

Exploring Business Communication Practices among Small Business Owners: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore business communication practices among small business owners and examine how communication is used to support daily business activities and maintain relationships with customers, suppliers, business partners, and other stakeholders. The study particularly focuses on the ways small business owners utilize interpersonal and digital communication in managing their businesses. This study employs a qualitative approach with an exploratory research design. Data were collected through in depth interviews with small business owners selected using purposive sampling based on their active involvement in managing their businesses. The collected data were analyzed thematically through data reduction, coding, categorization, identification of emerging themes, and interpretation to identify patterns in business communication practices. The findings indicate that business communication among small business owners serves not only as a means of conveying information but also as an important mechanism for building trust, maintaining customer relationships, conducting negotiations, and fostering customer loyalty. Small business owners tend to adopt communication practices that are personal, flexible, and adaptive to the characteristics of their communication partners. Digital communication, particularly instant messaging applications and social media, is increasingly used to promote products, respond to customer inquiries, receive orders, and maintain business relationships. However, several challenges remain, including limited professional communication skills, unstructured information management, and differences in customer characteristics. These findings suggest that effective and adaptive communication practices are an important component of small business sustainability and relationship management.

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INTRODUCTION

Small businesses constitute an important component of national and local economic development because they contribute to employment creation, income generation, innovation, and the distribution of economic activities across communities. Their contribution is not only reflected in the number of businesses but also in their ability to provide goods and services that are closely connected to local market needs. Unlike large corporations that generally operate through formalized organizational structures and specialized communication departments, small businesses are often managed directly by their owners, who simultaneously perform various functions such as marketing, customer service, negotiation, financial management, and strategic decision-making. This condition makes communication an integral part of everyday business operations. The ability of owners to communicate effectively with customers, employees, suppliers, and business partners can influence

how business information is exchanged, how relationships are developed, and how business activities are coordinated. Consequently, communication should not be viewed merely as a supporting activity but as an essential managerial practice that is embedded in the daily operation and development of small businesses. (World Bank, 2022)

Business communication in small enterprises has distinctive characteristics because the boundaries between personal and professional relationships are often less formal than those found in larger organizations. Small business owners frequently interact directly with customers and business partners, allowing communication to become highly personal, flexible, and relationship-oriented. Through direct communication, owners can identify customer preferences, respond to complaints, negotiate prices, explain product characteristics, and develop trust with their customers. In many small businesses, repeated interpersonal interactions may create familiarity and social bonds that become important foundations for customer retention and business continuity. Communication therefore involves not only the transfer of information but also the creation of meaning, trust, commitment, and relational value between business actors. From this perspective, effective business communication involves the ability to understand the needs of communication partners and to adapt messages, language, and communication styles to particular situations (Palmatier et al., 2006).

Trust represents one of the important elements underlying communication in business relationships, particularly when transactions involve uncertainty, repeated interactions, and dependence between parties. Customers are more likely to maintain relationships with businesses when they perceive that the business owner communicates honestly, responds appropriately, and demonstrates consistency between what is communicated and what is delivered. For small business owners, trust can be developed through simple but continuous communication practices, such as responding promptly to customer questions, providing accurate product information, handling complaints appropriately, and maintaining commitments. Communication can consequently become a mechanism through which business owners demonstrate reliability and strengthen relational bonds with customers. The importance of trust suggests that business communication should be examined not only from the perspective of message effectiveness but also from the perspective of the relationships that emerge through repeated communication (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002).

The emergence of digital technologies has substantially transformed the communication environment in which small businesses operate. Social media platforms, instant messaging applications, digital marketplaces, websites, and other online communication channels have created new opportunities for small business owners to interact with customers without being restricted by physical distance and conventional business hours. Digital communication enables businesses to disseminate product information, communicate promotional offers, receive customer inquiries, process orders, collect feedback, and maintain relationships in a relatively efficient manner. Social media, in particular, has changed business communication from a predominantly one-way process into a more interactive process in which customers can comment, provide reviews, share content, and directly communicate with business owners. These developments have expanded the role of communication from information delivery toward customer engagement and relationship management (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Ainin et al., 2015).

