



## SERVICE LEARNING IN STRENGTHENING BRANDING AND INNOVATION OF TRADITIONAL DODOL PRODUCTS, MELAKA, MALAYSIA

### PEMBELAJARAN BERBASIS LAYANAN DALAM MEMPERKUAT BRANDING DAN INOVASI PRODUK DODOL TRADISIONAL, MELAKA, MALAYSIA

Rachmad Chartady<sup>1</sup>, Satriadi<sup>2\*</sup>, Reza Ramadhania<sup>3</sup>, Teguh Widodo<sup>4</sup>, Darsih<sup>5</sup>, Putri Dimaz Meynah<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1,2\*,6</sup> Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi Pembangunan Tanjungpinang

<sup>3,4</sup> Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Asia Malang

<sup>5</sup> Universitas Serasan Muara Enim Sumatera Selatan

\*email koresponden: [satriadi@dosen.stie-pembangunan.ac.id](mailto:satriadi@dosen.stie-pembangunan.ac.id)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62567/micjo.v3i3.2561>

#### Abstract

This service responds to the challenges of traditional dodol entrepreneurs in Melaka, Malaysia: weak branding strategies, lack of product innovation, and low competitiveness in the midst of the modern food industry. Using a participatory service learning approach based on qualitative methods (in-depth interviews, field observations, FGDs), students are actively involved in business assistance including packaging design, flavor variant development, improvement of hygiene standards, and the use of digital media for promotion. This program aims to strengthen the Melaka dodol brand identity, encourage product innovation, and increase the capacity of MSME actors. Its contribution lies in the university-community collaboration model that strengthens the local economy while preserving culinary heritage through the documentation of cultural values. The results show an improvement in branding quality, more attractive packaging, the emergence of variant innovations, and an increase in the digital marketing capabilities of business actors. This activity also strengthens student-community social relations and opens up opportunities for community innovation hubs for sustainable collaboration. The findings affirm the effectiveness of service learning as an empowerment strategy that integrates cultural preservation with the strengthening of the local economy, as well as making a theoretical-practical contribution to community-based entrepreneurship.

**Keywords :** Service Learning, Branding, Innovation, Traditional Dodol, Heritage Products.

#### Abstrak

Layanan ini menjawab tantangan yang dihadapi para pengusaha dodol tradisional di Melaka, Malaysia: strategi branding yang lemah, kurangnya inovasi produk, dan daya saing yang rendah di tengah industri makanan modern. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan pembelajaran layanan partisipatif berbasis metode kualitatif (wawancara mendalam, observasi lapangan, FGD), mahasiswa secara aktif terlibat dalam bantuan bisnis termasuk desain kemasan, pengembangan varian rasa, peningkatan standar kebersihan, dan penggunaan media digital untuk promosi. Program ini bertujuan untuk memperkuat identitas merek dodol Melaka, mendorong inovasi produk, dan meningkatkan kapasitas pelaku UMKM. Kontribusinya terletak pada model kolaborasi universitas-masyarakat yang



memperkuat ekonomi lokal sekaligus melestarikan warisan kuliner melalui dokumentasi nilai-nilai budaya. Hasilnya menunjukkan peningkatan kualitas branding, kemasan yang lebih menarik, munculnya inovasi varian, dan peningkatan kemampuan pemasaran digital para pelaku bisnis. Kegiatan ini juga memperkuat hubungan sosial mahasiswa-masyarakat dan membuka peluang bagi pusat inovasi masyarakat untuk kolaborasi berkelanjutan. Temuan ini menegaskan efektivitas pembelajaran berbasis pelayanan sebagai strategi pemberdayaan yang mengintegrasikan pelestarian budaya dengan penguatan ekonomi lokal, serta memberikan kontribusi teoretis-praktis terhadap kewirausahaan berbasis komunitas.

