

## Small business community needs assessment: A case during the pandemic situation

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### **Abstract**

The study is aimed at assessing small businesses during a pandemic situation. Specifically, this research delved into the business condition, characteristics in common, difficulties encountered, and improvement measures. It utilized the descriptive type of research using a qualitative approach. It covered six small businesses at Klong 15, Ongkharak, Nakhon Nayok, Thailand. The safety measures and restrictions imposed by the government had greatly affected small businesses. They were found to be family-owned or home-based, with distinct product or service offerings, the same marketing activities, and local customers. They have difficulties with the narrow product or service offerings, limited marketing activities, and sustaining their operations. A contingency plan is recommended for the new normal situation.

**Keywords:** small business community; needs assessment; small business situation; difficulties encountered; improvement measures

## 1. Introduction

The contribution of small-to-medium enterprises to the growth of the global economy is crucial. According to the International Labor Organization's (2020) report, those types of enterprises account for more than two-thirds of global employment, ranging from 80% to 90% in low-income countries. The small and medium enterprises are among the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic situation due to reduced market demand, heavy revenue losses, being out of operation, and the challenges to survival (Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Trade and Development: Transitioning to a Nested Economy).

In 2020, the number of small businesses in the United States was 31.7 million, or 99% of the total number of businesses (How Many Small Businesses are there in the US in 2020, 2020). However, around 31% of them are hardly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic situation to the extent of not being operational (Mohsin, 2020).

In the European Union, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) represent 99% of all businesses employing around 100 million people, accounting for more than half of Europe's gross domestic product (GDP). These small-scale businesses are leading to adding value in all sectors of the economy (Entrepreneurship and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) 2020; Unleashing the full potential of European SMEs factsheet, 2020).

SMEs comprise more than 98% of enterprises in the Asia-Pacific region, employing about 50% of the total workforce and contributing 17% to national GDP in low-income countries like India. And about 40 to 50% in the higher-income countries like Malaysia and Singapore (Ata, 2020).

The situation of small businesses in Thailand is similar to the world condition. Around 99.5% of the 3 million registered businesses are small and medium types, making them the backbone of the economy of Thailand (Pandemic driving the digital transformation of Thai SMEs, 2021). According to Wang (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic situation in the country has affected around 1.3 million businesses, and more than 90% are small businesses (Thailand's Key Macroeconomic: Chart Pack, 2020). The affected Thai businesses are usually at the heart of their communities supporting local services and providing employment to the residents (Wang, 2020).

The future of small businesses in Thailand is uncertain, as revealed in the survey conducted about the impact of COVID-19 on small and medium enterprises (SMEs). As of May 2020, 90% of SMEs in Thailand expected excessive revenue loss, and 52% of the small businesses anticipated closing if the pandemic lasted longer (Coronavirus (COVID-19): SME policy responses, 2020).

In the countryside of Thailand, there is a small community at Klong 15, Rangsit-Nakhon Nayok, Buengsan, Ongkharak District, Nakhon Nayok, Thailand. The community has six different small businesses that were not spared by the effects of the

COVID-19 pandemic situation. In order to study the impact of the pandemic situation on the small businesses in the said community, a study is deemed necessary to explore the current situation, determine the common characteristics of the small businesses, identify the common difficulties, and recommend improvement measures.

## 2. Background of the Study

Klong 15, just like any other place in Thailand, was frequented by the students and staff of the nearby tertiary educational institution as an alternative place to hang out for lunch, snacks, accommodation, and the like. However, when the COVID-19 situation began to set where the effect was already being felt worldwide, even the small businesses in this small area of Ongkharak, Nakhon Nayok, were gradually affected. Until such time when classes were disrupted to become online as a preventive measure for the community spread of the said virus, the effect was greatly felt.

Recognizing what was happening, researchers devised a need assessment activity to delve deeper into the pandemic effect in that small business community and considered rationalizing assistance to the ailing small business community. However, the type of assistance has to be specific according to what the small businesses need and not what the group would like to provide.

Small businesses were visited to conduct the need assessment, such as the coffee shop, the dessert house, the duck farm, the laundry shop, and the boarding house or small apartment. The assessment aimed to understand the business stories and determine the new normal's condition in terms of the common characteristics and difficulties. Improvement measures are proposed in relation to the needs of small businesses and solutions to their difficulties in the new normal.

## 3. Statement of the Objectives

The study aims to assess the condition of the small businesses at Klong 15, Ongkharak, Nakhon Nayok, Thailand, at the height of the COVID-19 situation. It specifically dealt with the conditions of each small business in a small business community, the determination of their common characteristics, the identification of their difficulties, and the provision of proposals as improvement measures for the small businesses to cope with the new normal situation.

## 4. The Conceptual Framework of the Study

This sequence of the discussion for this study is based on the four main concepts of the small business situation during the pandemic: the common characteristics, the identified difficulties, and the improvement measures. Presenting the flow of concepts

more concisely can be seen in the illustration shown in Figure 1. The figure is composed of four concepts. The first concept is about the business condition of the small businesses in the community during the COVID-19 pandemic. After knowing the business situation of the small businesses, the common characteristics were determined and presented as the second concept of the study. The third concept is about the identified problems of small businesses based on their condition and common characteristics. The identified difficulties are provided with proposed improvement measures as the fourth concept of the study.



