The value that small business community partners place on a marketing-oriented service learning project

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A majority of service learning (SL) studies focus on the student benefits and challenges, whereas few consider the organization (community partner) viewpoint. This study examines the value that small businesses place on a marketing-oriented SL project run by the academic Marketing Department at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in South Africa. A client programme evaluation was administered via a structured questionnaire and a survey in order to discern the perceptions of 107 small business community partners. Perceived value was cross-tabulated with the performance benefits, lack of value reasons, satisfaction, lasting value, future participation, and student group variables (registration and grades). Small businesses generally found that the SL project added value to their organizations. Those small business community partners who found the SL project less valuable noted reasons such as lack of project coordinator involvement, ineffective communication, and the SL project was not apt for their business.

Service learning (SL) is a work-integrated learning (WIL) pedagogical practice that aims to incorporate formal academic content with community service work. Students are required to participate in academic community service activities, which provide them with practical experience via the application of classroom learning (Rinaldo et al., 2015). Hence, SL is a type of community engagement that endeavors to impart difficult-to-understand ideas and concepts to the students (Higher Education Quality Committee [HEQC], 2006). A number of SL projects have been implemented by universities in South Africa since the publication of the *Programme for the transformation of higher education* white paper (South African Government Department of Education, 1997). HEQC (2006) emphasizes that most community partners are located in underprivileged areas and are disadvantaged in South Africa. Nonprofit organizations predominately function as the community partners in SL projects. However, small businesses are increasingly fulfilling the community partner role in SL projects (Mitchell, 2018; Mokoena & Spencer, 2017; Paphitis & Pearse, 2017; Scholtz, 2018; Sotelino-Losada et al., 2021). McIntyre et al. (2005) and Mitchell (2018) affirm that nonprofit organizations and small businesses are limited by internal (e.g., human) and financial resources necessary for basic business tasks, which often include strategic planning, business, management and marketing. However, Vasbinder and Koehler (2015) suggest that students show greater engagement and are more positive toward small business-related SL projects compared to 'pure' philanthropic SL projects. Furthermore, small business community partners are generally more involved, useful and professional compared to nonprofit organizations. Dipadova-Stocks (2005) and Higgins and Aspinall (2011) verify that the involvement of community partners and student participation is lower in 'pure' SL projects versus private-sector SL projects. Consequently, the ensuing SL projects have not only assisted local disadvantaged communities with the services of skills, knowledge, expertise and additional resources, but provided students with a means to engage in experiential learning and practically apply theoretical concepts learnt in the classroom (Merkey & Palombi, 2020; Naik et al., 2020).

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Although much recent international examination has considered the value of SL projects from the student perspective (Alexander-Ruff & Ruff, 2021; Ferdiansyah et al., 2022; Gipson et al., 2021; Gonzales et al., 2021; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2021) and in South Africa (Bhagwan, 2020; Botha & Bezuidenhout, 2020; Jacobs, 2020), not much recent international (Husseinifard et al., 2022; Jordaan & Mennega, 2022; Merkey & Palombi, 2020; Mungaray-Lagarda et al., 2022; Naik et al., 2020; Rinaldo et al., 2015) and South African (Matthews, 2019; Mtawa & Fongwa, 2022; Westraadt, 2018) inquiry endeavored to ascertain the value of SL projects from a community partner viewpoint. This is worrying, as an important factor of SL is reciprocity and mutuality (Botha & Bezuidenhout, 2020; Cromhout et al., 2021; Jordaan & Mennega, 2022; Mtawa & Fongwa, 2022). There has been a growing call to conduct research that can inform programme improvement for which the community perspective is essential (HEQC, 2006). In addition, Merkey and Palombi (2020) and Mtawa and Fongwa (2022) assert that organizers of SL must ensure that it adds value to the host organization rather than creating unnecessary burdens and unanticipated hardship. Business-related SL projects are also essential in aiding small businesses (especially those that are disadvantaged) with additional resources and expertise in developing nations (Mungaray et al., 2007; Mungaray-Lagarda et al., 2022). Simola (2009); Mtawa and Fongwa (2022); and Mungaray-Lagarda et al. (2022) posit a need for additional inquiry that relates to small business SL projects in developing nations. So, this study attempts to bridge the aforementioned research gaps by examining small businesses in terms of the value of a South African marketing-oriented SL project.

