

Article

Marketing Challenges in Entrepreneurship: Perspectives from Business Students

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Abstract: This study explores the marketing challenges perceived by aspiring entrepreneurs, focusing on undergraduate business students' perspectives. Drawing on an empirical qualitative approach, this research utilizes data from semi-structured interviews with 31 students at a midwestern U.S. university to examine key barriers that hinder business development and growth. The research identifies five key themes: budget constraints, customer identification and engagement, branding and market differentiation, digital marketing barriers, and the role of education. The findings reveal that financial limitations and resource constraints hinder students' ability to implement effective marketing strategies, while limited practical experience complicates customer engagement and market research efforts. Additionally, participants emphasized challenges in establishing distinct brand identities and adapting to rapidly evolving digital marketing tools. These insights align with existing entrepreneurial marketing theories, reinforcing the role of adaptability and resourcefulness in early-stage business ventures. Education emerged as both a strength and an area for improvement, with students valuing theoretical foundations but identifying gaps in hands-on, experiential learning opportunities. This study contributes to entrepreneurial marketing literature by highlighting the interplay between resource constraints, creativity, and adaptability in understanding marketing challenges. It further underscores the importance of integrating digital marketing competencies and alternative financing strategies, such as crowdfunding and fintech solutions, into entrepreneurship education. It also emphasizes the need for educational reforms that integrate practical applications, mentorship, and digital marketing training to prepare students for real-world entrepreneurial endeavors. By addressing these gaps, the findings offer actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and entrepreneurial support systems to better equip aspiring entrepreneurs for sustainable success.



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1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship has long been recognized as a driver of innovation and economic growth [1,2], yet its success often hinges on a factor less discussed in the broader entrepreneurial discourse, which is marketing. Effective marketing strategies are crucial for entrepreneurial ventures, enabling them to identify core business insights and market intelligence, such as customer needs, establish a competitive presence, and build sustainable business models [3,4]. For aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly those at the beginning of their careers, navigating the complexities of marketing can present significant challenges. These obstacles include resource constraints, limited market knowledge, and the rapidly evolving digital marketing landscape, which can create additional barriers for those lacking

relevant expertise [5]. The ability to overcome these challenges is often a decisive factor in determining the long-term success of entrepreneurial ventures [6,7].

Despite the critical role marketing plays in entrepreneurship, existing research has primarily focused on entrepreneurial intentions, perceptions, and general challenges, with limited attention paid to marketing-specific barriers. For instance, studies have explored financial constraints, fear of failure, and the lack of practical experience as significant hurdles [8–11]. While these factors are undoubtedly critical, they often intersect with marketing in ways that remain underexplored. Marketing challenges, such as reaching target audiences, competing in saturated markets, and effectively utilizing limited budgets, are not only barriers but also opportunities to innovate and adapt. This calls for a more detailed understanding of marketing challenges as perceived by aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly those still in the formative stages of their entrepreneurial journey.

This study builds upon previous research on entrepreneurial perceptions, intentions, and challenges among business students, as outlined in Al-Fattal [11]. The earlier findings revealed that students aspiring to entrepreneurship identified financial constraints, lack of practical experience, and fear of failure as significant barriers. Moreover, these challenges were closely linked to marketing decisions, such as pricing strategies, brand positioning, and customer engagement efforts. However, a focused analysis of these marketing-related challenges was beyond the scope of the original study. This paper seeks to address this gap by investigating deeper into the marketing challenges faced by aspiring entrepreneurs, with a specific focus on undergraduate business students.

This study employs an exploratory qualitative approach, drawing on in-depth interviews with 31 undergraduate business students at a public university in the Midwest (U.S.). Given the nature of qualitative research, this study does not test predefined hypotheses but instead seeks to uncover key themes regarding the marketing challenges faced by aspiring entrepreneurs. Central to this inquiry is the question: What are the marketing challenges perceived by business students aspiring to entrepreneurship, and how do these perceptions reflect broader issues in entrepreneurial marketing? The analysis reveals key themes, including budget constraints, customer identification and engagement, branding and market differentiation, digital marketing barriers, and the role of education. These insights highlight the pressing need for entrepreneurship education programs to integrate marketing-specific training, emphasizing practical, actionable strategies to equip students for real-world challenges.

By focusing on the perspectives of business students, this study contributes to the growing discourse on entrepreneurial marketing, a field that emphasizes innovative and resourceful approaches to promoting and sustaining new ventures [5,12]. The findings have implications for educators, policymakers, and entrepreneurial support systems, offering a roadmap for addressing the unique marketing needs of aspiring entrepreneurs. Moreover, this study highlights the value of incorporating marketing as a central component of entrepreneurship education, ensuring that future entrepreneurs are not only equipped with innovative ideas but also the skills to bring these ideas to market effectively.

2. Entrepreneurship, Marketing, and Challenges

Marketing is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of entrepreneurial success, providing the tools necessary for ventures to build brand visibility, attract customers, and establish market footholds. However, the unique dynamics of marketing in the entrepreneurial domain, characterized by resource scarcity and the need for rapid adaptability, distinguish it from traditional marketing paradigms [12,13]. For example, unlike established businesses with defined market positions, entrepreneurs operate in volatile or emerging environments that demand creative approaches to customer engagement, often with minimal resources.

