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Bridging the Theory-Practice Gap: A Qualitative Portfolio Analysis of Consultancy-as-Pedagogy in Brand Management Education

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Abstract

In contemporary business education, a persistent "theory-practice gap" remains a critical challenge, particularly within marketing and brand management curricula where traditional instruction heavily relies on passive case studies of multinational corporations. To address this gap, this study evaluates the "Consultancy-as-Pedagogy" model, an experiential learning intervention where undergraduate students act as strategic brand consultants for real-world MSMEs. Within the authors' institution, this gap was historically observed as an operational curriculum challenge. Adopting a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) framework integrated with Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, this qualitative action research design systematically analysed 10 comprehensive, student-led strategic branding portfolios representing the collaborative work of 70 students across 10 distinct MSME cases in the Food & Beverage and Beauty sectors. Data were evaluated using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). The evaluation of the study focuses on student learning outcomes and student reflections on their engagement with MSME. The findings indicate that the model successfully yields immediate, mutually beneficial outcomes. Students demonstrated clear growth in professional readiness, shifting from passive learners to strategic problem-solvers, while MSME owners obtained highly localized, low-to-zero-budget branding assets explicitly tailored to their operational constraints. This research provides a grounded, realistic, and scalable framework for universities seeking to align academic learning with practical, community-based business development.

KEYWORDS

consultancy-as-pedagogy; experiential learning; brand management; msmes; higher education.

Introduction

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), or *Usaha Mikro, Kecil, dan Menengah* (UMKM), serve as the backbone of the Indonesian economy, contributing over 61% to the national GDP and absorbing 97% of the total workforce (Ananda, 2022; Subagiyo, 2021). Despite their strategic importance, many local MSMEs, particularly in sectors such as Food & Beverage (F&B) and Beauty, face significant hurdles in achieving long-term sustainability (Resti et al., 2023). A primary challenge is the "branding gap," in which high-quality products fail to gain market traction due to a lack of a professional brand identity and strategic marketing consistency (Ananda, 2022).

Under the regulatory mandate of the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (*Kemendikbudristek*), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are dynamically restructuring conventional curricula to comply with the *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) framework (Directorate General of Higher Education (Ditjen Dikti), 2024). While initial iterations of this policy relied heavily on centralized, state-funded internship provisions, the recent strategic shift toward MBKM *Mandiri* (Autonomous MBKM) demands that universities independently design, execute, and fund sustainable ecosystem partnerships (Suwarsi et al., 2023). This policy shift forces a profound operational evolution: HEIs can no longer function merely as isolated spaces for theoretical transmission; instead, institutional performance metrics (*Indikator Kinerja Utama* or IKU, specifically IKU 2 for off-campus learning and IKU 7 for collaborative, project-based classes) legally obligate universities to act as active, localized community innovation hubs (Sharma et al., 2025; Tono, 2023).

The *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) policy has shifted the pedagogical focus toward "Work-Integrated Learning" (WIL). This policy encourages universities to move beyond theoretical instruction and engage directly with community stakeholders to solve real-world problems (Gao & Huber, 2024; Kunsch & Sicker, 2026). This policy mandate directly influences Brand Management curricula by shifting the pedagogical focus toward Work-Integrated Learning that addresses the 'branding gap' in the MSME sector. Furthermore, scholars addressing experiential learning specifically within brand management education remains scarce, often relying on simulation data or passive case studies of multinational corporations. These conventional paradigms typically relegate student teams to the role of generalist operational helpers, rarely investigating how students navigate the profound cognitive friction of adapting advanced, enterprise-level corporate theories to micro-scale, resource-constrained environments. This shift is particularly critical for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), which constitute 99% of Indonesia's business entities but often lack the strategic branding capabilities required for the digital era (Resti et al., 2023).

However, a significant gap remains in the literature regarding how undergraduate branding courses can be structured to provide professional-grade consultancy to MSMEs without overwhelming the limited resources of small-scale entrepreneurs (O'Connor & Moran, 2024). In contrast to conventional Work-Integrated Learning research that primarily examines large-scale corporate internships, this study addresses a critical gap in branding education by analyzing the role of students as knowledge brokers for micro-enterprises (Soelaiman et al., 2024). While traditional marketing curricula often emphasise theoretical frameworks and case studies of large corporations, students frequently lack direct exposure to the unique challenges and resource constraints faced by local enterprises (Patricio, 2022). This disparity often leaves graduates inadequately prepared for the complexities of real-world brand management, particularly within the entrepreneurial ecosystem (O'Connor & Moran, 2024).

The current research evaluates a "consultancy-as-pedagogy" model designed to immerse Brand Management course students in practical applications, requiring them to adapt sophisticated theoretical knowledge to the demands of these smaller, dynamic businesses (Jones et al., 2023).This model fosters value co-creation experiences between students and MSMEs, an emerging paradigm in branding strategy that extends beyond traditional B2C interactions to encompass diverse stakeholder engagement and relationship marketing (Haq, 2021). By actively engaging students in real-world scenarios, this experiential learning model aims to cultivate professional empathy and a deeper understanding of brand value dynamics beyond conventional classroom settings (Hardcastle et al., 2025).

This pedagogical approach aligns with high-impact educational practices, in which student consulting projects serve to integrate university strategy, applied education missions, and accreditation standards while fostering significant community impact (Peake & Potter, 2022). Moreover, this model addresses the critical need for graduates who possess not only theoretical knowledge but also the practical ability and adaptability required to navigate diverse business landscapes. It also serves to empower MSMEs by providing them with professional marketing insights and strategies that they might otherwise be unable to access, thereby contributing to their growth and market competitiveness (Gao & Huber, 2024; Resti et al., 2023). This symbiotic relationship transforms the classroom into a dynamic, career-oriented environment, mirroring real-world job settings where students undertake project-based work for external clients (Raska & Keller, 2021). This study further explores how higher education institutions can leverage mentoring and project management principles to enhance both student learning outcomes and their brand visibility within the community (Rahul, 2024).

