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Embodied Empathy as Pedagogy: A Consumer Tribe Field Immersion Activity for Customer Experience Professional Formation

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ABSTRACT

A structural gap persists in higher business education between declarative knowledge of consumer behavior theory and the empathic competencies required for customer experience (CX) design practice. This paper presents the Tribal Disguise Activity, a structured six-phase experiential learning intervention in which undergraduate students design and embody consumer archetypes from diverse tribal identities, visit high-traffic commercial environments, and systematically document the service treatment they perceive while embodying that characterization. Implemented across eight consecutive academic semesters at two campuses of a major Mexican business school, the activity operationalizes Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle and is grounded in Cova, Kozinets and Shankar's (2007) consumer tribe framework. Drawing on reflexive thematic analysis of 115 reflection reports and 613 store interactions (2018–2025), with 25% independently second-coded, results show consistently perceived service differentials, emotional disequilibrium as a transformative learning catalyst, and a mindset shift from consumer to tribe-sensitive CX practitioner. Counter-patterns and limitations are discussed. The activity offers a replicable, low-cost, and scalable pedagogical instrument for business educators in international higher education contexts.

Keywords: Consumer tribes, Experiential learning, Customer experience education, Empathy development, Archetype segmentation, Retail service bias

INTRODUCTION

The capacity to design compelling customer experiences (CX) has emerged as a primary competitive differentiator across contemporary service industries (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). For firms in physical retail and hybrid omnichannel environments, CX quality is shaped not only by operational standards but by how well service staff recognize and respond to the diverse consumer identities entering their spaces. This diversity is increasingly organized around tribal affiliations—communities of shared values, aesthetics, and consumption rituals—rather than traditional demographic variables such as age, income, or gender (Cova, Kozinets and Shankar, 2007). Where tribal segmentation has proven more predictive of purchase behavior than generational or socioeconomic categories (Retail TouchPoints, 2024), organizations face

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an imperative to cultivate service cultures that detect and respond to tribal difference with equity and precision.

Yet a persistent tension exists in how CX professionals are educated. Undergraduate business students who design and deliver customer experiences are, as consumers themselves, embedded within narrow tribal identities and reference points. Their perspective—often digital-first, frictionless, and personalization-oriented among Generation-Z cohorts (Future Commerce, 2024; Research and Metric, 2025)—can function as an epistemological constraint on designing services for radically different archetypes. Existing pedagogical approaches—case studies, role-playing simulations, academic readings—treat tribal diversity as information to be received rather than experience to be inhabited. Yet research in empathy development consistently shows that declarative knowledge of social difference does not produce the embodied understanding required for genuine empathic practice (Varthana, 2024). The gap between knowing that an archetype exists and having navigated the social dynamics of inhabiting that identity inside a real commercial environment is consequential for CX design quality, and field-based interventions can generate learning that no classroom activity can replicate.

This paper addresses that gap by presenting the Tribal Disguise Activity: a structured intervention in which students characterize consumer tribes of their own design, enter high-traffic retail environments embodying those characterizations, and systematically document the service treatment they perceive. Implemented across eight consecutive academic semesters at two campuses of Tecnologico de Monterrey (Mexico), it makes three contributions: (1) a replicable, field-validated method for developing consumer empathy in undergraduate business students; (2) exploratory evidence of perceived service differentials in physical retail; and (3) a demonstration of how experiential learning innovations can simultaneously generate student competencies and applied research intelligence for real partner organizations. The guiding research question is: how does a field-based tribal embodiment activity contribute to the development of consumer empathy, archetype sensitivity, and CX professional competencies in undergraduate business students?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Consumer Tribe Theory

The concept of consumer tribes, introduced by Cova and Cova (2002) and systematically developed by Cova, Kozinets and Shankar (2007), draws on Maffesoli's (1996) sociological framework of neotribalism to describe the post-modern shift from individualistic to micro-community consumption patterns. Consumer tribes are characterized not by demographic homogeneity but by shared emotional bonds, ritualistic practices, and collective identity markers expressed through consumption and aesthetic affiliation. From a service design perspective, this framework challenges single-segment or generational cohort approaches, demanding instead a capacity to recognize

and respond appropriately to the multiplicity of tribal identities present within any commercial environment (Canniford, 2011).

