



Strategic Adaptation Narratives of Small Businesses Facing Digital Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how small business actors construct strategic adaptation narratives in response to digital transformation. Using a qualitative narrative approach and semi-structured interviews with eight digitally oriented small business owners in Bandung, the research identifies key themes through thematic coding. The findings reveal that strategic adaptation is shaped by experiential narratives emphasizing collaboration, flexibility, and technology integration to enhance efficiency and sustainability. The study concludes that digital adaptation involves not only technological adoption but also shifts in strategic thinking, decision-making, and organizational learning. Theoretically, it contributes to narrative-based strategic management studies, and practically, it offers insights to strengthen small businesses' adaptive capacity in navigating ongoing digital transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has become a central force shaping organizational dynamics and market competitiveness in various industry sectors around the world. The rapid development of digital technologies such as cloud computing, data analytics, and artificial intelligence has fundamentally changed the way businesses create value, interact with customers, and sustain growth (Nambisan et al., 2021). Globally, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face a dual challenge, namely how to leverage digital technology to increase efficiency while rearranging their strategic orientation to remain relevant in a highly dynamic market. This urgency has increased even more after the pandemic, when technological adaptation is no longer an option, but rather an urgent need to survive (Marques & Ferreira, 2022).

In Indonesia, accelerating digitalization in the small business sector has become an important component in strengthening national economic resilience. Based on data from the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs (2023), there are more than 64 million micro and small business units that contribute around 61% to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP), but only about 25% have integrated digital systems in their business operations. This gap presents a significant challenge in transforming traditional managerial mindsets towards strategies that are adaptive to the digital age. Along with the global push towards Industry 4.0 integration, Indonesian SMEs not only need to adopt technology, but also reorganize their strategic narrative to be able to compete at the local and global levels (Santoso et al., 2023).

Strategic adaptation in the digital economy is not just the application of technology, but an organizational sense-making process in which small business actors rearrange their strategic logic to align with digital reality. Research shows that successful adaptation is highly dependent on leadership skills, organizational learning, as well as the capacity to reframe business identities in a digital context (Fink & Ruff, 2022). However, many small business actors in developing countries show a reactive pattern of adaptation, focusing on short-term sustainability rather than long-term transformation (Ramdani et al., 2021). This shows the need for a deeper understanding of how the narrative built by business actors shapes their strategic adaptation behavior.

Most previous research has focused on technology adoption models, digital readiness, and innovation capacity, but has not examined how small businesses narratively build and articulate their adaptation strategies in the face of digital transformation. For example, Gao et al.'s (2023) research on SME digital innovation in China highlights the evolution of business models, but does not discuss the role of business narratives in framing strategic adaptation. Similarly, Bergmann and Samuel (2022) identified the stages of digital maturity of SMEs in Europe, but did not trace the process of creating meaning that underlies the strategic response. Therefore, there is still a research gap in understanding how small businesses in developing countries, particularly in Indonesia, build and communicate their strategic adaptation narratives amid the pressures of digital transformation.

This research specifically aims to explore how small business actors build and express their strategic adaptation narratives in the face of digital transformation. The focus of the research is directed to identify the strategic thinking patterns, decision-making processes, and organizational learning mechanisms inherent in the narrative. Using a narrative-based qualitative approach, this study seeks to capture the first-hand experiences of small business owners and key staff involved in the digital adaptation process. This approach allows researchers to understand how the process of meaning-creation and strategic reflection contributes to the adaptive capacity of small organizations.

Theoretically, this research is based on the perspective of strategic adaptation and narrative-based management, which views strategy as a social process formed through interpretation and storytelling practices (Whittington, 2021). Through a narrative theory approach, organizational adaptation is understood not as a linear process, but as a dynamic negotiation of meaning in which business actors continuously build their strategic direction in the midst of digital disruption (Brown et al., 2023). This theoretical framework allows research to bridge the gap between the formation of cognitive strategies and practical adaptation in digital contexts.