This framework advances the understanding of how experiential learning, specifically through community-engaged projects, can cultivate professional competencies and address the operational challenges faced by marketing educators in managing such endeavours (Kunsch & Sicker, 2026). This study explores the implementation and impact of the Consultancy-as-Pedagogy model, specifically focusing on how the project enhancing student learning outcomes and providing strategic value to local MSMEs. The findings provide critical insights for educators and policymakers on how to synchronize higher education outputs with the practical needs of the Indonesian business sector. While prior studies have explored Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), few have examined the specific mechanism of 'Theoretical Downsizing' within the Indonesian MSME branding context. Further, it situates the consultancy model within the Indonesian MBKM *Mandiri* context, where universities independently design community partnerships, offering a different perspective. Moreover, the study uses strategic branding portfolios as the primary data source, providing artefact-based evidence alongside student reflections

To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do students adapt complex branding frameworks into actionable strategies for resource-constrained MSMEs?

RQ2: To what extent does the consultancy-based intervention facilitate the transition across the four stages of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle?

RQ3: What are the tangible strategic outcomes delivered to MSME stakeholders through this pedagogical model?

Methods

Research Design

This study employs a Qualitative Action Research approach, which is particularly suited for pedagogical studies as it allows the researcher to implement an intervention and evaluate its impact on both student learning and community stakeholders (Borozan et al., 2025). Action research facilitates iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, making it ideal for examining educational innovations in real-world contexts (Sato & Chen, 2019). The intervention in this study is the "Consultancy-as-Pedagogy" model, in which undergraduate students in a Brand Management course serve as consultants to Indonesian MSMEs. This approach aligns with problem-based learning principles that emphasise student-centred, experiential education across disciplines (Davies et al., 2011). The study follows the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning framework to systematically examine the effectiveness of this experiential learning model. SoTL provides a structured approach to investigating teaching practices and their impact on student learning outcomes (Miller-Young & Yeo, 2015). By adopting this framework, the

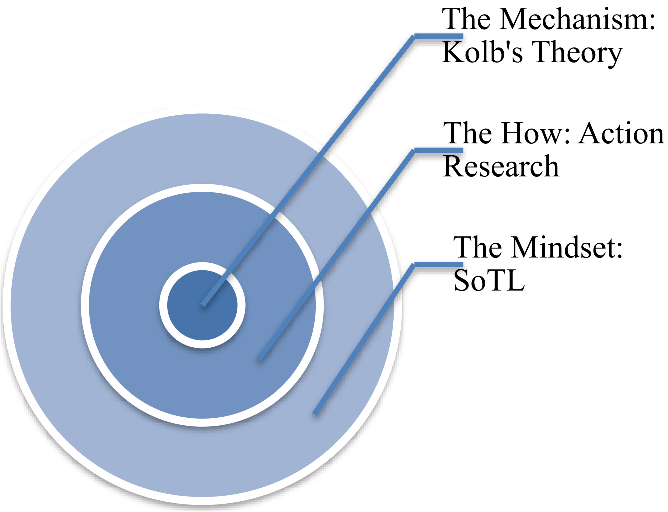

Figure 1. Research Design Framework

research contributes to the broader evidence base on how experiential learning initiatives affect both student development and community engagement (Matthews et al., 2013; Trigwell, 2013). The overall research design framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

The research design is best to viewed as three layers of the same process: the Method, the Mindset, and the Mechanism. At the outer layer, the study is framed within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), establishing the author's intent to systematically investigate their own teaching practice to contribute to the broader body of knowledge in higher education. Within this philosophical shell, the middle layer utilizes Action Research as the functional methodology; in here, the course syllabus serves as a structured intervention designed to solve the real-world "branding gap" faced by local MSMEs through a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Finally, the inner core of the research employs Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory as the explanatory framework to measure students' internal cognitive transition. By using Kolb's cycle, the study evaluates the depth of student learning, specifically their ability to move from "Concrete Experience" to "Active Experimentation". This is to ensure that the consultancy model is not only a service to the community but a rigorous vehicle for academic institution.

Within this philosophical shell, the middle layer utilizes Action Research as the functional methodology, executed in four clear operational phases throughout the semester: (1) Planning: Designing the syllabus, establishing partnership rubrics, and selecting MSMEs; (2) Acting: Students executing field audits and deploying branding interventions under instructor guidance; (3) Observing: Monitoring student progress and client engagement through mid-term presentations and feedback loops; and (4) Reflecting: Analyzing student written reflections and post-project deliverables to evaluate learning depth. The intervention remained structurally consistent throughout the 14-week period, following the course syllabus.

Data Sources and Participants

The primary empirical data for this research consists of 10 strategic branding portfolios (consultancy reports) co-created over a 14-week period. To ensure analytical validity, the primary unit of analysis for this study is defined as the strategic portfolio artefact (n=10), representing a group-level output. A total of 70 undergraduate students enrolled in the Brand Management course participated in this study, and were structurally organized into 10 collaborative consultancy teams consisting of exactly 7 students per team. Each distinct team was assigned to operate as a dedicated agency for one specific MSME client. The 10 portfolios were selected through purposive sampling to represent a diverse range of Indonesian MSME sectors, including food and beverage and beauty (Memon et al., 2025; Merlo et al., 2023). This sectors were chosen since every classes have different theme to avoid similarity and ensure variety between classes.

This sample size of 10 comprehensive group artifacts was deemed sufficient for qualitative analysis as it provided detailed, multi-perspective data from 10 distinct business cases and 70 participants. Analytic adequacy was determined through the principle of code saturation during Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), where repetitive patterns across the 10 portfolios meant that analyzing additional cases would yield diminishing returns, and verified via independent cross-author audit of code categories. The analysis of this research derived from student's reflections on their mid-term and final presentation in class, in addition of the portfolios.

In alignment with qualitative action research paradigms, the primary researcher occupied a dual positionality as both the course instructor and the primary researcher. While this close proximity provides deep, contextual insights into the student learning process, it introduces potential instructor bias during data analysis. To mitigate this threat to trustworthiness and ensure objective distance, several structural measures were implemented. The qualitative data collection and subsequent Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) were conducted strictly post-semester, after all final student grades had been officially calculated, locked, and submitted to the university. This temporal separation ensured that the analytical process was insulated from grading dynamics and that student evaluations were independent of the research agenda. Further, a peer debriefing protocol was established with the co-authors, who reviewed the emerging codes and thematic structures against the raw portfolio data to ensure analytical rigor and minimize individual subjectivity.

