



SERVICE LEARNING IN STRENGTHENING INNOVATION, AUTHENTICITY, AND BRANDING OF HONEY PRODUCTS AT B-B TOWN SDN. BHD., MELAKA, MALAYSIA

SERVICE LEARNING IN STRENGTHENING INNOVATION, AUTHENTICITY, AND BRANDING OF HONEY PRODUCTS AT B-B TOWN SDN. BHD., MELAKA, MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This service-learning activity was conducted to address the challenges faced by the local business Rumah Madu in Melaka, Malaysia, specifically in maintaining product authenticity, developing innovation, and strengthening branding strategies amidst global market competition. The solution implemented involved a service-learning approach through instructional sessions and direct observation with business managers to understand the production process, marketing strategies, and quality management practices. The purpose of this activity was to identify innovation and branding practices rooted in the authenticity of local products, as well as to provide academic contributions through the application of management theories in real MSME contexts. This program also contributed to the partner by preparing business development recommendations based on innovation and digital marketing. The findings reveal that product innovation utilizing local bee biodiversity, the implementation of ISO-standard quality systems, and the use of digital media have strengthened the brand image and competitiveness of Rumah Madu. This experience demonstrates that service learning serves as an effective approach in bridging academic learning with the enhancement of local business capacity in a sustainable manner.

Keywords : Authenticity, Branding, Innovation, Service Learning.

Abstrak

Kegiatan pembelajaran berbasis pelayanan ini dilakukan untuk mengatasi tantangan yang dihadapi oleh bisnis lokal Rumah Madu di Melaka, Malaysia, khususnya dalam menjaga keaslian produk, mengembangkan inovasi, dan memperkuat strategi branding di tengah persaingan pasar global. Solusi yang diimplementasikan melibatkan pendekatan pembelajaran berbasis pelayanan melalui sesi instruksional dan observasi langsung dengan manajer bisnis untuk memahami proses produksi, strategi pemasaran, dan praktik manajemen mutu. Tujuan kegiatan ini adalah untuk mengidentifikasi inovasi dan praktik branding yang berakar pada keaslian produk lokal, serta memberikan kontribusi akademis melalui penerapan teori manajemen dalam konteks UMKM nyata. Program ini juga berkontribusi



kepada mitra dengan menyiapkan rekomendasi pengembangan bisnis berdasarkan inovasi dan pemasaran digital. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa inovasi produk yang memanfaatkan keanekaragaman hayati lebah lokal, implementasi sistem mutu standar ISO, dan penggunaan media digital telah memperkuat citra merek dan daya saing Rumah Madu. Pengalaman ini menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran berbasis pelayanan berfungsi sebagai pendekatan yang efektif dalam menjembatani pembelajaran akademis dengan peningkatan kapasitas bisnis lokal secara berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci : Keaslian, Pencitraan Merek, Inovasi, Pembelajaran Berbasis Pelayanan.

1. INTRODUCTION

Service-based learning is an educational approach that integrates academic activities with community service. This approach provides students with a hands-on experience of learning through social engagement, while providing tangible benefits to community partners. Service Learning combines cognitive, affective, and social aspects so that students can connect theory with real practice in public life and the business world. According to Mamat et al. (2019), the implementation of service learning in several countries, one of which is in Malaysia, has succeeded in increasing student involvement in social activities, building empathy, and strengthening university relationships with local communities.

As the third mission of higher education institutions, the university's involvement with the community through service learning is the key to solving local problems and advancing sustainable development (Uniservitate, 2024). In Southeast Asia, this model is increasingly recognized as a unique instructional strategy, capable of fostering civic responsibility and connecting classroom knowledge with real-world contextual applications (Alvarez vanegas et al., 2024). Thus, the program not only serves as a knowledge transfer, but also creates a mutually beneficial collaborative ecosystem.

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a strategic role in the economy, including in Malaysia. Based on the 2023 report of the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives Malaysia, more than 97% of enterprises in Malaysia are classified as MSMEs which contribute around 38% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 7 million jobs (Yusof & Aziz., 2022). MSMEs are also the main pillar in strengthening the community's economic resilience and encouraging equitable development.

However, in the midst of the rapid growth of the digital economy, MSMEs in Malaysia face various complex challenges, especially in terms of digital marketing, the availability of human resources with adequate digital skills, and increasingly fierce market competition (Salleh et al., 2025). Failure to adapt to digital innovation can hinder the ability of MSMEs to maintain their existence and expand their business reach to global markets. Therefore, the ability of MSMEs to adapt to innovation is a key factor in maintaining their existence in the midst of global market competition (Artanto et al., 2022).

