



RECEIVED 2 March 2026
ACCEPTED 8 April 2026
PUBLISHED 30 April 2026

CITATION
Izzuddin A, Setianingsih WE, (2026). Content Gap Analysis in Digital Marketing Communication Strategy of Jember Batik SMEs Examining Expectation and Reality Differences. *Ijomata International Journal of Management*. 7 (2), 712-723.
doi: 10.61194/ijjm.v7i2.2238

TYPE Original Research
PUBLISHED 30 April 2026
DOI 10.61194/ijjm.v7i2.2238
VOL 7 Issue 2 April 2026

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Content Gap Analysis in Digital Marketing Communication Strategy of Jember Batik SMEs Examining Expectation and Reality Differences

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Abstract

This study examines the content gap in the digital marketing communication strategies of batik SMEs in Jember by highlighting the discrepancy between consumer expectations and the perceived reality of digital content, as well as analyzing their influence on consumer engagement. The novelty of this research lies in the integration of expectation–reality gap analysis with a mixed-method approach that combines consumer survey data and qualitative insights from SME owners within a cultural industry context that has rarely been explored simultaneously. The study employs a mixed-method design using SEM-PLS analysis of 100 consumer respondents and in-depth interviews with three batik SME owners, where quantitative data were collected through a six-point Likert scale questionnaire and qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to explain and strengthen the structural findings. The results indicate that both consumer expectations and perceived content reality significantly influence consumer engagement, with perceived content reality, particularly authenticity, emerging as the most dominant factor, while the structural model demonstrates strong explanatory and predictive power. Qualitative findings reveal that digital content practices remain largely reactive, characterized by limited planning, insufficient human resources, and a strong emphasis on product-oriented promotion, which contributes to the persistence of the content gap between audience expectations and delivered content. Therefore, this study concludes that aligning consumer expectations with authentic, structured, and culturally driven digital content is essential to enhance engagement, implying that batik SMEs must strengthen strategic content planning while maintaining authenticity to improve their digital competitiveness.

KEYWORDS

content gap analysis; digital marketing communication; consumer engagement; batik smes.

Introduction

Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped marketing communication practices across industries worldwide. The rapid expansion of social media platforms, algorithm-driven visibility systems, and consumer-generated content ecosystems has altered the way brands interact with audiences (Gabelaia & Tchelidze, 2022). In this evolving environment, content is no longer merely a promotional instrument but a strategic asset that shapes perception, engagement, and long-term brand relationships (Sharabati et al., 2024). Consumers increasingly expect personalized, authentic, and value-driven digital interactions rather than one-directional advertising messages. As digital environments become saturated with information, audiences exercise selective attention, choosing content that aligns with their emotional, informational, and experiential needs (Cavallone et al., 2024). Consequently, organizations are required to design content strategies that are not only consistent but also responsive to consumer expectations at different stages of the customer journey. Failure to align produced

content with audience expectations can result in reduced engagement, weakened brand perception, and diminished competitive positioning in digital markets.

Empirical evidence on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) indicates the presence of structural weaknesses in the implementation of digital content strategies; however, these findings must be interpreted within clearly defined contexts. For instance, (Abdullah et al., 2022) in a study focusing on SMEs within a specific sector and sample framework, identified limitations in strategic content planning and digital capability. Similarly, a survey-based study by (Amiri et al., 2023) involving cultural-product SMEs (n and geographic scope specified in the original study) reported that a substantial proportion of businesses still produce digital content reactively, driven by operational activities such as product launches or exhibitions rather than structured planning. When synthesizing findings across multiple studies, the reported proportions of SMEs lacking structured content calendars, audience segmentation, and integrated analytics generally fall within the range of approximately 65–75%, although these values vary depending on the country context, sector characteristics, and measurement definitions employed. Furthermore, engagement analytics reported by (Kalogiannidis et al., 2025) (based on a defined dataset and platform context) indicate that content lacking storytelling, authenticity, and audience-centered messaging tends to generate significantly lower interaction rates compared to strategically designed content, with differences observed within a reported range rather than as universally fixed values. Taken together, these contextualized findings suggest the existence of a measurable discrepancy between consumer expectations and perceived content reality, commonly referred to as a structural content gap, which constrains the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies. This issue is particularly critical in creative industries, where symbolic meaning, cultural narratives, and emotional resonance play a central role in shaping consumer perception and influencing purchasing behavior.

This study is theoretically grounded in the integration of Uses and Gratifications Theory, Customer Journey Theory, Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), and the Content Marketing Framework. Uses and Gratifications Theory explains that individuals are not passive recipients of media messages; rather, they actively select media content to satisfy various personal needs, including information seeking, entertainment, identity formation, and social interaction (Bruce et al., 2023). This study adopts a staged version of Customer Journey Theory, as outlined by (Sharma & Sharma, 2024), which conceptualizes consumer movement through distinct phases awareness, consideration, purchase, and advocacy while acknowledging that, in practice, consumer journeys can be iterative and non-linear depending on context, platform dynamics, and individual behavior. Nevertheless, the staged model is employed in this study as an analytical framework to systematically map content expectations and engagement patterns across key decision points in digital interactions. Furthermore, Integrated Marketing Communication emphasizes the importance of message consistency and strategic coordination across multiple communication channels to ensure brand coherence and effectiveness (Apasrawirote et al., 2022). Complementing this, the Content Marketing Framework highlights the critical role of relevance, value creation, and authenticity in fostering consumer engagement and sustaining long-term relationships (Li et al., 2022). The integration of these theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive and multidimensional foundation for understanding how the alignment between consumer expectations and perceived content reality influences engagement within digital marketing contexts.

Several prior studies support the relevance of examining digital content alignment. (Li et al., 2022) emphasize that customer experience across digital touchpoints significantly determines engagement and brand loyalty. (Wiweko & Anggara, 2025) argue that authentic and participatory content enhances customer engagement by fostering emotional connections and co-creation processes. (Noer et al., 2025) introduce the concept of digital content gap analysis, demonstrating that misalignment between producer-generated content and consumer expectations reduces perceived relevance and limits interaction intensity. These findings collectively suggest that digital engagement is not merely a function of content frequency but is heavily influenced by perceived authenticity, consistency, and expectation congruence.

