Value Crisis in SMEs Branding Communication: A Systematic and Bibliometric Study of Business Ethics Transformation

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Informasi artikel	:	ABSTRACT
		In today's complex digital and ethical business environment, SMEs face increasing tension between market-driven branding strategies and the integration of authentic ethical values. This study identifies a core problem in the literature: a persistent fragmentation between performance-oriented branding and ethics-oriented communication within SME practices . Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by PRISMA 2020 and supported by bibliometric tools (Bibliometrix and VOSviewer), we analyzed 79 Scopus-indexed articles published between 2015 and 2025. The analysis reveals three dominant conceptual clusters: (1) digital branding and social media, (2) sustainability and CSR integration, and (3) ethical legitimacy and stakeholder value. Despite increasing attention to sustainability, ethical dimensions often remain symbolic or fragmented. As a response, this study proposes a novel framework integrating digital strategy, value-based sustainability, and ethical stakeholder legitimacy. The study contributes a conceptual foundation for future research and offers practical guidance for branding strategies that are not only performative but also ethically grounded and socially legitimate.
		ABSTRAK
		Krisis Nilai dalam Komunikasi Branding UMKM: Kajian Sistematis dan Bibliometrik atas Transformasi Etika Bisnis. *Dalam lingkungan bisnis digital dan etika yang kompleks saat ini, UMKM menghadapi ketegangan yang meningkat antara strategi pencitraan merek yang digerakkan pasar dan integrasi nilai-nilai etika yang autentik. Studi ini mengidentifikasi masalah inti dalam literatur: fragmentasi yang terus-menerus antara pencitraan merek yang berorientasi pada kinerja dan komunikasi yang berorientasi pada etika dalam praktik UMKM. Menggunakan Tinjauan Literatur Sistematis (SLR) yang dipandu oleh PRISMA 2020 dan didukung oleh alat bibliometrik (Bibliometrix dan VOSviewer), kami menganalisis 79 artikel terindeks Scopus yang diterbitkan antara tahun 2015 dan 2025. Analisis tersebut mengungkapkan tiga kelompok konseptual yang dominan: (1) pencitraan merek digital dan media sosial, (2) keberlanjutan dan integrasi CSR, dan (3) legitimasi etika dan nilai pemangku kepentingan. Meskipun perhatian terhadap keberlanjutan semakin meningkat, dimensi etika sering kali tetap simbolis atau terfragmentasi. Sebagai tanggapan, studi ini mengusulkan kerangka kerja baru yang mengintegrasikan strategi digital, keberlanjutan berbasis nilai, dan legitimasi pemangku kepentingan yang etis. Studi ini memberikan landasan konseptual untuk penelitian masa depan dan menawarkan panduan praktis untuk strategi merek yang tidak hanya performatif tetapi juga berlandaskan etika dan sah secara sosial.*

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Introduction

In today's global business environment shaped by rapid digitalization and heightened social awareness, branding has evolved from a tool of product differentiation into a reflection of a firm's ethical values and social legitimacy (Wijaya et al., 2024). Across industries, enterprises are increasingly held accountable not only for their offerings but also for the integrity of their communication strategies. Ethical lapses such as greenwashing and greenhushing have highlighted how manipulative branding can damage consumer trust (Santos et al., 2024). These risks become more pronounced when branding narratives are developed without meaningful stakeholder engagement, both internally and externally (de Chernatony et al., 2000; Gregory et al., 2007). While much of the attention has focused on large corporations, such ethical considerations are equally critical for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), which often rely heavily on community trust and brand authenticity for survival and growth. This tension is further exacerbated when there is a misalignment between internalized organizational values and externally communicated brand narratives (Balmer & Balmer, 2013).

