

# Social Media Engagement As An Intervening Variable Between Digital Literacy, Entrepreneurial Skills, And SME Performance In Tangkahan Ecotourism

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## ABSTRACT

The Langkat Regency Government is developing village tourism to support the Tangkahan tourism area. However, limited exposure to the village's tourism potential is due to the underuse of information technology, such as social media, to showcase its natural beauty. As a result, Tangkahan village tourism has been underdeveloped, and the welfare of the local community, primarily small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the tourism sector, remains limited. This study aims to examine the effects of digital literacy, entrepreneurial skills, and social media engagement on SME performance in the tourism village. The study involved 150 SME operators in Tangkahan Ecotourism Village, using multistage area sampling and path analysis. The results show that digital literacy negatively impacts SME performance, while entrepreneurial skills and social media engagement positively influence it. Social media engagement does not mediate the relationship between digital literacy and SME performance, but it significantly mediates the effect of entrepreneurial skills on SME performance in Tangkahan Ecotourism.

**Keywords:** Social Media Engagement, Digital Literacy, Entrepreneurial Skills, and SME Performance.

## INTRODUCTION

The advancement of the tourism sector plays a crucial role in contributing to the nation and improving the welfare of the community. According to data from the 2023 Outlook on Tourism and Creative Economy, tourism foreign exchange reached USD 6.72 billion in 2022. By mid-2023, the number of international tourists had reached 6.31 million visits, marking an increase of 196.85%. Similarly, the number of domestic tourists recorded in the first half of 2023 amounted to 433.57 million trips, an increase of 12.57% compared to the same period in 2022 (KEMENPAREKRAF, 2020). Indonesia offers a diverse range of tourism types that attract both domestic and international tourists.

The Tangkahan Ecotourism Area is one of the popular destinations for both domestic and international tourists. According to data from the Langkat Regency BPS in 2023, the number of visitors has steadily increased from 100,104 in 2018 to 130,000 visitors in 2023 (BPS, 2023). Based on research by Siregar et al. (2020), It was found that 90% of the community members engaged in SMEs in the Tangkahan tourism village are familiar with social media, yet only 66% are actively using it to promote tourism products. This finding aligns with previous studies, which have shown that the distinctive features of tourist villages in Indonesia are often underexposed and poorly managed, leading to suboptimal tourism potential in various regions, thus failing to attract both domestic and international tourists (Lubis et al., 2022). On the other hand, the use of information technology, such as social media, can effectively capture the attention of a wide audience (Siregar et al., 2020). This indicates that the level of digital literacy competence plays a

crucial role in the development of SMEs in tourist villages. Therefore, gaining digital literacy competence through SMEs' experience in using digital platforms, such as social media, is essential (Ozdamar-Keskin et al. 2020).

One form of social media engagement is marketing through social media, which is an effective mass communication strategy that SMEs can utilize to reach their consumers (Erlanitasari et al., 2020). Marketing through social media is more effective in strengthening relationships with customers and stakeholders (Lai and Fu, 2020). From a business management perspective, effectively utilizing social media can support entrepreneurs in expanding their online market reach, staying updated on current issues, and engaging with business communities that are beneficial for business development (Sariwulan et al., 2020). The low level of digital literacy among the Tangkahan community affects the awareness of residents and SMEs in utilizing digital technology to promote Tangkahan tourism in public spaces. Communication through the use of information technology plays a crucial role in widely disseminating information about tourist locations.

This study examines how social media engagement mediates the indirect effects of digital literacy and entrepreneurial skills in encouraging the active participation of SMEs in the Tangkahan ecotourism area, particularly in becoming more adaptive. In this context, the use of social media as a tool for communication and product promotion, as well as promoting the tourist village, indirectly attracts the attention of tourists and enhances the performance of SMEs. The study conducted by Mhizha et al., (2015), shows that the failure of SMEs in developing countries to effectively utilize social media features is primarily due to issues related to connectivity and infrastructure. Alhaidari, Kabanda, and Almukhaylid, (2021), mentioned that structured challenges and the environment often pose obstacles in the development of tourism SMEs using social media. The novelty of this study lies in the analysis of digital literacy levels and entrepreneurial skills, linked by the enhancement of social media engagement to improve the performance of SMEs in the Tangkahan area.