Cape Peninsula University of Technology Service Learning Project Overview

The Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) academic Marketing Department initiated a SL project designed to provide small businesses with marketing expertise at no cost to the community partners. The SL project was dubbed the Brand Shepherd Advertising Challenge because it collaborated with Brand Shepherd, a local marketing agency. Since the programme started in 2010, it has served hundreds of small businesses while simultaneously giving students valuable, cooperative and experiential WIL experience. Second year marketing students formed small agencies and were then required to find local small businesses (e.g., food stores, spaza shops, shebeens, taverns, restaurants, beauty salons, barbershops, clothing retailers, etc.) in their communities with little to no marketing. McIntyre et al. (2005) postulate that marketing-oriented SL projects are appropriate for small businesses, since marketing students can find solutions to practical problems via apt marketing communications and marketing strategies. Most of CPUT's marketing students come from disadvantaged communities owing to the inequalities stemming from apartheid, and are classified as previously disadvantaged individuals (i.e., Indian, Mixed Ancestry and Black African) (Duffett, 2022). Therefore, a majority of the community partners also resided in disadvantaged communities, and were generally classified as microenterprises (96% had 10 or less employees). The SL project carried a weight of eight credits, which equates to 80 notional hours. The students spent the year developing and implementing various marketing strategies designed to increase sales and business performance for their partner small businesses. The students then conducted secondary (desk) research on the applicable industries, and primary research among the small businesses' customers in order to conduct a situational analysis and write a strategic plan in the first semester. Thereafter, the students were required to develop a marketing communication campaign plan, which was first presented to Brand Shepherd and the university staff SL project coordinator for feedback (in the second semester), before presenting the campaign plan to the small business community partners. The students were required to develop various marketing resources and tools (websites/blogs, social media pages, instant messaging profiles, email, online and print advertisements, advertising posters, branded items, customer database, loyalty cards, press releases, pamphlets, business cards, suggestion boxes, etc.) and

other promotional material (dependent on the small business needs that were identified in the situational analysis), implement no-cost elements of the campaign plan, and provide informal training (on the use and maintenance of the abovementioned marketing resources and tools) to the small business community partners. Hence, this SL project sought to make a tangible difference in mainly disadvantaged communities by assisting community partners with marketing and marketing communications in an endeavor to improve the performance of the small businesses.

Scholtz (2018) investigated the marketing-orientated SL project (primarily from the student perspective) during a single academic year to assess its value. The students mostly provided positive feedback by highlighting a number of benefits in the survey, viz.: the practical application of classroom knowledge to real-life clients/businesses, innovative and creative problem solving, team work, time management (i.e., the ability to meet tight deadlines), and to work under pressure in a real-world context. Scholtz (2018) also assessed the informal feedback documents (qualitative) that the small business community partners were required to submit to the university staff coordinator upon conclusion of the SL project. Generally, favorable feedback was received from the small businesses, which highlighted a number of benefits that were derived from participating in the SL project, namely: digital marketing platform and other marketing resources and tools development training, new marketing ideas, and being motivated and stimulated by the students energy, innovation and creativity.

Hence, the study's primary research objective is to conduct a comprehensive client (small business community partner) SL project evaluation, with the intention of determining it's the overall value, and whether perceived value differed across the performance benefits, reasons for lack of value, satisfaction, and lasting value variables. The study also endeavored to gain insights for improvement of the marketing-oriented SL project by assessing whether the perceived value differed across the future participation, student registration and grade variables.

SERVICE LEARNING THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

SL is a WIL pedagogy that is based on experiences in order to serve the needs of the community by providing students with the opportunity for practical experience, structured reflection and a balanced curriculum (Rinaldo et al., 2015). HEQC (2006) suggests a blurring between different forms of SL such as internships, volunteerism, community outreach, co-operative education, academic community service and community-based learning, but the shared denominator is the inclusion of some type of experiential WIL. SL can be distinguishable from other forms of WIL owing to the students' reflection on their personal experiences (challenges and successes), which facilitates greater student learning and civic responsibility (Berry & Workman, 2007; HEQC, 2006; Sotelino-Losada et al., 2021), but the student perspective was not the objective of this study. As mentioned in prior discourse, the use of small businesses as community partners in SL projects has experienced rapid growth in recent years (Cromhout & Duffett, 2022; Mungaray-Lagarda et al., 2022; Ortiz-Fernández & Tarifa-Fernández, 2022). Mungaray et al. (2007) and Niehm et al. (2015) affirm a number of parallels between nonprofit organizations and small businesses, which make both types of organization suitable for SL projects. These are: both have limited financial and human and constraints; struggle to access business advancement services (e.g., training, consultation and other related forms of assistance); support social causes (e.g., reduce poverty and create employment); and students receive expertise, experience and practical training that is vital for experiential learning, and personal growth and development. Community partners have noted benefits such as access to additional resources and tools (Jordaan & Mennega, 2022; Rinaldo et al., 2015), access to funding and increased capacity (Plaut, 2013; Rinaldo et

al., 2015), improved organizational performance (Naik et al., 2020), increased status and legitimacy of programmes (Preece, 2016), and greater organizational impact (Rinaldo et al., 2015). SL not only teaches students the importance of giving back to the community, it also allows students to apply the classroom taught knowledge and skills to real-life organizations (clients) in a real-world milieu (Fraustino et al., 2019).

SL is one of the main approaches used by tertiary education institutions to assist in attaining the educational and social demands placed on them by the South African government (Botha & Bezuidenhout, 2020). SL endeavors to establish and create mutually advantageous associations with communities, which generally includes the following key stakeholders: service providers (Brand Shepherd was used as the service provider for this SL project), community partners (i.e., small businesses in this study) and university (students and academic staff coordinators) (Christopher et al., 2020; Jacobs, 2020). SL initiatives also aim to develop and grow the students intellectually, practically, ethically and culturally, as well as provide a means for experiential training (Fraustino et al., 2019; Naik et al., 2020). Community engagement is essential for the transformation of education, especially via SL initiatives, by responding to the call for higher education to "demonstrate social responsibility…through making their expertise and infrastructure available to community service programmes" (South African Government Department of Education, 1997, p. 9). Students gain knowledge from the community (García-Rico et al., 2021; Jordaan & Mennega, 2022), gain a sense of responsibility (Fraustino et al., 2019), make associations between society needs and classroom concepts (Jacobs, 2020; Rodríguez-Nogueira et al., 2020), enhance intercultural competencies (Gipson et al., 2021), and achieve personal development goals (Du Plessis, 2020; Juaneda-Ayensa et al., 2019).