Recent literature highlights the strategic role of branding in enhancing SMEs competitiveness, particularly through innovation and identity building (Quaye & Mensah, 2019; Resnick et al., 2016). Studies have also examined how corporate communication can create business value through message integrity (Jacobson et al., 2020; Lim & Greenwood, 2017). Beyond internal strategies, some scholars emphasize the importance of co-creating brand narratives with consumers to reinforce ethical authenticity (Ind et al., 2017). In the digital era, inconsistency between brand narratives and real practices on social media can undermine consumer trust (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). However, a clear gap remains in the integration of ethical values such as transparency, honesty, and social responsibility into SMEs brand narratives. Much of the existing research is fragmented, either focusing on performance-based branding or normative ethics, with few studies offering a comprehensive framework that bridges both dimensions (Odoom et al., 2017; Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017).

This research gap becomes more urgent in the digital age, where consumer engagement through social media amplifies demands for authenticity and value congruence. The tension between managing brand image and maintaining ethical transparency, especially in post pandemic recovery, calls for a deeper investigation into the "value crisis" in SME branding. Moreover, the success of ethical brand communication is often contingent upon how well consumers perceive and engage with CSR efforts (Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009) and whether the communication strategies are participatory and stakeholder-responsive (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Despite the growing scholarly interest, integrative studies combining branding, communication, and business ethics remain scarce and under-theorized (Hajli et al., 2017; Tsai & Wang, 2017).

To address this gap, this study conducts a systematic and bibliometric review of the international literature that intersects SME branding, ethical communication, and value transformation. Applying the PRISMA protocol for Systematic Literature Review (SLR) (Liu et al., 2020) and using bibliometric tools such as Bibliometrix (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017) and VOSviewer, the study aims to map conceptual developments, scientific contributions, and emerging research clusters within this domain.

Although the literature shows that branding plays a strategic role in building the competitiveness and identity of SMEs, the integration of ethical values such as transparency, honesty, and social responsibility is still very limited. Various studies have focused on improving

brand performance and strategic innovation (Muhonen et al., 2017; Odoom et al., 2017; Quaye & Mensah, 2019), but has not touched in depth on the issues of values and ethical dilemmas that arise in brand communication practices (Macini et al., 2023). This condition creates a value crisis, namely the tension between the strategically constructed brand image and the reality of the values implemented in the field. This crisis is not only conceptual in dimension, because it shows the fragmentation in academic discourse between performative and ethical approaches, but also has practical impacts, namely the weakening of consumer trust and the decline in social legitimacy of SME brands in the post-pandemic era. Thus, a study is needed that not only maps existing scientific contributions but also formulates a conceptual framework that bridges business ethics, communication strategies, and SME sustainability in an integrative manner.

Based on the formulation of the problem, this study aims to conduct a systematic and bibliometric review of international literature that discusses SME branding communication, communication ethics, and value transformation in the context of small businesses. This approach uses the PRISMA protocol within the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) framework and bibliometric tools such as Bibliometrix and VOSviewer. To ensure objectivity and mitigate potential endogeneity bias, strict inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied during the article selection process. This study specifically answers two research questions: (1) How are ethical values integrated into SME branding communication practices? and (2) What are the conceptual and methodological trends emerging in the literature related to value-based branding?

Method

The selection of keywords and Boolean configurations in the search were carried out systematically by considering a combination of terms that represent the main domains of the study, namely SME branding, communication ethics/values, and business value transformation. Keyword combinations such as "branding," "ethics," "business communication," and "Small and Medium Enterprises" were selected based on the frequency and relevance of the terms in previous articles and were reviewed through a pilot search in Scopus to ensure the scope and accuracy of the search syntax. Boolean configurations such as AND, OR, and nested search were used to avoid duplication and filter out literature that was too general or too specific. Initial validation of the screening process was conducted by two researchers independently on a number of articles from the initial search. The selection results were compared to measure consistency of understanding of the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Discrepancies were consolidated through open discussion until consensus was reached, before the full screening process was continued on the entire corpus of literature. This approach was applied to ensure objectivity and transparency in the SLR process. The time span of 2015–2025 was chosen to capture the dynamics of literature in the last decade, including the post-pandemic literature response (2021–2023) which is highly relevant to the topic of business ethics transformation in branding communication. The year 2025 was included because Scopus had released several in-press and early access articles that were officially recorded as publications in 2025 at the time of the search (April 2025). Therefore, this scope remains valid in the context of a bibliographic-based systematic review. This study adopted a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology following the PRISMA 2020 protocol to examine the value crisis in SME branding communication (Liu et al., 2020). This approach ensures methodological transparency, reproducibility, and rigor in synthesizing academic literature. The use of PRISMA 2020