**Kata Kunci :** Pembelajaran Berbasis Pelayanan, Pencitraan Merek, Inovasi, Dodol Tradisional, Produk Warisan Budaya.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Melaka is one of Malaysia's historic states with a rich culture, including in the field of traditional cuisine. One of the heritage products that is still preserved today is dodol, a sweet food made from coconut milk, brown sugar, and glutinous rice flour that has long been part of the cultural identity of the local community. This product is not just a dish, but has historical and symbolic value as a form of preserving ancestral traditions. However, the development of the modern food industry, changes in consumer lifestyles, and increasingly fierce market competition have placed traditional dodol products in a vulnerable position. Many traditional dodol businesses face challenges in maintaining the relevance of their products amid consumer preferences that are now more interested in practical foods, modern packaging, and innovative flavor variants. This problem highlights the gap between the cultural value of dodol as a heritage product and the increasingly competitive modern market, requiring an approach that not only preserves tradition but also encourages renewal in terms of marketing, innovation, and brand identity strengthening.

Some of the main problems that arise include weak branding strategies, evident in the lack of a strong brand identity, unattractive packaging designs, and the lack of cultural narratives in marketing. In addition, product innovation is still limited because some businesses are more focused on maintaining traditional production processes without trying to adapt to current market needs. The scope of digital marketing is also still very limited, making it difficult for traditional dodol products to penetrate a wider market or compete with modern products that are more aggressive in online promotion. These problems ultimately have an impact on low competitiveness and declining consumer interest, especially among the younger generation, in dodol products.

In the context of dodol product development in Melaka, the application of service learning opens up opportunities for collaboration between universities, small entrepreneurs, and the local community. Students can contribute to aspects such as packaging design, flavor innovation, and digital marketing strategies that are in line with current consumer trends. Meanwhile, local entrepreneurs gain access to new knowledge, simple technology, and marketing insights that can increase the competitiveness of their products in a wider market. This is in line with previous research findings which show that service learning can increase the capacity of MSMEs in terms of innovation, digital marketing, and strengthening the identity of local products (Yusoff et al., 2021; Ismail & Kamarudin, 2020).

In addition to contributing to the strengthening of the local economy, service learning also has significant social and cultural dimensions. Through direct interaction between students and the community, a process of knowledge and cultural value exchange occurs that enriches both parties. This activity also serves as a means of preserving local wisdom, as students can document and revive the cultural narrative behind the making of dodol as part of Melaka's identity. This approach also supports the principle of community-based learning, which integrates cultural values into the educational process to produce socially and contextually relevant solutions.



However, despite various community service programs carried out by higher education institutions in Malaysia, there are still limitations in the documentation and academic studies regarding the real impact of service learning on strengthening branding and traditional product innovation. This community service program aims to fill this gap by focusing on analyzing how the application of service learning can strengthen branding strategies, encourage product innovation, and enhance the economic and cultural sustainability of dodol artisans in Malacca. A significant gap is evident in the limited research or community service programs that combine the concept of service learning with the strengthening of branding and traditional product innovation in an integrated framework. Most similar community service programs only highlight general marketing training or cultural documentation without systematically examining how modern branding strategies can be combined with local cultural values to increase the selling value of traditional products.

Thus, the main objective of this community service is to apply a service learning approach to strengthen branding strategies and encourage innovation in traditional dodol products in Melaka, Malaysia. Through this activity, it is hoped that local entrepreneurs will be able to increase their understanding of the importance of a strong brand identity based on local wisdom in order to be more competitive in the modern market. In addition, this program also aims to encourage product innovation through the development of variants, packaging, and marketing strategies that maintain the cultural values of Melaka. This activity is designed to build sustainable collaboration between universities and local communities, thereby creating a mutually beneficial relationship in the form of knowledge transfer, training, and small business assistance. Overall, this community service program not only aims to strengthen the economic and marketing aspects of products, but also to foster social awareness and cultural responsibility among students and strengthen the relationship between higher education and the community. Through the integration of service learning, branding, and product innovation theories, this community service program is expected to contribute theoretically and practically to efforts to preserve cultural heritage products that are adaptive to the dynamics of the modern market.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This community service was carried out using a participatory approach based on direct learning (service learning), in which students were actively involved as participants who learned directly from local entrepreneurs at Usaha Warisan Dodol Tradisional, Melaka, Malaysia. This approach was used because service learning has been proven to improve students' ability to understand the social and economic context of the community and make a real contribution to the development of culture-based MSMEs (Yusoff & Ibrahim, 2021; Tan & Hashim, 2024).

