perspectives. Using a phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 20 MSME owners, student organizers, and academic supervisors. Thematic analysis revealed three central themes: (1) Catalyst for Marketing Confidence, where the expo provided immediate validation, enhanced brand visibility, and practical sales experience (2) The Technology Adoption Gap, highlighting a disconnect between basic digital literacy provided and the MSMEs' need for sustained, advanced technological support and (3) The Synergy of Academic-Community Collaboration, underscoring the mutual benefits for MSMEs in gaining fresh ideas and for students in acquiring real-world skills. The study concludes that the expo's primary strength lies in its ability to boost marketing morale and create a collaborative ecosystem. However, for a transformative impact on technological capability, a long-term partnership model is recommended for transformative technological impact beyond one-off events.*

*Keywords : Community partnership, MSMEs, Polbeng Business Expo, Empowerment.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Usaha Mikro, Kecil, dan Menengah (UMKM) or MSMEs are universally acknowledged as the engine of economic growth, particularly in regions like Bengkalis, Indonesia. While statistical data reveals challenges in technology adoption and market access in the subjective experiences of the entrepreneurs themselves. The struggles, motivations, and perceptions of support program for MSMEs are less frequently documented. The Polbeng Business Expo represents a significant investment of academic resources into local economic development, but its true value must be understood through the voices of its direct stakeholders.

Existing literature on polbeng business expos often focuses on quantitative outcomes such as sales, network size, or technology adoption rates. While, this approach can overlook the importance of process-oriented changes that are critical for sustainable growth, such as increased entrepreneurial self-efficacy, shifts in mindset, and the quality of mentor-mentee relationships (Feng et al., 2024). A qualitative inquiry is therefore essential to uncover the "why" and "how" rather than just presenting numbers.

This study adopts a qualitative paradigm to deal deeply into the perceived impacts of the Polbeng Business Expo beyond asking if capabilities were enhanced to explore in what ways participants experienced growth and what factors they believe facilitated or hindered their journey. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How do MSME owners and expo organizers perceive the impact of the Polbeng Business Expo on marketing and technological capabilities?
2. What are the underlying challenges and enabling factors in translating the expo experience into sustained business practices?

3. How is the collaborative process between students and MSMEs experienced by both parties?

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1 The Strategic Importance of MSMEs and Their inherent Challenges

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are universally acknowledged as a critical engine for economic growth, job creation, and poverty alleviation, particularly in developing economies like Indonesia. According to the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs (2023), MSMEs contribute 61.07% to Indonesia's GDP and absorb 97% of the national workforce, solidifying their role as the economy's backbone. Studies by Tambunan (2021) and Hidayat et al. (2022) consistently affirm this significant contribution, highlighting MSMEs' resilience and their role in driving inclusive economic development at both regional and national levels.

Despite their pivotal role, MSMEs face a "dual challenge" in the modern economic landscape. First, they operate in an increasingly competitive domestic market, pressured by the entry of large-scale corporations and global e-commerce platforms like Shopee and Tokopedia, which offer competitive pricing and extensive market reach (Kadin Indonesia, 2023; Porter, 1990). Second, and more critically, is the slow adoption of digital technology. Data from Bank Indonesia (2022) reveals that only 23% of Indonesian MSMEs have integrated digital tools into their operations, with a vast majority still reliant on conventional marketing methods. This digital gap results in lower operational efficiency, limited market access, and a weakened competitive position (OECD, 2022). The World Bank (2021) identifies the root causes as limited technical knowledge, financial constraints, and a lack of structured training, creating a barrier to the digital transformation essential for survival and growth.

### 2.2 Business Expos as a Strategic Intervention for MSMEs

Business exhibitions or expos have long been recognized as a potent marketing and networking tool. The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry (UFI, 2021) emphasizes that expos provide a unique platform for direct customer interaction, product validation, and brand visibility. Lee and Sukoco (2020) found that participation in business expos significantly enhances SMEs' market knowledge and business networks through direct engagement with consumers, investors, and industry peers. This interaction allows MSMEs to identify market trends, learn from competitors, and forge strategic partnerships.

However, the literature also points to a significant limitation: the sustainability of expo impacts. A study by Suryana et al. (2020) in West Java found that only 30% of MSMEs maintained enhanced capabilities after an expo, while 70% reverted to conventional practices due to a lack of ongoing mentorship and support. This indicates that while expos can be a powerful catalyst, their effectiveness is often short-lived without integrated post-event programs. Furthermore, challenges such as high participation costs and intense intra-event competition can diminish the positive impacts, especially for resource-constrained MSMEs (World Bank, 2022).