Despite this centrality, entrepreneurial marketing has historically been underexplored in mainstream entrepreneurship literature, which has prioritized broader themes such as financial management, risk-taking, and leadership [5,14].

Emerging scholarship positions entrepreneurial marketing as an interplay of innovation and pragmatism, emphasizing the necessity of leveraging cost-effective tools such as social media and guerrilla marketing strategies to maximize impact [3]. However, critiques, e.g., Morris et al. [15], Yang and Gabrielsson [16], and Breit and Volkmann [17], have emerged about the theoretical fragmentation within the field, as much of the literature fails to consolidate insights from entrepreneurship and marketing into a coherent framework. This gap highlights the need for research that systematically examines the unique marketing challenges entrepreneurs face, particularly during the early stages of planning and business development.

Entrepreneurial ventures encounter multifaceted marketing challenges that can significantly impact their sustainability and growth. Several studies have addressed these challenges, e.g., Jones and Rowley [18], D'Avino et al. [19], Turan and Kara [20], Kanu [4], Sadiku-Dushi and Ramadani [21], and Breit and Volkmann [17]. Financial limitations remain one of the most pressing obstacles, as startups often operate with minimal budgets that restrict investments in traditional advertising and high-cost promotional activities [19]. These constraints compel entrepreneurs to rely on low-cost strategies, such as social media platforms or word-of-mouth marketing, which, while affordable, often lack the reliability and reach of established marketing channels, placing startups at a disadvantage in competitive markets [20].

Another critical challenge is customer identification and engagement. Many entrepreneurs fail to conduct adequate market research to define their target audience, leading to misaligned marketing efforts [18,21]. Furthermore, building customer loyalty is particularly difficult for new ventures, which often lack the brand recognition and established reputations that larger competitors enjoy [18]. This issue is more evident in competitive markets, where entrepreneurs struggle to differentiate their offerings from those of established players, who benefit from brand equity, customer loyalty, and economies of scale. These pressures are compounded by price wars and market entry barriers, which further strain entrepreneurs' ability to position themselves effectively and create compelling value propositions [22].

Another challenge relates to digital marketing, which although is a cost-effective outreach tool, also poses significant barriers for entrepreneurs. Many lack the technical skills necessary to navigate tools like search engine optimization, analytics, and digital advertising platforms, leaving them ill-equipped to leverage the rapidly evolving digital landscape [20]. In addition, the rapid evolution of social media platforms has fundamentally changed digital marketing strategies. Short-form video content on TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts has emerged as a dominant tool for consumer engagement, shifting traditional marketing approaches toward influencer collaborations and viral content [23]. Algorithmic updates and privacy regulations on platforms such as Facebook and Google have also disrupted targeted advertising strategies, forcing entrepreneurs to continuously adapt their digital marketing methods [24]. Understanding these changes is essential for startups aiming to build effective online engagement and brand positioning. Branding presents an ongoing challenge, as it requires not only visual consistency but also the creation of a resonant message that connects with the target audience. Limited expertise in brand strategy, coupled with the high costs of professional branding services, often results in weak branding, hampering customer engagement and long-term growth prospects [4].

Other challenges include entrepreneurs struggling to measure the effectiveness of their marketing efforts. Without access to tools and knowledge to evaluate key performance

indicators, such as return on investment and customer acquisition cost, entrepreneurs risk inefficient allocation of resources and missed opportunities for strategic optimization [25]. Cultural and demographic adaptation adds another layer of complexity, as entrepreneurs often underestimate the importance of tailoring their marketing strategies to diverse consumer behaviors [6]. Finally, navigating regulatory and ethical considerations further complicates marketing decisions, particularly in industries with strict legal standards, e.g., compliance with advertising laws, data privacy regulations, or ethical transparency.

Entrepreneurial marketing has been widely studied, with early research focusing on how startups navigate resource constraints, customer acquisition, and branding limitations. Studies such as Wu and Knott [22] and Jones and Rowley [18] emphasized the role of creativity and adaptability in overcoming financial and competitive challenges. However, in recent years, research has increasingly shifted toward the impact of digital transformation and technological advancements on entrepreneurial marketing strategies [23]. Recent studies highlight how AI-driven marketing tools, predictive analytics, and automation are reshaping how startups approach branding, customer engagement, and lead generation [24,26].

Additionally, the rise of alternative financing models such as crowdfunding and fintech solutions has changed how entrepreneurs allocate resources for marketing activities, reducing reliance on traditional funding mechanisms [23]. These developments indicate a shift from conventional marketing constraints toward technology-driven opportunities, requiring entrepreneurs to adopt new competencies to remain competitive. By incorporating these recent advancements, this study builds on existing research while addressing contemporary challenges that have emerged in the digital economy. The findings contribute to the evolving discourse on how startups can effectively integrate digital tools, alternative financing, and customer-centric marketing approaches into their growth strategies.