Despite these theoretical advancements, a conceptual puzzle remains unresolved. While prior literature acknowledges the importance of authentic and strategically aligned content, limited empirical studies explicitly measure the discrepancy between content expectations and perceived content reality within cultural-based SMEs. Existing research tends to focus either on content effectiveness or on engagement outcomes without systematically identifying the structural gap between expectation and reality. This study identifies two primary types of gaps: (1) expectation–production gap, referring to differences between what consumers expect and what producers design; and (2) authenticity–perception gap, referring to discrepancies between intended brand messaging and how audiences interpret real digital content. The novelty of this research lies in quantitatively measuring these gaps while qualitatively explaining their underlying causes through integrated mixed-method analysis. By combining structural modeling with thematic exploration, this study moves beyond descriptive analysis and proposes a data-driven framework for content gap identification in creative industry marketing communication.

Based on preliminary observations conducted on batik SMEs in Jember Regency, digital marketing activities are predominantly product-oriented and operationally reactive. Content uploads frequently consist of finished product photos or documentation of production activities without structured narrative framing, audience segmentation, or stage-based customer journey alignment. Most SMEs manage social media independently without dedicated digital marketing personnel, resulting in inconsistent posting schedules and limited strategic planning. Although some business owners acknowledge the importance of storytelling and educational content, implementation remains sporadic due to time constraints, limited digital literacy, and resource limitations. Consequently, there appears to be a divergence between consumer expectations for informative, authentic, and culturally rich content and the actual content delivered through digital platforms. This divergence potentially explains variations in engagement performance and highlights the need for systematic gap analysis.

The objective of this study is to analyze the influence of expectations toward batik digital content and the perception of the reality of viewed batik content on consumer engagement within digital marketing communication. Using a mixed-method explanatory sequential design, this research first quantitatively measures the structural relationships among variables through SEM-PLS analysis and subsequently qualitatively explores the underlying causes of identified gaps through in-depth interviews. By integrating these findings, the study aims to develop a comprehensive content gap framework that can enhance strategic digital communication practices for cultural-based SMEs and contribute to theoretical development in consumer engagement and digital marketing communication literature.

Method

Table 1. Qualitative Informants

No.	Informant	Position	Business Name
1	Informant 1	Owner	Sang Nara Batik
2	Informant 2	Owner	Batik Karimata
3	Informant 3	Owner	Batik Hariyani

Source: Primary Data (2026)

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach using an explanatory sequential design. In this design, quantitative data are collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data collection to explain and deepen the quantitative findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The explanatory sequential design is appropriate because the study aims not only to examine the statistical relationship between expectations toward batik content, perception of the reality of viewed batik content, and consumer engagement, but also to explore the underlying reasons behind the identified content gaps. The quantitative phase functions as the primary analytical stage, while the qualitative phase serves as an explanatory component. Integration between both phases is conducted at the interpretation stage through joint display analysis, enabling the triangulation of findings and the development of a comprehensive content gap framework (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Population and Sample

The population of this study consists of consumers who have viewed digital marketing content of batik SMEs through social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok. These consumers represent digital audiences who interact with online batik promotional content and therefore possess relevant perceptions regarding content expectations and content reality (Sugiyono, 2021). Because the exact population size of digital audiences who have viewed batik SME content is unknown, the sample size was determined using the Lemeshow formula for an unknown population:

$$n = \frac{Z^2 p(1-p)}{d^2}$$

With the following parameter details:

n = minimum sample size

Z = Z-score at 95% confidence level (1.96)

p = estimated population proportion (0.50)

d = margin of error (0.10)

Substituting values:

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2(0.50)(0.50)}{(0.10)^2} = \frac{3.8416 \times 0.25}{0.01} = \frac{0.9604}{0.01} = 96.04$$

The minimum sample size required was approximately 96 respondents, and this study used 100 respondents to ensure adequacy and improve statistical stability for SEM-PLS estimation (Hair et al., 2019). The sampling technique used in this study is a non-probability approach, considering that the exact population size of digital batik content viewers cannot be precisely identified. Respondents were selected based on specific inclusion criteria to ensure that they had relevant exposure and interaction with digital batik marketing content. Therefore, the sampling technique applied in this study is purposive sampling:

1. Individuals who have viewed digital content related to batik products on social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, or WhatsApp).
2. Individuals who have engaged in at least one form of online interaction (liking, commenting, sharing, saving, or sending inquiries via direct message).

3. Individuals aged 17 years and above and capable of completing the questionnaire independently.
4. Individuals who voluntarily agreed to participate and were willing to become research respondents/informants.

Qualitative Informants

The qualitative phase involved three key informants selected using purposive sampling techniques. The selection was based on their direct involvement in managing digital marketing communication activities within their respective businesses. These informants possess firsthand experience in planning, producing, and evaluating digital content strategies (see table 1)

These informants were selected because they are the primary decision-makers responsible for digital marketing communication within their SMEs. Each informant directly manages or supervises social media content production and promotional activities, ensuring that the data obtained reflect actual strategic practices rather than delegated perspectives (Sugiyono, 2019). Their involvement allows for deeper exploration of how content planning is conducted under real operational constraints. Furthermore, they provide insights into resource limitations, digital capability challenges, and storytelling implementation in practice. Their perspectives are essential for explaining the structural content gaps identified in the quantitative phase and for understanding the contextual realities behind digital marketing decisions.

Data Collection Techniques

Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire measured on a six-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree) to avoid neutral responses and enhance response discrimination. The instrument assessed three primary constructs: Expectations Toward Batik Content, Perception of the Reality of Viewed Batik Content, and Consumer Engagement, and was distributed to 100 respondents who met the purposive sampling criteria. In addition to the survey, structured content observation was conducted to complement and triangulate the interpretation of consumer perceptions. The observation focused on official social media accounts of selected batik SMEs (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok) over a six-month period (specify exact months in the final manuscript), with posts selected based on inclusion criteria such as publicly accessible content, relevance to batik products, and active engagement indicators, while excluding duplicated or non-promotional posts. The unit of analysis was individual digital posts, and a total number of posts (to be specified) were systematically reviewed. The coding process categorized content into several dimensions, including content type (promotional, educational, storytelling), presence of authenticity cues (e.g., production process, artisan involvement), and audience engagement indicators (likes, comments, shares). To ensure consistency, coding guidelines were developed prior to analysis, and where applicable, inter-coder agreement procedures were applied to enhance reliability. The observational data were primarily used as descriptive and triangulation support to contextualize and validate the quantitative findings rather than as a standalone analytical model.

Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with three SME owners: Sang Nara Batik, Batik Karimata, and Batik Hariyani. The interviews focused on exploring content planning practices, digital capability constraints, storytelling implementation, perceived audience preferences, and strategic challenges in digital marketing communication. Each interview was conducted directly with the

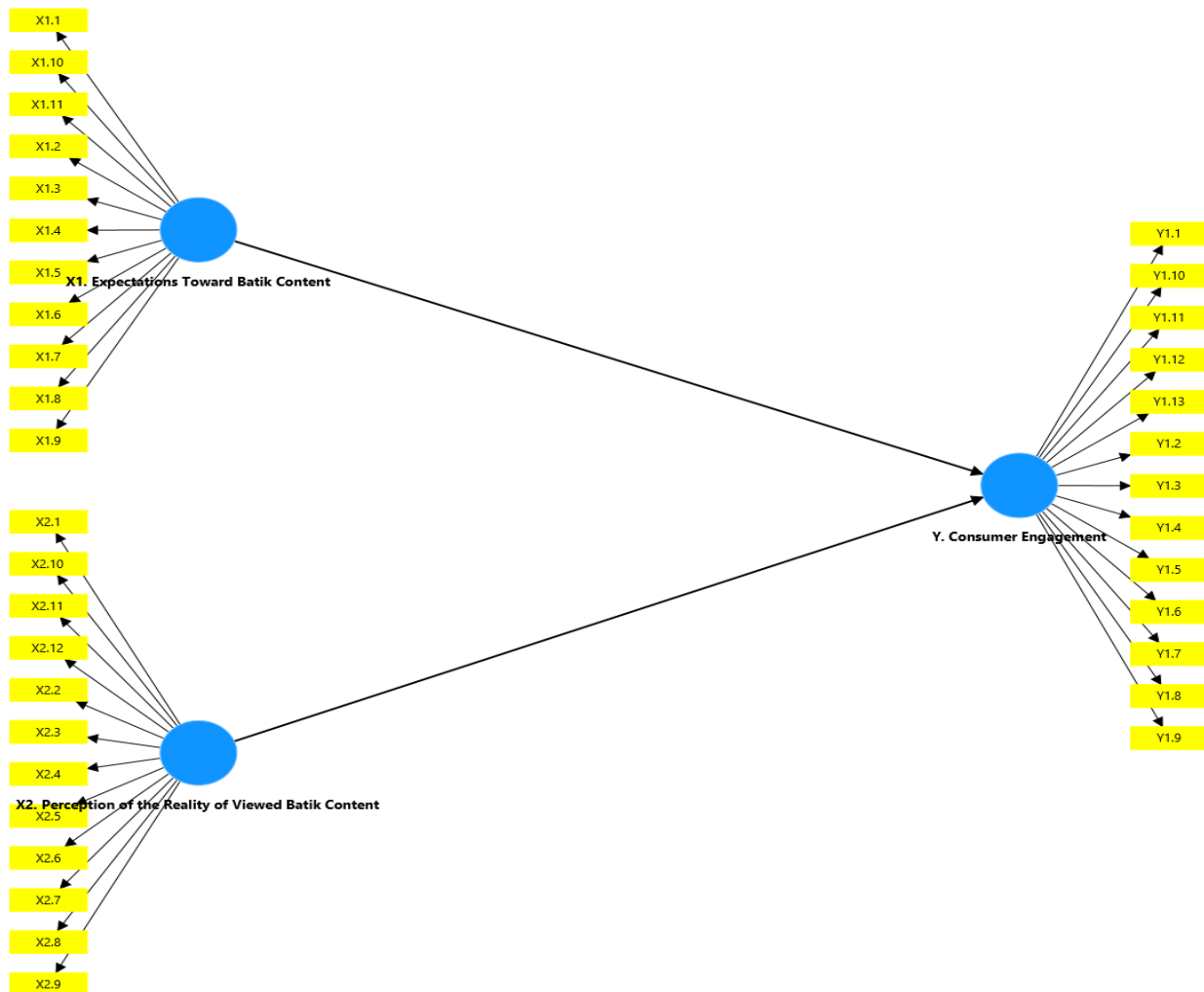


Figure 1. Research Model
Source: SmartPLS4 Output (2026)

business owner as the primary decision-maker in digital content management. The qualitative phase aimed to provide contextual explanations for the content gaps identified in the quantitative findings.

All constructs were tested for convergent validity, Variables and Measurement

This study includes three primary variables (Figure 1):

1. Expectations Toward Batik Content (X1): Refers to consumers' anticipated quality, relevance, storytelling value, and informativeness of digital batik content.
2. Perception of the Reality of Viewed Batik Content (X2): Refers to consumers' actual evaluation of the content they observe in digital platforms.
3. Consumer Engagement (Y): Refers to cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement in digital batik content, including interaction, sharing, and purchase intention.

All constructs were tested for convergent validity, discriminant validity (HTMT), composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE).

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data in this research were processed using the Structural Equation Modeling approach with the Partial Least Squares technique (SEM-PLS) to investigate the relationships between the study variables. The analysis began with the assessment of the measurement model by examining indicator reliability through outer loading values, evaluating internal consistency using composite reliability, and testing convergent validity through the Average Variance Extracted

(AVE). To ensure that each construct represented a distinct concept, discriminant validity was further evaluated using the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. After confirming the adequacy of the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated by observing the coefficient of determination (R^2) and the magnitude of the path coefficients among variables, while hypothesis testing was performed through a bootstrapping resampling procedure to determine the statistical significance of the relationships (Hair et al., 2021). The SEM-PLS technique was selected because of its strong predictive orientation and its effectiveness in handling complex analytical models with relatively limited sample sizes. In parallel, qualitative data were examined using thematic analysis, where interview transcripts were systematically reviewed and coded to identify recurring patterns related to digital content planning, limitations in digital capabilities, promotional communication tendencies, and the application of storytelling in marketing activities. The themes generated from this process were then integrated with the quantitative results to provide deeper contextual explanations regarding the structural content gaps identified through the SEM-PLS analysis.