From a student perspective, SL value is commonly assessed via practical skills and expertise growth, attitudinal changes, knowledge development and/or experience satisfaction (Horning et al., 2020; Rinaldo et al., 2015; Rodríguez-Nogueira et al., 2020). SL projects have also been found to produce some student value even if unsuccessful in meeting the community partner needs. Furlow (2010) reported that students increased their practical skills by developing a website for organizations effected by Hurricane Katrina. The website failed to gain any media exposure, but the students received additional learning by analyzing the SL project failure challenges. Community partners make significant resources, effort and time contributions during SL projects, which include planning, implementation and evaluation stages. However, the community partner does not receive much value when a SL project does not adequately achieve their needs and goals, especially when they put in more resources, effort and time than what they ultimately get out. Consequently, community partners may develop negative sentiment towards SL projects, which might inhibit future participation (Rinaldo et al., 2015). Conversely, many community partners experience significant value when SL projects are effectively managed, which often results in the dissemination of favorable word-of-mouth, reinforces associations with community partners, increases future participation, and strengthens the sustainability of SL projects (Naik et al., 2020; Rinaldo et al., 2015). The improvement and development of SL projects should garner input from all stakeholders, but particularly the beneficiaries of SL endeavors, viz. the community partners. Hence, this study seeks to ascertain the value that small business community partners derive from a marketing-oriented SL project in order to promote an approach that is more client-centric.

SMALL BUSINESS CONTEXT

Small businesses are perceived as major drivers of global socio-economic development due to their ability to reduce poverty, create jobs, and assist in the equalization wealth income distribution (Iwu,

2017). However, over 70% of new South African small businesses close in one to two years of operation (Bushe, 2019; Mokwena, 2021). Iwu (2017) ascertains that small businesses are able to become more sustainable if they implement business management tactics, which include marketing. Other inquires verified that marketing was an essential element that would not only increase sustainability, but also promote growth of businesses (Kallier, 2017; van Scheers, 2018). Therefore, several inquiries sought to provide insight into small business marketing problems, which include: branding issues (Makhitha, 2019), the impact of inappropriate marketing tactics on the failure of businesses (Cant, 2012; van Scheers, 2018), the effect of small business retailer competition (Chiliya et al., 2009), and the influence of no or poor marketing skills on business growth (Lekhanya & Mason, 2013). A number of inquiries confirm that small businesses do not only face limited finance access that curtail growth, but also suffer from a lack of marketing and management skills (Lekhanya & Mason, 2013; Mbatha & Ngwenya, 2018; Mungaray-Lagarda et al., 2022). Additionally, some investigations show that small businesses are aware that marketing is important (Franco et al., 2014), but do not possess the necessary knowledge, resources, skills and expertise to effectively implement marketing (Cant, 2012; Mbatha & Ngwenya, 2018).

Consequently, several investigations mandated that additional support programmes be developed as a mechanism to aid small businesses with marketing expertise, as well as to improve current initiatives via research techniques that include programme evaluation (Juaneda-Ayensa et al., 2019; Kallier, 2017; Mbatha & Ngwenya, 2018; Rambe, 2017). SL projects often move beyond experiential learning and can have a major favorable impact on the small businesses' performance and circumstances, since specific problems can be resolved by the students via the practical application of theoretical subject principles (Berry & Workman, 2007). A number of inquiries have examined small business support and training programmes in terms of effectiveness (Briere et al., 2015; Duffett & Cromhout, 2022b; Ferreira et al., 2010; Ladzani & Netswera, 2009; Ligthelm, 2008; Malapane & Makhubele, 2013; Mungaray-Lagarda et al., 2022; Peters & Naicker, 2013). The research shows that small business support programme endeavors, but frequently do not lead to significant growth (Ligthelm, 2008); are sometimes not clear about small business needs (Ferreira et al., 2010); and are difficult to access and too costly (Ladzani & Netswera, 2009). Small businesses frequently express dissatisfaction with support programmes owing to the lack of continual support and a dearth of information (Malapane & Makhubele, 2013). Peters and Naicker (2013) assert that small businesses perceive government support programmes are too administrative intensive (i.e., too much red tape) and are not of value. Briere et al. (2015) add that the programmes are frequently irrelevant to small business needs.

Accordingly, South Africa needs to establish a nurturing and sustainable a small business environment, and overcome the issues that small businesses experience in relation to support programme initiatives. This investigation aimed to ascertain if a marketing-oriented SL project could add value and provide support to local small businesses that were mainly situated in disadvantaged communities.

