



STRENGTHENING THE CROSS-BORDER COLLABORATION ECOSYSTEM: NETWORKING AND COMPETITIVENESS IN SMES

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ABSTRACT

The fashion Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) sector faces continuous challenges in expanding international networks, managing supply chains, and overcoming uneven digital adoption in the global market. This community service activity aimed to strengthen the cross-border collaboration ecosystem and enhance the competitiveness of the Muslim fashion SME "Dejubah" through an international empowerment framework. Conducted collaboratively by Universitas Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa and Mindanao State University, the program featured three international experts from the Philippines, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan. The methodology employed a three-phase systematic approach: preparation and needs assessment, implementation via interactive hybrid lectures and Focus Group Discussions (FGD), and final evaluation. The results demonstrated that direct on-site mentorship effectively validated the SME's operational readiness and fostered meaningful person-to-person (P2P) networking. Furthermore, the engagement crystallized a strategic collaborative blueprint focusing on upstream supply chain integration, cross-border P2P reseller programs, and expansion into institutional B2B/B2G markets. Ultimately, targeted international interventions significantly elevate the dynamic capabilities and global market readiness of local fashion MSMEs.

Keywords: *Cross-border collaboration, SME competitiveness, dynamic capabilities, international networking, digital empowerment*

INTRODUCTION

The Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) sector is the backbone of the national economy, contributing significantly to employment and gross domestic product growth. Within this MSME ecosystem, the fashion and apparel retail industry is one of the most dynamic and competitive subsectors, continuously requiring product diversification and the creation of added value, particularly within the convection industry (Hadi et al., 2025). Along with the shift in

consumer consumption patterns towards digitalization, business actors are required not only to be able to produce goods but also to be adaptive in managing digital progress and overcoming uneven SME digitalization challenges (Pinjaman et al., 2026). Although the utilization of digital technology has facilitated market access, the ability of MSMEs to survive, grow, and maintain their competitiveness depends heavily on how strong and extensive their business networks are. The fashion SME "Dejubah" is a business player in the textile and apparel sector that has actively penetrated the market through digital marketplaces such as Shopee. In its operations, Dejubah has demonstrated a commitment to managing retail metrics, formulating optimal product descriptions, and calibrating competitive pricing strategies. However, a situational analysis indicates that to achieve higher business escalation and strengthen the company's dynamic capabilities for better problem-solving creativity (Patmawati et al., 2024), Dejubah faces challenges in expanding its network, both in the textile material supply chain and in capturing cross-border market insights. The limitation of international relations often becomes an obstacle for local MSMEs in adopting agile and innovative global business practices.

Networking is not merely an activity of exchanging information; it is a strategic asset that facilitates knowledge sharing, minimizes knowledge hiding, and ultimately drives innovation capability within the resource-based view of the firm (Hadi, Setiawan, et al., 2026). For a fashion business entity like Dejubah, cross-border networking can open new perspectives on operational efficiency, cultural adaptation in products, and multinational negotiation strategies. Therefore, academic and practical intervention is needed to bridge this knowledge gap.

Based on the problems outlined, this community service activity was carried out with the aim of providing network strengthening and strategic insight transfer to the SME Dejubah. This activity was comprehensively designed by presenting four experts: Syamsul from Indonesia, Syahraman from the Philippines, Rima from Uzbekistan, and Salman from Pakistan. The presence of speakers with diverse geographical backgrounds and expertise is expected to stimulate Dejubah's management in building a cross-border collaboration ecosystem, designing partnership strategies, establishing cross-cultural business relations, and ultimately enhancing the SME's competitiveness amidst an increasingly globally integrated market.

IMPLEMENTATION METHOD

This community service activity was conducted using a participatory and interactive approach, designed specifically to address the networking limitations faced by the target partner, the "Dejubah" fashion SME. The implementation of this program was systematically divided into three main phases: Preparation, Core Implementation, and Evaluation.

Preparation and Needs Assessment

The preliminary phase involved an initial assessment of the Dejubah SME to identify specific gaps in their cross-border business networks. During this phase, the service team coordinated with the SME's management to align the activity's objectives with their business goals. Based on this assessment, the team formulated a customized mentorship module and invited four experts Syamsul (Indonesia), Syahraman (Philippines), Rima (Uzbekistan), Salman (Pakistan) to provide multidimensional perspectives on global networking.

Core Implementation

The main activity was executed through a hybrid of Interactive Lectures (Seminars) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD), ensuring a dynamic two-way communication process rather than a passive learning environment. This phase consisted of three systematic steps:

1. **Multi-Perspective Lectures.** The session commenced with comprehensive presentations from the three international speakers. Each expert delivered insights based on their respective geographical and professional backgrounds, covering fundamental strategies for entering multinational markets, cross-cultural communication, and the psychological readiness required for global networking.
2. **Interactive Q&A and Information Exchange.** Following the lectures, a structured Q&A session was held to foster active dialogue. This session specifically facilitated the exchange of practical information regarding the tools and platforms necessary to support person-to-person (P2P) networking. Discussions highlighted the utilization of professional digital platforms, international trade forums, and B2B communication channels suitable for fashion SMEs.
3. **Collaborative Potential Exploration.** The core implementation concluded with a brainstorming and mapping session aimed at identifying concrete collaboration potentials.