Research Location

The research was conducted at one of private University located in Gading Serpong, Tangerang, Indonesia. The study focused on the Management Study Program during the Odd Semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The participants involved were undergraduate students enrolled in the Brand Management course and 10 purposively selected MSME owners across the Tangerang and Greater Jakarta areas, representing the Food & Beverage and Beauty sectors.

Table 1. Strategic Branding Portfolio Guidelines

Topics	Sub-topics	Evaluation
Brand Equity	Brand Awareness, Brand Image	Ability to identify the baseline "branding gap" of the micro-business via field audits.
Build a Strong Brand	• Positioning Guidelines (POP/POD), Brand Mantra. • Brand Resonance Model: Brand Salience, performance, imagery, judgment, feelings, resonance. • Brand Value Chain	Evaluates how student teams strip corporate complexities out of Keller's CBBE pyramid. Points are awarded for converting abstract variables (e.g., perceived quality) into immediate, low-cost operational tools
Constructing Brand Element	Brand Archetypes, Brand Elements	Evaluation of the tactical execution of visual and emotional branding. Measures how effectively students utilize archetypes
The Brand's Marketing Program	Experimental/Relationship Marketing, 4P's Strategy	Review of the marketing mix recommendations against the zero-budget reality of an MSME
Leveraging Secondary Association relates to SDG	Brand Leverage	Evaluates the students' capacity to connect the local business's sourcing, community hiring, or packaging choices to regional sustainable metrics (SDGs).
Measuring Brand Equity (Sources & Outcomes)	Brand Audit (Inventory and Exploratory), mental map	Teams are graded on their execution of semi-structured interviews with owners, local competitive mapping.
Brand Architecture Strategies	Brand architecture strategy, Brand portfolio	Measures the clarity and risk-mitigation of the proposed expansion paths, making brand inventory (social media contents that MSME can use)
Managing Brands Over Time	Reinforcing brand, revitalizing brand, adjustment to brand portfolio	Evaluates the long-term sustainability of the recommendations.
Brands Over the Boundaries relates to SDG	Regional Brand, Global brand strategy, standardization & customisation of strategies, aspect SDG	Matching global quality parameters with authentic local storytelling.

Source: Course Syllabus and lecturer's note

Instrumentation or Tools

The primary instrument for this study was the Strategic Branding Portfolio Guidelines (Table 1), derived from the course syllabus. These guidelines ensured that data collection was standardised across all 10 MSME cases. This guideline was made according main book references for this course: Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity, 5th edition, Chapter 1-14 (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020).

For auditing protocols, students used semi-structured interview guides to capture MSME owners' insights and business challenges. As for digital tools, students utilized Adobe Creative Cloud and Canva for the visual branding deliverables, while Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was facilitated through manual coding and memo-writing to ensure deep engagement with the qualitative data. The evaluation metrics for this study are derived from the alignment between the Brand Management Course Learning Outcomes and the final strategic artefacts. Learning outcomes of the course as stated, "*Students are able to create a comprehensive company branding proposal and evaluate them by critically analyzing the alignment of brand strategies with company objectives, market demands, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).*" (Arinto & Alexandra, 2025). The 'impact' of the model is evidenced through Portfolio Quality Stakeholder Deliverables provided to the MSME owners, and Pedagogy-Syllabus Mapping. Later, this guideline was reviewed by lecturers according to the student presentation of mid-term and final examination.

The primary instruments for this study consisted of the Strategic Branding Portfolio Guidelines (Table 1) and a Semi-Structured Interview Guide to ensure replicability. The Semi-Structured Interview Guide followed a three-part structure: (1) Business History and Operations (founding story, core products, target audience); (2) Perceived Branding Gaps (current visual identity, consistency issues, competitor threats); and (3) Resource Constraints (marketing budget, operational capacity, digital literacy). The Required Portfolio Components included five specific milestones matching the course progression: an initial baseline field audit, a Keller-based Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) deconstruction, a tactical brand element redesign (logo, archetypes), a zero-budget marketing mix strategy, and a long-term brand architecture or sustainability (SDG) recommendation. Assessment and Rubric Criteria were standardized across three dimensions: Conceptual Rigor (accurate translation of brand management theories), Operational Feasibility (adaptability of recommendations to the MSME's zero-budget constraint), and Deliverable Quality (professional execution of visual assets and social media tools).

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection procedure was integrated into the 14-week Brand Management course syllabus (Table 1). The process followed a Synchronous-Experiential model, where students first received theoretical grounding in the classroom before applying those concepts to their assigned MSMEs. Primary data were collected through two major milestones: a Mid-Term Recommendation Report (Week 7) and a Final Strategic Consultancy Portfolio (Week 14). This structured timeline ensured that the branding strategies developed were rooted in both rigorous academic theory and authentic field data (see Table 2).

At the beginning of the semester, students were verbally informed that their anonymized portfolios would be analyzed as part of a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) project. They were given the option to "opt-out" of the research data pool without any impact on their final course grade or

Table 2. Data Collection & Activity

Phase	Course Weeks	Pedagogical Activity (Syllabus)	Data Collection & Research Activity
I. Preparation	Weeks 1 - 2	Theoretical lectures on Brand Equity and Brand Elements. Group formation.	Baseline Identification: Students selected 10 MSMEs from F&B, and Beauty sectors for observation.
II. Audit & Diagnosis	Weeks 3 - 6	Lectures on Brand Positioning, Resonance, and Value Chain.	Primary Data Collection: Students conducted field audits, interviews with owners, and competitive mental mapping.
II. Mid-Term Intervention	Week 7	Mid-Term Presentation: Initial Brand Recommendation Report.	Preliminary Analysis: Evaluation of student "Brand Essays" and initial strategic frameworks for the MSMEs.
V. Advanced Strategy	Weeks 8 - 12	Lectures on Brand Architecture, Sub-branding, and Global Branding.	Theoretical Synthesis: Students synthesized advanced theories to create the "Consultancy Booklets" and digital assets.
V. Final Execution	Weeks 13 - 14	Final Project Submission: Comprehensive Branding Strategy Proposal.	Final Data Archiving: Collection of the 10 finalized portfolios (PDFs) and qualitative owner feedback for thematic analysis.