Canniford (2011) argues that effective management of consumer tribes requires organizations to develop tribe-sensitive service cultures, not merely tribal marketing strategies—an imperative that flows upstream into business education, since the professionals who will design such strategies must first understand how tribal identity shapes service expectations in retail environments. Shankar (2023) further emphasizes that tribal membership is performative, expressed through appearance and material signifiers, making the physical retail environment a legible space in which tribal identity is read and acted upon by staff. It is precisely this performative dimension that the Tribal Disguise Activity exploits: by making visible the normally invisible process through which appearance signals tribal belonging and conditions the quality of service received.

Experiential Learning and Empathy Development

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle proposes that genuine learning arises through four iterative stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The model emphasizes that information reception alone—reading, listening, watching—cannot substitute for the learning generated through direct, situated engagement with the phenomenon under study. This theoretical position aligns with a broader body of research demonstrating that empathy development—particularly the cross-cultural, cross-identity variety required for tribe-sensitive CX practice—depends critically on embodied, emotionally engaged contact with the perspective of the other (Varthana, 2024).

For Generation-Z students, whose social awareness is frequently mediated through digital screens, inhabiting a radically different identity in a real physical environment constitutes a high-leverage pedagogical disruption (Retail TouchPoints, 2024). The emotional disequilibrium this generates is not incidental: Kolb (1984) identifies precisely this cognitive-affective tension as the catalyst for the reflective observation and abstract conceptualization stages of the cycle. Activities that generate genuine emotional risk—adopting a stigmatized or unfamiliar consumer identity in a public setting—produce a quality of reflective engagement that structured simulations or role-playing typically cannot achieve.

Embodied learning anchored in episodes of genuine emotional salience—such as experiencing discrimination or social invisibility in a real commercial environment—produces memory that is more durable and more readily transferable to professional contexts than knowledge acquired through reading or listening (Varthana, 2024).

Challenge-Based Learning in Business Education

Challenge-Based Learning (CBL), institutionalized in Tecnologico de Monterrey's Tec21 model (Tecnológico de Monterrey, 2019), positions

real-world organizational challenges as the primary axis of professional formation, with the partner's challenge functioning as motivational scaffold, authenticity anchor, and quality standard for student deliverables. When an experiential activity such as the Tribal Disguise Activity is embedded within a CBL structure, its outputs are applied directly to the partner's strategic agenda—a dual-value dynamic that elevates its status from academic exercise to applied research contribution.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This paper employs a qualitative, longitudinal action-research design. Data were collected across eight consecutive academic semesters (2018–2025) at two Mexican campuses: Queretaro (2018–2023) and Santa Fe in Mexico City (2024–2025). Primary data sources are: (a) structured observational reports produced during and after the field visit; (b) individual reflection reports synthesizing field experience with theory; (c) debriefing session documentation; and (d) the facilitator's reflective observation records across all cohorts. Reports were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis: the facilitator coded all reports inductively, then against the five rubric dimensions; a second coder independently coded a random 25% subsample, and discrepancies were resolved by discussion before assigning each report's prevailing pattern.

The corpus spans eight cohorts at Campus Querétaro (2018–2023) and the 2025-1 cohort at Campus Santa Fe. Methodological milestones across these cohorts include the introduction of the structured observational rubric (2019-1), the pre-visit hypothesis requirement (2021-2), and a shift to hybrid delivery during the COVID-19 period (2020-2); two incomplete reports from cohort 2022-2 were excluded. The 2025-1 Santa Fe cohort (n = 14), linked to the Cinepolis CBL partner, serves as this paper's primary focus. Altogether the cohorts total 117 students, 613 store-level observation records, and 115 individual reflection reports retained for analysis.

Participant Profile

Participants in the 2025 cohort were 14 Generation-Z undergraduates (aged 20–22) in the fourth-year business Concentration "Innovation in Digital Experience Management" at Tecnologico de Monterrey Campus Santa Fe. Cinepolis—the largest cinema operator in Latin America, across 18 countries—served as the semester's Formative Partner, providing a real-world CX improvement challenge as the culminating deliverable.