enhances the clarity of the identification, screening, and inclusion processes. The systematic protocol helps avoid selection bias and improves the quality of evidence synthesized across studies involving branding, ethics, and communication in SMEs. The identification phase involved retrieving 30,194 records from the Scopus database using three carefully constructed Boolean search queries: (1) Branding AND SMEs (n = 166), (2) Ethics/Values AND Business Communication (n = 24,558), and (3) Branding AND Ethics/Values (n = 5,470). These search strings were selected based on their conceptual alignment with the research focus and refined iteratively to balance specificity and comprehensiveness. After refining keywords and applying Boolean logic, the total records were narrowed down to 3,066 documents: 79 results for Query 1, 808 for Query 2, and 2,179 for Query 3. These documents were screened by examining titles, abstracts, and keywords for relevance. From this screening, 1,266 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility based on inclusion and exclusion criteria that emphasized relevance to SME branding, integration of ethical or value-based themes, and publication in peer-reviewed, Scopus-indexed journals. Ultimately, 79 final articles were selected for in-depth analysis through both thematic synthesis and bibliometric tools such as Bibliometrix and VOSviewer (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017), enabling a robust mapping of the intellectual and conceptual landscape within the field. The final selection of 79 articles was the result of a rigorous screening process with strict inclusion criteria: articles had to explicitly address SME branding, integrate ethical or value-based communication themes, and be published in peer-reviewed, Scopus-indexed journals. Studies lacking contextual depth, focusing only on large companies, or being methodologically weak were excluded. The selected articles were analyzed using Bibliometrix and VOSviewer to map thematic trends, conceptual clusters, and intellectual structures, ensuring an objective and evidence-based synthesis of the research landscape.

Result and Discussion

The findings on the fragmentation between performative and ethical approaches in SMEs brand communication can be further analyzed through the lens of Stakeholder Theory and Ethical Communication Theory. In this context, the performative approach leads to strategic imaging that focuses on market expectations and short-term performance, while the ethical approach is rooted in social legitimacy, public trust, and commitment to long-term value (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). Phenomena such as greenhushing, the practice of hiding sustainability claims for fear of being criticized for value inconsistencies, reflect the tension between a brand's external narrative and a company's internal values. This signals a crisis in communication accountability, where SMEs experience a dilemma between meeting stakeholder expectations and maintaining authentic values (Santos et al., 2024). Therefore, the integration of ethics into brand communication strategy cannot be merely symbolic, but must be rooted in real and consistent organizational values.

To deepen the synthesis of findings, content analysis of the most cited articles revealed a significant polarization of approaches. (Quaye & Mensah, 2019) emphasizes marketing innovation as a means of competitive advantage for SMEs, but ignores the value or ethical dimensions in the brand narrative. On the contrary, Ferreira & Coelho, (2020) highlighting the importance of value alignment between organizations and the public through transparent and trust-based communication. Articles like Davcik & Sharma, (2015) and Sheehan et al., (2018) also show similar tendencies: one emphasizes brand structure and market differentiation, the other highlights the role of reputation and social value in the service industry. The disconnect

between the "branding innovation" and "ethical legitimacy" clusters reinforces the conclusion that the literature is still fragmented. Therefore, a theoretical framework is needed that integrates brand performance and value dimensions as two mutually reinforcing elements in sustainable SME branding strategies.

Descriptive analysis of 79 selected documents during the period 2015–2025 shows the increasing scientific attention to the issue of branding communication and ethical values in the context of SMEs. The documents were published in 60 scientific sources involving 218 authors, with an average of 17.34 citations per document reflecting the relevance and influence of this study in the global literature. A total of 313 keywords were used to represent the diversity of themes, while 5,240 cited references show the theoretical depth underlying this academic discourse. These findings provide a strong basis for further analysis of the structure and dynamics of research on the topic of value-based branding communication.