Source: Author's Data

Table 3. Code Category

RQ	Code Category	Example Codes
RQ1	Framework adaptation (5 codes)	"Simplifying Keller's pyramid," "Replacing abstract terms," "Translating theory to owner language," "Budget-conscious modification," "Framework merging"
RQ2	Kolb cycle evidence (4 codes)	"Concrete experience/field audit," "Reflective observation (SWOT/revision)," "Abstract conceptualization (theory application)," "Active experimentation (final deliverable)"
RQ3	Tangible outcomes (7 codes)	"Brand booklet," "Logo/visual identity," "Social media content calendar," "Market entry plan," "Line extension proposal," "Packaging mockup," "Owner feedback quote"

Source: Author's Data

assessment. As for MSME owner, consent was established through the formal acceptance of the consultancy partnership.

Owners were briefed that the strategic artefacts produced (portfolios) and their feedback would be used for academic analysis and publication to improve branding pedagogy. Their continued participation and active sharing of business data served as implied consent. All data compilation, anonymization, and thematic analysis were executed strictly post-semester after all final grades had been officially computed, finalized, and locked within the university's electronic portal, preventing any possibility of grading bias.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study follows the six-phase approach of Reflexive Thematic Analysis as conceptualised by Braun and Clarke (Braun et al., 2022; Byrne, 2022). Unlike traditional content analysis, RTA was selected for its theoretical flexibility and its recognition of the researcher's subjectivity as an analytic resource rather than a bias to be eliminated (Byrne, 2022; Hole, 2024). By utilizing RTA to evaluate structured student consultancy portfolios, this study provides a replicable blueprint demonstrating how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can realistically function as community innovation hubs without compromising academic rigor or curriculum outcomes. The analysis of this study was conducted manually by the primary researcher to preserve deep, interpretative proximity to the nuanced text, while the co-authors acted as peer validators to ensure analytical trustworthiness.

The analysis was conducted manually by the primary researcher to preserve deep, interpretative proximity to the nuanced text. The six phases were executed as follows:

Phase 1 – Familiarization: The primary researcher read and re-read all 10 strategic branding portfolios in full, noting initial impressions and recurring patterns in a reflexive journal. Particular attention was paid to how students described their adaptation of theoretical frameworks.

Phase 2 – Generating initial codes: The researcher systematically coded the entire dataset using a manual highlighting and annotation method. Codes were assigned to any segment of text that addressed the research questions. Examples of initial codes included can be find in Table 3. A total of 16 initial codes were generated across the 10 portfolios.

Phase 3 – Generating initial themes: Related codes were grouped into candidate themes. For instance, codes such as "simplifying Keller's pyramid," "reducing resonance to behaviors," and "removing proprietary assets" were clustered under the candidate theme "theoretical downsizing."

Phase 4 – Reviewing themes: The primary researcher reviewed all candidate themes against the coded data extracts and the full portfolios to ensure internal coherence and external distinction between themes. The co-authors acted as peer validators, reviewing the emerging codes and thematic structures against the raw portfolio data to ensure analytical rigor and minimize individual subjectivity. Disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached.

Phase 5 – Defining and naming themes: Each theme was refined with a clear definition, scope, and boundary conditions. For example, "theoretical downsizing" was defined as "the deliberate simplification, re-sequencing, or translation of a strategic branding framework to fit MSME resource constraints while preserving theoretical integrity."

Phase 6 – Writing the report: The final themes were integrated into the Results and Discussion sections, with illustrative quotes and portfolio excerpts (anonymized) to support each claim.

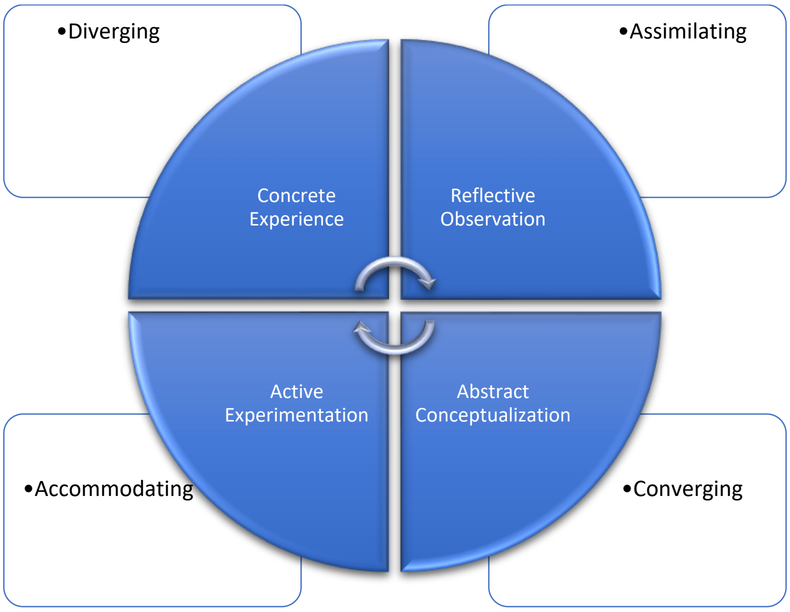

Figure 2. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle
Source: (Kolb, 1981)

Table 4. Kolb's Stage

Kolb's Stage	Pedagogical Activity (The Data Source)	Focus
Concrete Experience	Initial MSME field audits and stakeholder interviews.	Identifying the gap between classroom theory and MSME reality.
Reflective Observation	Weekly progress reports and mid-term SWOT audits.	Observing how students re-evaluated their initial assumptions.
Abstract Conceptualization	Development of the branding strategy and "Downsizing" models.	Evaluating how students simplified complex Keller models.
Active Experimentation	Delivery of the 14-week Final Branding Booklet to the owner.	Measuring the utility of the final strategic artifacts.

Ethical Approval

This study evaluated existing pedagogical artifacts generated as part of the standard, mandatory curriculum assessment for the Brand Management course. Because the data matrix comprised collective group portfolios and reflection logs built for course grading requirements, the research was conducted as a retrospective secondary analysis of educational data. This study adhered to an ethical standard: students provided informed consent for their portfolios to be used as research data, and all participants were anonymized. Informed Consent was obtained from all 10 MSME owners, who agreed to participate in the consultancy project and allowed their business data to be used for academic and research purposes. Furthermore, sensitive internal MSME strategies or financial data not relevant to the branding study were kept confidential, ensuring that the 'Value Co-Creation' model remained beneficial to the enterprises without compromising their competitive security. To safeguard the participating micro-businesses, all sensitive financial data, specific internal sales metrics, or proprietary product formulations disclosed to the student teams were explicitly omitted from the research manuscript. Furthermore, the final strategic assets were delivered as open-access tools directly to the owners, ensuring the project operated under a dual-benefit community engagement model.