One example of a leading MSME that represents the success of local product-based business development is Rumah Madu located in Melaka, Malaysia. It was established in 1978 as a brand and opened a showroom in Melaka in 2013. Rumah Madu is the largest honey producer in Malaysia with its own garden-based production system. Honey House products are not only marketed domestically, but have also penetrated the international market. This achievement shows the importance of innovation and branding strategies in maintaining product authenticity and expanding the distribution network in the global market.

The agribusiness sector, especially honey, faces a crucial issue regarding product authenticity. The issue of unoriginal honey or counterfeiting has created a negative stigma among global consumers, so the need to guarantee originality is very vital for the sustainability of local brands (Putritamara et al., 2021). To increase consumer trust, a honey brand must be able to prove the traceability of the product, from the hive to the packaging process. This makes authenticity a key asset in branding in the economic market.



In the context of the development of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), service learning plays an important role in strengthening innovation, maintaining the authenticity of local products, and building a strong brand image to be able to compete in the global market. Kurniawan & Rahmawati (2022) emphasized that university collaboration with MSME actors can increase innovation and branding through training activities, market research, and business mentoring. The results from Laurina et al. (2024) also support this view, digitalization and strategic branding have been proven to increase the competitiveness of MSMEs in the digital market through strengthening product identities and local narratives. This activity also provides an opportunity for students to contribute to the service, development, and marketing of local products.

Through this service learning program, students can collaborate with local communities to be able to support the economy through improving the quality and added value of selling products, developing digital-based innovations and branding strategies, strengthening the authenticity of local products that reflect Melaka's cultural identity, and increasing students' capacity to apply academic knowledge in the real world. Therefore, this service highlights the importance of the service learning approach in bridging the world of education and the business world that creates sustainable social, economic, and educational impacts.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The planning and implementation of activities in this service learning project is carried out collaboratively between students, supervisors, and the management of Honey House, Mr. Aidy Astri Abdullah. The planning process begins with the identification of business needs and development potential in the aspects of innovation, authenticity, and branding strategies for honey products. This collaboration aims to ensure that service-based learning activities not only provide a real experience for students, but also provide direct benefits for the development of local businesses managed by local communities (Diong et al., 2025). This approach is in line with the principle of service learning which emphasizes equal partnerships between universities and communities to create meaningful learning and empower local economies.

In the implementation of this service activity, students play the role of learning agents and innovators who actively interact with the community. Students had an in-depth discussion with the management of Rumah Madu to learn about the business history, production process, marketing strategy, and challenges in maintaining product quality. The service strategy used in this project is participatory. The participatory approach is applied through direct student involvement in discussions and analysis of the results of in-depth dialogue to find relevant development opportunities for businesses in branding strategies and honey product innovation. Hamzah et al. (2023) emphasized that participatory service learning encourages the formation of transformative learning experiences when students learn through active involvement with the community. These activities include direct observation at beehouses in Bukit Katil and Jasin, and documentation of the production process.

According to Bringle & Hatcher (1996), effective service learning or community service activities must go through a systematic process that includes community needs identification, activity planning, implementation, reflection, and evaluation. In line with that, the Directorate of Learning and Student Affairs (Kemendikbud, 2020) explained that the implementation of KKN includes four main phases, namely:

1. Planning

The initial stage involves analyzing the needs of partners or target communities, mapping local potential, and preparing activity plans. In this phase, students together with supervisors and partners determine the goals, targets, and forms of relevant service activities.

2. Implementation

At this stage, students carry out service activities according to the plan that has been prepared beforehand. This activity can be in the form of information search, training, business assistance,



community education or the application of appropriate technology. The main principles of this phase are collaborative, participatory, and action-oriented.

3. Reflection

Reflection is carried out to evaluate the learning process and experience of students as well as the impact of activities on partners. At this stage, students relate their field experience to the theory they have learned.

4. Evaluation & Follow-up

The final stage includes assessing the effectiveness of activities, gathering feedback from partners, and formulating recommendations for program sustainability.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Service learning activities at Rumah Madu have produced a number of important findings that show the close relationship between innovation, product authenticity, and strengthening branding through collaboration between universities and local business actors. This program is carried out through four main stages, namely: planning, implementation, reflection, and evaluation. The initial stage of planning is carried out through discussions between students, supervisors, and business partners to determine the focus of service activities. Based on the results of the identification of needs, Rumah Madu was chosen as a partner because it has the potential to develop innovation and branding of local honey products. At this stage, students prepare observation and discussion plans as a form of service-based service learning activities.

The implementation of the activity was carried out through in-depth dialogue and direct observation with one of the business managers, namely Mr. Aidy Astri Abdullah. This structured discussion aims to understand the history of the establishment, honey production process, and marketing strategy. Based on the search for information, it was found that Rumah Madu was established in 1978 with a showroom opened in Melaka in 2013. The main goal of its establishment is to become the largest honey seller or supplier in Malaysia, as well as a provider of high-quality local honey products.