3. Enhancing Marketing Education in Entrepreneurship Curricula

Identifying Key Gaps. Entrepreneurship education has progressed to include marketing as a critical component, reflecting the recognition of its importance in equipping students for real-world challenges [11,27]. However, the depth and focus of marketing education in these programs remain inconsistent. Traditional curricula often prioritize theoretical constructs over experiential learning, leaving students underprepared to address practical marketing challenges, such as brand development or customer acquisition [14,28]. Experiential learning methods, such as internships and business plan competitions, have been shown to enhance entrepreneurial competence. However, these activities frequently lack a marketing-specific focus, emphasizing general business skills instead [29]. This limitation highlights the need for curriculum reforms that integrate marketing-centric experiential learning opportunities [30]. For instance, incorporating projects that require students to design and execute marketing campaigns for hypothetical ventures could bridge the gap between theory and practice. Moreover, existing studies suggest that entrepreneurship education programs must move beyond the basics of marketing to address advanced topics, such as digital marketing analytics and adaptive branding strategies [31].

Business students, as a distinct demographic of aspiring entrepreneurs, provide unique insights into the intersection of marketing and entrepreneurship. Research reveals that students often perceive marketing as a secondary priority, focusing instead on tangible aspects of entrepreneurship, such as product development and financial management [29]. This perception reflects a broader trend of underestimating the strategic importance of marketing in early-stage ventures. However, Al-Fattal [11] identifies that many challenges perceived by students, such as financial constraints, competition, and fear of failure, are deeply intertwined with marketing-related decisions. For instance, budget limitations influence the scope and scale of promotional efforts, while fears of market rejection tie directly

to branding and positioning strategies. This interplay underscores the need for a more detailed understanding of how students approach marketing challenges and the extent to which their educational experiences prepare them to address these issues effectively. Entrepreneurs now have access to innovative financing methods, including crowdfunding and fintech-based solutions, which help overcome budget constraints in marketing [32]. These tools provide startups with greater flexibility and reduce reliance on traditional bank loans.

Despite the growing recognition of marketing as a critical component of entrepreneurship, existing research often treats marketing challenges as marginal to broader entrepreneurial concerns. Scholars have highlighted financial constraints, lack of practical experience, and fear of failure as key barriers to entrepreneurship [5,21]. Yet, these challenges are rarely analyzed through a marketing lens, overlooking the role of strategic marketing decisions in addressing these obstacles. Furthermore, while entrepreneurial marketing literature has explored innovative practices, such as guerrilla marketing and social media campaigns, there remains a lack of empirical research on how aspiring entrepreneurs perceive and navigate these challenges.

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the marketing challenges perceived by business students, a group uniquely positioned at the heart of entrepreneurial ambition and educational preparation. By focusing on this segment, the research aims to contribute to both the theoretical discourse on entrepreneurial marketing and the practical development of entrepreneurship education programs.

4. Methodology

This study follows an exploratory qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to investigate business students' perceptions of marketing challenges in entrepreneurship. As an exploratory study, it does not rely on predefined hypotheses but rather seeks to identify emergent themes through thematic analysis. This approach is particularly useful for understanding complex and subjective experiences, allowing for a flexible and in-depth examination of participants' perspectives [33,34]. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for capturing the depth and complexity of human experiences, providing rich insights into participants' thoughts, emotions, and motivations [33]. The use of semi-structured interviews offered a balance between consistency and flexibility, allowing for the exploration of predetermined themes while enabling participants to introduce novel perspectives and elaborate on their responses. The decision to adopt this approach was informed by the exploratory nature of the study. Marketing challenges, as perceived by aspiring entrepreneurs, are multifaceted and context-dependent, requiring a methodology capable of capturing insights that quantitative methods might overlook. This design ensured the collection of detailed, contextually grounded data, essential for addressing the research objectives.

The study included 31 undergraduate business students from the business school at a Midwestern public university, representing a range of programs such as marketing, management, finance, and entrepreneurship. This university was selected due to accessibility and its well-established business program, which offers a variety of entrepreneurship and marketing courses. The broad curriculum provides students with theoretical foundations and practical exposure to business development, making it a suitable setting for exploring the marketing challenges faced by aspiring entrepreneurs. While the findings are specific to this context, the insights gained contribute to a broader understanding of how students perceive and navigate entrepreneurial marketing challenges.

Participants were purposively selected based on their expressed interest in pursuing entrepreneurial ventures. This criterion was chosen to ensure that the sample reflected

individuals with a direct connection to the research focus, thereby enhancing the relevance and depth of insights into the marketing challenges faced by aspiring entrepreneurs. Another criterion for selection was that participants were recruited based on their enrollment in entrepreneurship-related and marketing courses, ensuring that they had exposure to relevant concepts and frameworks. A saturation sampling strategy was employed to ensure comprehensive data collection, capturing the full spectrum of perspectives on marketing challenges in entrepreneurship. This approach involved recruiting participants until no new themes emerged, ensuring the adequacy and depth of the data [35]. Recruitment was conducted through multiple channels, including in-class announcements, targeted email invitations, and flyers displayed within the business department. These efforts aimed to maximize participation and ensure representation from all relevant programs within the business school. Purposive sampling criteria were used to focus on students with foundational knowledge of entrepreneurship and marketing, aligning their academic background with the study's research objectives. To further enrich the data, the sampling strategy prioritized diversity across academic year (sophomores, juniors, and seniors) and gender. This heterogeneity allowed for the inclusion of a broad spectrum of experiences and viewpoints, enhancing the study's ability to provide a detailed and relevant understanding of the marketing challenges perceived by aspiring entrepreneurs. The inclusion of students at different stages of their academic journey offered insights into how exposure to entrepreneurship and marketing education shapes their perceptions over time [36].