Result and Discussion

The characteristics of respondents provide an overview of the demographic and digital profile of consumers involved in

Table 2. Characteristics of Respondents

No.	Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Gender	Male	42	42%
		Female	58	58%
2	Age	17–25 years	40	40%
		26–35 years	35	35%
		36–45 years	15	15%
		>45 years	10	10%
3	Main Social Media Platform Used to View Batik Content	Instagram	35	35%
		Facebook	25	25%
		TikTok	20	20%
		WhatsApp	20	20%
Total			100	100%

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Table 3. Measurement Model After Indicator Dropping

	X1. Expectations Toward Batik Content	X2. Perception of the Reality of Viewed Batik Content	Y. Consumer Engagement
X1.1	0.749		
X1.10	0.72		
X1.11	0.782		
X1.2	0.811		
X1.4	0.838		
X1.5	0.832		
X1.7	0.825		
X1.8	0.816		
X2.1		0.809	
X2.10		0.784	
X2.11		0.839	
X2.12		0.843	
X2.2		0.827	
X2.3		0.734	
X2.4		0.798	
X2.5		0.768	
X2.6		0.753	
X2.7		0.866	
X2.9		0.765	
Y1.1			0.818
Y1.10			0.901
Y1.11			0.803
Y1.12			0.903
Y1.13			0.921
Y1.2			0.817
Y1.3			0.821
Y1.4			0.799
Y1.5			0.84
Y1.6			0.869
Y1.7			0.844
Y1.8			0.84
Y1.9			0.899

Source: SmartPLS4 Output (2026)

this study. Understanding these characteristics is important to interpret how expectations and perceptions toward batik digital content are formed across different audience segments. The following table presents the distribution of respondents based on gender, age, and primary social media platform used to access batik content:

Based on Table 2, the majority of respondents are female (58%), indicating that women represent a slightly larger audience segment for digital batik content. In terms of age distribution, respondents aged 17–25 years (40%) and 26–35 years (35%) dominate the sample, suggesting that younger and early-adult consumers form the primary digital audience. Instagram emerges as the most frequently used platform (35%) for viewing batik-related content, followed by Facebook

(25%), TikTok (20%), and WhatsApp (20%), reflecting the multi-platform nature of digital marketing communication for batik SMEs.

Measurement Model Evaluation (Outer Model)

Based on the SmartPLS4 output (2026), Figure 2 presents the initial measurement model before indicator elimination, where several indicators showed outer loading values below the recommended threshold of 0.70 and were therefore removed to improve model validity. After the indicator dropping process, Table 3 demonstrates that all remaining indicators achieved satisfactory outer loading values above 0.70, confirming strong convergent validity across the three constructs: Expectations Toward Batik Content, Perception of

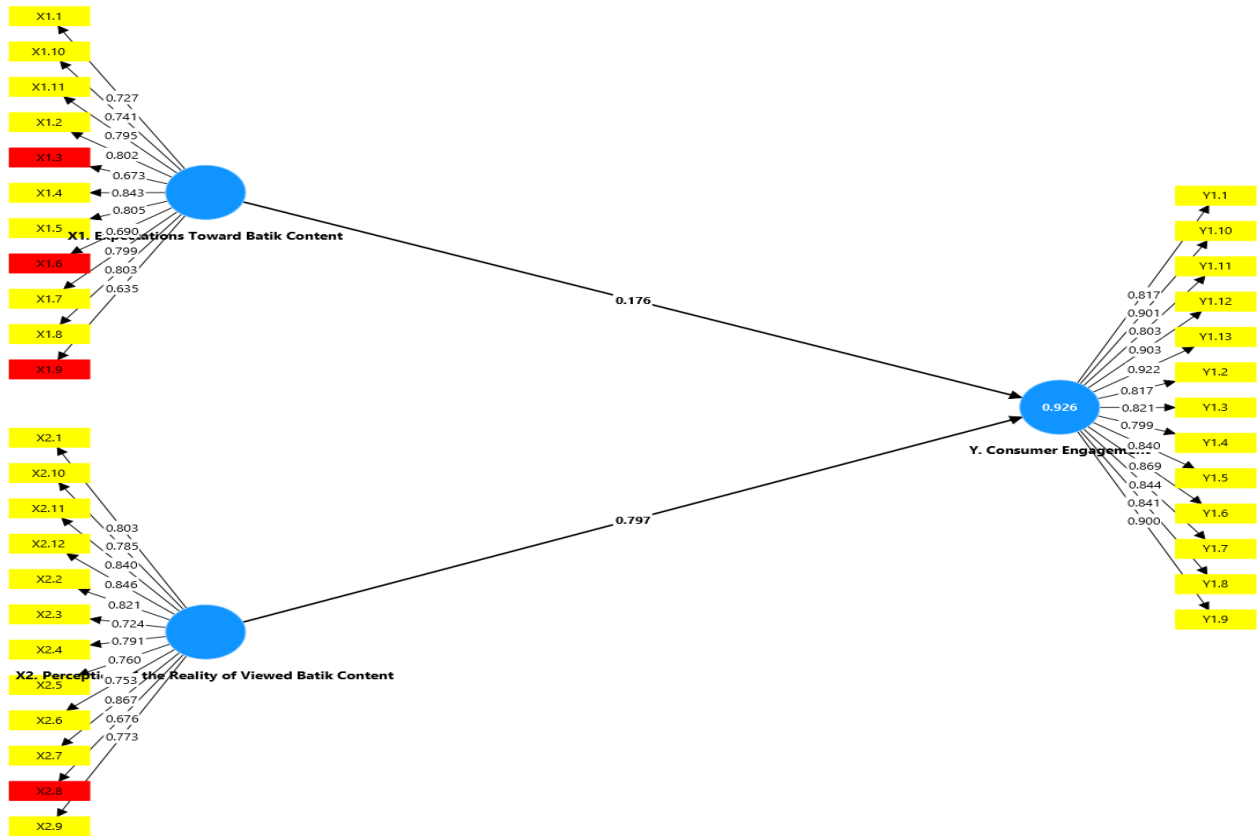


Figure 2. Measurement Model Before Indicator Dropping
Source: SmartPLS4 Output (2026)