Table 1. Descriptive Analysis: Key Information Regarding the Collection

Description	Value
Period	2015–2025
Documents	79
Sources (journals and conference papers)	60
Authors	218
Average citations per document	17.34
Author's keywords (DE)	313
References	5240

Annual scientific production on the topic of branding and value communication in SMEs shows interesting fluctuations throughout the period from 2015 to 2025. The number of publications tends to increase gradually from 2016 to reach a stable peak of 10 articles per year in 2019 and 2020. However, in 2021 there was a drastic decrease to only 1 publication, which is likely due to the impact of global disruption after the pandemic. Post-2021, there was a significant spike, with scientific production reaching its highest point in 2023 with more than 12 articles. This trend shows that academic attention to the issue of branding value and communication in SMEs is getting stronger, especially in the post-crisis context that drives shifts in business communication ethics and strategies.
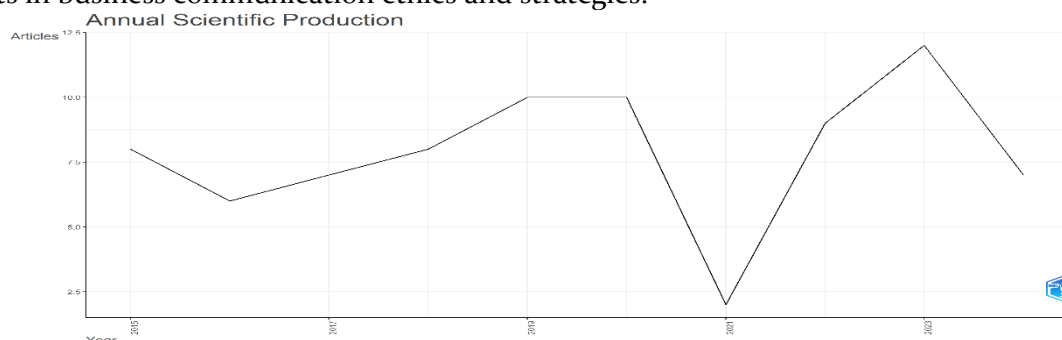
Figure 1. Annual Scientific Production

Analysis of publication sources reveals that the topic of value crisis in SME branding communication has been addressed across a diverse range of reputable journals, reflecting its growing academic significance. The Journal of Product & Brand Management and the Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship emerged as the most prominent outlets, each contributing four articles and holding an h-index of 4. Although journals such as Industrial Marketing Management and Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes published only two articles each, their high citation counts (85 and 61, respectively) underscore their substantial

influence in the field. The publication pattern confirms that value-based branding in SMEs is a multidisciplinary issue, gaining traction not only in marketing and entrepreneurship but also in hospitality, tourism, and industrial management. The relatively consistent m-index values across sources (0.111 to 0.444) suggest even scholarly development between 2015 and 2025. This diversity highlights the importance of examining SME branding ethics through various disciplinary perspectives to strengthen both theoretical frameworks and practical applications.

Table 2. Sources' Local Impact

Source	h_index	g_index	m_index	TC	NP	PY_start
Journal of Product & Brand Management	4	4	0.444	118	4	2017
Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship	4	4	0.364	63	4	2015
Journal of Brand Management	3	3	0.273	44	3	2015
Abac Journal	2	3	0.333	9	3	2020
Industrial Marketing Management	2	2	0.25	85	2	2018
Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing	2	2	0.333	26	2	2020
Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development	2	2	0.222	28	2	2017
Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes	2	2	0.25	61	2	2018
African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure	1	1	0.143	2	1	2019
Business and Economic Horizons	1	1	0.111	2	1	2017

Analysis of the most globally cited documents highlights the significant theoretical and empirical contributions shaping the discourse on value-based branding in SMEs. The most influential work is Quaye's (2019) article in Management Decision, which garnered 137 citations, averaging 19.57 citations per year, and achieved the highest normalized citation score (7.49). This is followed by Ferreira & Coelho, (2020) and Davcik & Sharma, (2015), with 88 and 79 citations respectively, whose research provides foundational insights into brand innovation and strategic value creation in small business contexts. The high citation counts and normalized TC values underscore the central role of these studies in framing ethical branding as a strategic imperative for SMEs navigating competitive and volatile environments.