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted over a three-month period. Interviews were held virtually via Zoom, accommodating participants' schedules and logistical constraints. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 min, with the variation in duration reflecting participants' engagement and depth of responses. A detailed interview protocol was developed, informed by prior literature and pilot-tested with three students to ensure clarity and relevance. This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to investigate business students' perceptions of marketing challenges in entrepreneurship. The development of the interview questions was informed by key theoretical frameworks in entrepreneurial marketing, particularly market orientation theory, dynamic capabilities theory, and the resource-based view. These theories provided a foundation for understanding how entrepreneurs adapt to resource constraints, engage with customers, and differentiate their brands in competitive markets.

To ensure that the interview structure captured a comprehensive range of marketing challenges, questions were designed to explore five main themes: budget constraints, customer identification and engagement, branding and market differentiation, digital marketing barriers, and the role of education. The interview guide was refined based on insights from prior studies in entrepreneurial marketing, ensuring alignment with existing literature, e.g., Jones and Rowley [18], D'Avino et al. [19], Turan and Kara [20], Kanu [4], Sadiku-Dushi and Ramadani [21], and Breit and Volkmann [17], while allowing for emergent themes to surface through inductive analysis. By grounding the interview structure in established theoretical perspectives, this study provides a structured yet flexible approach to exploring the marketing challenges faced by aspiring entrepreneurs.

The first thematic area examined participants' perceptions of significant marketing obstacles for new ventures, including comparisons to challenges faced by established businesses. The second focused on resource constraints and budget issues, investigating how limited financial resources influence marketing decisions and strategies. The third explored customer identification and engagement, particularly the difficulties entrepreneurs face in defining target audiences, understanding customer needs, and building lasting relationships. The fourth thematic area addressed branding and market differentiation, with discussions centered on the challenges of creating a distinct brand identity in saturated

markets. The fifth area assessed the role of digital marketing, emphasizing the importance of digital tools and the barriers entrepreneurs encounter in utilizing them effectively. Finally, the sixth thematic area evaluated how well participants felt their education prepared them to address these marketing challenges, highlighting gaps and potential improvements in entrepreneurship and marketing programs.

Open-ended prompts and follow-up probes were used to encourage participants to share detailed responses, experiences, and reflections, enriching the dataset for analysis. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and field notes were taken during and after the interviews to capture non-verbal cues, contextual observations, and emerging ideas. Transcriptions were produced instantly via Zoom technologies and transcripts were reviewed within 48 h of each interview to ensure accuracy and data integrity.

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke [34], was employed in this study. While the thematic areas explored in the interviews were informed by the literature review, the analysis process remained flexible to capture additional insights and patterns emerging organically from the data. This hybrid approach combined deductive elements, based on the pre-identified themes, with inductive coding to ensure that participants' unique perspectives were fully represented. The process began with familiarization, where transcripts were read multiple times to develop a deep understanding of the content. Initial codes were generated by systematically annotating transcripts, highlighting significant statements, and capturing recurring ideas related to both the pre-identified themes and unexpected insights. Codes were grouped into broader categories, which were iteratively refined to ensure coherence and alignment with the research objectives. A selective reading approach, inspired by Van Manen's [37] hermeneutic phenomenological framework, was used to extract key phrases that encapsulated the essence of participants' experiences. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis, with a reflexive journal documenting decisions and potential biases.

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the findings, the study adhered to established qualitative research criteria. Credibility was maintained through member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation of data sources, including transcripts and field notes, to validate the findings. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail that documented all methodological decisions and processes, allowing for potential replication or review. Transferability was addressed by providing rich, detailed descriptions of the research context and participant characteristics, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings. Finally, confirmability was strengthened through the use of reflexive journaling and external auditing, minimizing researcher bias and enhancing the objectivity of the study. These measures collectively ensured the rigor and reliability of the research process and outcomes.

Participation was entirely voluntary, and all students were informed of the study's objectives, procedures, and ethical considerations prior to enrollment. They were assured that their decision to participate or not would have no impact on their academic standing or relationships with faculty. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were reminded of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. This approach ensured trust, autonomy, and ethical integrity throughout the study. Pseudonyms were used in reporting to protect participants' identities, and sensitive information was excluded from publication to uphold ethical integrity.

5. Results

The analysis of qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 31 business students revealed five key themes that encapsulate the marketing challenges perceived by aspiring entrepreneurs. These themes, which align with the overarching research objective,

provide data-rich insights into the difficulties students associate with launching and sustaining entrepreneurial ventures. While some challenges, such as budget constraints and customer engagement, were anticipated based on existing literature, e.g., Al-Fattal [11], Watson et al. [29], and D'Avino et al. [19], other challenges including gaps in digital marketing expertise and branding struggles emerged as significant but less explored barriers. These findings illuminate the intersection of marketing and entrepreneurship, highlighting the unique challenges faced by new ventures in today's dynamic and competitive markets.