As explained, service learning is an effective method for connecting academic theory with field practice through collaborative activities involving students, lecturers, and the community (Ismail & Abdullah, 2019; Zainuddin & Khalid, 2023). In addition, this learning model supports the preservation of cultural heritage products and the development of innovation in the traditional food industry.

The implementation of activities is divided into four phases as follows:

### 1. Preparation and Planning Phase

The activity begins with technical preparation and understanding of the location context. Students are given initial training on the concepts of service learning, culture-based micro-enterprises, and the background of dodol as a culinary heritage of Melaka.

### 2. Collaborative Implementation Phase

At this stage, students conduct direct field visits to the Dodol Heritage Business. Activities include observing the dodol production process, interacting with business owners, and discussing branding strategies and the sustainability of traditional businesses. Students play an active role in dialogue and ask questions, record business processes, and understand the cultural values inherent in dodol products.



### 3. Evaluation and Reflection Phase

After the visit, students participated in discussion and reflection sessions with lecturers to discuss the lessons learned. They evaluated their understanding of the dynamics of MSMEs, the challenges of preserving heritage products, and local business strategies in responding to modern market needs. Students compiled reflective reports as a form of individual and group learning documentation.

### 4. Sustainability and Network Strengthening Phase

As a follow-up, this activity is expected to form the basis for the development of a learning network between the university and the local community, where the documentation of learning outcomes can be used as a reference for future programs involving collaborative branding and cultural heritage preservation.



Figure 1 Steps of Community-University Partnership Program

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This service learning-based community service activity was carried out at Usaha Warisan Dodol Tradisional (Traditional Dodol Heritage Business) in Melaka, Malaysia. Located in the cultural area of Melaka, this dodol business is managed by local entrepreneurs who have preserved the traditional recipes and production techniques of Melaka dodol for generations. This activity focused on observing and documenting business practices, holding open discussions with business owners, and reflecting on strategies for managing heritage products amid the tide of modernization. Through this interaction, students not only gained insight into the dynamics of small culture-based businesses, but also came to appreciate the social and historical value inherent in traditional products such as dodol.



Figure 1. Interaction between Students and Dodol Heritage Business Operators, Malacca, Malaysia



In addition to general observations of the Dodol Heritage Business in the cultural area of Malacca, the service learning activity also provided a special focus on one of the traditional dodol producers that has been operating for many years and has become a reference for tourists looking for authentic Malacca dodol. This business is known because the production of Malacca heritage dodol is a traditional process that has been passed down from generation to generation and is still maintained today by local producers. Dodol is made from a mixture of fresh coconut milk, Malacca sugar, and glutinous rice flour, which is cooked in a large pot over low heat. During the cooking process, the mixture must be stirred continuously with a wooden spoon for hours to produce a chewy, smooth texture that does not spoil easily. This manual stirring technique is a hallmark of traditional Malacca dodol production, as it requires patience, energy, and expertise to maintain the consistency of the dough. Once it reaches a dark brown color and a strong caramel aroma, the dodol is then cooled, cut, and wrapped using natural materials before being distributed to souvenir shops as one of Malacca's culinary icons. From their visit, the students found that this business has great potential in terms of culture-based branding. The story of the traditional manufacturing process, the use of ancestral recipes, and the cultural philosophy behind dodol are powerful elements that can be highlighted as selling points in a marketing strategy.

Although dodol is made using traditional techniques, several innovations have been developed to increase the product's appeal and competitiveness. These innovations include the development of flavor variants (such as pandan, durian, or chocolate), improvements in packaging quality to make it more modern and hygienic, and the use of visual designs that highlight Malacca's cultural motifs to strengthen the brand's identity.