HYPOTHESES

A number of prior inquiries reveal that SL projects add value to community partners' businesses (; Jordaan & Mennega, 2022; Matthews, 2019; Mungaray-Lagarda et al., 2022; Naik et al., 2020; Rinaldo et al., 2015; Westraadt, 2018). Other studies affirm SL projects (especially marketing-oriented) result in performance benefits than can increase: brand awareness (Sprague & Hu, 2015), a gain in new customers (van Vuuren & Botha, 2010; Vizenor et al., 2017), sales (Furlow, 2010; Rinaldo et al., 2015), competitive advantage (Sharma, 2015), employee motivation (Tyron et al., 2008; van Vuuren & Botha,

2010), business efficiency (Naik et al., 2020; Tyron et al., 2008) and customer loyalty (Scholtz, 2018). Therefore, it is hypothesized:

> H1. Perceived value is higher for small business community partners who specify performance benefits due to the SL project.

Schachter and Schwartz (2009) report that one in three organizations indicate that SL projects are not beneficial in terms of helpfulness. A lack of positive value resulting from SL is also recorded by Krasynska et al. (2013). Gazley et al. (2013) show that 20% of organizations perceive SL projects to not be beneficial. Consequently, the students SL project work may not be of an appropriate quality to produce performance benefits for the small businesses (Mokoena & Spencer, 2017). Therefore, it is hypothesized:

> H2. Perceived value is lower for small business community partners who indicate no positive performance benefits due to SL project.

A number of challenges could potentially contribute to the lack of value of SL projects. Harrington (2014) indicates that SL projects place a greater workload on community partners who are already overloaded. Darby et al. (2013) advise organizations to be cautious about participating in SL projects due to the large amount of time that it took for student engagement throughout the course of SL initiatives. A lack of involvement from the SL project university staff coordinator is cited as a major problem by several authors (Matthews, 2019; McReynolds, 2014; Steimel, 2013). Literature shows that communication can be problematic among all SL stakeholders, viz. community partners, service partners, university staff coordinators and students (Barrientos, 2010; Matthews, 2019; McReynolds, 2014; Sprague & Hu, 2015; Steimel, 2013; Vizenor et al., 2017; Worrall, 2007). Gazley et al. (2013) assert that community partner student engagement is sometimes not effective due to staff resistance and other organizational priorities. Darby et al. (2013) found that several community partners were not appropriate in terms of the students allocated to specific organizations. Similarly, Gazley et al. (2013) and Rinaldo et al. (2015) listed poor resources (e.g., money, space, and staff) as a restrictive variable to effectively engage and extract the full value out of SL projects. Several other studies also indicate that a fund shortage was a major barrier for small businesses to effectively implement marketing strategies (dos Santos & Duffett, 2021; Lekhanya, 2015; Lekhanya & Mason, 2013; van Scheers, 2018). Therefore, it is hypothesized:

> H3. Perceived value is lower for small business community partners who identify challenges with the SL project.

Many inquiries also report high satisfaction levels among organizations that took part in SL projects (Campbell & Lambright, 2011; Duffett & Cromhout, 2022a; Gazley et al., 2013; Krasynska et al., 2013; Mungaray-Lagarda et al., 2022; Schachter & Schwartz, 2009; Vasbinder & Koehler, 2015). Therefore, it is hypothesized:

> H4. Perceived value is higher for small business community partners who are satisfied with the SL project.

A number authors suggest that SL projects add enduring value to their community partner organizations (Campbell & Lambright, 2011; Duffett & Cromhout, 2022c; Gazley et al., 2013; Jordaan & Mennega, 2022; Krasynska et al., 2013; Matthews, 2019; Naik et al., 2020; Rinaldo et al., 2015; Vizenor et

al., 2017; Westraadt, 2018). Schachter and Schwartz (2009) also affirm that SL programmes add lasting value for the community partner organizations. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

> H5. Perceived value is higher for small business community partners who indicate lasting value due to the SL project.

Plaut (2013) reveal that most community partner organizations are keen to rejoin SL projects again, with one of the respondent's stating: "the possible positive ripple effect from the students is immeasurable" (pp. 12). In the case of Schachter and Schwartz (2009), there is also a clear correlation between usefulness, lasting value, and satisfaction, which emphasizes that the more benefits community partners receive from SL projects, the higher the satisfaction, and the more likely the SL programme is to provide lasting value to the organizations that results in future participation. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

> H6. Perceived value is higher for small business community partners who affirm participation in future SL projects.

Part-time students frequently have greater work and marketing experience, especially since a number of them are employed in marketing positions. Hence, part-time students may provide small business community partners with superior service compared to the full-time students who generally have no to little work and/or marketing experience (Anderson, 2019). Therefore, it is hypothesized:

> H7. Perceived value is higher for small business community partners who work with part-time registered students in the SL project.

Robinson (2018) reveals that student grading practices are important when assessing the value of WIL pedagogical practices among all stakeholders. So, higher student grades for the SL project may increase the perceived value of small business community partners. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

> H8. Perceived value is higher for small business community partners who work with students who received higher grades for the SL project.