The increasing use of social media has also created opportunities for small businesses to develop communication strategies that are more interactive and customer-oriented. Through digital platforms, business owners can present their products using photographs, videos, narratives, testimonials, and other forms of content that allow customers to obtain information before making purchasing decisions. At the same time, customers can immediately respond to business content, ask questions, provide feedback, and share their experiences with other users. This interaction can contribute to the development of customer engagement and electronic word-of-mouth, which may subsequently influence perceptions of the business and its products. Social media thus functions not simply as an advertising channel but also as a communication space where businesses and customers continuously construct relationships and exchange information (Felix et al., 2017; Tajvidi & Karami, 2021).

Nevertheless, the adoption of digital communication does not mean that traditional interpersonal communication has become irrelevant. Small business owners often combine multiple communication channels depending on the type of customer, purpose of communication, and

business situation. Face-to-face communication may remain important for negotiating transactions, developing personal trust, and resolving sensitive problems, while instant messaging may be preferred for routine inquiries and order confirmations. Social media may be used primarily for promotion and customer engagement, whereas telephone communication may be selected when immediate clarification is required. This combination demonstrates that business communication among small business owners is often characterized by flexibility and adaptation rather than adherence to a single communication model. Understanding these choices requires attention to the practical experiences of business owners and the contexts in which particular communication strategies are employed (Ritz et al., 2019; Dwivedi et al., 2021).

The growing importance of digital communication also creates new challenges for small business owners. Although digital platforms provide opportunities to communicate with a wider market, they require business owners to develop new capabilities related to content creation, customer response, online reputation management, and digital interaction. Customers may expect rapid responses, accurate information, professional language, and consistent service across different communication channels. Negative reviews, misunderstandings in text-based communication, delayed responses, and inconsistent information can potentially affect customer perceptions of a business. Furthermore, the informal nature of communication on digital platforms may create challenges for owners in maintaining an appropriate balance between friendliness and professionalism. These circumstances indicate that digitalization does not automatically produce effective communication; rather, the benefits of digital communication depend on how business owners understand and manage the communication process (Ritz et al., 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Another important issue is the variation in communication capabilities among small business owners. Small businesses generally operate with more limited financial, human, and technological resources than larger enterprises. Consequently, business owners may have to develop communication strategies based largely on their personal knowledge and experiences rather than on formal training or specialized communication personnel. Some owners may have developed strong interpersonal communication skills through years of interacting with customers, whereas others may still experience difficulties in organizing business information, responding to customer complaints, negotiating, or creating appropriate digital content. Differences in education, experience, technological familiarity, and access to resources can therefore shape the ways in which business communication is practiced. This makes the experiences and perspectives of individual business owners important for understanding the diversity of communication practices within the small business sector (OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

In addition, communication practices are influenced by the social and cultural context in which small businesses operate. In local business environments, relationships between owners and customers may extend beyond formal commercial transactions and involve familiarity, community connections, recommendations, and social interaction. Word-of-mouth communication can become particularly important because customers may rely on recommendations from family members, friends, colleagues, or members of their communities when deciding whether to purchase from a particular small business. Such communication can contribute to reputation building and customer acquisition without requiring substantial promotional expenditure. Therefore, understanding small business communication requires consideration of both formal business communication and informal relational communication that develops through social networks and everyday interactions (Granovetter, 1985; Berger, 2014).

Previous studies have provided substantial evidence regarding the relationship between digital technology, social media, customer engagement, and business performance among small and medium-sized enterprises. Research has demonstrated that social media can provide SMEs with opportunities to communicate with customers, develop relationships, and strengthen their market presence. Other studies have focused on digital transformation and the organizational factors that influence technology adoption among SMEs. While this body of literature has contributed significantly to understanding the strategic importance of digital technologies, much of the discussion remains focused on technology adoption, usage intensity, marketing outcomes, customer engagement, or business performance. Consequently, there remains an opportunity to examine business communication from the perspective of the actual practices and experiences of small business owners themselves (Ainin et al., 2015; Tajvidi & Karami, 2021; Verhoef et al., 2021).