Table 4. Discriminant Validity Results Using HTMT Ratio

Constructs	X1. Expectations Toward Batik Content	X2. Perception of the Reality of Viewed Batik Content	Y. Consumer Engagement
X1. Expectations Toward Batik Content	—		
X2. Perception of the Reality of Viewed Batik Content	0.618	—	
Y. Consumer Engagement	0.542	0.702	—

Source: SmartPLS4 Output (2026)

Table 5. Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
X1. Expectations Toward Batik Content	0.918	0.933	0.636
X2. Perception of the Reality of Viewed Batik Content	0.943	0.951	0.640
Y. Consumer Engagement	0.969	0.972	0.727

Source: SmartPLS4 Output (2026)

Table 6. Coefficient of Determination (R-Square) Results

Endogenous Variable	R-Square	R-Square Adjusted
Y. Consumer Engagement	0.926	0.925

Source: SmartPLS4 Output (2026)

Table 7. Effect Size (f²) Results

Exogenous Variable	Endogenous Variable	Effect Size (f ²)
X1. Expectations Toward Batik Content	Y. Consumer Engagement	0.085
X2. Perception of the Reality of Viewed Batik Content	Y. Consumer Engagement	1.280

Source: SmartPLS4 Output (2026)

Table 8. Predictive Relevance (Q²) Results

Construct	SSO	SSE	Q ² (= 1 - SSE/SSO)
X1. Expectations Toward Batik Content	800	800	0.000
X2. Perception of the Reality of Viewed Batik Content	1100	1100	0.000
Y. Consumer Engagement	1300	433.535	0.667

Source: SmartPLS4 Output (2026)

the Reality of Viewed Batik Content, and Consumer Engagement. The loading values for Consumer Engagement are particularly strong, ranging from 0.799 to 0.921, indicating that the construct is well represented by its indicators.

Table 9. Bootstrapping Results for Structural Model Path Coefficients

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
X1. Expectations Toward Batik Content -> Y. Consumer Engagement	0.199	0.206	0.085	2.338	0.019
X2. Perception of the Reality of Viewed Batik Content -> Y. Consumer Engagement	0.776	0.772	0.079	9.815	0.000

Source: SmartPLS4 Output (2026)

Similarly, both exogenous variables show stable and acceptable loading values, ensuring that each construct reliably reflects its latent variable.

Table 4 presents the discriminant validity assessment using the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. The HTMT values between Expectations Toward Batik Content and Perception of the Reality of Viewed Batik Content (0.618), between Expectations Toward Batik Content and Consumer Engagement (0.542), and between Perception of the Reality of Viewed Batik Content and Consumer Engagement (0.702) are all below the recommended threshold of 0.90. These results indicate that each construct is empirically distinct and measures different conceptual dimensions within the model. The absence of excessively high HTMT values confirms that there is no multicollinearity or construct overlap among the variables.

Table 5 presents the results of construct reliability and convergent validity assessment. All constructs demonstrate strong internal consistency, as indicated by Cronbach's Alpha values above 0.90 and Composite Reliability (CR) values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all variables are above 0.50, confirming adequate convergent validity. The Consumer Engagement construct shows particularly high reliability and validity, with CR of 0.972 and AVE of 0.727, indicating that its indicators strongly represent the latent construct.

Structural Model Assessment (Inner Model)

Table 6 presents the coefficient of determination (R-square) results for the endogenous variable. The R-square value of 0.926 indicates that 92.6% of the variance in Consumer Engagement is explained by the independent variables, namely Expectations Toward Batik Content and Perception of the Reality of Viewed Batik Content. The adjusted R-square value of 0.925 further confirms the stability and robustness of the model, showing only a minimal difference from the original R-square value. This high explanatory power suggests that the proposed model has strong predictive capability in explaining consumer engagement within the context of digital marketing communication.

Table 7 presents the effect size (f^2) results, which indicate the magnitude of influence of each exogenous variable on Consumer Engagement. The effect size of Expectations Toward Batik Content ($f^2 = 0.085$) falls within the small effect category, suggesting that although it contributes to consumer engagement, its impact is relatively modest. In contrast, Perception of the Reality of Viewed Batik Content demonstrates a very strong effect ($f^2 = 1.280$), indicating a substantial contribution to explaining variations in consumer engagement. This finding confirms that consumers' perceptions of the actual content they observe play a far more dominant role than their initial expectations.

Table 8 presents the predictive relevance (Q^2) results using the Stone–Geisser criterion obtained through the blindfolding procedure, with an omission distance (D) applied

as specified in the analysis (to be stated in the final manuscript). The Q^2 value is only evaluated for the endogenous construct, namely Consumer Engagement, which yields a value of 0.667, indicating strong predictive relevance of the structural model. Values of Q^2 greater than zero confirm that the model has adequate predictive capability, while a value as high as 0.667 reflects substantial predictive accuracy in explaining variations in consumer engagement. Q^2 values for exogenous constructs are not reported, as predictive relevance is not applicable to these variables within the model. Therefore, the results demonstrate that the model possesses strong predictive power in explaining consumer engagement within the context of digital marketing communication.

The structural model was evaluated using the bootstrapping procedure to test the significance of the proposed hypotheses. The results indicate that both independent variables significantly influence Consumer Engagement. Table 9 presents the path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values for each relationship:

Expectations Toward Batik Content → Consumer Engagement

The results show a positive and significant effect ($\beta = 0.199$; $t = 2.338$; $p = 0.019$). Although the effect size is relatively small, the significance level below 0.05 confirms that consumer expectations contribute to engagement. This suggests that higher expectations regarding content quality and relevance can encourage interaction. However, expectations are not the dominant factor in driving engagement behavior.

Perception of the Reality of Viewed Batik Content → Consumer Engagement

The results reveal a strong and highly significant effect ($\beta = 0.776$; $t = 9.815$; $p < 0.001$). This indicates that consumers' perceptions of the actual content they observe have a substantial impact on engagement. The much larger coefficient compared to expectations highlights that real content experience plays a more decisive role. Therefore, improving the authenticity and quality of digital content is crucial for increasing consumer engagement.