METHODOLOGY

Bhattacherjee (2012) refers to quantitative research as the collection and interpretation of metrics, scores and other numerical data, which can be utilized to formulate hypotheses, generalize findings, assess causality, and identify trends for larger research populations. Additionally, quantitative research provides a more accurate account of characteristics of the particular individuals or groups of the phenomenon under investigation. Several other small business-related SL projects have adopted quantitative methods for their research (Mokoena & Spencer, 2017; Mungaray et al., 2007; Mungaray-Lagarda et al., 2022; Scholtz, 2018). Accordingly, the selected design of this research was also quantitative in nature, so as to investigate the complex associations of the aforementioned hypotheses for a relatively large research population. Hence, this research design was utilized in order to ascertain the value that the small business community partners derived from the SL project over an extended time period, examining if perceived value differed among the performance benefits, reasons for lack of value, satisfaction, lasting value, future participation, student registration and grades for the SL project. Accordingly, small businesses were surveyed that partook in the marketing-oriented SL project over a five-year period.

All 280 the small business managers and owners, who had participated in the SL project over the five-year period, were contacted by phone to request affirmative involvement in the survey. Ethical approval was sought and received from the Faculty of Business and Management Science's research ethics committee to conduct the study (clearance certificate no. FBREC2522015). Ultimately, a total of 107 business owners participated in the study.

The research examined the SL project's value by employing a client (community partner) program evaluation research technique, which took the form of an empirical survey. The descriptive research design assessed the small business perceptions via the following criteria: student and small business inputs, student-small business community partner outputs, and small business SL project outcomes. The research employed structured questionnaires that aimed to determine the value that small businesses derived from the SL project. The criteria were analyzed in terms of the above-mentioned SL project factors, namely performance benefits, reasons for lack of value, satisfaction, lasting value and future participation (independent variables), and student group independent variables (student registration and grades for the SL project) via cross-tabulation with the single-item four-point perceived value scale (dependent variable).

Questions relating to the benefits, reasons for the lack of value, satisfaction and lasting value were represented by single-item scales and 'list' multiple response options, which were adapted from Hopkins (2012); Kallier (2017); Oji et al. (2017); Rosenberg et al. (2016); and Schachter and Schwartz (2009), and examined via one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistical measures to ascertain if there were significant difference in relation to the perceived value of the SL project. In order to determine and locate the variability between the groups, a Bonferroni post-hoc test measure was used to examine the estimated marginal means via the pair-wise comparisons.

RESULTS

Small Business and Student Group Descriptive Statistics

The data showed that most of the small business community partners operated in the community, personal, social and services (42.1%) or wholesale and retail (50.5%) industries. Most small businesses were older than 2.5 years (89.5%), employed 10 or less people (96%), and were situated in the Cape Flats (32.7%), Southern Suburbs (22.4%), or City Bowl of Cape Town (20.6%). Over half (52.9%) of the small businesses annual turnover was less than $12,500. Most of the small businesses functioned as sole proprietors (43.1%), privates companies (22.5%) or closed corporations (26.5%).

The students were either registered full-time or part-time, which provided insight as to whether they had previous work experience or not. A majority of students were registered for full-time studies (72%), whereas the rest were completing the course on a part-time basis (28%). Student grades provide an indication of the work quality of the final SL projects produced by the students. Over two-thirds of the students (68.2%) passed the SL project by achieving a grade that ranged from 50% to 74%. A minority of students received a distinction grade of 75% and above (19.6%) or failed the SL project (12.1%).

Table 1 provides a full overview of the SL project descriptive statistics in terms of the small businesses perceived value, performance benefits, reasons for lack of value, satisfaction, lasting value variables and future participation, as well as student group variables that include student registration and grades for the SL project.

TABLE 1: Service Learning project descriptive statistics.

		%
Perceived value	Valuable	18.4
	Somewhat valuable	24.3
	Was previously valuable	31.1
	Not valuable	26.2
Performance benefits	Increased brand awareness	41.7
	New customers	44.7
	Increased sales	39.8
	Increased competitive advantage	12.6
	Increased employee motivation	14.6
	Increased business efficiency	17.5
	Increased customer loyalty	26.2
	There was no positive value	33.0
Lack of value reasons (challenges)	Lack of time	57.6
	Lack of finances	28.2
	Lack of the appropriate people	17.6
	The SL project was not apt for the business	3.5
	Lack of knowledge	22.4
	Lack of project coordinator involvement	16.5
	Lack of communication from students	30.6
	Lack of communication overall	10.6
Satisfaction	Very satisfied	24.5
	Satisfied	47.2
	Dissatisfied	22.6
	Very dissatisfied	5.7
Lasting value	Significant lasting value	21.2
	Some lasting value	30.8
	Minimal lasting value	26.0
	No lasting value	18.2
	Negative value	3.8
Participation in the future	Yes	81.0
	No	19.0
Student registration	Part-time	28.0
	Full-time	72.0
SL project student grades	Fail (<50%)	12.1
	Pass (50%-74%)	68.2
	Distinction (>75%)	19.6

Note. Although the sample size was 107, in some instances questions were not applicable or respondents could select multiple options. As such, although the valid percentage is given, percentages may at times not add up to 100%.

Service Learning Project Perceived Value

ANOVA showed that the overall perceived value (dependent variable) of the SL project was significant at $p<0.001$ and $p<0.05$ (M=2.35, SD=1.064) since there were differences when this variable was cross-tabulated with the independent variables, which included the performance benefits, reasons for lack of

value (challenges), satisfaction, lasting value variables, future participation, student registration and student grades for the SL project (discussed below). The Bonferroni correction post-hoc test measures showed where the significant differences were located between the aforementioned independent variables.