Literature Review

Advancing Work-Integrated Learning through Consultancy

The integration of Work-Integrated Learning within the Brand Management course represents a significant shift toward "Link and Match 2.0" in the Indonesian context (Gao & Huber, 2024; Kodrat, 2021). This mandate requires higher education institutions to move beyond simple field trips toward structured professional interventions that foster graduate readiness (Casado-Aranda et al., 2021; Soelaiman et al., 2024). This study finds that WIL is most effective when conducted through "live business projects," where the 14-week syllabus provides a rigorous pedagogical roadmap from abstract theory to active experimentation (Lu et al., 2018; O'Connor & Moran, 2024). By positioning students as consultants, the curriculum ensures that experiential learning is grounded in professional standards rather than simulations alone (Chad, 2020).

By adopting a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning framework, this research identifies the "work" component of WIL as the primary catalyst for skill enhancement (Miller-Young & Yeo, 2015; Sharma et al., 2025). Students are forced to move beyond rote memorization to solve the resource-constrained realities of MSMEs in the Food & Beverage and Beauty sector (Suwarsi et al., 2023) This "Consultancy-as-Pedagogy" model thus provides a scalable framework for Value Co-Creation, where the classroom functions as an "Innovation Hub" that benefits multiple stakeholders. The impact of this approach is best understood through a "Triple Bottom Line" of value, where outcomes are measured by student skill retention, MSME strategic growth, and institutional community impact (Slater et al., 2019; Williams, 2024). Through this model, undergraduate students can deliver professional-grade results that bridge the persistent gap between the classroom and the regional economy (Peake & Potter, 2022).

Using a SoTL approach allows this study to treat the 14-week course as a laboratory for pedagogical innovation (Trigwell, 2013). By analyzing 10 branding portfolios as primary data, this research moves beyond anecdotal evidence of "good teaching" to a systematic evaluation of how students develop Citizen Scholar competencies (Matthews et al., 2013). SoTL also requires that pedagogical findings be shared to improve the broader field of business education (Miller-Young & Yeo, 2015). This research contributes by showing how the "Consultancy-as-Pedagogy" model acts as a catalyst for Value Co-Creation between higher education and local economies (Haq, 2021). The synergy between Kolb and SoTL directly addresses the persistent challenge in marketing education: ensuring that students don't just "know" branding theory but can "do" branding in resource-constrained environments (Resti et al., 2023).

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as a Research Lens

The "Consultancy-as-Pedagogy" model is built upon the integration of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. While Kolb provides the cognitive roadmap for how students transform experience into knowledge, SoTL provides the framework for researchers to systematically evaluate these learning outcomes (Trigwell, 2013). This study utilizes Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1981) not merely as a pedagogical goal, but as the primary framework for data collection and thematic analysis. ELT posits that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience via a four-stage recursive cycle, as illustrated in Figure 2.

The following table defines how each stage of Kolb's cycle guided the study's data collection and analysis (see Table 4)

Result and Discussion

The thematic analysis, guided by the 16 codes structured around the three research questions, yielded three main themes. For RQ1 (adaptation of frameworks), the analysis revealed a consistent pattern of Theoretical Downsizing across all 10 portfolios. For RQ2 (Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle), evidence of all four stages was present in every portfolio, though the depth of reflection varied. For RQ3 (tangible strategic outcomes), each portfolio contained between two and five distinct deliverables provided to MSME owners. Table 5 summarizes the key consultancy outputs across all 10 cases.

To properly contextualize the data presented in Table 5, a critical distinction must be maintained between immediate consultancy deliverables (proximal outputs) and long-term economic business performance (distal impacts). Table 5 outlines the concrete, creative, and strategic artifacts developed by the student teams during the 14-week action-research cycle. This research does not claim to track or measure quantitative market impacts—such as long-term shifts in MSME net revenue, customer retention rates, or digital conversion metrics. Instead, the value of these outputs is evaluated through a three-fold qualitative framework tracking student learning, theoretical adaptation, and immediate micro-enterprise utility:

1. Demonstration of Student Learning: The generation of these outputs serves as primary empirical evidence of higher-order learning according to Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. Rather than passively analyzing historical case studies, students had to actively apply brand management principles to fluid, real-world constraints. The successful delivery of complex artifacts—such as a cohesive visual identity package or an integrated content calendar—proves the students' capacity to diagnose a problem, manage real client relationships, and synthesize abstract concepts into functional business solutions.
2. Operationalizing Theoretical Adaptation: Each output in Table 5 highlights the process of 'theoretical downsizing'. For example, when students mapped out a local food stall's brand elements, they could not simply copy a global multinational framework. They had to intentionally adapt enterprise-level theories (such as Keller's Consumer-Based Brand Equity model) by stripping away capital-intensive corporate strategies and replacing them with low-to-zero budget tactics. The outputs are therefore tangible proof of the students' ability to critically evaluate, resize, and translate high-level theory into a hyper-local business reality.
3. Generation of MSME Value: While longitudinal market impact was not measured, the immediate reciprocal value generated for the MSME partners was substantial. For resource-constrained micro-enterprises in the F&B and Beauty sectors, creating a standardized visual asset or a 30-day marketing matrix requires time, digital literacy, or capital that they typically lack. The outputs provided immediate, operational relief by delivering ready-to-use digital assets and actionable toolkits explicitly customized to the owner's current technical capabilities and time availability, establishing a highly localized form of academic-community value exchange.