The experts and the Dejubah team collaboratively explored viable synergies, such as raw material sourcing, cross-border reseller programs, and multinational marketing collaborations.

Evaluation and Action Plan

To measure the effectiveness of the community service, an evaluation was conducted at the end of the session. The evaluation utilized qualitative feedback and observed the participants' ability to formulate a preliminary "Networking Action Plan." This plan serves as a blueprint Dejubah to follow up on the contacts, tools, and collaborative ideas discussed during the interactive sessions, ensuring the sustainability of the program's impact.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The community service activity, officially formalized under the "International SME Empowerment Program," was successfully executed to bridge the gap between theoretical global networking concepts and the practical realities faced by local MSMEs. The intervention focused on enhancing the dynamic capabilities of the "Dejubah" fashion SME through strategic international knowledge transfer.

Program Implementation and Institutional Synergy

The execution of the program began with an on-site visitation to Dejubah's operational facility. As depicted in Figure 1, the activity fostered a robust institutional synergy, uniting academic delegations from the Master of Management Program of Universitas Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa (UST) and the College of Business Administration and Accountancy of Mindanao State University, alongside international subject-matter experts.



Figure 1. *The collaborative synergy between the international academic delegation and the Dejubah SME team*

The physical presence of the international experts Syahraman (Philippines), Dr. Rima (Uzbekistan), and Salman (Pakistan) erved a strategic purpose. Before initiating the core mentorship, this site visit allowed the delegates to observe the SME's production scale and operational infrastructure firsthand. This direct engagement successfully cultivated mutual trust between the mentors and the SME practitioners, establishing a critical foundation for effective person to person (P2P) networking. By understanding the grassroots context, the experts were able to calibrate their multidimensional perspectives, ensuring that the proposed global networking strategies were practically aligned with the SME's current organizational capacity.

Cross-Cultural Knowledge Exchange in P2P Networking

Following the initial observation, the core activity transitioned into an intensive Focus Group Discussion (FGD). To dismantle formal communication barriers and encourage a fluid exchange of ideas, the discussion was conducted in an intimate, culturally embedded setting (*lesehan*), as illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2. *An intensive Focus Group Discussion (FGD) highlighting an interactive and culturally adaptive approach to P2P networking.*

This spatial arrangement was deliberately chosen to foster psychological safety and transparency, which are paramount when initiating P2P networking across diverse cultural backgrounds. During this session, the theoretical concepts of global networking were translated into actionable dialogues. The experts shared specialized insights regarding multinational communication strategies and practical tools to support cross-border networks. The dialogue facilitated a two-way information exchange where Dejubah's management articulated specific operational constraints, leading to targeted feedback on utilizing professional B2B digital platforms, applying culturally sensitive negotiation tactics, and building credibility with prospective international partners.

Tangible Product Showcasing and Operational Readiness

The transition from theoretical discussion to practical business relationship building was marked by direct engagement between the SME actors and the international delegates. Figure 3 captures the moment a representative of Dejubah presented a branded token of appreciation to one of the speakers within the operational warehouse.



Figure 3. *The presentation of a branded souvenir serving as both a cultural gesture and a strategic product showcase.*

Beyond a cultural gesture of hospitality, this symbolic exchange acted as a tangible product showcase. Conducted amidst systematically arranged inventory racks, the setting highlighted the SME's disciplined stock keeping and operational scale. The SME demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of digital marketplace systems, evidenced by their strategic retail pricing structure for specific inventory categories, such as ensuring a uniform numerical discount deduction for size XL apparel to optimize algorithmic promotions. By allowing the experts to directly evaluate the finished products and their thoughtfully designed packaging, the SME effectively validated its market readiness and capability to handle potential international reseller network demands

Strategic Collaborative Potentials for Cross-Border Ecosystems

The intensive mentoring, interactive FGDs, and direct operational observations generated a comprehensive mapping of Dejubah's collaborative potentials. Moving beyond theoretical knowledge transfer, the engagement with international experts from the Philippines, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan crystallized several actionable blueprints for cross-border collaboration:

1. **Strategic Supply Chain Integration and Raw Material Sourcing:** A primary collaborative potential identified is the optimization of Dejubah's upstream supply chain. By leveraging the international networks introduced by the delegates, particularly the textile industry insights from the Pakistani and Uzbek experts, Dejubah can explore strategic cross-border sourcing. This P2P collaboration aims to identify alternative, cost-effective, and high-quality textile suppliers directly from international manufacturing hubs. Diversifying the supply chain will not only reduce production overhead costs but also enhance the material quality of Dejubah's apparel lines, strengthening their competitive advantage in the domestic and regional markets.
2. **Multinational Market Penetration via P2P Reseller Networks:** The presence of the Philippine delegation provided a tangible pathway for regional market expansion. Recognizing the demographic and cultural similarities within the ASEAN market, Dejubah possesses a high potential to export its Muslim fashion commodities. The collaboration blueprint involves establishing a specialized cross-border P2P reseller program. By utilizing institutional networks, such as alumni or entrepreneurial incubators from Mindanao State University, Dejubah can initiate micro-exporting and test the international market response without the immediate need for massive capital expenditure.
3. **Expansion from B2C to Institutional B2B/B2G Markets:** While Dejubah has demonstrated robust capabilities in managing retail metrics on business-to-consumer (B2C) e-commerce platforms, the discussions unveiled significant opportunities in the business-to-business (B2B) sector. The academic and institutional synergy formed during this community service serves as a catalyst for Dejubah to target institutional procurement. This includes providing standardized uniforms or customized apparel for international academic delegations, corporate events, and potential capacity-building programs. This diversification strategy provides a more stable and high-volume revenue stream compared to retail fluctuations (Hadi, Bidayati, et al., 2026).
4. **Digital Knowledge Spillover and Algorithm Optimization:** Global networking is not limited to physical goods; it heavily involves the exchange of digital strategies. The FGD facilitated a knowledge spillover regarding international e-commerce behavior. The experts provided insights into multi-national marketplace pricing strategies and cross-cultural consumer psychology. For instance, strategies such as setting base prices to

accommodate uniform numerical discount deductions during promotional periods can be adapted and optimized for different regional algorithms. This collaborative exchange enhances Dejubah's dynamic capabilities in digital marketing, allowing them to remain agile against shifting global e-commerce trends.

5. **Co-Creation of Culturally Adaptive Product Lines:** Through continuous P2P networking, Dejubah and its international counterparts can engage in product co-creation. By understanding the specific aesthetic preferences, seasonal clothing requirements, and cultural modesty standards of consumers in Central Asia or other parts of Southeast Asia, Dejubah can launch limited-edition, culturally adaptive product lines (Hastiti et al., 2025). This strategy not only elevates the brand's international prestige but also serves as a practical application of the knowledge absorbed during the empowerment program.

CONCLUSION

The "International SME Empowerment Program" successfully bridged the gap between theoretical global networking frameworks and the practical, operational realities of the Dejubah fashion SME. The strategic institutional synergy between Universitas Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa, Mindanao State University, and the international experts catalyzed a comprehensive transfer of cross-cultural knowledge and digital strategies. By utilizing an interactive, culturally embedded mentoring approach, the program successfully validated the SME's operational readiness, evidenced by its structured inventory management and disciplined retail metrics. Furthermore, the engagement crystallized a concrete strategic blueprint for Dejubah, focusing on upstream supply chain integration with international manufacturing hubs, the establishment of person-to-person (P2P) cross-border reseller networks, and the transition toward stable B2B and institutional procurement markets. Ultimately, this community service activity proved that targeted international intervention significantly enhances the dynamic capabilities and innovation readiness of local MSMEs in navigating the global digital ecosystem.

RECOMENDATION

Based on the implementation and evaluation of the empowerment program, the following strategic recommendations are proposed:

- For the SME (Dejubah) - Implementation of the Action Plan: It is highly recommended that Dejubah's management immediately execute the Networking Action Plan formulated during the focus group discussions. The primary focus should be initiating micro-exporting trials through the established institutional networks in the ASEAN region (particularly the Philippines) and actively utilizing professional digital B2B forums to communicate with potential raw material suppliers in Central or South Asia.
1. For the SME (Dejubah) - Algorithm and Digital Strategy Alignment: Dejubah should continuously calibrate its digital marketplace strategies by applying the global e-commerce insights gained from the experts. Maintaining a consistent internal pricing structure and strategically aligning product descriptions with international algorithmic trends will be crucial for capturing cross-border digital traffic.
 2. For Academic Institutions - Longitudinal Mentorship and RPL Integration: To ensure the sustainability of this empowerment program, the involved academic institutions should conduct longitudinal monitoring of Dejubah's cross-border progress. Furthermore, universities are encouraged to integrate such high-level, international capacity-building collaborations into formal Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) frameworks. By doing so, business practitioners and corporate trainers who actively participate in and demonstrate mastery of global networking credentials can utilize these practical experiences for academic course exemptions or accelerated master's degree pathways, further strengthening the synergy between the academic and corporate sectors.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We extend our deepest gratitude to Universitas Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa and Mindanao State University for their full support in organizing this international community service program. We also express our highest appreciation to the international expert speakers—Syahraman (Philippines), Dr. Rima (Uzbekistan), and Salman (Pakistan)—for sharing their knowledge and providing invaluable guidance. Furthermore, the writing team thanks the management and staff of the fashion MSME "Dejubah" for their active cooperation, openness, and warm hospitality throughout the event.

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