Figure 1. Outdoor Display and Educational Display at Honey House

Based on the question and answer session, Rumah Madu has three main types of bees, namely: kelulut bees, Italian bees (European Bee), and tualang bees (Forest Bees). These three types of bees produce a unique and distinct honey flavor that reflects innovation through biodiversity utilization as



explained by Chen & Zhang (2021), that innovation based on local natural resources can increase the competitive advantage of products through differentiation of taste and function.

This product differentiation is a key strategy for Rumah Madu to compete in the premium market. By offering unique honey varieties such as Kelulut (which is sour) and Tualang (forest honey that is difficult to cultivate), the company creates its own added value and niche market (Mohd-aspar et al., 2024). This shows that product innovation does not always come from new technologies, but also from the exploitation and intelligent management of unique and authentic natural resources in Melaka (Sukri et al., 2023).

The production process is carried out with a combination of traditional and modern methods, namely honey extraction is done manually for small scale and using machines for large scale, reflecting the balance between efficiency and maintaining traditional quality. Meanwhile, the honey packaging process is carried out in a factory with ISO standards and is equipped with Malaysian health certification that ensures product purity and safety. This is in line with the findings of Samat & Ramayah (2023) which states that the implementation of a quality control system based on international standards can increase consumer confidence in local products.

Commitment to authenticity is emphasized through strict quality control practices, starting from the honeycomb to product storage and distribution. Based on Mr. Aidy's statement, the quality of honey is greatly influenced by the moisture content and condition of the hive, so strict supervision is carried out to prevent pests, bees, and natural predators. This integrated quality control is a vital element in ensuring the traceability of Rumah Madu's honey products, which is a determining factor for consumer trust in processed food products. This step shows the company's commitment to purity.



Figure 2. Demonstration Of The Honey Extraction Process

The Honeyhouse Company shows a real contribution to the surrounding community. Most of the workers at Rumah Madu are from the surrounding community from the Melaka area, so the company acts as a local employment provider and contributes to the region's GDP. In addition, the Honey House company also opened beegardens in various regions, such as: Bukit Katil, Jasin, and Melaka which are also used as educational tourist locations and are open to the public. This reflects the concept of community-based entrepreneurship as explained by Hamzah et al. (2023) that socially oriented small businesses can be the driving force for community development as well as a center for entrepreneurship learning.

When it comes to marketing and branding promotion, the company combines conventional and digital strategies. The old way with the use of brochures and direct promotions is still maintained, but



since the last three years the company has expanded marketing through digital platforms. The Honey House Company is active in various social media and e-commerce such as Instagram, Facebook, and Shopee. Engagement on these digital platforms significantly increases brand visibility and opens up wider market opportunities. Now, Honey House has exported its products to foreign countries such as Singapore, Korea, Thailand, and Middle Eastern countries. This strategy is in accordance with the view of Widiastuti & Nurhadi (2021), that the implementation of digital branding can expand market reach and increase the brand equity of MSMEs through presence on e-commerce platforms, allowing MSMEs to compete with large companies at the international level.

The reflection stage is carried out after question and answer activities and observations to assess the student's learning experience. Through discussions with supervisors, students reflect on how this process provides insight into local business management, product innovation, and branding strategies. This reflection is important to connect field experience with the theory that has been learned. From the results of the reflection, it was understood that the success of the Honey House company does not only lie in the scale of production, but also in the commitment to quality, sustainability, and empowerment of the local community. Mr. Aidy Astri Abdullah emphasized the importance of maintaining a balance between productivity and nature conservation. He also gave a message to the younger generation to "not kill bees, especially kelulut bees that do not sting and have high ecological value" and encourage entrepreneurial interest in the field of beekeeping. Through this reflection, students realize that business innovation cannot be separated from social and environmental responsibility.

Evaluation is carried out by compiling reports on the results of information and observations as a form of academic contribution to the development of partner businesses in an article. Students and supervisors conduct a joint analysis of the findings to identify opportunities for product development and digital promotion. This evaluation shows that service learning activities can provide benefits for both parties students to gain real experience, while business partners get documentation and business development advice.

Discussion

During the service learning activities, it was seen that there was a close relationship between academic learning, business innovation, and local community empowerment to strengthen the university's role as an agent of social change. Collaboration between universities and MSMEs can be an effective model in developing local products based on knowledge and culture (Wahab., 2024). This model emphasizes the concept of engaged scholarship, namely the theoretical knowledge of management students directly tested and applied to real business challenges in Melaka.