Evidence of "Theoretical Downsizing"

The portfolios demonstrate that students successfully adapted high-level academic frameworks to fit the resource-constrained reality of MSMEs. This process of "theoretical downsizing" is essential for MSMEs that often lack a clear brand identity and struggle to understand the benefits of formal branding. By this project, students are able to adapt complex frameworks as they applied sophisticated models such as Keller's Brand Equity Pyramid and Mark & Pearson's Brand Archetypes to small local businesses. To bridge the "branding gap" identified in the MSME sector, this study utilizes Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity model as the primary strategic framework for student consultants. Keller defines brand equity as the differential effect that brand knowledge has on consumer response, emphasizing that a brand's strength is built through a sequence of steps: identity, meaning, response, and relationships (Bahari & Bestari, 2019; Setiawan, 2021). For MSMEs, establishing this equity is vital for differentiation in crowded markets where high-quality products often lack legal protection or intellectual asset value (Setiawan, 2021). Research indicates that for smaller enterprises, dimensions such as brand association and brand loyalty are the strongest predictors of competitive performance, even more so than simple brand awareness. Students in this course are tasked with developing a "Consumer-Based Brand Equity scale" that measures functionality, authenticity, and resonance to ensure the MSME brand can sustain long-term growth (Chokpitakkul & Anantachart, 2020).

For example, in Case C2 (*Ayam Geprek* vendor, figure 3), students were tasked with building "Brand Equity." Traditionally, this involves complex dimensions like perceived quality, brand associations, and proprietary assets such as patents/trademarks. The students realized that for a street-side food vendor, these high-level academic terms were "theoretically heavy" and difficult for the owner to operationalize. For example, instead of using Likert-scale surveys to measure quality perception, students suggest the MSME to create a product consistency manual. They turned the theory into a simple kitchen checklist to ensure every serving was identical. From Brand Associations to "The Signature Element"; complex mental maps were downsized into a single sensory cue. Students identified that the sound of the mortar and pestle (*geprek*) was the strongest brand association. They advised the owner to move the preparation area to the front of the stall to amplify this "auditory brand association." From Brand Loyalty to "The Regulars' Reward": Instead of calculating "Customer Lifetime Value" (CLV), students downsized loyalty into a WhatsApp broadcast list. They taught the owner how to send "Special Friday Promos" to frequent customers, converting the abstract concept of loyalty into immediate repeat sales.

Table 5. Key Consultancy Output

Case ID	MSME Name	Industry	Primary Theoretical Framework Used	Key "Consultancy" Output
C1	Bakmie Ayam Acang	F&B	Brand Archetypes & Global Strategy	Global Market Entry Plan + Localization Guide
C2	Puka Beauty Bar	Beauty	Keller's Brand Equity Pyramid	Professional Brand Booklet + "Way-finding" Video
C3	Lienz Cake	F&B	SWOT & Market Segmentation	Malaysia Export Strategy via E-commerce
C4	Lash Addicted	Beauty	Brand Architecture & Line Extension	Line extension plan (Nail & Spa Addicted)
C5	Vitabliss.id	F&B	Social Media Marketing Optimization	Digital Ad Budgeting & Content Calendar
C6	Ayam Geprek LOL	F&B	POD & Sub-branding	"LOL Kids" sub-brand + Drive-thru strategy
C7	Good Jus	F&B	Brand Potential & Archetypes	New Logo/Packaging Mockups for Japan Market
C8	Bubur Ayam Central	F&B	Brand Leverage & Segmentation	Campus-based expansion & social media revamp
C9	Pecel Pincuk Ibu Ida	F&B	Observational Brand Audit	Physical Delivery of Strategic Booklet to Owner
C10	Liv Nail Bar	Beauty	Brand Revitalization & Mental Maps	High-end positioning shift in BSD area

Source: Primary Data

Figure 3. C2 Consultancy Report

Coding evidence for RQ1 confirmed that this pattern was not anecdotal: all 10 portfolios contained at least one instance of framework simplification, with Codes such as "simplifying Keller's pyramid" (present in 8/10 portfolios) and "replacing abstract metrics with observable behaviors" (present in 9/10 portfolios) being the most frequently observed.

Beyond functional equity, this pedagogy incorporates the use of Brand Archetypes to build emotional connections. Archetypes—universal patterns from the collective unconscious—provide a psychological foundation for a brand's personality (Xara-Brasil et al., 2018)(Merlo et al., 2023). Rather than viewing a brand as just a logo, students apply archetypal meanings (such as the Hero, Mage, or Creator) to establish a lasting identity that resonates with consumers' basic motivations (Baronio et al., 2022; Sousa, 2021). For instance, the "Lover" and "Creator" archetypes were used to define the identity of a small nail salon (figure 4), providing a strategic depth usually reserved for multinational corporations. By using these archetypes stories, student consultants can help MSMEs move from "direct selling" methods to compelling storytelling that builds trust and personal relationships in the digital ecosystem (Adi, 2025).

Students also generate ideas on how to do strategic simplification for local business strategy. The students'

Figure 4. Pearson's Brand Archetypes for small nail salon

Figure 5. Global Strategy for Small Business

consultancy work began with a systematic diagnostic phase, utilizing SWOT Analysis to bridge the internal capabilities of local MSMEs with the external competitive environment (Sukimin et al., 2025). This diagnostic audit is essential for aligning an MSME's perceived identity with the operational realities of the market (Ogunsanya et al., 2020).

To visualize this competitive landscape, the consultancy teams employed Positioning Maps to identify "blue ocean" gaps in the Food & Beverage and Beauty sectors (Rachman et al., 2026). By mapping attributes

Figure 6. Portfolios with evidence of Field Observations

Figure 7. Professional grade branding assets for MSME

such as "artisanal vs. mass-produced" and "traditional vs. modern aesthetics," students helped MSME owners define a unique market space that avoids direct price wars with established conglomerates (Ogunsanya et al., 2020). This positioning is not merely a visual exercise but a strategic effort to establish brand distinctiveness, which is a primary driver of marketing performance in the SME sector (Wong & Merrilees, 2005). Through this process, students move MSMEs up the "ladder of brand orientation," transitioning from a product-focused approach to a brand-integrated business model.

Further, the critical challenges for local MSMEs is the "legitimacy gap," where high-quality products are perceived as unprofessional due to poor brand elements (Berthon et al., 2008). To address this, students applied Keller's framework of Points of Parity and Points of Difference (POP/POD). The intervention first focused on achieving Points of Parity—the industry-standard visual cues, such as professional packaging and digital responsiveness, that signal credibility to a modern consumer (Odoom et al., 2017). Once parity was established, the students identified and amplified the brand's Points of Difference. In the context of Indonesian MSMEs like *Tanocraft* or *Blankblaze*, these PODs were found in the narrative design and the "local story" behind the product (Rachman et al., 2026; Rais et al., 2022). By integrating storytelling with professional branding, students created an emotional connection that justifies a premium position (Sousa, 2021). This approach ensures that the brand positioning is not only significant and credible but also sustainably differentiated from global competitors (Ogunsanya et al., 2020).