The results are presented thematically, with each section providing a detailed narrative of the theme, supported by illustrative quotes from participants. This approach ensures that the voices of the participants remain central to the analysis, offering a data-rich and grounded perspective on the marketing-specific obstacles potential entrepreneurs encounter. By examining these themes, the results not only highlight the specific challenges aspiring entrepreneurs face, but also shed light on areas where educational programs and entrepreneurial support systems could better prepare students to navigate these obstacles effectively.

5.1. Theme 1: Budget Constraints

Budget limitations emerged as a prominent challenge, with 24 out of 31 participants highlighting financial constraints as a significant potential obstacle in their imagined entrepreneurial journeys. Participants consistently expressed concerns about how limited resources might affect their ability to implement effective marketing strategies. Participant 27 (P hereafter) noted, *"We're taught that marketing is key to success, but when you think about starting a business with little to no budget, it's hard to imagine where you'd find the money for proper advertising, proper market research, or even promotional campaigns."* Similarly, P11 reflected on hypothetical scenarios discussed in class, stating

"It's clear that without sufficient funds, many startups might have to cut back on marketing, which could mean losing out on customers who don't even know you exist. . . It's not just about cutting costs; it's about making tough choices all the time. . . How would you get your brand recognized in a crowded market when every option seems expensive? You might think about social media as a free option, but even that takes time, and time is money when you're trying to juggle everything else. After all, you need to spend money to get money, right? But what if you don't have the money to start with?"

The perceived challenges were magnified by comparisons to larger, established businesses. P15 remarked, *"It's honestly kind of scary to think about competing with these big companies that have huge advertising budgets. I mean, as students, we can barely scrape together enough for mock campaign tools in class, so imagining doing that for a real business someday feels overwhelming. It's like, where would we even start?"* This sense of disparity underscored the students' awareness of the competitive landscape they might face as future entrepreneurs.

An additional layer of concern expressed by participants was the burden of existing or anticipated financial obligations, such as student loans and future startup mortgages. P18 commented, *"A lot of us are already thinking about how we're going to pay off student loans, so the idea of spending a big chunk of money on marketing feels risky. It's hard to justify when you're not even sure the business will succeed."* This apprehension reflects a cautious approach to financial risk, where students perceive marketing as a gamble rather than a guaranteed investment, particularly when weighed against long-term financial responsibilities.

Despite these perceived challenges, several participants explored innovative, low-cost alternatives in classroom discussions or projects. For example, P7 described leveraging social media and grassroots outreach as plausible options, stating, *"Platforms like Instagram and TikTok are affordable, but they also take a lot of time and skill to use effectively. It's something we'd need to learn better before trying it in real life."* However, these approaches were not

seen as guaranteed. P19 noted, *“Even if social media is cheap, it doesn’t guarantee success... If everyone’s doing it, how do you stand out without paying for ads?”*

5.2. Theme 2: Customer Identification and Engagement

Identifying and effectively engaging target audiences emerged as another significant challenge, with 21 out of 31 participants highlighting this aspect as a critical hurdle in their entrepreneurial aspirations. Many students expressed concerns about their ability to define and connect with the right customer segments, emphasizing the risks of misaligned marketing efforts. P8 stated

“One of the biggest questions we always ask ourselves is, ‘Who is our future customer?’... I know it might sound simple, like just picking a group of people... but when you actually start breaking it down, like thinking about their age, interests, buying behaviors, and all these little details, it gets really complicated... You realize it’s not just about knowing who they are but really understanding them. And honestly, if you can’t figure that out, everything else falls apart because all your decisions depend on getting that right.”

This challenge was further supported by the participants’ limited practical experience in conducting market research to identify customer needs and preferences. P13 reflected

“We’ve done some basic exercises in class, like figuring out target markets or customer profiles, but you know, trying to apply that to a real business feels completely overwhelming... In class, it’s just practice, but out there, you’re not just guessing for fun. You’re making real decisions that could either make your startup a success or completely break it. It’s such a huge responsibility, and honestly, it feels a bit intimidating.”

Another participant, P29, noted the difficulties of balancing customer acquisition with retention, explaining, *“It’s not just about getting people to try your product; it’s about keeping them... That’s where I feel completely lost. How do you make someone come back when there are so many other options out there?”*

Participants also expressed concerns about adapting their marketing strategies to diverse customer demographics. P5 shared, *“I think one of the toughest parts is trying to understand different cultural or social groups. What works for one might completely backfire for another, and as students, we haven’t had enough exposure to know what to do in those cases.”* This challenge was echoed by P20, who commented, *“The idea of tailoring a message to fit different audiences is easier said than done... You need data, and you need to interpret it correctly... Right now, we’re kind of shooting in the dark”.*

The issue of customer engagement extended beyond identification, with many participants acknowledging the difficulty of building and sustaining meaningful relationships with customers. P10 remarked, *“Engaging with customers isn’t just about talking to them. It’s about listening to them and making them feel heard. That’s a skill we’re still learning, and it’s not as straightforward as it sounds.”* P24 added

“We’re always told that building customer loyalty is really important, and it makes sense, but it’s not something you can just do overnight. It takes time, consistency, and trust... like, a lot of effort to get people to believe in your brand and keep coming back. As new entrepreneurs, I feel like we’ll have to work twice as hard to earn that because we don’t have the name or resources that established companies do... It’s definitely going to be... a challenge.”