Small business community partners, who perceived the SL project to be valuable, noted the following significant business performance benefits: increased brand awareness (M=3.05, SD=0.785, $p<0.001$), new customers (M=3.09, SD=0.830, $p<0.001$), increased sales (M=3.17, SD=0.803, $p<0.001$), increased competitive advantage (M=3.33, SD=0.888, $p<0.001$), increased employee motivation (M=3.13, SD=0.915, $p<0.05$), increased business efficiency (M=3.06, SD=0.827, $p<0.05$) and increased customer loyalty (M=2.93, SD=0.874, $p<0.050$). Accordingly, *H1* was supported.

Small business community partners who cited no performance benefits due to the SL project (M=1.32, SD=0.535, $p<0.001$) indicated that it was less valuable versus those that perceived positive benefits (M=2.86, SD=0.879, $p<0.001$), so *H2* was supported.

Statistically significant variables that inhibited the perceived value of the SL project (i.e., challenges) included: the SL project was not apt for the business (M=1.00, SD=0.000, $p<0.050$), a lack of communication from students (M=1.31, SD=0.679, $p<0.001$), a lack of project coordinator involvement (M=1.64, SD=0.745, $p<0.050$) and a lack of communication overall (M=1.67, SD=0.707, $p<0.050$). The lack of time ($p=0.792$); lack of finances ($p=0.148$); lack of the appropriate people ($p=0.437$); and lack of knowledge ($p=0.387$) variables were not found to be statistically different, so *H3* was partially supported.

Small business community partners who were very satisfied (M=3.23, SD=0.908, $p<0.001$) and satisfied (M=2.53, SD=0.830, $p<0.001$) indicated that the SL project was more valuable compared to those that were very dissatisfied (M=1.00, SD=0.000, $p<0.001$) and dissatisfied (M=1.35, SD=0.573, $p<0.001$), so *H4* was supported.

Small business community partners who reported the SL project to have a significant lasting value (M=3.52, SD=0.750, $p<0.001$), some lasting value (M=2.67, SD=0.884, $p<0.001$) and minimal lasting value (M=2.04, SD=0.662, $p<0.001$) indicated that the SL project was more valuable in comparison to those that had experienced no lasting value (M=1.16, SD=0.375, $p<0.001$), or negative value (M=1.25, SD=0.500, $p<0.001$), so *H5* was supported.

Small business community partners who affirmed that they would participate in future SL projects (M=2.51, SD=1.055, $p<0.001$) indicated that the SL project was more valuable compared to those that stated they would not participate again (M=1.60, SD=0.754, $p<0.001$), so *H6* was supported.

Interestingly, small businesses that worked with part-time registered students (M=2.75, SD=1.005, $p<0.05$) indicated that the SL project was more valuable compared to those that worked with full-time registered students (M=2.20, SD=1.053, $p<0.05$), so *H7* was supported. The SL project student grades ($p=0.387$) were not found to be statistically different, so *H8* was not supported.

DISCUSSION

The study found that the marketing-oriented SL project not only added value to a vast majority of the small businesses, but greater value was denoted by community partners who indicated performance benefits, namely increased brand awareness, a gain in new customers, sales, competitive advantage,

employee motivation, business efficiency and customer loyalty, which was also confirmed by several inquiries (Furlow, 2010; Naik et al., 2020; Rinaldo et al., 2015; Sharma, 2015; Sprague & Hu, 2015; Tyron et al., 2008; van Vuuren & Botha, 2010; Vizenor et al., 2017). Small business community partners also noted satisfaction, which was supported by a number of studies (Krasynska et al., 2013; Mungaray-Lagarda et al., 2022; Schachter & Schwartz, 2009; Vasbinder & Koehler, 2015) and lasting value that was confirmed by many investigations (Gazley et al., 2013; Jordaan & Mennega, 2022; Krasynska et al., 2013; Matthews, 2019; Naik et al., 2020; Rinaldo et al., 2015; Vizenor et al., 2017; Westraadt, 2018) due to the SL project. So, this SL project made a positive difference to most of the small businesses and the disadvantaged communities (i.e., where they were situated). There are a number of possible reasons for the positive sentiment towards the marketing-oriented SL project.

The students were instructed to select small businesses in their communities with little to no marketing. Hence, any marketing and marketing communications assistance and support received by the community partners had the potential to make a significant tangle difference in the performance benefits of the small businesses that participated in the SL project. The students were often customers, and/or a relative was employed (or even owned) by the small businesses, so the students were more motivated to work hard to ensure that the SL project was successful (due to their vested interest). Consequently, the increased performance benefits experienced by many of the small businesses community partners had the potential to: improve the quality of life of owners and staff (and their households) due to increased income; create employment; and reduce poverty in the disadvantaged communities where they were located, which verifies that small businesses can fulfil similar community partner needs in comparison to nonprofit organization stakeholders, and also affirmed by several studies (Mitchell, 2018; Mokoena & Spencer, 2017; Paphitis & Pearse, 2017; Scholtz, 2018; Sotelino-Losada et al., 2021).