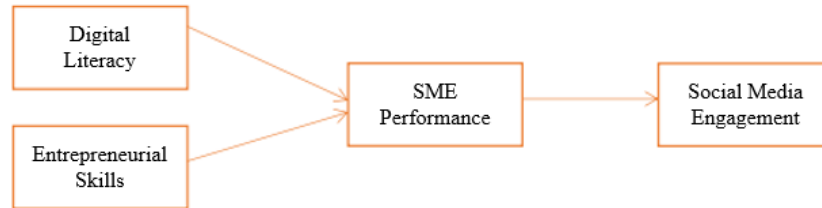
## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Social Media Engagement is a measure of the level of interaction that occurs within a piece of content, including likes, comments, shares, saves, or other forms of engagement, depending on the social media platform used. Social media engagement, as a form of marketing, is an effective mass communication strategy that SMEs can utilize to reach their consumers (Erlanitasari et al., 2020). Digital literacy is one of the key factors for improving the performance of SMEs, as technological advancements provide opportunities to access information that can advance businesses (Khodijah & Indriyani, 2023).

Entrepreneurial skills refer to an individual's ability to identify opportunities, generate ideas, and manage risks in running a business. Entrepreneurial skills involve how individuals can create value with the skills they possess to achieve financial gains from their creative efforts. This ability is a combination of two aspects: the capability to overcome difficulties and challenges (Purnomo and Sudarso, 2020). SME performance encompasses reputation, productivity, employee satisfaction, profits, sales or revenue, product alignment, capital adequacy, operational effectiveness in production, product quality, achievement of set targets, customer numbers, ease of monitoring, and reduction in production costs (Gopang et al., 2017). SME performance is also significantly influenced by the quality of human resources. In an era of increasingly intense competition and environmental changes, including information technology, high-quality human resources are essential to adapt to the changes that occur (Azhari Hutabarat et al., 2022).

## METHODS

This study employs a quantitative approach to analyze the intervening effect of social media engagement using path analysis on the performance of SMEs in the Tangkahan tourist village (McCusker and Gunaydin, 2015). This study uses cluster stratified sampling. The total population of the three villages is 13,637. The sample size for this study consists of 150 respondents, with 50 respondents from each village, all of whom are directly involved in the activities of village tourism. Data analysis was performed using Path Analysis to examine the mediating role of social media engagement in the effects of digital literacy and entrepreneurial skills on SME performance, with the following conceptual framework.



**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework**

The hypotheses derived from the constructed framework are as follows:

- H1: Digital literacy has a positive and significant effect on SME performance (Sariwulan et al., 2020).
- H2: Entrepreneurial skills have a positive and significant effect on SME performance (Sariwulan et al., 2020).
- H3: Social media engagement has a positive and significant effect on SME performance (Noviaristanti, Yunita, and Triono, 2023).
- H4: Digital literacy has a positive and significant effect on SME performance, with social media engagement as an intervening variable (Bouwman, Nikou, and de Reuver, 2019; Siregar et al., 2023).
- H5: Entrepreneurial skills have a positive and significant effect on SME performance, with social media engagement acting as an intervening variable (Bouwman, Nikou, and de Reuver, 2019; Siregar et al., 2023).