Global-Local Integration strategy were made to prepare the MSMEs to enter global market. Students applied Global Brand Strategies to local contexts, proposing how businesses like a juice shop or nail bar could utilize standardization and customization for potential expansion into international markets like Malaysia or Thailand. The findings suggest that local brands achieve the highest consumer resonance when they balance local customization with global homogenization (Lopez-Lomelí et al., 2019; Vaziri et al., 2021). By helping MSMEs adopt global-quality brand power while maintaining their "local icon" and authenticity, students ensured that these businesses could compete in an increasingly internationalized market (Schmidt-Devlin et al., 2021). This approach is particularly vital for Indonesian MSMEs facing tight global competition in sectors like creative manufacturing and fashion (Japutra et al., 2015), The resulting global strategy recommendations developed for the participating MSMEs are presented in Figure 5.

Transition to Active Strategic Experimentation

The data indicate a shift from passive classroom learning to professional consultancy. This transition is a hallmark of "experiencing" integrated marketing communications, where students move from theoretical understanding to practical application. Portfolios include evidence of field observations, in-depth interviews with owners, and consumer surveys conducted at the business locations, as illustrated in Figure 6. Such field-based management is recognized as a superior pedagogical approach for managing projects in community-engaged environments (Kunsch & Sicker, 2026).

Students were also being able to produced professional-grade assets, including new logo designs, social media filters, and comprehensive brand "booklets" delivered directly to MSME owners. By creating these tangible assets, students develop "citizen scholar" competencies—such as adaptability and professional resilience—required in the 21st-century business landscape (Gao & Huber, 2024). By providing professional-grade strategic assets to MSMEs, the university functions as an Innovation Hub that solves socio-economic problems in the surrounding area (Sudirjo et al., 2024). This shift toward innovation-based business education is essential for adapting to a knowledge-based economy, where universities are expected to drive regional growth through cross-sector collaboration (Mudrikah et al., 2026), The resulting professional-grade branding assets are illustrated in Figure 7.

The results suggest that when students are tasked with consultancy rather than hypothetical case studies. This is evidenced by their ability to scale down Keller's Brand Equity model into actionable steps for a local nail salon or a porridge stall, a skill often missing in traditional marketing education. The findings also contribute to the development of the MBKM *Mandiri* framework by demonstrating how universities can provide professional-grade strategic assets to the community while simultaneously achieving high-level Key Performance Indicators (IKU 2 and IKU 3). Further, students created a digital brand inventory that MSMEs can use on their social media to support further brand and business development. The trend of digital environmental transformation leads MSMEs especially in Jabodetabek area to adopt social media as their primary marketing platform (Novianda et al., 2026). Specifically, the appeal of a social media influencer might inspire the audience to cultivate innovative connections in digital platforms (Purnamaningsih et al., 2024).

Mapping Kolb's Cycle to the Consultancy Process

The 14-week Brand Management syllabus is designed to move students through all four stages of Kolb's cycle, ensuring that learning is not just passive but also 'hands on. The cycle begins with students enter the community to interact with MSMEs as part of concrete experience. This stage involves direct "experiencing" of the messy, real-world branding challenges that cannot be replicated in a textbook (O'Connor & Moran, 2024). Students then continue to do reflective observation through iterative group discussions and guest lecturer sessions; they reflect on the gap between theory and the MSME's reality. Further, they analyze why certain strategies might fail in a local market, leading to deeper critical thinking. Next step is doing the abstract conceptualization, by acquiring theoretical frameworks—such as Keller's Brand Equity and Brand Archetypes—within the classroom. In this stage, students form mental models and "theoretically downsize" complex concepts to prepare for field application. As an active experimentation, the cycle culminates in the creation of Brand Recommendation Reports and tangible assets (logos, social media filters, and brand booklets). By delivering these to business owners, students "test" their knowledge in a real-world environment, thereby solidifying their professional identity (Gao & Huber, 2024).

Coding evidence for RQ2 confirmed the presence of Kolb's four stages across all portfolios. The code "concrete experience (field audit/interview)" appeared in all 10 portfolios, as every team conducted owner interviews and on-site observations. The code "reflective observation (SWOT/revision)" appeared in 9/10 portfolios, evidenced by mid-term revisions and SWOT analyses. The code "abstract conceptualization (theory application)" appeared in all 10 portfolios, with teams explicitly referencing Keller, Archetypes, or POP/POD frameworks. Finally, the code "active experimentation (final deliverable)" appeared in all 10 portfolios, as each team produced and delivered a tangible strategic asset to their MSME owner. This cross-portfolio pattern supports the claim that the 14-week syllabus successfully moved students through the full Kolb cycle.

The "Triple Bottom Line" of Value Co-Creation in Branding Pedagogy

The Triple Bottom Line framework used in this study is adapted from (Elkington, 1997) conceptualization of economic, social, and environmental value, but reinterpreted here for pedagogical contexts. Rather than measuring financial profit, social responsibility, and ecological impact, this study redefines the three dimensions as: student learning outcomes (analogous to economic value), MSME strategic benefit (analogous to social value), and institutional community engagement (analogous to structural value). This adaptation emerged inductively from the portfolio analysis, where benefits consistently clustered around these three stakeholder groups. Accordingly, the framework is presented as a context-specific interpretation rather than a direct application of corporate Triple Bottom Line logic.

The results of this study suggest that the "Consultancy-as-Pedagogy" model functions through a "Triple Bottom Line" of value co-creation, where strategic benefits are simultaneously generated for the student, the MSME partner, and the higher education institution (Haq, 2021; Hardcastle et al., 2025). Unlike traditional classroom assignments that produce "disposable" work, this model treats the university brand as an active participant in regional economic development. While professional self-efficacy was not quantitatively tracked or measured using standardized psychometric scales, the qualitative narratives within the student reflective logs support the inference that students experienced a heightened sense of professional capability. By shifting from passive theoretical consumption to active strategic production, this experiential arrangement allowed them to transition from merely learning about brand principles to internalizing the identity of active branding consultants for real-world enterprises (Kunsch & Sicker, 2026).