Qualitative Findings and Explanatory Analysis

The qualitative findings indicate that digital content planning among batik SMEs in Jember remains largely reactive and operationally driven rather than strategically structured. The owner of Sang Nara Batik explained, "Currently, the content is still uploaded whenever there is time, but in previous periods I had planned and scheduled it, and I intend to plan it again in the future. I used to have my own team, but because they had their own activities that could not be left, I was no longer able to continue that system. Recently, I have started trying to schedule again and want to pay more attention to it." This statement reflects an awareness of the importance of structured planning, yet the implementation remains inconsistent due to resource constraints. Similarly, content decisions are often influenced by immediate activities rather

Table 10. Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Evidence	Interpretation
Expectations Toward Batik Content significantly influence Consumer Engagement ($\beta = 0.199$; $p = 0.019$)	SMEs do not systematically design content based on audience research. Owners stated that content is often created without knowing specific consumer preferences.	Consumer expectations contribute to engagement, but limited strategic planning prevents full alignment between expectations and produced content.
Perception of the Reality of Viewed Batik Content has a very strong influence on Consumer Engagement ($\beta = 0.776$; $p < 0.001$)	Content frequently displays real production processes, customer orders, and authentic workshop activities. Owners emphasized showcasing actual batik-making activities.	Authentic and realistic content strengthens consumer trust and significantly enhances engagement.
Engagement level is strongly explained by the model ($R^2 = 0.926$; $Q^2 = 0.667$)	SMEs acknowledge limited digital capacity, lack of content calendars, and resource constraints.	Engagement is highly dependent on how well content reflects authenticity, but strategic consistency remains a structural weakness.

Source: Primary Data Processed (2026)

than long-term communication objectives.

Another important theme concerns the limitations of time and human resources. The owner of Sang Nara Batik further stated, "The main obstacle in creating content is time, because currently I handle all batik production activities myself, starting from designing, waxing, to coloring, so I cannot focus on content, especially since I do not have a dedicated admin." Likewise, the owner of Batik Karimata emphasized financial constraints, saying, "I do not have a special employee to handle promotional content; I manage everything myself. I have heard from friends that hiring someone is expensive per month, so I handle it on my own because the money is better used for my children's school fees." These responses clearly illustrate that operational priorities and financial limitations restrict the development of more professional digital marketing strategies.

The findings also reveal that most digital content is predominantly promotional in nature. The owner of Batik Karimata stated, "Most of the content I create is promotional. For educational content, I usually deliver it directly during training sessions or at schools. I never explain the story behind the batik motifs on social media; I explain it directly when customers come." This demonstrates a strong orientation toward hard-selling practices rather than narrative-based digital communication. Although promotional posts may generate short-term sales, they do not fully capitalize on the cultural and emotional value embedded in batik products.

Awareness of storytelling importance is beginning to emerge among SME owners. The owner of Batik Hariyani explained, "Consumers nowadays are not satisfied with just seeing product photos. They want to know the story, such as the batik-making process, who makes it, and the meaning behind the motif. Many are also interested when short videos show the detailed process, because from that they can see the quality." This perspective highlights the growing recognition that authentic and process-oriented content may strengthen consumer trust and engagement. Nevertheless, the execution of such storytelling strategies remains irregular due to practical limitations.

Overall, the qualitative findings provide contextual explanations for the quantitative results, particularly the strong influence of perceived content reality on consumer engagement. While SME owners recognize the need for data-driven and structured strategies, implementation remains limited. As expressed by the owner of Batik Hariyani, "If I had clear data about consumer preferences, I would certainly make my strategy more directed. For example, knowing what time most people view the content, what type of content is most preferred, and which motifs are most searched for. From there I could arrange a more regular posting schedule." This statement underscores the need for systematic digital

strategy development to bridge the gap between consumer expectations and the actual content delivered by batik SMEs.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provides a comprehensive understanding of the content gap phenomenon in the digital marketing communication of batik SMEs. While the quantitative phase statistically identified the strength of relationships among variables, the qualitative phase offered contextual explanations behind those relationships. The mixed-method integration enables a deeper interpretation of how expectations and perceived content reality influence consumer engagement, as well as why certain effects are stronger than others. The following table 10 presents the joint display of integrated findings.

The integrated findings demonstrate that although consumer expectations toward digital batik content significantly affect engagement, their influence is relatively modest compared to perceived content reality. Qualitative evidence reveals that SME owners rarely conduct formal audience research or apply structured content strategies, which explains why expectations are not fully optimized. Consumers may expect informative and storytelling-based content, yet SMEs primarily produce operational and promotional posts without strategic segmentation. This gap between expectation and content planning reduces the potential impact of expectations on engagement behavior.

The perception of the reality of viewed batik content shows a dominant influence on engagement, supported by qualitative findings indicating that SMEs often share authentic production activities and real customer interactions. Such authenticity appears to foster trust and emotional connection, which directly enhances consumer engagement. The strong R-square and Q-square values further confirm the model's explanatory and predictive power. However, despite the strength of authenticity-driven engagement, the absence of systematic strategy and storytelling integration suggests that batik SMEs have not yet fully maximized their digital marketing potential. Therefore, strengthening structured content planning while maintaining authenticity becomes essential to bridge the identified content gap.

The Influence of Consumer Expectations and Perceived Content Reality on Consumer Engagement in Jember Batik SMEs

The findings of this study demonstrate that both consumer expectations (X1) and perceived content reality (X2) significantly influence consumer engagement, with perceived content reality emerging as the dominant factor. This result indicates that engagement in Jember batik SMEs is more strongly shaped by how consumers evaluate the actual content they experience rather than by their initial expectations alone

(Mubarok et al., 2025). The dominance of X2 over X1 can be interpreted through the expectancy–disconfirmation perspective, where consumers compare their expectations with the actual content encountered; when the perceived reality exceeds or aligns with expectations, stronger engagement is generated. In this context, authenticity becomes a critical mechanism explaining why perceived content reality exerts a stronger influence. Qualitative findings support this interpretation, revealing that consumers respond more actively to content that displays real production processes, artisan involvement, and cultural narratives, indicating that authenticity functions as a key driver of trust and emotional connection.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding aligns with Uses and Gratifications Theory, which suggests that audiences actively seek content that fulfills cognitive and emotional needs. When batik SMEs provide content that conveys meaningful storytelling, cultural value, and production transparency, consumers experience higher gratification, leading to increased interaction (Hokmabadi et al., 2024; Minga & Przybylska, 2024). (Fatorachian et al., 2025) found that interactive and vivid content significantly enhances engagement compared to purely promotional approaches. However, this study extends prior research by demonstrating that fulfillment of expectations alone is insufficient; instead, the perceived authenticity of delivered content plays a more decisive role (Mubarok, Sari, Wibowo, 2025). This explains why X2 shows a substantially larger effect size compared to X1, as consumers ultimately base their engagement behavior on actual content experience rather than anticipated value.