The indicators for measuring the variables in this study are as follows

**Table 1. Variable Question Indicators**

<b>Digital Literacy</b>
1. Accustomed to conducting transactions on e-commerce platforms (Shopee, marketplaces, Tokopedia, etc.)
2. Accustomed to promoting the business through online media.
3. Obtaining important information for the business from online media.
4. Building business networks by utilizing information technology.
5. Updating production or business information online.
<b>Entrepreneurial skill</b>
1. Capable of managing the business with effective financial management.
2. Mastering the production process and the technology used to support the business operations.
3. Able to anticipate business risks (bankruptcy, fire, natural disasters, etc.)
4. Enjoys innovating in business.
5. Possesses good social and teamwork skills.
<b>Business Social Media Engagement</b>

1. Frequently gives "likes" on business content that is beneficial.
2. Often comments on business content to interact with other users and exchange business information.
3. Uses "share" to distribute business information to be read across various social media platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, etc.).
4. Frequently sends "DM" (direct messages) to business influencers to inquire about information or tips for growing a business.
5. Actively follows interesting business content.
<b>SME (Small and Medium Enterprises) Performance</b>
1. The business has experienced an increase in sales this year.
2. The business has been able to increase the number of products, whether goods or services.
3. The number of customers has grown.
4. Has set business goals and can achieve them.
5. Produces new goods and services every year.

## RESULTS

### Reporting Research Results

#### Hasil Uji Analisis Jalur

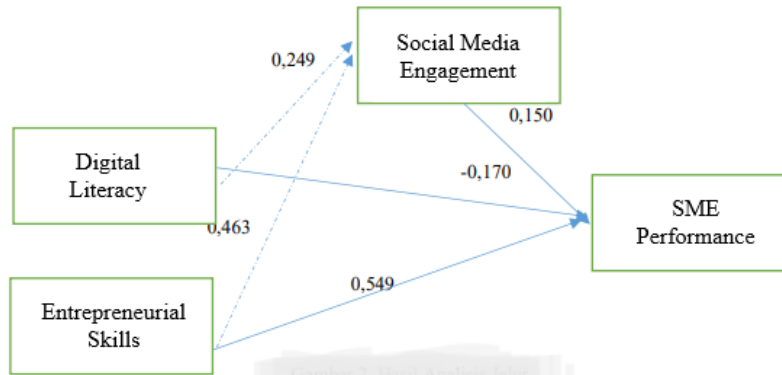
The results of the variable testing are described as follows:

**Table 2. Recapitulation of Substructure 1 and 2 Analysis**

Dependent Variable (Y)	Independent Variable (X)	Path Coefficient	t-Statistic	Sig	Remarks
SME Performance	Digital Literacy Level	-0.170	-2.799	0.01	H1 Rejected
	Entrepreneurial Skill	0.549	0.580	0.00	H2 Accepted
	Social Media Engagement	0.150	2.398	0.00	H3 Accepted
R-squared = 0.328; F-statistic = 18.649, p-value = 0.00					
Intervening Variable	Independent Variable (X)	Path Coefficient	t-Statistic	Sig	Remarks
Social Media Engagement	Digital Literacy Level	0.249	-2.799	0.02	H4 Rejected
	Entrepreneurial Skill	0.463	0.580	0.01	H5 Accepted
R-squared = 0.158; F-statistic = 13.607					

Source: Primary Data Processed, 2024.

Based on the results of the substructure analysis calculation, the following path analysis framework is obtained:



**Figure 2. Results of Path Analysis Testing**

**Sobel Test**

The Sobel Test is a statistical tool used to determine the significance of the indirect relationship between the exogenous variables, Digital Literacy (X1) and Entrepreneurial Skill (X2), on the endogenous variable, SME Performance (Y), through the intervening variable, Social Media Engagement (Z). The results of the test are as follows:

**Table 4. Results of the Sobel Test**

Mediation Effect (Intervening)	Significance	t-table	Sobel Test	Remarks
X1 --- Z --- Y	0.05	1.660	0.31648	Rejected
X2 --- Z --- Y	0.05	1.660	2.0497	Accepted

Source: Primary Data Processed, 2024.