Beyond these producers, the Dodol Heritage Business more broadly demonstrates how businesses in Melaka are interconnected within a strong community network. The Dodol Heritage Business is a concrete example of how traditional culinary products can be preserved through a strong community approach. Business actors not only focus on production, but are also active in collaborating with other MSME networks in the Melaka region, including sharing raw materials, production facilities, and promotion at souvenir centers and on social media. This reflects the collaborative strength of the micro-business community in Malaysia, which promotes the principles of mutual growth and cultural sustainability. The branding strategy used is also rich in cultural values, such as the dodol product packaging, which uses visual designs with motifs typical of Melaka to strengthen the product's identity.



**Figure 2. Appearance of Dodol from the Dodol Heritage Business**

From the perspective of service, this activity shows that the presence of students and lecturers in observational practice is not only for learning, but also to provide a space for appreciation and validation of local small businesses as guardians of cultural heritage. The dialogue conducted during the visit opened up a space for two-way reflection, where students understood the real challenges faced by MSME actors, such as limitations in digitization, fluctuations in raw materials, and marketing, while business actors received appreciation and academic documentation that could support their long-term existence. This activity is in line with the principles of community-based service learning, where



the learning process is built on the basis of interaction, respect, and mutual reinforcement between academics and the community (Puspitasari & Hidayat, 2020) .

This experience also reinforces the importance of culture-based branding in maintaining the competitiveness of heritage products. Students learn that cultural elements such as local language, ancestral stories, and community life philosophies can be strengths in building an authentic and memorable brand image. According to Anuar et al.(2023) , community participation in preserving heritage products through community entrepreneurship has a positive impact on local economic sustainability. Meanwhile, Pratama & Raharjo(2021) emphasize that cultural branding can foster consumer loyalty that is not only based on product quality but also on emotional connections and cultural values offered.



**Figure 3. Student Discussion with Business Actors**

Overall, the service learning activity at Usaha Warisan Dodol Melaka serves as a tangible means to integrate the values of community service, cultural preservation, and local entrepreneurship development. This activity encourages students to think critically, empathize, and recognize the importance of academic involvement in documenting and strengthening community resilience through collaborative and meaningful approaches.

### Discussion

The implementation of service learning activities at the Melaka dodol heritage business opened up a rich learning space for students. They not only saw how small businesses work firsthand, but also understood how traditional businesses can continue to survive and thrive amid modern challenges. Through interactions during the visit, students began to realize that running a business is not just about selling products, but also about preserving the cultural values contained within them. This makes them appreciate local heritage more and see entrepreneurship from a broader perspective. As explained by Negar & Najafi (2025) , direct experience in the work environment and community can increase students' understanding of business dynamics and encourage more down-to-earth creativity and innovation.

For business owners, the arrival of students provides motivation and moral support. They feel valued because their local knowledge is used as learning material. Some business owners have also begun to realize the importance of strengthening cultural narratives in selling products, such as explaining the origins of dodol or the meaning of motifs on packaging. Although there have been no major changes yet, the conversations and dialogues that have taken place have prompted reflection on how their businesses are run and introduced to young consumers. This is in line with the results of the study " , which confirms that the synergy between the younger generation and local entrepreneurs can strengthen cultural identity and open up new opportunities for innovation in community-based products.

The relationship formed between students and business actors also creates a bridge for potential future collaboration. Students gain real insights into the obstacles faced by MSMEs, such as limitations in promotion, packaging, and access to technology. Conversely, business actors gain new perspectives from the younger generation, who are accustomed to digital media and creative marketing strategies.