When compared with prior studies, the results are consistent with (Boom-Cárcamo et al., 2024), who emphasized that meaningful digital touchpoints strongly influence consumer progression along the customer journey. In addition, (Kamyabi et al., 2025) highlighted that alignment between message delivery and audience perception is essential in Integrated Marketing Communication, supporting the finding that inconsistencies between expected and delivered content reduce engagement. The findings also corroborate (Tauheed et al., 2024), who argued that value-driven and authentic content strengthens trust and long-term engagement. Nevertheless, this study differs from some prior research that places stronger emphasis on expectations as primary drivers of engagement, as it empirically demonstrates that perceived content reality has a significantly greater impact. This discrepancy may be explained by the cultural-product context, where authenticity and symbolic meaning are more salient compared to utilitarian product categories.

From a managerial perspective, these findings can be translated into actionable digital content strategies. First, SMEs should prioritize authenticity by incorporating content elements such as real production processes, artisan storytelling, and behind-the-scenes documentation. Second, content cadence should be structured through consistent scheduling (e.g., weekly storytelling posts combined with promotional content) to ensure continuity. Third, audience segmentation should be applied to tailor content based on demographic and behavioral characteristics, particularly targeting younger audiences who dominate digital engagement. Fourth, content should be mapped to customer journey stages awareness (educational and cultural content), consideration (process transparency and product quality), purchase (promotional offers), and advocacy (user-generated content and testimonials). These mechanisms provide a practical framework for reducing the content gap and enhancing engagement effectiveness.

The high explanatory power of the model ($R^2 = 0.926$) should also be interpreted cautiously as a methodological note. While it indicates strong predictive capability, such a

high value may reflect model specification, sample characteristics, or potential overlap between constructs. Therefore, future research is encouraged to validate the model across different contexts and larger samples to ensure robustness. Additionally, the concept of “authenticity” can be operationalized through observable indicators such as transparency of production processes, presence of artisans, and narrative depth, while the “content gap” can be measured as the discrepancy between expected and perceived content attributes. By systematically integrating these elements into content planning, SMEs can move from reactive content practices toward more strategic and engagement-driven digital communication.

Digital Content Practices and Strategic Constraints in Batik SMEs

The findings of this study indicate that digital content practices among batik SMEs are predominantly characterized by operational improvisation rather than strategic communication planning, which directly contributes to the persistence of the content gap identified in the empirical results. Content production is largely driven by short-term operational activities such as production cycles, customer visits, or exhibitions, reflecting a reactive approach that limits the development of consistent and value-driven communication. This condition explains why, despite the presence of consumer expectations, engagement remains more strongly influenced by perceived content reality, as SMEs fail to systematically align content with audience needs. From the perspective of the Content Marketing Framework, effective content should be audience-centered, relevant, and strategically consistent; however, the findings reveal that most SMEs prioritize product-oriented posts without integrating storytelling or cultural narratives. As argued by (Mubarok, Muhammad Umam and Santoso, Budi and Satoto, 2025), sustainable engagement emerges from the continuous delivery of meaningful and relevant content, not from episodic promotional activities. Therefore, the absence of structured planning weakens the ability of SMEs to transform batik's cultural value into strategic digital storytelling, which in turn limits engagement optimization.

These limitations are further reinforced by structural constraints related to human resources and time allocation, which emerged strongly in the qualitative findings. SME owners often simultaneously manage production, marketing, and digital communication, resulting in fragmented and inconsistent content practices. This condition provides a practical explanation for the weak alignment between expectations (X1) and content delivery, as limited capacity prevents SMEs from conducting audience research, segmentation, or content scheduling. From the perspective of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), such conditions lead to message inconsistency and reduced coherence across communication channels, thereby weakening brand positioning and engagement potential. As highlighted by (Rahmat Putra Ahmad Hasibuan & Nurfadhilah Ahmad Hasibuan, 2025), IMC effectiveness depends on strategic coordination and customer-focused messaging, which becomes difficult to achieve in micro-scale enterprises with limited resources. Consequently, limited digital capability is not merely an operational issue but a structural factor that explains the dominance of perceived content reality over expectations in influencing engagement.

These constraints significantly affect how batik SMEs manage communication across Customer Journey stages, which provides additional insight into the observed engagement patterns. The findings show that content is rarely differentiated across awareness, consideration, and purchase phases, resulting in a uniform communication approach that fails to guide consumers through a structured decision-making

process. While promotional content may support short-term transactional outcomes, it does not sufficiently address informational and emotional needs that are critical for long-term engagement. This explains why perceived content reality, particularly authenticity, becomes the dominant factor, as consumers rely on actual content experience to evaluate credibility and value. Supporting this interpretation, (Hidayati et al., 2025) emphasize that meaningful experiences across customer journey touchpoints are essential in shaping consumer relationships and loyalty. In the context of batik SMEs, the absence of stage-based content strategy limits the ability to convert initial interest into sustained engagement and advocacy.

From the perspective of Uses and Gratifications Theory, these findings further highlight that engagement is driven by the extent to which digital content fulfills psychological and informational needs. When SMEs prioritize operational efficiency over content quality and relevance, the gratification potential of digital communication is significantly reduced. Consumers who expect cultural storytelling, process transparency, and artisan authenticity instead encounter repetitive promotional content, resulting in lower satisfaction and weaker engagement responses. This aligns with the findings of (Hassan & Nohahassannguedueg, 2026), which demonstrate that interactive and vivid content significantly enhances online engagement compared to purely promotional messaging. Therefore, the constraints identified in this study not only limit strategic capacity but also reduce the psychological resonance of digital content.