The Tribal Disguise Activity: Six-Phase Design

The activity is structured across six sequential phases within a 17-week unit. As shown in Table 1, each phase fulfills a specific role in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle while advancing CX competency development.

Table 1: Tribal disguise activity: phase structure and learning objectives.

Phase	Weeks	Objective	Deliverable
1 – Theoretical Preparation	1–4	Ground students in consumer tribe theory, archetype frameworks, and CX design principles	Conceptual map of target archetypes and service hypotheses
2 – Disguise Design	5–6	Develop an authentic tribal characterization; formulate observational hypothesis	Written disguise rationale and hypothesis document
3 – Field Visit	7	Inhabit the archetype in real retail environments; record differential service interactions	Structured observational report (min. 5 stores, 2 shopping centers)
4 – Individual Reflection	8–9	Synthesize field experience with theoretical frameworks	Written reflection report integrating hypothesis, observations, and emotional impact
5 – Classroom Debriefing	10–11	Activate collective intelligence; identify systemic service patterns	Comparative cross-archetype analysis documented by instructor
6 – CX Proposal	12–16	Apply tribal insights to a real organizational CX challenge (Formative Partner)	Differentiated CX protocol and tribal segmentation strategy for partner organization

Figure 1 below illustrates the correspondence between Kolb's four learning stages and the activity's phase architecture, demonstrating that the intervention operationalizes the complete experiential learning cycle rather than isolated components of it.

Concrete Experience →	*Phase 3: Field visit—inhabiting the tribal archetype in real retail settings*
Reflective Observation →	*Phase 4: Individual report—documenting and comparing hypothesis with field experience*
Abstract Conceptualization →	*Phase 5: Debriefing—synthesizing cross-archetype patterns and theoretical connections*
Active Experimentation →	*Phase 6: CX proposal—translating tribal insights into organizational strategy*

Figure 1: Mapping of tribal disguise activity phases to Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle.

The observational instrument used in Phase 3 consisted of five structured dimensions aligned with prior research on service discrimination in retail contexts (Alfaro Cendejas, 2015): (a) initial greeting behavior and elapsed time before staff approach; (b) verbal and non-verbal communication quality from staff; (c) product suggestions and depth of service engagement;

(d) observable security or surveillance responses; and (e) the student's own emotional reactions during the interaction. Stabilized from the fifth semester onward, the instrument enabled cross-cohort comparison across a standardized set of indicators. Each student completed the protocol in a minimum of five stores, generating at least 70 store-level observation records per cohort.

The range of consumer archetypes represented across the 2025 cohort included: a street vendor of low socioeconomic appearance, a luxury AB+ consumer, a gothic subculture member, a skater/urban youth, a formally dressed adult professional, a foreign tourist in casual dress, and an indigenous-dress consumer, among others. Ethical safeguards: the instructor approved each characterization to avoid caricature; students made no recordings, purchases or staff identifications, could withdraw, and joined a debriefing that deconstructed each archetype and the staff perspective; reports were used anonymized and with consent.

RESULTS

Perceived Service Differentials Across Archetypes

Across the 14 students of the 2025 cohort—consistent with prior cohorts—110 of 115 (95.7%) reports reported perceived differences in the quality, speed, and attentiveness of service associated with the characterized identity. As shown in Table 2 below, four distinct service interaction patterns emerged across the archetype spectrum.

Table 2: Observed service differential patterns by consumer archetype category.

Archetype Category	Representative Examples	Service Indicators Observed	Prevailing Pattern	n (%)
High-status / Premium	Luxury buyer, formal professional, well-dressed tourist	Immediate greeting; proactive product offers; extended conversation; no surveillance	Preferential attention	35 (30%)
Countercultural	Gothic subculture, skater/urban youth, punk aesthetic	Delayed approach; minimal verbal interaction; absent product suggestions; occasional surveillance	Service avoidance	32 (28%)
Low socioeconomic cues	Street vendor, indigenous dress, low-income appearance	No initial greeting; active surveillance; in one case, security-mediated exit request	Exclusionary treatment	27 (24%)
Neutral / Ambiguous	Foreign tourist (casual), elderly consumer, student	Variable attention; moderate wait times; polite but limited engagement	Inconsistent service	21 (18%)

Note. Percentages are based on the 115 retained reflection reports; each report was assigned a single prevailing pattern based on the modal experience across that student's store visits.