Notably, the majority of top cited articles are published in high-impact journals such as the European Journal of Marketing, Journal of Product & Brand Management, and Industrial Marketing Management, reflecting the broad academic interest and multidisciplinary relevance of the topic. These publications span diverse sectors including marketing strategy, innovation, hospitality, and entrepreneurship. While the normalized citation values vary indicating differing temporal influence the collective pattern reveals a sustained and growing scholarly focus on the intersection of branding, ethics, and performance in the SMEs sector. These key articles form the backbone of the evolving research landscape and provide a robust foundation for future conceptual and empirical inquiry.

Table 3. Most Global Cited Documents

Paper	DOI	Total Citations	TC per Year	Normalized TC
Quaye D, 2019, Management Decision	10.1108/MD-08-2017-0784	137	19.57	7.49
Ferreira J, 2020, International Journal of Innovation Science	10.1108/IJIS-10-2018-0108	88	14.67	4.49
Davcik NS, 2015, European Journal of Marketing	10.1108/EJM-03-2014-0150	79	7.18	2.95
Sheehan M, 2018, Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes	10.1108/WHATT-10-2017-0062	58	7.25	2.12

Resnick SM, 2016, International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research	10.1108/IJEBR-07-2014-0139	57	5.70	3.72
Muhonen T, 2017, Journal of Product & Brand Management	10.1108/JPBM-01-2016-1083	47	5.22	2.72
Törmälä M, 2018, Journal of Product & Brand Management	10.1108/JPBM-01-2016-1089	47	5.88	1.72
Hsiao SH, 2020, Industrial Marketing Management	10.1016/j.indmarman.2019.02.022	46	7.67	2.35
Agostini L, 2015, Journal of Small Business Management	10.1111/jsbm.12185	43	3.91	1.61
Ben Youssef K, 2018, Journal of Strategic Marketing	10.1080/0965254X.2017.1384038	41	5.13	1.50

The list of the most productive authors in the study of branding communication and ethical values in SMEs reveals a cohort of ten researchers who have each contributed two publications on this topic. Anantachart Saravudh and Chokpitakkul Nitcha lead with the highest fractionalized contribution scores (0.83), indicating a substantial role in co authored outputs and suggesting strong intellectual leadership in their respective collaborations. They are followed by Saraniemi Saila (0.75), along with Jake Ansell, Raphael Odoom, and Priscilla Mensah, each scoring 0.58 reflecting balanced involvement in multi-author research efforts. This pattern illustrates that while some authors emerge as core contributors, others play integrative roles within diverse research teams.

The diversity of author backgrounds and affiliations highlights a robust trend of cross-institutional and international collaboration in this research area. The presence of authors from Asia, Europe, and Africa underscores the global relevance of value-based branding in SMEs and the shared concern over ethical communication practices in small business ecosystems. These contributions not only enrich the theoretical development of ethical branding but also reflect growing interdisciplinary engagement across marketing, entrepreneurship, communication studies, and business ethics. The expanding author network signifies a vibrant and evolving research community committed to advancing sustainable and socially responsible branding practices for SMEs worldwide. This trend also opens opportunities for future cross-country comparative studies and deeper integration of local cultural values into global branding frameworks.