In terms of theoretical contribution, this study enriches the study of strategic management by integrating narrative perspectives in the digital transformation discourse in the SME sector. This research provides a more contextual understanding of how strategic adaptation takes place in the midst of cultural, institutional, and technological realities in developing countries. The findings of the research are expected to expand existing strategic adaptation models by emphasizing the human and interpretive dimensions of the digital transformation process, which is particularly relevant for SMEs with limited resources and managerial capacity.

Practically, the results of this study provide applicable insights for policy makers, business development institutions, and MSME actors. Understanding how small businesses frame and narrate their strategic adaptations can help design digital training programs, support policies, and mentoring systems that are more in line with the cognitive realities and local cultures of entrepreneurs. By highlighting the relationship between digital literacy, organizational culture, and the process of forming strategic meaning, this research is expected to strengthen Indonesia's digital economy ecosystem and increase the long-term resilience of the small business sector.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Digital Transformation and the Dynamics of Small Businesses

Digital transformation has become a major catalyst in changing the global business landscape, including in the small business sector. Technological developments such as cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and data analytics are encouraging small businesses to revisit their business strategies to remain competitive in the digital economy era. According to Vu (2024), digitalization opens up new opportunities for increased efficiency and innovation, but also creates challenges in adjusting organizational structures and work culture. In the

Indonesian context, Ainurrokhim et al. (2024) explained that most small businesses face obstacles in terms of digital literacy, limited capital, and lack of adequate technological infrastructure. Meanwhile, Setiawan et al. (2023) highlight that the digital adoption gap among small businesses shows the need for strategic policies that not only emphasize technology, but also a transformation of managerial mindsets. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of digital transformation is key to ensuring the sustainability of small businesses in the face of increasingly complex global pressures.

Organizational Capabilities and Strategic Adaptation

The success of digital transformation is highly dependent on the organization's ability to adapt to change. Müller et al. (2023) emphasized that the concept of dynamic capabilities is the main foundation for small businesses to develop the ability to learn, innovate, and adapt quickly to changes in the digital market. In the context of developing countries, Hendrawan et al. (2024) found that small business actors tend to emphasize flexibility and improvisation more than long-term strategies, so digital transformation runs reactively. Li (2025) added that the success of strategic adaptation depends not only on technology adoption, but also on the organization's ability to integrate digital vision with daily business practices. Thus, strengthening organizational capabilities is an important foundation in building a sustainable adaptive strategy.

Narrative of Strategic Adaptation and Meaning Formation

In modern management studies, strategy is no longer seen only as a rational plan, but also as a narrative process in which business people create meaning for the changes they experience. Brown et al. (2023) explain that the narrative approach allows researchers to understand how small entrepreneurs interpret digital challenges and reframe their business identities. Ben Slimane et al. (2022) emphasize that narrative approaches are relevant to explain how strategies emerge through experience and reflection, not just formal planning. In the local context, Asmar et al. (2024) show that the narrative of strategic adaptation of small business actors in Indonesia is heavily influenced by collaborative values and the spirit of mutual cooperation in adopting new technologies. This means that strategic narratives are an important forum in the learning and adaptation process in the midst of disruptive digital transformation.

Contextual Factors and Local Challenges

Digital adaptation in small businesses cannot be separated from contextual factors that include the social, economic, and cultural environment. Gunawan and Tasrim (2024) found that financial and digital literacy is an important combination to increase the readiness of small business adaptation in Indonesia. A similar study by Jeza and Lekhanya (2022) in South Africa shows that while digitalization opens up wider market access, limited human resources and infrastructure are still a major obstacle for small businesses to grow sustainably. Wijaya and Tasrim (2024) added that the success of digitalization is greatly influenced by the support of social networks and local communities that act as agents of collective learning. Therefore, understanding the local context is

crucial so that the adapted strategies designed can be realistic and effective in practice.

Collaboration, Organizational Learning, and Business Resilience

One of the important aspects of the strategic adaptation narrative is the ability of small businesses to build continuous organizational learning. Utami et al. (2023) explained that collaboration between business actors, educational institutions, and the government is a catalyst in strengthening the digital resilience of SMEs. Wulandari et al. (2024) also highlighted that digital literacy and data analysis skills play an important role in shaping long-term competitiveness, especially through increased efficiency and technology-based innovation. In this context, collaboration is not only a business strategy, but also a means of collective learning to deal with the uncertainties of the digital market. Thus, a collaborative and knowledge-based adaptation strategy is a key element in maintaining the sustainability of small businesses in the era of digital transformation.