Students representing countercultural and low-socioeconomic archetypes consistently reported longer wait times, reduced or absent verbal interaction, minimal product offerings, and—in at least one instance—security-mediated removal, while premium archetypes received immediate, personalized service and proactive recommendations. These perceptions echo prior research on retail service inequity (Alfaro Cendejas, 2015); their recurrence across stores, brand categories, and cohort years suggests, but cannot establish, systemic norms rather than individual staff behavior.

Emotional Disequilibrium as a Transformative Learning Catalyst

The most pedagogically significant dimension was not cognitive but affective. Reflection reports across all cohorts consistently describe strong emotional responses—shame, surprise, anger, a sense of injustice—when students perceived inferior or discriminatory service. This disequilibrium fulfills the catalytic role Kolb (1984) assigns to the concrete experience stage: it disrupts the student's cognitive schema and creates the motivational pressure for genuine reflective observation, with intensity a function of the social distance between the student's actual identity and the archetype inhabited.

Representative reflections describe feeling invisible in stores the student normally frequented, noticing previously imperceptible surveillance, and encountering social inequality embedded in interactions that had appeared neutral—with several students reporting a permanent shift in how they would engage with commercial environments. The student who characterized a low-income archetype and was asked by security to leave a store reported that the incident made the inequality impossible to ignore, consistent with the transformative potential experiential pedagogies assign to emotional disruption (Varthana, 2024), and it generated one of the most substantive classroom discussions in six years of implementation.

This emotional intensity also activated classroom discussions extending well beyond CX design into socioeconomic prejudice, identity construction through appearance, and the ethical responsibilities of service organizations toward diverse consumers—a depth of engagement, and an emotional residue that persists in students' professional memory, that no case reading or virtual simulation could replicate.

Mindset Shift: From Consumer to CX Practitioner

Prior to the activity, students' perceptions of service quality were anchored in their own consumer experiences—predominantly digital, friction-minimal, and personalization-centered (Research and Metric, 2025). Inhabiting a consumer identity radically different from their own revealed both the narrowness of designing CX from a single archetype and the possibility of systemic service differentials across tribal categories. This epistemic disruption—the discovery that one's own position is merely one node in a diverse tribal ecology—constitutes the foundational shift from consumer to practitioner perspective.

The operational consequences were evident in students' subsequent CX deliverables. Groups that completed the activity showed greater precision in archetype segmentation, incorporated service-equity considerations into their protocol designs, and framed recommendations in terms of tribal sensitivity rather than generational cohort assumptions—a specificity qualitatively distinguishable from proposals by prior cohorts without the field component. Instructors across both campuses consistently identify the field visit as the most frequently cited transformational moment in students' semester-end narratives.

Applied Output: The Cinepolis CX Proposal

The 2025 cohort's proposal to Cinepolis operationalized tribal sensitivity insights into two evidence-grounded deliverables. First, a differentiated service attention protocol aligned with five identified consumer archetypes present in the cinema experience: the family nucleus, the Gen-Z social group, the premium solo viewer, the elderly patron, and the digital-native couple. Each archetype received a tailored service sequence, communication tone guidelines, and staff empowerment recommendations derived directly from field observations generated through the disguise activity.

Second, a CX segmentation strategy recognizing the tribal diversity of Cinepolis' audience—organized around genre affiliation, social ritual patterns, digital-physical integration expectations, and loyalty behavior—with touchpoint improvements across the moviegoing journey. The depth of archetypical analysis embedded in the proposal, unachievable through theoretical instruction alone, validates the activity as a methodological bridge between academic CX frameworks and applied organizational strategy.