As previously noted, small businesses (comparable to nonprofit organizations) generally have limited access to: financial and human resources; training and consultation assistance; and strategic planning, business, management and marketing knowledge, skills and expertise (Mbatha & Ngwenya, 2018; Mitchell, 2018). However, government support programmes and other forms of assistance are often difficult to assess (administrative intensive and bureaucratic); add little value; generic; and irrelevant in addressing the small businesses unique circumstances and needs (i.e., ineffective in disadvantaged communities) since the programmes are not customized to take into consideration the unique operation conditions (Briere et al., 2015). However, as mentioned in prior discourse, an overwhelming majority of CPUT students reside in disadvantaged communities, and were instructed to select small businesses community partners located in their own community. Therefore, the students have a better understanding of the community partner needs, since they grew-up and reside in the same disadvantaged communities. So, many of the students were able to develop, customize, adapt and implement marketing-orientated strategies to meet the specific needs of the small businesses by using their unique knowledge of these disadvantaged communities, which was combined with the practical application of the theoretical marketing knowledge concepts they learnt in the classroom. Hence, this SL project fulfilled the mandate of SL, in other words students giving back and making a meaningful difference to their own communities, and providing the students with an opportunity gain invaluable experiential learning experience in a real-world context (Fraustino et al., 2019; Merkey & Palombi, 2020; Naik et al., 2020; Scholtz, 2018). Therefore, it is important that the students are correctly matched with compatible community partners (e.g., have common demographic or geographic backgrounds where possible) in a bid to attain optimum results for the other SL stakeholders.

However, some small business community parties also revealed that the SL project was not valuable and/or yielded no positive performance benefits, which was also indicated by a number of studies (Gazley et al., 2013; Krasynska et al., 2013; Mokoena & Spencer, 2017; Schachter & Schwartz, 2009). Several possible challenges were identified for the marketing-oriented SL project's lack of value.

Firstly, small businesses that reported that the SL project was not appropriate for their businesses, may occur when the students and community partners are not suitably matched (discussed in preceding text and highlighted by Darby et al. (2013). Hence, the design of the SL project should be effectively geared towards the needs of small businesses in order for student groups to be effectively matched with the correct small business partners. The university staff coordinators should closely monitor and approve the students' selection of community partners to ensure a suitable match between small business needs and the students marketing knowledge, skills and expertise. It is important that all of the SL stakeholders' needs and goals are achieved and not only those of the students. Hence, the students need to be effectively trained, monitored, and supported to ensure high quality work. Furthermore, introducing student support interventions such as draft evaluations, peer reviews, writing workshops, small business education about involvement demands and needs, and working closely with community partners are possible interventions that can be implemented by the university staff coordinators to ensure a successful SL project, and a more fitting match between students and community partners.

Secondly, a lack of student or overall communication was also identified as a problem that reduced value among small business community partners involved in the SL project. As outlined in prior text, a number of prior studies (relating to both nonprofit organization and small business community partners) also confirmed that communication between various SL stakeholders can cause problems (Barrientos, 2010; Matthews, 2019; McReynolds, 2014; Sprague & Hu, 2015; Steimel, 2013; Vizenor et al., 2017). First year marketing students participate in a social responsibility SL project under the guidance of the Communication lecturer, which was tailored to train the marketing students how to communicate with community partners. However, a number of second year students have part-time jobs, full schedules/academic calendars, poor responsiveness, and/or may simply not be interested in the SL project, which could contribute to poor communication. Hence, an initial meeting should be held with potential community partners (university staff, students and other stakeholders) so that they are made aware of the nature and requirements (especially in terms of communication expectations) of the SL project before choosing to participate. Meeting and communication schedules and checklists could also be established between the SL stakeholders, once the small businesses agree to participate, which could be monitored by the university staff coordinators to improve the overall and student communication.

Thirdly, a lack of university staff coordinator involvement was cited as another factor that limited the value of the SL project. This problem was also a commonly identified among nonprofit organization-related SL projects (Matthews, 2019; McReynolds, 2014; Steimel, 2013). Community partner participants are often confused about their role in SL projects, which university staff coordinators could resolve via an initial meeting between SL stakeholder and an efficient communication schedule (detailed above). Considering that small business community partners have little time and marketing expertise and many students have little work experience, it is vital that university staff coordinators play a very active part in monitoring the progress of students' work and liaise with participating small businesses regularly to increase value of the SL projects.

The lack of time, finances, appropriate people and knowledge were also specified as reasons that limited the value of SL projects (though none of these challenges were statistically significant). As discussed in prior discourse, small business community partners frequently have limited time, financial, space and human resources to supervise and host students, and effectively implement business and marketing strategies, which inhibits them from unlocking the full value of SL projects (Gazley et al., 2013; Lekhanya, 2015; Lekhanya & Mason, 2013; Rinaldo et al., 2015; van Scheers, 2018). SL projects need to focus on providing lasting and sustainable benefits that meet the community partner expectations instead of only giving students an effective experiential learning experience (often at the expense of the community partners' limited resources). Hence, the SL project brief instructed the students to: develop a low-cost marketing communication campaign plan; implement the no-cost marketing resources and tools elements (e.g., websites, social media pages, etc.); use the university's resources (infrastructure, facilities and equipment) and their own time; and provide informal training on the use of marketing resources and tools. These stipulations sought to save the small business community partners money, time, staff, and space resources, while also providing the students with an effective experiential learning experience. Additionally, a checklist (weekly or monthly) could be developed by the university staff coordinators to monitor the students SL project activities to ensure they are not overburdening the small business community partners, and reduce the human, financial and time resources needed to effectively participate in the SL project. It is also proposed that postgraduate students are assigned to student teams to serve as mentors, which will facilitate greater access to experience and knowledge (besides the university staff coordinator) in order to better serve the needs of community partners, and increase the overall value of SL project for the participating small businesses.