From a managerial standpoint, these findings suggest the need for a structured transformation in digital content strategy. SMEs should operationalize authenticity through specific content elements such as behind-the-scenes production, artisan narratives, and cultural storytelling, while also implementing consistent content scheduling and audience segmentation. Additionally, content should be mapped to different stages of the customer journey to ensure relevance and continuity of communication. By integrating these mechanisms, batik SMEs can reduce the content gap, enhance perceived authenticity, and ultimately improve consumer engagement.

Integrative Analysis of the Content Gap: Bridging Consumer Expectations and Digital Content Reality

The integrative analysis indicates that the content gap in Jember batik SMEs is primarily driven by the misalignment between consumer expectations and the actual execution of digital content strategies, as evidenced by the stronger influence of perceived content reality compared to expectations. This finding suggests that engagement is determined not only by what consumers expect but more critically by how they evaluate the authenticity and relevance of the content they encounter. The gap therefore reflects a structural issue rooted in limited strategic planning, insufficient digital capabilities, and reactive communication practices identified in the qualitative findings. From a theoretical perspective, this misalignment can be explained through the expectancy-disconfirmation mechanism, where engagement outcomes depend on the degree to which perceived content reality meets or exceeds initial expectations. When SMEs fail to deliver content that aligns with these expectations, particularly in terms of authenticity and cultural value, engagement becomes fragmented and less sustainable.

From the standpoint of Uses and Gratifications Theory the findings demonstrate that consumers actively seek content that fulfills informational, emotional, and identity-related needs, especially in culturally embedded products such as batik. However, the empirical results show that SMEs have not yet systematically translated these needs into structured

content strategies, which explains the relatively weaker effect of expectations compared to perceived content reality. In addition, Customer Journey Theory provides further insight into this gap, as the findings reveal that content is rarely differentiated across stages awareness, consideration, and purchase resulting in a uniform communication approach that does not effectively guide consumer decision-making. This lack of stage-based content mapping limits the ability of SMEs to convert initial attention into deeper engagement and loyalty, reinforcing the dominance of perceived experience over anticipated value.

From the perspective of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and the Content Marketing Framework, the persistence of the content gap can be attributed to the absence of consistency, coherence, and narrative depth across digital touchpoints. The findings indicate that content is predominantly promotional, with limited integration of storytelling elements such as motif meaning, artisan identity, and production processes, which are essential for building authenticity. As a result, the perceived content reality becomes the primary determinant of engagement, as consumers rely on observable cues to assess credibility and value. To bridge this gap, SMEs need to operationalize authenticity through specific and measurable content elements, including behind-the-scenes production documentation, artisan-centered narratives, and culturally meaningful storytelling, while also implementing structured content planning, audience segmentation, and journey-stage mapping.

From a managerial perspective bridging the content gap requires a shift from reactive content practices toward a strategic, audience-centered digital communication model. This includes establishing a consistent content cadence, aligning content themes with consumer expectations, and integrating storytelling into each stage of the customer journey. Additionally, the concept of "content gap" can be operationalized as the measurable discrepancy between expected and perceived content attributes, while "authenticity" can be translated into observable indicators such as transparency, narrative depth, and cultural relevance. By systematically applying these mechanisms, batik SMEs can enhance perceived content reality, reduce expectation-reality misalignment, and ultimately strengthen consumer engagement in a sustainable manner.

Limitations and Cautions

This study is subject to several limitations that should be interpreted with caution. First, the research focuses specifically on batik SMEs in Jember, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other regions or creative industries with different cultural, structural, and digital maturity contexts. Second, although the mixed-method approach strengthens explanatory depth, the qualitative phase involved only three SME owners, which may not fully capture the diversity of digital practices across all batik businesses. Third, consumer engagement was measured based on perceptual and self-reported responses rather than longitudinal behavioral tracking data, which may introduce response bias. Additionally, the rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms and algorithm changes may influence engagement patterns over time, meaning that findings represent a contextual snapshot rather than a permanent structural condition. Therefore, conclusions should be understood within the scope of the sample, methodology, and temporal context of the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research is encouraged to expand the scope beyond a single regional cluster in order to compare digital content strategies across different cultural or industrial contexts. Studies could incorporate larger and more diverse qualitative samples, including digital marketing practitioners, consumers,

and platform specialists, to deepen understanding of strategic constraints and innovation opportunities. Longitudinal designs would also be valuable to examine how content alignment strategies evolve over time and influence sustained engagement and brand loyalty. Furthermore, future studies may integrate advanced digital analytics, such as social media performance data or sentiment analysis, to complement perceptual measurements with objective behavioral indicators. Exploring additional mediating or moderating variables such as digital literacy, brand authenticity perception, or cultural attachment could further refine theoretical models explaining the content gap in creative SMEs.

Conclusion

This study investigated the content gap between consumer expectations and perceived digital content reality and aimed to examine their influence on consumer engagement in Jember batik SMEs. The findings demonstrated that both variables contribute to engagement, with perceived content reality playing a more dominant role in shaping consumer interaction. Notably, the study reveals that although SMEs recognize the importance of storytelling and authentic communication, strategic constraints such as limited time and human resources hinder systematic content planning. These results underscore the importance of aligning audience expectations with authentic and value-driven digital content to strengthen engagement in creative SMEs. While this study provides meaningful insights into digital content practices in Jember batik SMEs, several limitations should be noted, including the regional focus, limited qualitative informants, and reliance on perceptual data. Future research should expand the scope to different regions or industries, incorporate larger samples, and integrate behavioral digital analytics. Further studies may also explore additional variables such as digital capability or brand authenticity perception to refine the theoretical understanding of content gap dynamics and improve strategic digital marketing practices.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) of Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember for their continuous support and facilitation throughout the research and publication process, including during the revision and finalization stages of this manuscript. The authors also highly appreciate the valuable input and feedback provided by the editorial team during the galley proof process, which has contributed to improving the quality and clarity of this article. In addition, the authors thank all respondents and related parties who have willingly contributed their time and information to support this study.

Conflict of interest

The authors gratefully acknowledge the batik SME owners in Jember for their valuable insights and participation during data collection. Appreciation is also extended to the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember, for academic support, and to all survey respondents for their contributions to this study.

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