The existing literature also indicates a methodological gap that warrants further investigation. Quantitative studies are valuable for identifying relationships between communication activities, technology adoption, customer engagement, and business outcomes; however, they may provide limited insight into the meanings and experiences underlying those relationships. For example, quantitative measurements may indicate that social media use is associated with improved business performance, but they may not fully explain how owners communicate with customers through these platforms, why particular communication styles are selected, how owners respond to communication problems, or how trust is constructed through repeated interactions. Qualitative research provides an opportunity to address these questions by allowing researchers to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, interpretations, and strategies within their natural business contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

A qualitative exploration is therefore particularly relevant for examining business communication among small business owners because communication is a socially embedded and context-dependent practice. Rather than treating communication as a predetermined set of variables, a qualitative approach allows researchers to investigate how owners themselves define effective communication, how they adjust their communication according to different stakeholders, and how they manage the challenges associated with both traditional and digital communication. Such an approach can reveal patterns that may not be immediately visible through standardized questionnaires, including the role of personal experience, trust, emotional interaction, negotiation, responsiveness, and informal communication networks in shaping business relationships (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Based on this context, there is a need for further empirical investigation into how small business owners actually practice business communication in their everyday activities. Particular attention should be given to the ways owners communicate with customers, suppliers, employees, and business partners; how they combine interpersonal and digital communication; how they build and maintain trust; and what challenges they encounter when managing different communication channels. Examining these aspects can provide a more nuanced understanding of communication as an everyday business practice rather than merely as a marketing instrument. It can also contribute to the broader literature on small business management by demonstrating how communication practices are connected to relationship building, customer engagement, and the continuity of business activities (Palmatier et al., 2006; Tajvidi & Karami, 2021).

Accordingly, this study aims to explore business communication practices among small business owners using a qualitative approach. The study specifically seeks to understand how small business owners communicate with customers and other stakeholders, what communication strategies they employ in face-to-face and digital environments, how they build trust and maintain business relationships through communication, and what challenges they experience in implementing these practices. By focusing on the lived experiences and perspectives of small business owners, this study is expected to provide a contextual understanding of business communication practices and contribute to the development of knowledge concerning communication, relationship management, and small business sustainability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach with an exploratory design to gain an in-depth understanding of business communication practices among small business owners. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focused on exploring the experiences, perceptions, strategies, and meanings constructed by business owners in their everyday communication activities. Rather than measuring communication practices through predetermined variables, this study sought to understand how business owners communicate with customers, suppliers, employees, and business partners within their natural business contexts. Qualitative research enables researchers to examine social phenomena from the perspectives of participants and to capture contextual meanings that may not be adequately represented through quantitative measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The research was conducted among small business owners who were actively involved in managing their businesses and communicating directly with customers and other business stakeholders. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, whereby participants were intentionally chosen based on predetermined criteria relevant to the research objectives. The criteria included: (1) being the owner or primary manager of a small business; (2) actively participating in daily business operations; (3) having direct communication with customers, suppliers, or business partners; and (4) having experience using at least one communication channel, either face-to-face or digital. Purposive sampling was used because the study required participants who could provide rich and relevant information concerning the phenomenon being investigated (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This technique allowed the researcher to prepare a set of guiding questions while maintaining sufficient flexibility to explore issues that emerged during the interviews. The interview questions focused on several areas, including the participants' understanding of business communication, communication practices with customers, communication with suppliers and business partners, the use of digital communication platforms, strategies for building customer trust, responses to complaints and misunderstandings, negotiation practices, and challenges encountered in business communication. The semi-structured format enabled participants to describe their experiences in their own words while allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions when particular responses required further clarification or elaboration (Kallio et al., 2016; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

Each interview was conducted in a setting that was considered comfortable and appropriate for the participants. With participants' consent, interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. The researcher also maintained field notes to document relevant observations, contextual information, and reflections that emerged during the data collection process. The combination of interview transcripts and field notes was intended to provide a comprehensive representation of participants' communication experiences. Data collection continued until the researcher obtained sufficient information to identify recurring patterns and themes relevant to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed a systematic process involving familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for potential themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Initially, the researcher repeatedly read the interview transcripts to develop a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. Meaningful statements related to business communication were then identified and assigned initial codes. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories and examined to identify recurring patterns across participants. The resulting themes were interpreted in relation to the research objectives and the existing literature on business communication and small business management (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The analysis was directed toward identifying several key dimensions of business communication practices, including interpersonal communication, customer relationship communication, negotiation and persuasion, digital communication, communication responsiveness, trust building, and communication challenges. These dimensions were not treated as rigid categories from the beginning but were used as analytical directions that could be refined according to the empirical data. This approach allowed themes to emerge from participants' experiences while maintaining alignment with the research objectives. The researcher also compared responses across participants to identify similarities, differences, and contextual variations in communication practices (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied several qualitative validation strategies. First, the researcher conducted repeated examination of interview transcripts to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' statements. Second, comparison across participants was conducted to identify consistent and contrasting experiences. Third, member checking was used where appropriate by clarifying researchers' interpretations with selected participants. In addition, the researcher maintained an audit trail documenting the data collection, coding, categorization, and interpretation processes. These procedures were employed to strengthen the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical considerations were also addressed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Informed consent was obtained before conducting the interviews. Participants' identities and sensitive business information were protected by using pseudonyms or general descriptions rather than real names and identifiable business information in the research report. The collected data were used solely for research purposes and were stored securely to protect participant confidentiality (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interpersonal Communication and Trust Building