It is not unsurprising that small business community partners, who found the SL project to be valuable, would participate in future SL endeavors, which was also verified by Plaut (2013) and Schachter and Schwartz (2009). Hence, the university staff coordinators should continue to strive to improve on the SL project by implementing the abovementioned recommendations, which aim to reduce the possible challenges, as well as ensure sustainable value and enduring participation by small business community partners. Few inquiries have quantitatively assessed future participation as an independent variable, especially in terms of value, so inquiry adds to the limited body of SL knowledge in this regard.

Small business community partners who worked with part-time students experienced higher levels of value, which is a rational result since it is a requirement for students to be employed in order to register for studies on a part-time basis at CPUT. Hence, these students are generally more mature (older), have greater work experience, and are often employed in marketing-related jobs. Anderson (2019) confirmed full-time students typically do not have much work experience. Hence, it could be advantageous to have joint part-time and full-time student agencies, which would improve the quality of work and value for small business community partners, as well as enhance the experiential learning experience for the students. There is a dearth of SL research that differentiates between part- and full-time students, particularly from a community partner perspective, so this study makes an original contribution to SL pedagogy in this regard.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The investigation was hindered by several limitations, including a small sample size that was situated in only one geographic location, and at one point of time. Future research should increase the size and scope of the study, as well as survey the small business community partners after every year to increase

participation and recall. Most of the small business community partners surveyed were generally already established. Future research may consider surveying businesses at every stage of the business growth cycle, including start-ups. The study focused on the benefits and challenges that small business community partners experienced during the course of the SL project. Future research may consider implementing randomized control trials via pre-tests and post-tests to examine the actual impact of the marketing-oriented SL project on the small business performance, and do so at various intervals to determine the immediate, medium-term, and long-term impact.

CONCLUSIONS

A majority of the small businesses indicated that the overall marketing-oriented SL project was valuable. Hence, this inquiry provides further evidence that SL projects can add value to small businesses that serve as community partners, which are not limited to nonprofit organizations. The use of small businesses as community partners in SL projects is growing around the world, but additional research is necessary to fully ascertain the value of SL initiatives for small businesses, both from a developing and developed country context. The SL project had a significant positive impact on the small business community partners' performance benefits, which included brand awareness, a gain in new customers, sales, competitive advantage, employee motivation, business efficiency and customer loyalty. The performance benefits resulted in increased value among a vast majority of the small businesses. So, it is proposed that university staff coordinators investigate means to grow the impact of the SL project on a larger scale based on the many business performance benefits, and the economic importance of small businesses in developing countries such as South Africa. Furthermore, there is potential to attain similar performance benefits in more developed economies, so equivalent marketing-oriented SL projects could consider the use of small businesses as community partners from an international perspective.

Small business community partners recommended that there should be improved student monitoring by university staff project coordinators; improved induction and training for small businesses and students; and improved communication by all stakeholders. SL coordination, student monitoring, communication and induction and training are identified as essential factors for the success of SL projects by a number of international studies (Harrington, 2014; Matthews, 2019; Merkey & Palombi, 2020; Schachter & Schwartz, 2009; Tyron & Stoecker, 2008). However, a majority of the small business community partners recognized that the SL project had a major lasting impact on their organizations. These small business community partners also highlighted high satisfaction levels and were enthusiastic to take part in future SL projects. There is limited quantitative investigation that examines satisfaction, sustainable value and future participation from a community partner stance, so further international research is recommended in other countries to support these findings. Small business community partners who worked with part-time students exhibited greater value predispositions. There is little inquiry that considers the differences between part- and full-time students in SL pedagogy, both from a student and community partner viewpoint, so additional study is suggested to locally and globally verify these results.

Small businesses acknowledged long-lasting and far-reaching benefits in terms of the marketing-oriented SL project despite of the numerous challenges that South African small business experience in a challenging economic environment, which is also evident around the world. Therefore, it is proposed that the university staff coordinator explore other potential South African and international universities that could offer the SL project owing to its numerous benefits. For example, the SL project could be expanded to other local and international university marketing departments, which would reach and

add value to many small businesses around the world. Accordingly, university students at other institutions could also receive discipline-related, real-world and relevant experience, while serving the unique needs and offering value to small businesses. It is hoped that the expansion of the marketing-oriented SL project would provide small businesses with the support that they need in order to succeed in the tough economic climate in South Africa and worldwide, especially in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In conclusion, this investigation heeded the call for further research to improve SL projects by considering the value of WIL initiatives from the community partner perspective, especially due to the lack of enquiry from both a South African and international viewpoint. Hence, this research assisted in narrowing the gap in research by exploring and providing new insight into the value of a South African marketing-oriented SL project from a small business community partner perspective.

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