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated an awareness of potential solutions, yet with some degree of uncertainty. For example, P16 suggested leveraging social media platforms to interact directly with customers, stating, *“I think platforms like Instagram or TikTok could help us understand what customers want, but only if we know how to use them effectively.”* However, others were skeptical about the feasibility of such

approaches. P9 argued, “Even with social media, you need the right strategy. Otherwise, it’s just noise. You might be posting every day and still not connecting with anyone”.

5.3. Theme 3: Branding and Market Differentiation

Participants described branding as one of the possible challenges they might face, emphasizing the difficulty of crafting a unique and memorable identity for their future ventures. Seventeen participants expressed concerns about competing with well-established businesses, particularly in rural areas where communities often have strong loyalties to familiar brands. Participant 12 commented, “It’s one thing to have a product or service you think is great, but it’s a whole different story to make people see it that way. . . . Around here, people like what they know, so trying to get them to trust something new feels almost impossible sometimes”.

The complexity of branding was further highlighted in discussions about what it means to differentiate a business in competitive markets. Students acknowledged that branding extends far beyond visual elements like logos and colors, requiring a deeper understanding of storytelling and emotional connection. A substantial number of students ($n = 14$) recognized the challenge of creating a compelling brand narrative, with P4 reflecting

“We’ve talked about branding in class, like picking colors and logos, but that’s just the surface. I mean, how do you actually make your brand something people care about? Like, how do you tell your story in a way that sticks? Especially when you’re competing with big companies that have ads everywhere... It’s hard to see how we could even get started on that with no resources.”

For 11 participants, the challenge was not just about standing out but doing so in a way that aligns with limited budgets and resources. They shared feelings of being at a disadvantage compared to established businesses that dominate local markets. P9 explained about their local area

“It’s not like you’ve got thousands of people to sell to, so if there’s already a business doing something similar. . . . you’re kind of out of luck. It’s hard to come up with something new and different enough that people will pick you over what they already know. And even if you do. . . . how do you keep their attention long enough to matter?”

Despite these challenges, participants showed resilience and creativity in their approach to branding. Eight participants viewed small communities as an opportunity to build close, loyal relationships with customers if they could clearly communicate what made their businesses unique. P18 shared

“It’s not all bad if you think about it. We’ve got small communities, so word of mouth can spread fast, but only if you’re doing something really unique. The hard part is figuring out what makes you different and then actually sticking with it. . . . You’ve got to think about the time when you don’t have money for ads or fancy campaigns. It’s like, if you don’t get it right the first time, you’re done.”

5.4. Theme 4: Digital Marketing Barriers

Digital marketing was identified as a significant challenge by 20 out of 31 participants, many of whom admitted feeling overwhelmed by the complexities of effectively utilizing online tools to promote their future businesses. Participants frequently pointed out that while digital marketing offers immense potential, it requires technical skills and strategic planning that they felt underprepared to execute. P3 shared, “Everyone says you need to be on social media, but it’s not just about posting pictures or videos, right? You’ve got to know how to target the right people, use targeting ads, and even look at the analytics. I don’t even know where to start with that”.

A related challenge discussed by 12 participants was the overwhelming number of digital platforms and the difficulty of choosing where to focus their efforts. P11 remarked, “It feels like there are too many options. . . Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, you name it. And you can’t be everywhere all the time. . . especially when you’re just one person. I’m always thinking, what if I pick the wrong one? It’s like you’re gambling with your time and effort”.

Another relevant challenge participants identified was the constant change and updates to social media platforms and their tools. Seven students felt disoriented by how frequently features are updated, algorithms are adjusted, or entirely new platforms emerge, making it difficult to stay proficient. P21 said, “It feels like just when you figure out how something works, they go and change it. . . You spend all this time learning a platform, and then there’s an update, and suddenly your strategies don’t work anymore. It’s frustrating. . . because it’s not just about being creative, it’s about keeping up with the tech”. This challenge was particularly concerning for participants who viewed social media as a critical marketing tool for their future ventures. The rapid pace of change left many feeling unprepared to adapt effectively. P11 remarked, “They tell you to keep up with trends, but how are we supposed to do that when the platforms themselves keep shifting? One day it’s reels, the next it’s stories, then it’s something completely new. It’s like you’re always playing catch-up”.

Another key barrier was a lack of confidence in creating content that could compete with professional marketing campaigns. P7 explained, “You see these ads and posts online that look super polished, and then there’s what I can do, just some basic pictures and captions. It’s hard not to feel like you’ll never get anyone’s attention when everything else looks so much better”. Seven students mentioned having relevant confidence in creating visual content using popular online platforms like Canva and five students referred to some confidence using Generative Artificial Intelligence tools to create content.

Despite these challenges, some participants ($n = 9$) viewed digital marketing as an opportunity for small businesses to level the playing field with larger companies, provided they could learn the necessary skills. P15 shared

“I think if you can figure out how to use it right, social media could actually help small businesses like ours get noticed. It’s not about spending a ton of money, but about being creative and consistent with your posts and messages. In class, we’ve talked about how social media can be a great tool, we even had several points where we got to experience those, but I wish we could have more hands-on practice. Like, it’s one thing to hear about strategies or see examples, but it’s another thing to actually create a campaign and see what works. The problem is, most of us don’t know how to plan content, how often to post, or even how to make it look good enough to stand out. It feels like there’s so much to learn just to get started.”