METHODOLOGY

Types and Approaches to Research

This research uses a qualitative approach with narrative design, because the main purpose of the research is to understand and interpret the strategic experiences of small business actors in facing digital transformation through the narrative they build. Narrative design allows researchers to trace how individuals structure their business meanings, actions, and decisions in the context of rapid technological change (Creswell & Creswell, 2024). This approach emphasizes the storytelling process as a means to uncover strategic mindsets and organizational learning that emerge from empirical experience (Riessman, 2021).

Population and Sampling Techniques

The research population includes small business actors operating in the city of Bandung and have implemented digitalization elements in their business processes, such as digital marketing, online transactions, or the use of e-commerce platforms. The purposive sampling technique was used to select informants based on the suitability of the research criteria, namely: (1) small business owners who have been operating for at least three years, (2) have implemented digital-based strategies since the COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) are active in the strategic decision-making process in the business. A total of eight informants were selected to allow for in-depth narrative exploration, with a variety of sectors such as culinary, retail, and creative services. The composition of the informants consists of eight small business actors in the city of Bandung who have adopted digital practices in their business management

Data Collection Techniques

Key data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews designed to explore business actors' experiences, reflections, and adaptive strategies in the face of digital change. The interview guide was structured based

on the theoretical framework of Dynamic Capabilities and the Narrative Strategy Framework, which highlights the organization's ability to respond to environmental changes through learning and strategic narratives (Teece, 2021; Vaara & Tienari, 2022). Each interview lasts between 60–90 minutes and is conducted face-to-face at the business location and through an online platform (Zoom or Google Meet) according to the availability of informants. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim with the informant's consent. The validity of the data is maintained through member checking, which is the process of re-verifying findings to participants, as well as triangulating sources, by matching interview results to supporting documents such as their business profiles and digital activities (Tracy, 2020).

Research Procedure

The research stages are carried out systematically. First, the researcher conducted a conceptual literature review on digital transformation and small business adaptation strategies to formulate the research focus and prepare interview guidelines. Second, participant recruitment is carried out through a network of MSME associations and digital communities in Bandung. Third, the field data collection stage is carried out by paying attention to research ethics, including the anonymity and confidentiality of participant data. Fourth, the results of the interviews are transcribed, verified through member checking, and analyzed in stages. Finally, the researcher developed a thematic narrative to reveal strategic adaptation patterns based on the subjective experiences of business actors. This procedure follows the principles of qualitative research that emphasizes researcher reflexivity, data credibility, and traceability of the analysis process (Bickman & Rog, 2022).

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using a thematic narrative analysis approach, which is the process of interpreting participants' stories and experiences to identify emerging strategic themes. The analysis was carried out through four main stages: (1) familiarization, which is repeated reading of interview transcripts to understand the narrative context; (2) coding, which is marking the unit of meaning related to the adaptation strategy; (3) thematic clustering, which is grouping the main themes such as innovation, digital learning, and collaboration; and (4) narrative synthesis, which is reconstructing participants' experiences in the form of a collective storyline that explains their strategic adaptation patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis process is assisted by NVivo 14 software to facilitate the coding and visualization of inter-theme relationships. The validity of the results is strengthened through peer debriefing and researcher reflection to ensure the interpretation remains consistent with the empirical data (Vaismoradi et al., 2023). This approach results in an in-depth understanding of how small businesses build strategic narratives as a form of response to digital transformation challenges and opportunities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Restructuring Strategic Thinking Patterns Based on Empirical Experience

The first findings show that small business actors do not view digitalization as a mere technical change, but as a momentum to reimagine their strategic thinking towards business. Most informants emphasize that a new understanding of digital markets emerges through first-hand experience of changing consumer behavior and competitive pressures. This strategic thinking pattern is built through a process of trial and error and reflection on the failures that occur.