This situation opens up opportunities for future collaboration, whether through further training, business digitalization, or the formation of local branding communities. Thus, this program is not only a learning tool but also encourages mutually beneficial collaboration between the world of education and society.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The service learning activity carried out at Usaha Warisan Dodol Tradisional, Melaka, Malaysia, shows that the integration of student learning and field practice can be an effective means of understanding the power of culture-based branding, encouraging innovation in traditional products, and strengthening community entrepreneurship networks. Through a participatory approach, students not only learn from small business owners but also appreciate and document the local values that form the foundation of dodol's strength as a heritage product. Meanwhile, business owners gain moral reinforcement, new reflections on business strategies, and opportunities to build long-term collaborations with educational institutions. This synergy demonstrates that cultural preservation and local economic development can go hand in hand through a mutually empowering service-learning approach.

#### 5. REFERENCES

- Ali, M., & Hassan, F. (2019). Entrepreneurial learning through service learning: Enhancing community-based small enterprises in Malaysia. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 39(3), 289–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2019.1645037>
- Bingle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (1996). Implementing service learning in higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 67(2), 221–239. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2943981>
- Che Omar, A. R., & Mohd Noor, N. (2020). Sustaining traditional food businesses through innovation and branding: Evidence from Malaysia's heritage industry. *International Journal of Business and Society*, 21(2), 857–872.
- Chinomona, R., & Sandada, M. (2018). Brand authenticity and its impact on brand trust and brand loyalty: Evidence from the food industry. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 35(2), 223–233. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCM-03-2017-2131>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Drucker, P. F. (1985). *Innovation and entrepreneurship: Practice and principles*. Harper & Row.
- Hashim, H., & Ahmad, N. (2020). Preserving traditional foods through cultural branding: A study of Malaysian heritage products. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 26(8), 789–804. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2019.1703141>
- Holt, D. B. (2004). *How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding*. Harvard Business Press.
- Ismail, N., & Abdullah, M. (2019). Community-based learning in Malaysia: Service learning as a tool for sustainable education. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, 16(1), 55–72.
- Keller, K. L. (2013). *Strategic brand management: Building, measuring, and managing brand equity* (4th ed.). Pearson.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Rahman, A., & Zakaria, Z. (2021). Digital transformation and innovation among Malaysian SMEs in traditional food industries. *Asian Journal of Business Research*, 11(3), 56–70. <https://doi.org/10.14707/ajbr.210085>
- Tan, C. L., & Hashim, N. (2024). Empowering local SMEs through cultural innovation and digital branding: Lessons from Malaysia's heritage industries. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 31(1), 101–120.



- Tengku, N. M. A., & Karim, A. F. (2022). Local food branding strategy for heritage-based SMEs: The case of Melaka's traditional confectioneries. *Journal of Entrepreneurship, Business, and Economics*, 10(2), 145–160.
- Yusoff, W. F. W., & Ibrahim, M. (2021). University–community engagement and the development of social entrepreneurship through service learning in Southeast Asia. *Education and Training*, 63(4), 588–605. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-06-2020-0178>
- Zainuddin, N., & Khalid, S. (2023). Integrating cultural identity in product innovation for traditional food sustainability in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Cultural Economics and Business*, 8(1), 32–47.
- Anuar, F. I., Azizan, N. A., & Yaacob, M. R. (2023). Sustaining traditional food heritage through community-based entrepreneurship: A case study in Malaysia. *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Environment Management*, 8(32), 39–49.
- Negar, N. Z., & Najafi, M. (2025). Improving employee performance through internal marketing and organizational learning: The mediating role of organizational innovation. *Journal of New Advances in Management and Marketing*, 4(1), 1–12.
- Pratama, A. S., & Raharjo, S. T. (2021). Cultural branding as a strategy to strengthen consumer loyalty on traditional culinary SMEs. *Jurnal Manajemen Dan Kewirausahaan*, 23(2), 89–97.
- Puspitasari, D., & Hidayat, A. (2020). Service learning in community empowerment: Case study of student social engagement program. *Jurnal Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat (Indonesian Journal of Community Engagement)*, 6(3), 579–588.
- Yosofvand, H. R., & Abdollahi, A. A. S. (2025). The role of rural women in the development of community-based tourism (CBT): A case study of villages around the Gahar Lake in Lorestan Province. *Spatial Planning*, 9(1), 33–45.