5.5. Theme 5: Role of Education

The results show that education played a crucial role in shaping participants’ entrepreneurial mindset and marketing knowledge, with many acknowledging its strengths while identifying areas for growth. A majority ($n = 24$) expressed appreciation for the theoretical foundations provided by their coursework, which gave them a strong understanding of key concepts such as target markets, branding, and customer engagement. P6 shared, “We’ve learned a lot about what goes into marketing, like how to identify your audience and create strategies. It’s given me the confidence to think like an entrepreneur, even if I know there’s still more to learn”.

However, participants also noted areas where they felt their education could better prepare them for real-world challenges. For seven students, the rapidly evolving nature

of digital marketing posed a significant challenge, as they felt their courses sometimes struggled to keep pace. P19 explained, “Digital marketing is so dynamic, and while our professors do their best to introduce us to the basics, I feel like there’s a lot we have to figure out on our own, especially with the newer platforms and trends”.

Several participants (12 out of 31) highlighted the value of hands-on experiences, such as working on real-world projects, simulations, or internships, as crucial for bridging the gap between classroom learning and practical application. P27 reflected, “The concepts we learn in class are great, but the best learning happens when you’re putting those ideas into action. . . . When we work on group projects or case studies, it really helps us see how to solve problems creatively”.

Mentorship and exposure to industry professionals were also seen as impactful. Seven participants emphasized the value of hearing directly from entrepreneurs or guest speakers who could share their experiences and offer practical insights. P13 remarked, “When we had a local business owner come to class. . . . it really stuck with me. Hearing how they overcame challenges made everything we learn feel more real and achievable.” Interestingly, six participants pointed to their part-time jobs or internships as sources of invaluable marketing insights. P8 shared, “Working at a local store over the summer taught me so much about customer interactions and promotions. Those experiences showed me how small businesses think creatively, and that kind of learning complements what we do in class”.

Despite some gaps, many participants ($n = 14$) appreciated how their education helped develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which they saw as transferable to various entrepreneurial contexts. P4 commented, “The way our professors push us to analyze situations and come up with strategies really prepares us to think on our feet. Even if we don’t have all the tools yet, we’ve got the mindset to figure things out”.

6. Discussion

This study highlights the multifaceted marketing challenges aspiring entrepreneurs face, providing insights into the interplay of educational preparation, personal creativity, and resource constraints. The findings underscore the importance of rethinking entrepreneurship education to better equip students for the complexities of modern marketing. Understanding the target audience emerged as a cornerstone of entrepreneurial success, linking customer engagement, branding, and digital marketing into a cohesive framework. This finding reinforces market orientation theory, which emphasizes aligning business strategies with customer needs. However, participants’ struggles with audience identification reflect a deeper issue: a lack of hands-on market research experience. Similar challenges have been highlighted by Minton and Krszjzaniek [38] and Mills and Hair [39], who underscore the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application. While theoretical knowledge lays the groundwork, entrepreneurship education must integrate practical training, such as live projects or customer interviews, to bridge this gap. Consistent findings by Al-Fattal [11], Ha and Koo [40], Watson et al. [29], and Maritz and Brown [41] further validate the importance of embedding experiential learning in entrepreneurship curricula.

The findings also underscore the critical role of adaptability in navigating the ever-changing landscape of digital marketing. Participants’ apprehension about constant platform updates and evolving algorithms aligns with the dynamic capabilities theory, which highlights the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in competitive markets [42]. In particular, the role of AI in digital marketing has significantly transformed how entrepreneurs approach customer engagement. AI-driven tools such as predictive analytics, automated chatbots, and personalized advertising enable businesses to optimize marketing

strategies at scale [26]. These advancements allow startups to compete more effectively, leveraging AI-powered content recommendations and real-time consumer insights to enhance engagement [42]. This challenge is particularly emphasized for aspiring entrepreneurs operating with limited resources, who must adopt creative, low-cost strategies to establish a brand presence. Educational institutions can play a pivotal role by incorporating adaptive learning modules that emphasize up-to-date digital marketing tools and strategies, fostering a mindset of continuous learning. A similar call for educational reforms is echoed in the literature, as reviewed by Al-Fattal et al. [43] and Sitaridis and Kitsios [44], who stress the importance of equipping students with digital adaptability to meet industry demands.

Entrepreneurship education can incorporate experiential learning methods such as business simulations, case-based learning, and direct collaborations with entrepreneurs. Business simulations allow students to experiment with marketing strategies in a risk-free environment, applying theoretical concepts in simulated market conditions. Industry partnerships, including guest lectures from entrepreneurs and consulting projects with local startups, provide students with direct exposure to real-world marketing challenges. These approaches bridge the disconnect between academic knowledge and practical skills, ensuring students develop the problem-solving abilities needed in entrepreneurial ventures.