The calculated Sobel test value > 1.660 (t-table at a 95% confidence level), indicates that Social Media Engagement as an intervening variable significantly mediates the relationship between Entrepreneurial Skill and SME Performance in the Tangkahan area. Meanwhile, for the Digital Literacy variable, Social Media Engagement as an intervening variable does not significantly mediate the relationship with SME Performance.

**DISCUSSION**

**H1: The effect of digital literacy level on SME performance in the Tangkahan tourism area**

The test results indicate that the level of digital literacy has a negative and significant effect on SME performance. These findings are not consistent with the results of previous studies Sariwulan et al. (2020). Several factors may explain why the level of digital literacy does not directly affect SME performance in Tangkahan, such as the limited infrastructure in the Tangkahan Ecotourism area, where the availability of digital infrastructure is a priority to be utilized by SMEs for digital transformation. This is consistent with the results of the previous grand mean analysis, which indicated that the digital literacy level of SMEs in the Tangkahan area is at a moderate level.

Another possible cause is the lack of digital literacy training support for SMEs in Tangkahan, which may explain why the level of digital literacy does not significantly affect SME performance. This is due to the limited knowledge of digital tools, which leads to a lack of engagement by SMEs in utilizing digital tools in their business. The Tangkahan area, being a tourism industry, has unique characteristics in offering direct experiences to tourists (Qalati et al., 2022).

Although this study shows that the level of digital literacy does not have a positive and significant effect on SME performance, digital literacy remains important for adapting to technological advancements. Digital technology insights, whether for marketing activities, reservation management, or customer interactions, can still provide a competitive advantage amidst the tourism service competition in North Sumatra.

## **H2: The effect of entrepreneurial skills on SME performance in the Tangkahan tourism area**

The test results indicate that entrepreneurial skills have a positive and significant effect on SME performance. This is consistent with the findings of previous research Wijaya, Yadewani, and Kurniati Karim, (2022), Entrepreneurial skills are relevant to the overall improvement of SME performance. Entrepreneurial skills among SMEs in the Tangkahan area play a crucial role in the sustainability of the business and performance improvement. This is evident in the innovation skills possessed by SMEs in Tangkahan, such as the innovation in utilizing wood waste to create unique souvenirs from Tangkahan. Innovation capabilities play a crucial role in the development of unique and appealing products and services for tourists. As a component of entrepreneurial skills, innovation can enhance the attractiveness of SME businesses and attract tourists (Dirgiatmo et al., 2019). This phenomenon is frequently observed in this study, where successful and growing SMEs in the area are those with strong management skills. This is an important consideration, given that Tangkahan is an area with a poverty rate of 9% of the population, making entrepreneurial skills crucial for maximizing the primary professions of the local community, which are involved in the provision of goods and services in the tourism sector. One issue related to entrepreneurial skills that requires attention is the lack of partnership networks established by SMEs in the Tangkahan area. Partnership networks, such as travel agencies, local government, private sector entities, and associations or associations of SMEs, can strengthen the businesses operated by SMEs in areas such as marketing, capital, and skills.

## **H3: The effect of Social Media Engagement on SME performance in the Tangkahan tourism area**

The test results indicate that Social Media Engagement has a positive and significant effect on SME performance. These findings are consistent with research conducted by Trunfio and Rossi (2021), where the involvement of SMEs in using social media can foster creativity in marketing management and improve performance through increased product sales. Social media is an effective and relatively low-cost promotional tool compared to traditional marketing methods. In this case, SMEs in the Tangkahan area extensively use Facebook, particularly Facebook Marketplace, to market their goods and services. Additionally, SMEs in the Tangkahan area utilize Instagram Stories to showcase the natural beauty of the area while simultaneously promoting their products.

The involvement of SMEs in Tangkahan in using social media can help them build brand awareness and establish stronger relationships with visitors (Bouwman et al., 2019). Tangkahan is home to some craftsmen who produce unique woodcrafts from the Batang Serangan River, which have become a local specialty. However, a key challenge faced by SMEs in social media engagement is the limited ability to create engaging marketing content. Therefore, stakeholders involved in the management of SMEs in Tangkahan need to adopt an approach that motivates small business owners to be more creative and learn how to produce appealing content for social media.