### 2.3 The Imperative of Technological and Marketing Capabilities

In the era of the digital economy, technological and marketing capabilities are intertwined determinants of an MSME's competitiveness namely:

1. Technological Capability refers to a firm's capacity to adopt, adapt, and utilize technology to improve productivity and efficiency. Haque (1995) positioned this capability as the foundation for international competitiveness, particularly for

developing nations. The adoption of technologies such as e-commerce platforms, digital inventory management (POS systems), and social media analytics can increase operational efficiency by up to 35% (McKinsey, 2021; OECD, 2022). Despite these benefits, adoption remains uneven. Bank Indonesia (2022) categorizes only 18% of Indonesian MSMEs as advanced technology users, while over 50% remain at a basic level, such as using social media for promotion. Barriers include low digital literacy, high implementation costs, and a mismatch between available technological solutions and the specific needs of MSMEs (Tambunan, 2021).

2. Marketing Capability, particularly in its modern, digital form, is crucial for customer acquisition and retention. Kotler et al. (2021) stress the need for a customer-centric approach leveraging data for market segmentation and personalized content. Success stories, such as MSMEs in Yogyakarta increasing sales by 25% through optimized Facebook ads, demonstrate the power of digital marketing (Pramudya et al., 2024). Conversely, Priyono et al. (2020) identified that 72% of Indonesian MSMEs still rely on conventional word-of-mouth strategies due to a lack of understanding of digital platform algorithms. This highlights a critical gap between the availability of digital marketing tools and the ability of MSMEs to leverage them effectively.

#### 2.4 The Synergy of Academia, Industry, and MSMEs

The role of academic institutions in fostering local economic development is gaining traction. The concept of the "Triple Helix," which emphasizes university-industry-government collaboration, is relevant here. Polytechnics, with their applied learning orientation, are uniquely positioned to act as catalysts for MSME development through project-based learning (PBL). Events like the Polbeng Business Expo represent a practical application of this model, where students apply theoretical knowledge in marketing, management, and entrepreneurship to real-world challenges faced by local MSMEs.

This synergy creates a mutually beneficial ecosystem. For students, it is an invaluable exercise in soft skill development, problem-solving, and professional networking (Raflah & Arimurti, 2023). For MSMEs, it provides access to fresh ideas, modern business knowledge, and energetic manpower that they would otherwise not afford. This collaborative model addresses the "fragmentation between the industrial sector and educational institutions" that Haque (1995) noted, by creating a direct pipeline for knowledge and skill transfer.

#### 2.5 Gap in Literature and This Study's Position

While the existing body of literature adequately covers the general challenges of MSMEs, the role of business expos, and the importance of technological and marketing capabilities, several gaps remain:

1. Local Context Specificity: Most studies focus on a macro context or cases outside Bengkalis. The specific socio-economic dynamics, infrastructural limitations (e.g., internet access), and the dominance of traditional sectors in Bengkalis require a localized investigation.
2. Evaluation of Student-Led Expos: There is a scarcity of empirical research evaluating the effectiveness of *student-led* business expos as a mechanism for MSME empowerment, particularly within the Indonesian polytechnic system.
3. Integrated Capability Analysis: Previous research often examines technological and marketing capabilities in isolation. This study seeks to investigate the synergistic interaction between these two capabilities following expo participation.
4. Qualitative Depth: Much of the existing evaluation relies on quantitative metrics. This research, through its qualitative design, aims to provide deeper insights into the perceived impacts, the human dynamics of collaboration, and the underlying reasons behind the success or failure of capability adoption.

Therefore, this study positions itself to fill these gaps by conducting a qualitative, in-depth evaluation of the Polbeng Business Expo, exploring its role as a catalyst for enhancing the technological and marketing capabilities of MSMEs in Bengkalis within the unique framework of academic-community collaboration.

### **3. METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative research design guided by a phenomenological approach. The objective was to capture the essence and underlying structures of the participants' lived experiences with the Polbeng Business Expo (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

#### **3.1. Participants and Sampling Strategy**

A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to identify participants who could provide rich, information-dense insights based on their direct involvement with the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2015). The final sample consisted of 20 participants across four distinct stakeholder groups to enable triangulation and a multi-faceted understanding. The participants were:

1. 10 (ten) MSME Owners: Selected specifically from repeat participants of the expo to ensure they had substantial and reflective experience.
2. 5 (five) Student Organizers: Enrolled in the International Business Administration program, all of whom were deeply involved in the planning, mentoring, and execution phases of the event.
3. 2 (two) Academic Supervisors/Lecturers: Directly responsible for overseeing the project-based learning activity.
4. 3 (three) Industry Practitioners: Individuals who acted as judges or sponsors for the expo, providing an external, industry-oriented perspective.

#### **3.2. Data Collection**

Data were collected through two primary qualitative methods to ensure depth and contextual understanding.