Longitudinal Consistency and Iterative Refinement

Across eight consecutive academic semesters, the activity's core pedagogical impact—tribal bias observation, emotional transformation, and professional mindset shift—has remained consistent despite variation in campus context, cohort composition, and Formative Partner profile, while iterative refinements (the observational rubric, the pre-visit hypothesis requirement, and the designation of disguise findings as the primary evidence base for the partner deliverable) strengthened its rigor over time (Tecnológico de Monterrey, 2019). Beyond its pedagogical function, the cumulative dataset—hundreds of store interactions across multiple brand categories and commercial districts in two Mexican cities, anchored in real consumer identities—constitutes a primary research resource on perceived tribal service differentials that future work could formalize for cross-cohort and cross-institutional comparison.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Contributions

The Tribal Disguise Activity contributes to two intersecting bodies of literature. First, it operationalizes Maffesoli's (1996) and Cova et al.'s (2007) construct of neotribalism not as an analytical abstraction but as an embodied experience, extending consumer tribe theory by showing that the

framework's implications for service design are most effectively transmitted through experiential embodiment rather than theoretical instruction.

Second, the activity extends Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle into the domain of CX professional formation. The findings confirm that emotional disequilibrium—generated through genuine first-person exposure to social inequality in a commercial setting—functions as the critical catalyst for the reflective observation and abstract conceptualization stages of the cycle. This aligns with and contextualizes recent research on empathy development in Generation-Z learners (Varthana, 2024; Retail TouchPoints, 2024), suggesting that embodied, socially situated experiences are particularly powerful pedagogical instruments for a cohort whose social awareness is predominantly screen-mediated.

Implications for Business Educators and Limitations

For faculty in CX, marketing, and service management courses, the activity offers a replicable, low-cost, scalable instrument whose primary resource is the creative autonomy granted to students in designing their own characterization—making it adaptable to diverse campus contexts and consumer markets internationally. Its key methodological anchors, the observational rubric (Phase 3) and pre-visit hypothesis requirement (Phase 2), are easily transferable to any mixed-consumer physical environment—shopping districts, urban markets, commercial streets—and require no specialized technology beyond a structured rubric and a clear student briefing protocol.

The classroom debriefing (Phase 5) is the most demanding element, surfacing emotionally charged material—including perceived discrimination—that requires a psychologically safe space for collective processing; it also deconstructs each archetype so that the activity questions, rather than reinforces, stereotypes. Integrating a real organizational partner (Phase 6) is also strongly recommended, as it transforms the activity from an academic exercise into applied research, building student competencies while generating actionable consumer intelligence for the partner.

Three limitations warrant note. First, sample size and generalizability: the primary cohort ($n = 14$) is small and demographically homogeneous, and even the longitudinal corpus ($n = 115$) was drawn from a single institutional context, so the patterns should be treated as hypotheses to be tested in future research rather than as generalizable findings. Second, self-report bias: all data derived from student-authored reports written for an audience that includes the activity's designer, which may have shaped how experiences were framed; disconfirming cases were nonetheless reported. Third, encounters were uncontrolled and non-independent (no matched controls; staff, store and timing varied), so findings describe perceived differentials, not causal evidence of bias.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented the Tribal Disguise Activity as a sustained, longitudinally validated pedagogical innovation that, across eight academic semesters and two university campuses, has consistently contributed to the development of consumer empathy, tribal sensitivity, and CX professional

competencies in Generation-Z undergraduate business students. Its central contribution lies in demonstrating that the kind of empathy required for tribe-sensitive CX design cannot be produced through declarative instruction alone; it requires direct, emotionally situated inhabitation of a consumer identity different from one's own—an experience that generates learning irreducible to any classroom equivalent.

The activity's longitudinal durability across diverse cohorts, campus cultures, and partner organizations speaks to the robustness of its design, and its particular relevance for Generation-Z students—a cohort with high social awareness but limited embodied exposure to tribal diversity in physical commercial environments—makes it a timely contribution to business education. Its application to the Cinepolis proposal validates its applied-research dimension: students generate exploratory observational evidence about tribal behavior and perceived service inequity that directly informs real organizational strategy.

Future research should pursue longitudinal tracking of empathy retention, adaptation to digital and omnichannel contexts, and multi-campus international implementation. As AI increasingly mediates consumer-facing interactions, cultivating genuine embodied empathy becomes more, not less, essential to business education.

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