The first major theme identified in the analysis is interpersonal communication and trust building. The findings indicate that direct and personal communication remains an important practice among small business owners, particularly in establishing and maintaining relationships with customers. Although digital communication has become increasingly common, participants described personal interaction as an important mechanism for understanding customer needs, responding to individual preferences, explaining products, and maintaining long-term relationships. For small business owners, communication is not merely understood as the delivery of information but as an ongoing relational process through which customers become familiar with the business owner and gradually develop confidence in the business.

One participant explained that maintaining a personal relationship with customers was considered more important than simply completing a transaction:

“When customers come frequently, we usually get to know them. So, it is not only about selling products, but we also have conversations, ask about their needs, and sometimes we already know what kind of products they are usually looking for.”
(Informant 1, Small Business Owner)

This statement illustrates that communication in small businesses can extend beyond the immediate economic transaction. The interaction becomes more personal as owners develop familiarity with customers. Through repeated communication, owners acquire knowledge about customer preferences, while customers become familiar with the personality and communication style of the business owner. This relational familiarity can create a sense of comfort that encourages customers to continue interacting with the business.

Another participant emphasized the importance of honesty and consistency when communicating with customers:

“I always try to explain the condition of the product honestly. If there is a deficiency, I tell the customer from the beginning so that they do not feel deceived. In my opinion, trust is more important than making a profit from a single transaction.”
(Informant 2, Small Business Owner)

The statement demonstrates that trust is constructed through communication practices that emphasize transparency and consistency. Customers do not only evaluate the product being offered but may also evaluate how the owner communicates information about the product. When information is delivered honestly, communication can reduce uncertainty and create a perception of reliability. This finding is consistent with the relationship marketing perspective, which places trust and commitment at the center of long-term relationships between businesses and customers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Previous research also indicates that relationship quality can generate value for both customers and businesses by strengthening relational bonds and encouraging continued interaction (Palmatier et al., 2006).

The findings further suggest that trust is not established through a single communication event but through repeated interactions. Small business owners often interact with the same customers over relatively long periods, allowing communication to accumulate into a relational history. A customer who repeatedly receives accurate information, receives appropriate responses to complaints, and experiences consistent service may develop stronger confidence in the business. In this sense, communication becomes a form of relational investment. Every interaction contributes to the customer's perception of whether the business owner can be trusted.

This finding is particularly relevant to small businesses because the owner frequently becomes the primary representation of the business. In larger organizations, communication with customers may be handled by different employees or specialized departments. In small businesses, however, customers may communicate directly with the owner, making the owner's communication style closely associated with the identity and reputation of the business. Therefore, interpersonal competence—including listening, empathy, politeness, honesty, and responsiveness—becomes an important business resource.

The findings therefore indicate that interpersonal communication remains central even in an increasingly digital business environment. Digitalization may increase the speed and reach of communication, but it does not eliminate the relational dimension of business interactions. Instead, interpersonal communication provides the foundation upon which customer trust and long-term relationships can be developed.

Digital Communication and Customer Engagement

The second major theme concerns the increasing role of digital communication in customer engagement. The findings indicate that small business owners increasingly utilize digital platforms, particularly instant messaging applications and social media, to communicate with customers. Digital communication is used for various purposes, including promoting products, providing product information, responding to inquiries, receiving orders, confirming transactions, and maintaining communication after purchases.