1. In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 20 participants, each lasting between 45 to 60 minutes. As recommended by Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), interview guides were tailored to each stakeholder group (e.g., MSMEs, students) but centered on core themes of learning, perceived benefits, challenges, and the dynamics of collaboration.
2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Two separate FGDs were facilitated—one with the MSME owners and another with the student organizers. This method was chosen to foster group interaction and generate collective insights on shared experiences, which can reveal consensus and divergence in views (Morgan, 1996).

All interviews and FGDs were conducted with informed consent, audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. All transcripts were anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

#### **3.3. Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the systematic six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). This process involved:

1. Familiarizing with the Data: Immersing in the data by repeatedly reading the transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the content.
2. Generating Initial Codes: Identifying and labeling significant phrases, sentences, or concepts relevant to the research questions across the entire dataset.
3. Searching for Themes: Collating the codes into potential overarching themes that captured meaningful patterns in the data.

4. Reviewing Themes: Checking if the candidate themes worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset, refining them for coherence and distinctiveness.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Developing a detailed analysis of each theme, capturing its essence and determining its narrative scope.
6. Producing the Report: Weaving the thematic analysis into a coherent and compelling narrative, supported by vivid and illustrative direct quotes from the participants.

## 4. RESULT & DISCUSSION

### 4.1. RESULT

The findings indicated that participants consistently viewed the expo as more than a mere sales event that can be classified into three themes.

Table 4.1. Research Findings

No.	Theme	Sub-Theme	Key Findings (Reported Speech)	Illustrative Participant Quote
1.	<b>Expo as a Catalyst for Marketing Confidence</b>	<b>Immediate Market Validation</b>	MSME owners reported that direct customer feedback served as a critical form of validation, reinforcing the value of their products and their identity as entrepreneurs.	"When people lined up for my <i>mie sagu</i> and customers especially non local customers and foreigners said it was delicious, it confirmed that my product has value. It felt like a real entrepreneur." (MSME Owner)
		<b>Enhanced Visibility and Brand Storytelling</b>	Participants found the expo enabled them to craft and communicate their brand narrative effectively, with many noting that connecting a product to its cultural story significantly enhanced its perceived value.	"The students helped me create a sign explaining my <i>lempuk</i> are local cuisine from local durian. People were buying a piece of our culture. That made me proud of my homeland." (MSME Owner)
		<b>Practical Skill Application</b>	Student organizers described the event as a vital opportunity for applying theoretical knowledge, highlighting the immersive experience of negotiation, booth design, and direct customer engagement.	"In class, we learn the '4Ps'. Here, we had to negotiate (Price), design a booth (Place), and convince a customer (Promotion). It's like learning in an open lab." (Student Organizer)
2.	<b>The Technology Adoption Gap</b>	<b>Surface-Level Digital Literacy</b>	The technological support was frequently characterized as foundational. MSME owners expressed confusion about advanced functions like using hashtags or managing online orders.	"They showed me how to post on Instagram, but I don't understand how to use hashtags and catchy captions to reach more people or handle online orders without getting confused." (MSME Owner)
		<b>Barriers: Fear and Cognitive Overload</b>	The primary obstacles were identified as psychological and cognitive, not just financial. Some entrepreneurs voiced apprehension towards digital payments, preferring the tangibility of cash.	"These digital payments make me nervous. What if the money doesn't come? With cash, I see it and I feel it. It's safe. However with QRIS more customers willing to buy as most of them don't carry much cash around" (MSME Owner)
		<b>Need for Sustained Partnership</b>	A key limitation identified was the short-term nature of the intervention. Participants emphasized that technology adoption is a continuous journey requiring long-term support.	"We give them a push, but they need a companion to walk with them for a while. Technology adoption is a journey, not a one-day workshop thus the participants will always be our priority." (Lecturer)
3.	<b>The Synergy of Academic-Community Collaboration</b>	<b>Mutual Learning and Energy Exchange</b>	MSMEs reported appreciating the "fresh energy" and new perspectives from students, while students gained profound respect for the resilience and practical wisdom of the entrepreneurs.	"The students brought such fresh ideas and energy to our booth." (MSME Owner) / "We gained a whole new level of respect for what these entrepreneurs do every day." (Student Organizer)

		<b>Building a Supportive Ecosystem</b>	The event was described as a "community" that reduced the isolation of MSMEs, facilitating peer networks for exchanging tips and forming collaborative partnerships.	"I met other sellers here. We exchange tips and sometimes combine our products. It feels like we are not alone in this struggle." (MSME Owner)
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Source: processed data, 2025

## 4.2. DISCUSSION

This discussion analyzes the student-led MSME program through three themes, namely: boosted marketing confidence, a technology adoption gap, and vital academic-community synergy for sustainable impact.