Branding and market differentiation emerged as significant challenges, particularly in rural contexts where community dynamics present both opportunities and constraints. These findings reflect the resource-based view (RBV), which identifies intangible assets like brand identity as critical to achieving competitive advantage [45,46]. Participants' uncertainty in developing unique branding strategies points to the need for targeted educational interventions, such as branding workshops, community-based projects, and industry collaborations. Such initiatives can help students navigate the details of building brands that resonate with local audiences while maintaining scalability. Research by Ha and Koo [40] and Martiz and Brown [41] supports this approach, highlighting the effectiveness of context-sensitive branding education in preparing future entrepreneurs.

Education itself was identified as both a strength and an area for improvement. While participants valued the theoretical foundations provided by their courses, many noted gaps in practical application and exposure to industry practices. This finding aligns with the experiential learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of active experimentation and reflection in skill development. Incorporating hands-on opportunities, such as internships, simulations, and collaborative projects, can better prepare students to address real-world marketing challenges. The role of experiential learning in entrepreneurial education has been emphasized by Kariv et al. [14] and Mills and Hair [39], who advocate for curricula that balance theory with practice. Additionally, mentorship programs and industry partnerships can provide students with relevant insights into entrepreneurial problem-solving, further bridging the gap between classroom learning and practical application [28,30].

This study contributes to the growing discourse on entrepreneurial marketing by identifying key challenges and proposing actionable insights for education and practice. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that combines theoretical rigor with practical application, fostering adaptability, creativity, and resilience. By evolving entrepreneurship education to reflect these priorities, educators can better prepare aspiring entrepreneurs to navigate the complexities of marketing and achieve sustainable success in an increasingly dynamic business environment.

7. Conclusions

This study explored the marketing challenges perceived by aspiring entrepreneurs, shedding light on the interplay between education, creativity, and resource constraints.

The findings revealed five interconnected themes: (1) budget constraints, (2) customer identification and engagement, (3) branding and market differentiation, (4) digital marketing barriers, and (5) the role of education. These themes collectively highlight the complexities of entrepreneurial marketing. These challenges underscore the need for targeted educational reforms to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

This study concludes that while entrepreneurship education provides a strong foundation, it should evolve to include more experiential learning opportunities, mentorship programs, and adaptive training in areas such as digital marketing and branding. This approach can better prepare students to navigate real-world challenges and foster the adaptability and creativity essential for entrepreneurial success. Additionally, the role of non-academic experiences, such as internships and part-time jobs, highlights the value of integrating practical insights into formal education.

Given the increasing reliance on AI-driven advertising, social media engagement, and digital financing solutions, entrepreneurship programs should integrate these topics into their curricula. One key recommendation is the inclusion of practical training in digital marketing strategies, such as simulations and hands-on experience with social media campaigns, search engine optimization, and AI-powered consumer analytics. Universities should also establish partnerships with industry professionals and digital marketing platforms to provide students with real-world applications of theoretical concepts.

The findings of this study carry theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study contributes to entrepreneurial marketing literature by reinforcing the relevance of frameworks such as market orientation theory, dynamic capabilities theory, and the resource-based view. By examining the specific marketing challenges faced by aspiring entrepreneurs, this study extends these theoretical models to the context of early-stage business development, highlighting how resource constraints, branding limitations, and digital marketing barriers shape strategic decision-making at the startup level. Furthermore, this study advances the understanding of entrepreneurial education by identifying gaps in marketing training and proposing more targeted experiential learning approaches. These findings extend the understanding of how entrepreneurial success depends on integrating customer-centric strategies, adaptability, and intangible assets like brand identity. The study also highlights gaps in entrepreneurial education, supporting the application of the experiential learning theory to address the disconnect between theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

Practically, the results emphasize the need for educational reforms that incorporate experiential learning opportunities, mentorship, and adaptive training in areas like digital marketing and branding. Policymakers can support these reforms by funding partnerships between universities and businesses, fostering real-world learning environments. Additionally, entrepreneurial support systems, such as incubators and accelerators, should offer targeted training and resources to equip aspiring entrepreneurs with the tools to navigate marketing challenges effectively. Together, these implications provide actionable pathways to enhance entrepreneurial education and support systems.

Furthermore, preparing future entrepreneurs for emerging challenges in digital financing is crucial. Knowledge of crowdfunding, fintech solutions, and decentralized finance mechanisms can help students overcome financial barriers and implement effective marketing strategies. By embedding these elements into entrepreneurship education, institutions can better equip students with the skills necessary to navigate modern marketing challenges, ensuring they are prepared for success in the digital economy.

While this study provides valuable insights into the marketing challenges faced by aspiring entrepreneurs, it is not without limitations. The sample was limited to undergrad-

uate business students at a single university, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Student perceptions of entrepreneurial marketing challenges may also be influenced by cultural and regional factors, such as local economic conditions, access to business resources, and prevailing market dynamics. The entrepreneurial ecosystem of the university's location may shape how students view opportunities and constraints, potentially limiting the applicability of these findings to different cultural and institutional settings.

Future research could expand the scope by including diverse populations across different educational contexts and geographic regions. Comparative studies across multiple universities, both within the U.S. and internationally, could provide a broader understanding of how marketing challenges vary across different entrepreneurial environments. Moreover, longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of entrepreneurial skills and marketing competencies over time could provide deeper insights into how education impacts entrepreneurial success.

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