## **H4: Influence of digital literacy level on MSME performance with Social Media Engagement as an intervening variable**

The Sobel test results indicate that social media engagement does not mediate the relationship between digital literacy and SME performance. These findings are inconsistent with several previous studies, such as those conducted by Diptyana, Rokhmania, and Herlina, (2022), which state that the level of digital literacy can drive social engagement to enhance SME performance in general.

There are several reasons why social media engagement does not mediate the relationship between digital literacy and SME performance in the area. One of the reasons is that the digital literacy level of SMEs in the Tangkahan area is at a moderate level. Another reason is that SMEs do not fully utilize the social media platforms they have for business purposes. Based on the research team's observations, the high level of engagement on social media is not proportional to its quality. In other words, SMEs are participating or engaging with social media more for personal interests outside of business, which means that social media engagement does not function as an intervening variable.

In addition to the factors mentioned above, external factors such as competition and digital infrastructure were not controlled in this study, which may have obscured the results of the analysis on the relationship between digital literacy, social media engagement, and SME performance in the Tangkahan area. Rural and remote areas like Tangkahan face challenges in providing communication networks, resulting in weak and unstable signals, particularly for 4G and 5G networks. This limitation is evident in the fact that there is only one digital communication service provider available in the Tangkahan area. As a result, these conditions contribute to the failure of social media engagement as an intervening variable.

#### **H5: The effect of Entrepreneurial Skills on SME performance with Social Media Engagement as an intervening variable**

The Sobel test results indicate that social media engagement effectively mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and SME performance in the Tangkahan area. These findings are consistent with several previous studies, such as those by Susanto et al., (2023), which demonstrate that entrepreneurial competencies have a positive effect, both directly and indirectly, on SME performance. In these studies, social media engagement is considered a component of digital marketing capabilities that can mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial competencies and SME performance.

Social media engagement plays a crucial role for social media users, particularly those with low social competence in direct interactions. As such, this variable effectively assists SMEs that may feel awkward in face-to-face marketing activities, enabling them to perform well. Entrepreneurial skills foster innovation and creativity in developing new products or services that are appealing to customers (Lestari et al., 2019). When SMEs in Tangkahan effectively utilize social media to promote local products, high engagement with customers or potential visitors can be achieved. The Langkat Regency government needs to focus on improving communication infrastructure in the Tangkahan area. This will facilitate communication within the tourism area and support the promotion of Tangkahan's ecotourism, which boasts natural beauty comparable to other tourist destinations in North Sumatra.

## **CONCLUSION**

Digital literacy does not have a significant impact on the performance of SMEs in the Tangkahan tourism area. This may be due to limited digital infrastructure and the lack of digital literacy training for SME owners. Entrepreneurial skills, on the other hand, do have an impact on SME performance. SME owners in Tangkahan who can innovate and possess good business management skills tend to perform better, as evidenced by strong sales figures and the long-term sustainability of their businesses. Active use of social

media also influences the performance of SMEs in Tangkahan. Social media helps SME owners market their products, increase brand awareness, and reach more customers.

Social media engagement is not able to mediate the relationship between digital literacy and SME performance, but it can mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and SME performance. Once again, the limited communication infrastructure plays a crucial role in strengthening the intervening function of social media engagement in improving the performance of SMEs in Tangkahan.

## LIMITATION

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the limited sample size (150 SME operators) and the cross-sectional approach restrict the ability to generalize findings or draw conclusions about long-term causal relationships. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported measures for key variables and the narrow focus on digital literacy may affect the objectivity of the results. External factors such as government policies and digital infrastructure were not examined, although they could influence SME performance. Finally, since the study focuses solely on the ecotourism sector, the findings may not be fully applicable to SMEs in other sectors.

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