### 4.2.1 Theme 1: Catalyst for Marketing Confidence.

It was perceived as a significant boost to their marketing confidence and sense of legitimacy due to the following reasons:

1. **Immediate Market Validation:** MSME owners reported that direct feedback from customers served as a critical form of validation. Food vendors explained that the experience of having a queue for their product and receiving positive comments from strangers confirmed the value of their offering, which reinforced their identity as a legitimate entrepreneur.
2. **Enhanced Visibility and Brand Storytelling:** It was found that the platform enabled MSMEs to effectively craft and communicate their brand narrative. For instance, a vendor selling sago noodle described how, with student assistance, she created signage explaining that her products were made from traditional sago flour that produced locally. This allowed customers to connect with the cultural story behind the product, which was reported to significantly enhance its perceived value.
3. **Practical Skill Application:** From the student organizers' perspective, the expo was described as a vital opportunity for translating theoretical knowledge into practice. They reflected that the necessity to negotiate with suppliers, design visually compelling booths, and engage directly with customers provided an immersive, real-world application of marketing principles that was profoundly impactful.

### 4.2.2 Theme 2: The Technology Adoption Gap

The data revealed that while the expo successfully introduced technological concepts, a distinct gap was observed between this initial exposure and the meaningful, sustained adoption of digital tools.

1. **Surface-Level Digital Literacy:** The technological support provided was frequently characterized as foundational. Several MSME owners expressed that while they were shown how to make social media posts, they lacked understanding of more advanced functionalities, such as using hashtags for broader reach or managing the logistics of online orders, which led to confusion. With a government bank as one of the sponsors, a program has been initiated for students to register MSMEs and enable them to use Quick Response Code Indonesian Standard (QRIS) as a payment method.
2. **Barriers as Perceived by MSMEs:** The primary obstacles to technology adoption were identified not only as financial but also psychological and cognitive. Some participants, particularly older entrepreneurs, voiced apprehension towards digital payment systems, citing a preference for the tangibility and perceived security of cash transactions. This highlighted that interventions must address deep-seated anxieties alongside skill deficits.

3. **The Need for Sustained Partnership:** A key limitation identified by both lecturers and MSMEs was the short-term nature of the intervention. It was noted that while the expo provides an initial impetus, a longer-term companionship model is required, as the journey of technology adoption is continuous and cannot be fulfilled through a single workshop.

#### 4.2.3 Theme 3: The Synergy of Academic-Community Collaboration

The findings underscored that the expo's value was derived as much from the collaborative ecosystem it fostered as from its direct economic outcomes.

1. **Mutual Learning and Energy Exchange:** MSMEs frequently reported appreciating the "fresh energy" and innovative perspectives introduced by the students. Conversely, student organizers stated that they gained a profound respect for the practical wisdom and resilience exhibited by the local entrepreneurs, indicating a two-way exchange of knowledge and value.
2. **Building a Supportive Ecosystem:** The event was consistently described as a "community" that helped mitigate the sense of isolation often experienced by MSMEs. One participant shared that the expo facilitated connections with other sellers, leading to the exchange of tips and even collaborative product bundling. This emergent peer network was identified as a critical, albeit often unmeasured, social asset that contributed to a supportive business environment.

## 5. CONCLUSION

### 5.1 conclusion

This qualitative inquiry reveals that the Polbeng Business Expo's most significant impact is socio-psychological, effectively building marketing confidence and fostering a collaborative ecosystem between the academy and the community. It serves as a crucial "launchpad" for visibility and validation. However, its model is currently less effective in driving profound technological change, as it grapples with the complex, human-centric barriers to digital adoption. The value of the expo, therefore, lies not merely in transactional outcomes but in the relational and experiential learning it facilitates for all involved.

### 5.2 Recommendations

Based on these nuanced findings, the recommendations are tailored to leverage the expo's strengths and address its qualitative gaps:

1. **Implement a Tiered Mentoring System:** Shift from a single-event model to a tiered system where senior students provide sustained, low-intensity mentoring to MSMEs on digital tools over a semester, building trust and addressing fears gradually.
2. **Curate Peer-Learning Circles:** Facilitate structured peer-to-peer sessions among MSMEs, moderated by students, to share success stories and solve common problems related to technology and marketing, strengthening the community ecosystem.
3. **Develop "Digital Storytelling" Modules:** Integrate training that helps MSMEs weave technology into their unique brand narratives, making digital tools feel more relevant and less intimidating (e.g., "using Instagram to share the story behind your craft").

4. 4. Formalize Reflective Practice: Incorporate structured reflection, through journals or debrief sessions, as a core component for student organizers to deepen their learning from the collaborative experience.

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