One participant described how digital communication had become part of the daily operation of the business:

“Nowadays, most customers ask questions through WhatsApp. They usually ask about prices, product availability, sizes, or request photos of the products. WhatsApp is very helpful because customers do not have to come directly to the store.”
(Informant 3, Small Business Owner)

This experience demonstrates how digital communication can reduce geographical and temporal limitations in customer interaction. Customers can obtain information without physically visiting the business location, while owners can communicate with several customers through a relatively accessible platform. This flexibility is particularly relevant to small businesses that may have limited resources for establishing formal customer service systems.

Social media also provides opportunities for businesses to communicate proactively rather than waiting for customers to initiate contact. One participant explained:

“Instagram is mainly used to introduce our products. We upload photos or videos, and when someone is interested, they usually continue the conversation through WhatsApp. So, Instagram is used to attract attention, while WhatsApp is used for more detailed communication.”
(Informant 4, Small Business Owner)

The statement reveals that different digital channels can perform different communication functions. Social media may serve as an initial point of customer engagement, while instant messaging can facilitate more personalized communication and transaction completion. This suggests that small business owners do not necessarily perceive digital platforms as interchangeable. Instead, they develop an informal communication strategy in which each platform is used according to its perceived function.

This finding is consistent with previous research showing that social media can provide SMEs with opportunities to interact with customers, strengthen relationships, and support marketing activities (Ainin et al., 2015). Social media can also facilitate customer engagement by enabling businesses and customers to interact through content, comments, responses, and other forms of participation (Felix et al., 2017). More recent research similarly emphasizes that digital communication and social media have become important elements of contemporary SME customer relationship practices.

However, the findings indicate that digital communication is not simply a technological issue. Its effectiveness depends on the way business owners manage communication through these platforms. Posting promotional content, for example, does not automatically result in customer engagement. Business owners must also respond to questions, provide relevant information, address complaints, and maintain consistency in their communication. Thus, the communication process becomes interactive rather than one-directional.

Another participant described the importance of responding to customers through digital platforms:

“Whenever there is a message from a customer, I try to respond as quickly as possible. If the response takes too long, the customer may move to another seller. However, we also have to be careful when responding. We should not respond quickly if the information we provide is inaccurate.”

(Informant 5, Small Business Owner)

This statement highlights an important dimension of digital customer communication: responsiveness and accuracy must operate simultaneously. Speed is valuable because customers may expect immediate responses, but inaccurate information can damage customer trust. Consequently, digital communication requires not only technological familiarity but also communication judgment.

The findings further suggest that digital communication has created a more continuous relationship between businesses and customers. In traditional business settings, communication may occur primarily during the purchasing process. Through social media and instant messaging, however, businesses can remain visible to customers before, during, and after a transaction. Customers can receive product updates, promotional information, and follow-up communication even when they are not physically present at the business location.

Therefore, digital communication should not be understood merely as a promotional instrument. It represents an additional relationship-building mechanism that allows small businesses to maintain contact with customers and create opportunities for repeated interaction. Nevertheless, the findings also demonstrate that digital communication is most effective when supported by relational and interpersonal communication capabilities.

Communication Adaptation and Challenges For Business Owner

The third theme identified in the study is communication adaptation and challenges. The findings indicate that small business owners do not employ a single communication style for all customers or situations. Instead, they adjust their communication according to the characteristics of the customer, the complexity of the issue, the communication channel, and the purpose of the interaction. This adaptive behavior was evident in the way participants differentiated between communication for promotion, routine customer inquiries, negotiation, complaints, and transaction-related discussions.

One participant explained:

“Not all customers communicate in the same way. Some prefer short and direct communication, while others ask many questions. So, we have to adapt. With new customers, I usually provide more detailed explanations, while communication with regular customers is usually easier because we already understand each other.”

(Informant 2, Small Business Owner)

This statement illustrates that communication effectiveness is context-dependent. The owner does not simply deliver the same message repeatedly but modifies the communication according to the customer's level of familiarity and information needs. This adaptive approach reflects the importance of customer orientation in small business communication.

Adaptation becomes particularly important when business owners encounter complaints or misunderstandings. Digital communication may create additional challenges because written messages do not always communicate tone, emotion, or intention as clearly as face-to-face interaction. One participant stated:

“When customers complain through chat, sometimes we have to read their messages carefully to understand what they really mean. Sometimes a customer's message may appear angry, even though they may simply want an explanation. So, I usually try not to respond emotionally.”