In terms of innovation, the Company is able to combine traditional methods and modern technology in the honey production process. This is in line with the principle of innovation-based learning, which is that students learn directly from field practice and see how innovation is applied to increase efficiency without reducing the authenticity of the product (Gill & Hanafi., 2020). This innovation can be seen from the adaptation of extraction methods (manual vs machine) according to production volume, which is an example of efficient operational management.

Innovations carried out by Rumah Madu both through product development (various types of honey), processing methods, and marketing digitalization can strengthen business performance and competitiveness. This is in line with Chen & Zhang (2021) who stated that the ability to innovate makes company performance increase mediated by business model innovation. In this context, Rumah Madu's innovation in utilizing the uniqueness of tualang bees (forest honey) as a premium product is a differentiation of business models that create new market segments.

The aspect of authenticity is at the core of branding food products such as honey. Rumah Mahoney's production practices emphasize the importance of maintaining the natural quality of honey from honeycomb to packaging, ISO standards and Malaysian health certifications are proof of the company's commitment to product authenticity. Students can learn how the value of authenticity is the main force in maintaining consumer trust (Mijan, Noor, & Jaafar., 2020). Supply chain transparency



and ethical practices are essential in fostering consumer trust and encouraging positive buying actions. By providing a guarantee that honey is not counterfeited or diluted, Rumah Madu puts authenticity as the main selling point that is proof of the feasibility of the selling price.

In terms of branding, Rumah Mahoney's marketing strategy shows a transformation from a conventional way to a digital one. The existence of products on e-commerce platforms such as Shopee, as well as promotional activities on social media, also strengthen the brand image and expand the international market. This shows that service learning is not only beneficial for students, but also helps MSMEs strengthen technology-based promotion strategies (Jumbulingam et al., 2024).

Digital innovation plays an important role in strengthening branding and increasing the competitiveness of local products (Widiastuti & Nurhadi, 2021). The success of exports to countries such as Korea and the Middle East is proof that digital marketing strategies allow Malaysian MSMEs to reach a global audience at a more cost-efficient cost than traditional methods. The increase in export prices (conversion to SGD) also shows that authentic branding has created premium value in international markets.

In addition, the involvement of local communities shows that the success of MSMEs is not only measured from economic aspects, but also social. By providing jobs for local residents and opening educational tours of beekeeping, Rumah Madu contributes to sustainable community development, namely the Sustainable Development goals (SDGs 8) (Alamsyahbana et al., 2024).

Broadly speaking, support for Rumah Madu reflects the importance of a sustainable business model that balances economic, social, and cultural preservation benefits. With strong innovation and branding, Rumah Madu can become a representation of modern MSMEs that are able to compete in the global market without losing the value of the authenticity of their local products. The involvement of students in this program also fosters ecological awareness and social empathy, in line with the concept of service learning as the optimal methodology for sustainable development.

This activity shows that service learning can be a forum for transformative learning, namely students not only acquire practical skills, but also build ecological awareness and social empathy for local business actors (Naufal et al., 2024). Thus, the project becomes a bridge between the Management academic curriculum and the real challenge of creating an innovative, authentic, and sustainable business ecosystem.



Figure 3. Student activities at the Honey House

4. CONCLUSION

The service learning activity carried out at Rumah Madu, B-B Town Sdn. Bhd., Melaka, Malaysia, made a real contribution to strengthening the relationship between academic learning and community-based business practices. Through in-depth learning and observation with business managers, this activity resulted in an understanding that the success of Rumah Madu as a highly competitive local honey producer is determined by the synergy between product innovation, commitment to authenticity, and the implementation of branding strategies that are adaptive to digital developments. Quality control practices from production to distribution, as well as the quality certification applied, are the foundation in building consumer trust and strengthening the brand's position in the global market.



Academically, the implementation of this service learning strengthens the relevance of innovation and marketing management theory in the real context of micro and small businesses. Students gain experience regarding the application of the concept of local resource-based innovation, digital branding strategies, and sustainability-oriented product quality management. This experience shows that the combination of product innovation, authenticity, and digital transformation is the main determinant in building added value and competitiveness of MSMEs at the international level.

However, this service activity has limitations. Activities that focus on structured discussions and observations have not allowed the implementation of direct mentoring strategies on the impact of innovation and branding carried out. In addition, time constraints and the scope of activities limit further exploration of managerial aspects such as operational efficiency, financial analysis, or sustainable export strategies.

Therefore, continued service is recommended to integrate participatory and collaborative approaches that involve direct business intervention so that the results are more comprehensive and applicable to business partners. Overall, this activity emphasizes that service learning plays a strategic role in developing student competencies and supporting the sustainability of local businesses. Collaboration between universities and MSME actors such as Rumah Madu has created an impact, namely strengthening the academic capacity of students and empowering the community's economy through innovation, authenticity, and globally oriented branding of local products.

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