

From Lecture Halls To Local Impact: Undergraduates' Participatory Action Research In Creative Digital Marketing Education

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Abstract

This study explores the integration of Participatory Action Research (PAR) within a digital marketing course at the University of Jaffna, emphasizing the benefits of combining PAR with Undergraduate Research Experiences (UREs). Despite their traditionally distinct roles, the integration of PAR and UREs addresses shared limitations and amplifies the mutual benefits for both students and communities. Rooted in principles of collaboration, action, and knowledge co-creation, this study highlights the PAR experiences of undergraduates enrolled in the course. As part of their core course assignment, two consecutive batches of students engaged in PAR with ten Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) across Sri Lanka. Using a blend of narrative inquiry, photovoice, participatory mapping, and focus group discussions, students collaborated with MSME owners to identify digital marketing challenges and develop tailored strategies. The research revealed several barriers, including limited digital marketing knowledge, lack of online presence, and resistance to adopting digital technologies. In response, students helped MSMEs establish and manage social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp Business), implemented online payment systems, created digital content, and optimized marketing strategies. These participatory actions enabled the businesses to enhance customer engagement, brand visibility, and sales. The PAR process provided students with valuable hands-on experience in digital marketing, while supporting the digital transformation of local entrepreneurs. This collaborative approach not only helped students apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts but also empowered the MSMEs, fostering reciprocal learning. The study explores the potential of integrating PAR into higher education as a model for community engagement, offering scalable frameworks for enhancing academic learning and community development simultaneously.

Key Words: Community engagement, Digital marketing, MSMEs, Participatory Action Research (PAR), Sri Lanka, Undergraduate Research Experiences (UREs).