(Informant 1, Small Business Owner)

This experience indicates that communication challenges are not limited to the technical ability to use digital platforms. They also involve emotional awareness and interpretation. Business owners must interpret the meaning behind customer messages and determine an appropriate response. Misinterpretation can escalate relatively simple issues into larger conflicts.

The findings also reveal that small business owners face challenges in managing communication volume. As businesses increasingly use digital platforms, owners may receive

messages through several channels simultaneously. Managing these interactions while also performing other business activities can become demanding, particularly because small businesses often have limited employees.

“Sometimes I receive WhatsApp messages, Instagram comments, and customers who come directly to the store at the same time. Since I still manage the communication myself, I have to be able to decide which messages need to be answered first.” (Informant 4, Small Business Owner)

This statement demonstrates the tension between increased communication opportunities and limited organizational capacity. Digitalization provides greater access to customers but can simultaneously increase the communication workload of the owner. Thus, digital communication should not be interpreted as an uncomplicated solution to small business communication problems.

The adaptive nature of communication found in this study is consistent with research emphasizing that SMEs use digital technologies according to their organizational circumstances, available resources, and business needs (Ritz et al., 2019). The findings also reinforce the argument that digital transformation involves organizational and behavioral changes rather than simply adopting new technological tools (Verhoef et al., 2021).

From a qualitative perspective, these findings demonstrate that small business communication is a situated practice. Owners continuously interpret situations and make communication decisions based on their experiences. They determine when to use informal language, when to provide detailed explanations, when to move a conversation from social media to instant messaging, and when a digital interaction should be followed by direct communication. These decisions are rarely based on formal communication manuals; rather, they are developed through experience and repeated interaction with customers.

The three themes demonstrate that business communication among small business owners is simultaneously relational, digital, and adaptive. Interpersonal communication provides the foundation for trust, digital communication expands customer engagement and accessibility, while adaptive communication enables owners to respond to diverse customer characteristics and communication challenges. This integrated pattern suggests that effective communication in small businesses depends not on choosing between traditional and digital communication, but on the ability to combine different communication practices according to the needs of particular business situations. Thematic analysis is particularly appropriate for identifying these recurring patterns because it allows researchers to systematically develop themes from participants' narratives and interpret their meaning within the research context (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study explored business communication practices among small business owners, focusing on interpersonal communication, digital communication, and communication adaptation in everyday business activities. The findings demonstrate that communication is not merely a mechanism for delivering business information but an essential relational practice that supports customer engagement, trust building, and the continuity of business relationships. Despite the growing use of digital platforms, direct interpersonal communication remains important because it enables business owners to understand customer needs, establish familiarity, demonstrate honesty, and develop trust through repeated interactions. The study also found that digital communication has become an increasingly important component of small business activities. Social media and instant messaging applications provide business owners with opportunities to promote products, respond to customer inquiries, receive orders, provide information, and maintain relationships beyond physical business locations. However, the findings indicate that digital communication does not replace interpersonal communication. Instead, small business owners tend to integrate digital and face-to-face communication according to the purpose of interaction and the characteristics of their customers. This demonstrates that effective business communication in small businesses is increasingly characterized by a combination of interpersonal and digital practices.

The findings reveal that communication among small business owners is highly adaptive. Business owners adjust their communication styles, channels, and responses according to different customers and situations. This adaptability is particularly important when managing customer complaints, misunderstandings, negotiations, and multiple communication channels. At the same

time, business owners face challenges related to communication workload, response expectations, potential misunderstandings in digital interactions, and the need to maintain professionalism while communicating through informal digital platforms.

This study contributes to the understanding of small business communication by demonstrating that effective communication is simultaneously relational, digital, and adaptive. The findings suggest that the effectiveness of communication does not depend solely on the adoption of digital technologies but also on the interpersonal capabilities of business owners, particularly their ability to listen, respond, communicate transparently, adapt to customers, and build trust. Therefore, developing both digital communication competence and interpersonal communication skills is important for small business owners seeking to maintain meaningful customer relationships and support the sustainability of their businesses. Future research could expand this study by involving a larger and more diverse group of small business owners across different industries and geographical contexts. Comparative studies could also examine differences in communication practices between businesses that rely primarily on traditional communication and those that have adopted more extensive digital communication strategies. Such research could provide further insight into how changing communication environments influence customer relationships, business development, and the long-term sustainability of small businesses.

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