For the MSME partners, the co-creation process yields high-value strategic assets that are typically beyond the financial reach of micro-enterprises. The findings demonstrate that through "theoretical downsizing," students provided MSMEs with professional-grade logos, social media filters, and brand booklets—deliverables that directly address the branding inconsistencies that often hinder MSME sustainability (Resti et al., 2023). This reciprocal learning environment allows MSME owners to gain strategic clarity while students gain operational insight, creating a "win-win" partnership that supports local economic resilience (Novita et al., 2023; Williams, 2024).

Coding evidence for RQ3 documented the tangible strategic outcomes delivered to MSME owners. Across the 10 portfolios, the most common deliverables were "brand booklet" (7/10 portfolios), "logo/visual identity redesign" (6/10), and "social media content calendar" (5/10). Other deliverables included "market entry plan" (C1, C3, C7), "line extension proposal" (C4, C6), and "packaging mockup" (C7). Owner feedback, captured informally during final presentations, indicated satisfaction with usability; for example, the owner of C9 described the strategic booklet as "*immediately useful*." However, no longitudinal or financial impact data were collected, making claims of MSME strategic growth provisional.

Finally, the benefit for the University is structural rather than measured. The Consultancy-as-Pedagogy model directly supports MBKM *Mandiri* implementation, as evidenced by syllabus design and course accreditation records. Specifically, the model aligns with institutional Key Performance Indicators IKU 2 (off-campus learning) and IKU 7 (collaborative project-based classes). This alignment is documented through the university's curriculum records and MBKM compliance reporting. However, community-level brand impact, such as improved institutional reputation or increased community partnerships — was not formally tracked. Therefore, while the structural benefit is documented, broader perceived or measured benefits to the university remain claims for future investigation.

Limitations and Cautions

While this study provides valuable insights into experiential marketing education in Indonesia, several critical limitations must be explicitly acknowledged. First, due to the qualitative design and the bounded timeline of a 14-week semester, long-term MSME economic performance metrics, such as sales revenue, digital conversion rates, or market share changes were not quantitatively tracked. Second, individual student competency gains and long-term knowledge retention were inferred from final course artifacts and reflective essays rather than measured via standardized quantitative pre- and post-tests. Finally, the broader institutional and community impacts, such as university reputation enhancements or long-term regional innovation ecosystem development, were not formally measured or tracked. Future research should employ mixed-method longitudinal designs to quantify these long-term multi-stakeholder outcomes.

Recommendations for Future Research

For higher education institution, to ensure the replicability of the Consultancy-as-Pedagogy model, it is recommended that instructors move beyond traditional lectures to a 'Studio-Based' delivery. Specifically, the curriculum should include dedicated 'Theory Adaptation' workshops where students are guided to 'downsize' global frameworks into actionable 1-page briefs suitable for MSME owners with limited marketing literacy. Further, institutions should formalize the 'Innovation Hub' role by creating a digital repository of student-led MSME projects. This serves as a 'Living Lab' that documents the long-term impact on local economic resilience, fulfilling the university's community service mandates while providing students with a professional-grade portfolio. And as for MSME owners are encouraged to engage in 'Co-Creation' sessions rather than acting as passive recipients of student work. The study suggests that the highest value is co-created when owners provide immediate feedback on the 'usability' of brand assets, ensuring that student outputs do not remain purely academic exercises.

Addressing sample sizes and stakeholders, this research was limited to a qualitative analysis of 10 portfolios in the F&B and Beauty sectors. Future studies should employ a longitudinal approach to track the MSMEs' performance six to twelve months after the consultancy intervention. Since the model were focusing on F&B and beauty industry, further investigation is needed to determine if this model is effective in non-creative sectors, such as manufacturing or B2B services. Comparative studies between 'MBKM *Mandiri*' and government-funded programs could also reveal how different institutional supports influence the quality of the consultancy outputs.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the "Consultancy-as-Pedagogy" model serves as a vital bridge between theoretical branding education and the practical needs of the Indonesian MSME, especially in F&B and beauty industry. By analyzing 10 diverse case studies, this research demonstrates that students can effectively act as "Knowledge Brokers". Through the lens of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, the findings reveal that the process of "Theoretical Downsizing" allows students to internalize complex frameworks (such as Keller's Brand Equity and Brand Archetypes) while providing tangible strategic value to MSME owners.

For higher education administrators, this study suggests that curricula should be designed around "Value Co-Creation" rather than passive content delivery. Integrating consultancy projects into the syllabus directly supports the achievement of Key Performance Indicators. It is suggested that the theoretical grounding must precede field engagement: Weeks 1–2 should be dedicated exclusively to core frameworks (Keller, Archetypes, POP/POD) before students meet MSME owners. Further, assessment should be milestone-based: weightings of 30% for mid-term diagnostic report (audit + SWOT), 50% for final strategic portfolio (brand booklet + assets), and 20% for reflective presentation ensure accountability without over-penalizing creativity.

However, the findings suggest that the successful implementation of this model is contingent upon specific structural and ethical safeguards. This study establishes that the model is most effective under the following conditions: theoretical foundations are solidified before field audits begin; success is dependent on maintaining low student-to-mentor ratios and establishing clear ethical protocols regarding client data and deliverable quality; and the model demonstrates high efficacy in B2C sectors (F&B and beauty) but may face significant friction in technical B2B industries or with early-stage learners who lack the maturity to simplify complex frameworks.

For future educators, the goal is not merely to teach students how to apply theory, but to empower them to adapt it for real-world impact. However, successful replication of this model depends on navigating the specific conditions identified in this study, including the need for strong theoretical preparation before field engagement and clear ethical protocols to protect both students and MSME partners. Ultimately, this research moves beyond a descriptive account of classroom activity to offer a documented, empirically grounded blueprint for community-engaged branding education. By positioning students as active contributors rather than passive learners, higher education institutions can simultaneously fulfill their academic mission and contribute meaningfully to local economic development.

Author contributions

YA conceived the study, designed the research methodology, oversaw the primary field research, collected and analyzed the qualitative portfolio data, and drafted the initial manuscript. BA co-developed the course curriculum, designed the structural syllabus and intervention parameters for the Consultancy-as-Pedagogy model, and managed student cohort coordination. RPS contributed to the theoretical framing of the paper, assisted with data interpretation, and conducted the critical review, editing, and formatting of the final manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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