Table 4. Most Relevant Authors

| Authors	Articles	Articles Fractionalized
Saravudh Anantachart	2	0.83
Jake Ansell	2	0.58
Nitcha Chokpitakku	2	0.83
Urs Daellenbach	2	0.50
Sally Davenport	2	0.50
Fenfang Lin	2	0.58
Priscilla Mensah	2	0.58
Raphael Odoom	2	0.58
Michelle Renton	2	0.50
Saila Saraniemi	2	0.75

Institutional affiliation analysis shows that Victoria University of Wellington is the highest institutional contributor to the study of branding and value communication in SMEs, with a total of four articles published. Followed by six other institutions that each contributed three articles, namely Chulalongkorn University (Thailand), Universitas Negeri Padang

(Indonesia), Universiti Putra Malaysia, University of Ghana Business School, and University of Oulu (Finland), indicating geographical diversity in the development of this study. Meanwhile, several other universities, such as Curtin University and Central Queensland University (Australia) and the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (Italy) also showed active contributions. This finding reflects that the issue of value-based branding in SMEs has received cross-country attention, especially from institutions in Asia, Oceania, and Europe that focus on entrepreneurship, business communication, and local economic development.

Table 5. Most Relevant Affiliations

Affiliation	Articles
Victoria University of Wellington	4
Chulalongkorn University	3
Universitas Negeri Padang	3
Universiti Putra Malaysia	3
University of Ghana Business School	3
University of Oulu	3
Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan	2
Central Queensland University	2
Curtin University	2
Free University of Bozen-Bolzano	2

The keyword co-occurrence map generated through VOSviewer shows that the term "branding" occupies a central position and is strongly connected to various other themes in different clusters, such as "smes", "sme", "social media", and "small and medium enterprises". The green cluster emphasizes the relationship between branding and brand orientation, digital marketing, and entrepreneurship; while the purple cluster shows the relationship between "sme", "corporate branding", and "branding strategy". Meanwhile, the red cluster illustrates the influence of social media, employer branding, and digitalization signifying the contemporary dimension and digital communication in strengthening the brand value of SMEs. This finding reflects that the literature constructs SME branding as a multidimensional topic that is closely related to communication strategy, digital transformation, and value practices in small businesses.
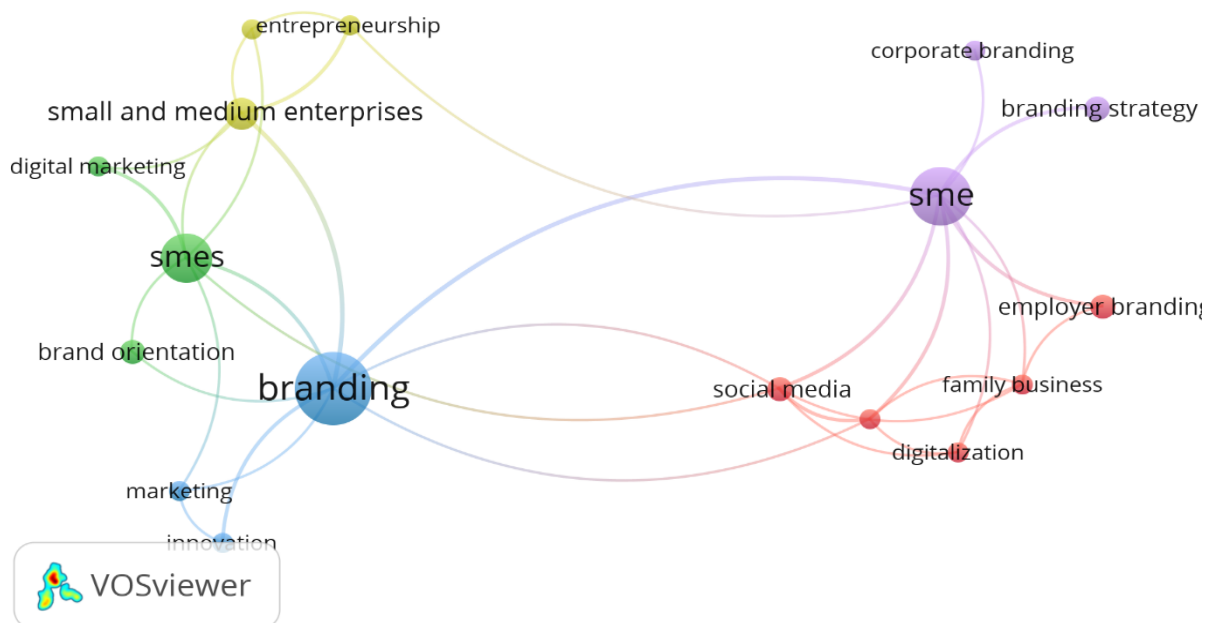
Figure 2. Co-occurrence map