One of the informants stated, *"Initially, I only participated in online sales due to the pandemic, but after seeing sales data increase, I realized that this digital strategy is not temporary, but a new direction for my business"* (SB-02, August 10, 2025). This statement describes how the empirical learning process becomes the basis for strategic restructuring. Another informant added, *"If in the past my strategy was only focused on products, now I also think about customer experience on social media"* (SB-04, August 15, 2025). The same thing was also emphasized by other informants, *"Digital is not just about tools, it's about how to rethink how our business is relevant in the future."* (SB-07, August 18, 2025).

This process shows that the narrative of strategic adaptation is not formed instantly, but grows out of a new awareness of the strategic value of technology. Business actors internalize their experiences as a source of meaning and new strategic directions, resulting in a more reflective and visionary thinking orientation towards digital change.

Adaptive Decision Making Through Digital Reflection

The second theme highlights how small businesses are developing adaptive decision-making mechanisms based on reflection on data and digital experiences. Business decisions are no longer based entirely on intuition, but instead also consider the results of digital interactions such as online sales trends, customer responses on social media, and digital advertising performance.

An informant explained, *"Now every promotion decision I look at the data first, which posts are the most crowded, then I make a new strategy from there"* (SB-01, August 8, 2025). This reflection-based approach shows a shift from traditional management styles to data-informed decision making. Another informant revealed, *"We learned to read insights from e-commerce platforms, so stock and price decisions are not as original as they used to be"* (SB-05, August 12, 2025). Meanwhile, another informant added, *"I used to be hesitant to invest in digital, but after seeing the results of online campaigns that tripled, I immediately changed my long-term plans"* (SB-03, August 17, 2025).

This reflective process shows that digital adaptation drives transformation in strategic thinking and acting. Decision-making is now more dynamic and based on continuous learning, where each step is considered through an evaluation of previous digital experiences.

Collaborative Organizational Learning as the Foundation of Business Sustainability

The third theme illustrates that the success of strategic adaptation does not only depend on the individual capabilities of business owners, but also on the

formation of collective learning within the organization. Internal collaboration between team members as well as external cooperation with the local digital community are important elements in strengthening the adaptive power and innovation of small businesses.

One of the informants said, *"We learn together through the digital MSME community, so if there is a problem, someone will immediately help give you a solution."* (SB-06, August 14, 2025). This confirms that collaboration is an effective means of accelerating the organizational learning process. Another informant said, *"My team now routinely shares every week about digital trends, so that everyone understands the same strategy direction"* (SB-08, August 20, 2025). Meanwhile, the third informant added, *"With cooperation between small businesses, we can exchange experiences and that really helps for product innovation."* (SB-04, August 22, 2025).

These results show that collaboration acts as a catalyst for organizational learning that drives innovation, resilience, and sustainability of small businesses in the digital era. The narrative that emerged from business actors shows that the success of adaptation does not only come from the ability of individuals to understand technology, but from collective strength in building a shared learning ecosystem.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that small business actors tend to build adaptive narratives based on empirical experience, with three key elements: collaboration, flexibility, and technology integration in an effort to improve business efficiency and sustainability. This narrative is not just an operational story, but a strategic frame of mind that connects business experiences, reflections, and actions in the era of digital transformation.

First, the findings show that small business actors are restructuring their strategic mindset based on empirical experience and reflection on real conditions in the digital market. This approach is in line with dynamic capabilities theory, which states that organizations must be able to learn, respond to change, and reconfigure their resources to remain competitive (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2021). In this context, small business actors build a narrative that technology is not just an operational tool but part of a long-term strategic vision. This reinforces the literature that shows that successful digital transformation in SMEs requires a change in mindset from technology as a complement to technology as the core of business strategy (Kraus et al., 2023). Consequently, a flexible strategic mindset is the main foundation for sustainable adaptation.