Bibliometric findings show that the topic of value crisis in SME branding communication has experienced increased academic attention post-pandemic, especially in the 2022–2023 period. This indicates a shift in focus from conventional branding to a more reflective approach to business values and ethics. The number of publications has increased significantly, with an average citation per document reaching 17.34, reflecting the relevance of this topic in the global realm. In addition, the involvement of 218 authors from various institutions shows that this issue is multidisciplinary and has become a concern across sectors, ranging from entrepreneurship, communication, to tourism. With a wide distribution of journals and an even m index, this topic not only receives quantitative attention but also has a meaningful influence on the construction of academic knowledge.

The keyword co-occurrence map shows that SME branding has a strong relationship with terms such as "social media", "digital marketing", and "corporate branding", but its relationship with value keywords such as "ethics" and "moral value" is still less dominant. This indicates the dominance of a performative approach in SME branding practices, compared to a more substantial ethical approach. Several highly cited articles such as (Macini et al., 2023) emphasize innovation and branding capabilities without discussing the dimensions of value and moral communication in depth. Thus, this study identifies a fragmentation in the literature, namely the separation between performance-based and value-based approaches, which is an important conceptual gap to be filled by further research.

Affiliation analysis shows that this topic has received special attention from institutions in Southeast Asia, Europe, and Oceania, reflecting the global context of the issue of value-based branding communication. However, the dominance of performance-based branding approaches without value integration indicates that SMEs have not fully internalized the importance of moral communication in building sustainable brands. Practices such as greenhushing found in the literature confirm that ethical challenges are still latent issues. Therefore, a new conceptual model is needed that can bridge branding strategies and value transformation, especially in the digital and post-crisis context. Further research can develop a framework for ethical communication based on local values, and test its effectiveness in strengthening consumer trust and social legitimacy of SMEs.

The results of bibliometric mapping show that the literature on SME branding communication forms three main thematic clusters that reflect the tension between performative and ethical approaches. The first cluster focuses on "Digital Branding & Social Media", which emphasizes the importance of digital channels, audience engagement, and brand visibility. However, this cluster tends to ignore the alignment of narratives with the organization's internal values. The second cluster, "Sustainability & CSR Integration", displays SMEs' symbolic efforts in adopting sustainability values, but has not systematically resolved communication dilemmas such as greenwashing or greenhushing. The third cluster, "Ethical Legitimacy & Stakeholder Value", contains the most substantive discourse related to ethics, trust, and communication accountability. These three clusters are interrelated in forming the conceptual landscape of the value crisis, and show that sustainability solutions lie not only in technological innovation, but in consistent alignment between strategy, narrative, and the organization's ethical values.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the value crisis in SME branding communication is a complex conceptual and practical issue, reflected in the fragmentation between performative and value-

based approaches in the current literature. Through a systematic review of 79 articles during 2015–2025, it was found that SME branding practices are still dominated by digital strategies that pursue market expectations, but lack deep integration of ethical and sustainability values. This study proposes an initial conceptual framework consisting of three main elements: digital communication strategy, sustainability value integration, and stakeholder-based ethical legitimacy. These three elements need to be synergized so that SME branding strategies are not only effective in reaching audiences, but also authentic and sustainable. For empirical validation, this framework can be tested through qualitative and quantitative approaches such as case studies, grounded theory, or structural modeling (SEM/PLS), while in practice, this framework can be used as a guide by SMEs actors in evaluating the consistency between external communication and organizational values. As a further research agenda, it is necessary to explore the long-term impact of the greenhushing phenomenon, ethical communication strategies based on social media, and cross-cultural studies related to values in SME branding, all of which are expected to strengthen the position of ethics as a strategic element in brand communication in the post-pandemic era.

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