Second, the results of the study reveal that decision-making among small business actors now tends to be based on reflection and digital data is not just intuition. Decisions about stocks, pricing, promotions, and digital marketing channels are increasingly based on insights gained from digital experiences, consumer trends, and simple analytics. This enriches the narrative strategic management framework because it shows that the narrative of strategic adaptation involves a digital sense-making process, in which business actors translate digital data into real actions. Digital literacy and analytical capabilities are important mediators in the context of SMEs (Bouwman et al., 2022). Thus,

strategic adaptation does not arise naturally but is built through a process of systematic reflection on digital output.

Third, research reinforces that organizational learning and collaboration are the main adaptive mechanisms. Adaptive narratives are formed through social interaction between business owners, internal teams, and between businesses in the local digital community. This concept of collective learning is in line with the literature that states that social networks, communities of practice, and the exchange of experiences between businesses improve the digital resilience of SMEs (Vial & Rivard, 2022). Collaboration is not just an efficiency strategy, but a means of forming a shared narrative that strengthens strategic identity and innovation capacity. This marks an important practical contribution: that successful digital adaptation in small businesses also depends on the social-cognitive dimension of the organization.

Although adaptive narratives have been proven to work, this study also reveals real challenges, especially related to technology integration and limited resources such as capital, digital literacy, and skilled labor. This is consistent with the finding that SMEs in developing countries are often hampered by technological and resource constraints (Papadopoulos et al., 2022). However, what is interesting in this study is that small business actors in Bandung use narrative improvisation strategies for example, using simple technology, sharing resources through communities, or conducting digital experiments gradually. This is in contrast to the literature that often emphasizes large investments in technology. Thus, this study shows that in the context of limited resources, strategic flexibility and reflective learning via adaptive narratives can be a more realistic and sustainable approach.

Conceptually, this study expands the literature on strategic management and digital transformation by adding a narrative perspective in the context of small businesses. The narrative of strategic adaptation emerges as a construct of meaning that connects empirical experience with strategic action, showing that strategy is not only the result of rational analysis, but also a process of social interpretation. Thus, this study proposes that digital adaptation in SMEs should be seen as a narrative and cognitive process, not just a technical or structural one. In practical terms, these findings provide a framework for policymakers and small business coaches to emphasize strategic narrative building, community collaboration, and reflective learning as part of digitalization programs.

This study has several limitations, namely that the narrative approach does not allow quantitative estimation of the relationship between variables such as the level of technology adoption and business performance results. Therefore, it is recommended that further research use mixed methods with a larger sample and across regions to test the narrative model of strategic adaptation quantitatively. In addition, research can also explore narrative interventions such as digital adaptation narrative training programs and measure their impact on small business performance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This research confirms that an adaptive narrative based on empirical experience is the main foundation for small businesses in responding to the dynamics of digital transformation. The three key elements found collaboration, flexibility, and technology integration show that strategic adaptation is not only concerned with the application of technology alone, but also with the formation of meaning, reflection, and collective learning in a rapidly changing socio-economic context. Through this process, small businesses are able to build a dynamic and sustainability-oriented strategic mindset, where technology is positioned not just as an operational tool, but as the core of a long-term vision and business competitiveness.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of narrative-based strategic management studies by showing that strategy is the result of a construction of meaning that continues to develop along with social interaction and reflection of experience. These findings enrich the perspective of the literature on digital adaptation in small businesses, especially in the context of developing countries. Practically, this research offers important implications for policymakers and MSME support institutions to emphasize the importance of reflective, collaborative, and digital capacity building in programs to strengthen the competitiveness of small businesses. Thus, this research contributes to the development of narrative-based strategic management studies, while offering practical implications for increasing the adaptive capacity of small businesses in the face of sustainable digital transformation.

FURTHER STUDY

Future studies could further investigate how adaptive narratives develop across different types of small businesses and cultural settings, allowing for a deeper understanding of how contextual factors shape strategic meaning-making in digital transformation. Research could also explore the mechanisms through which collaboration, reflection, and collective learning influence long-term strategic resilience, particularly in environments with limited digital infrastructure. Additionally, longitudinal studies would be valuable to examine how narrative-based strategies evolve over time and how they relate to measurable improvements in competitiveness and sustainability. Expanding the inquiry to include comparative analyses between developing and developed countries could also enrich theoretical insights and highlight which narrative practices are universally effective versus culturally specific.

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