**Figure 1.** The Conceptual Framework of the Study

## 5. Literature Review

This study is based on the Protection Motivation Theory by Tannenbaum et al. (2015) and Floyd et al. (2006) cited by Albarracin and Jung (2021). According to the studies, this theory incorporates threat, which includes perceptions of risk or susceptibility and perceptions of severity, and efficacy perceptions, which comprise the sense that the recommended behavior will avert the threat." Likewise, Floyd et al. (2006) concluded that in general, increases in threat severity, threat vulnerability, response efficacy, and self-efficacy facilitated adaptive intentions or behaviors.

Another basis of the study is the resilience theory, also known as the dynamic capability (DC) theory, which according to Obal and Gao (2020), is relevant in response to the criticality, velocity, and volatility of COVID-19 effects, which is about having sales be made virtually rather than physically. This explains the need for improved measures for small businesses to cope with the effects of the pandemic in the new normal.

The two concepts noted in the protection motivation theory are the threat of the situation and the perceived seriousness of the threat. For the dynamic capability theory, the concept of the ability to respond in coping measures is expounded in the study. In terms of the situation, Sun et al. (2021) mentioned in the study that there was a significant decline in consumer demand brought about by the pandemic. Likewise, Xiong et al. (2020) stated that the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns have negatively impacted small enterprises.

The situation of small businesses, especially in the latest wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, made the small business owners resort to debt loans that could lead to the closure of most of them (Pandemic pushes millions of small Thai companies into crisis, 2021, July 6). Furthermore, it was found that the pandemic affected practically all small and medium-sized businesses, resulting in a decrease in the number of customers and a decrease in sales (Digitally Driven, 2021). The service sector, where physical proximity is necessary, was likewise greatly affected by the guidelines on social distancing (Belitski et al., 2021, August).

The concept of the difficulties affecting small and medium enterprises was borrowed from Sallem et al. (2017). They identified the most common problems, such as a lack of accounting knowledge, proper record-keeping, a lack of information and communications technology usage, and limited financial resources. The research further exhibited that those would negatively affect the sustainability and performance of the businesses, such as mentioned in the study of Sun et al. (2021) of a great difficulty which is about the significant decline in consumer demand affecting the financial condition of the small businesses during the pandemic.

Several studies that were conducted suggest coping measures for the new normal. Researchers recommended resolving the related issues through a contingency plan to improve profitability and performance (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020; Su et al., 2021). Likewise, Liu et al. (2020) and Su et al. (2020) suggested that making some operational changes and adjustments in the performance and formulating contingency plans to improve sales are necessary business activities to cope with the uncertainties brought by the pandemic.

## **6. Methods**

This study is a descriptive type that utilized a qualitative approach. There were six small businesses described and analyzed in this study. These businesses are located in the community of Klong 15, Ongkharak, Nakhon Nayok, Thailand. The researchers visited and interviewed the participants (business owners), utilizing unstructured and structured questions. The marketer of the small businesses provided additional information to the researchers. Data were analyzed, followed by determining the shared characteristics and difficulties encountered during the pandemic.

## **7. The Small Businesses Situation**

The following are the stories in the small business community in the area, revealing the individual situation of the six small businesses. They are about the coffee shop, the dessert house, the small restaurant, the duck farm, the laundry shop, and the boarding house or small apartment.

## 7.1 The Coffee Shop

The first house that was visited was a coffee shop. The group conferred with the owner and asked for assistance to go to another household in the area. The coffee shop can accommodate a maximum of 12 customers simultaneously. The central motif or theme of the design is 'Doraemon,' a cartoon television character for kids. There are three sections in the coffee shop, and each is comprised of a set of furniture to accommodate different groups. There was a long table with two chairs of long legs for two-some customers at the side. Outside of the coffee shop, one can find three sets of areas. One area near the door has two hanging chairs that can accommodate two customers and is suitable for photo ops. It is surrounded by ornamental plants, including a pathway full of flowering plants. There is also a lake at the backside of the house of the owner of the coffee shop. Two kiosks are in a place where one is over the lake. The other is at the back of the house, which is seen at the sidewall of the coffee shop. Outside the shop were two sets of furniture for two (2) more groups. The shop offers a variety of tea and coffee with bread and meals. The owner has two children with two relatives managing the coffee shop and had an assistant cook. The eldest child also helps in the operations of the shop.

The coffee shop relied on word of mouth and signage on the small street corner for their marketing. It also utilized a promotional tool where a specific number, like 5 of any beverages ordered from the shop, entitles the customer to a complimentary glass of coffee or tea.

## 7.2 Dessert House – Kanom Thai

The second house was located near the street going to the Rangsit-Nakhon Nayok highway. The residents in that house were busy making desserts for sale. The group was able to interview the main contact. She said that she was a chef in the Maldives before, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she could not go back there. So, she concentrated on their business of making and selling desserts made of coconut milk and coconut meat, known in Thai as Wan Katee. She further mentioned that the business was handed over from generation to generation. Her uncle was slicing coconut meat and had prepared a new dessert made of sweet taro (an edible root crop with starchy tubers) with a topping of coconut jelly. She further said that they usually make three kinds of sweets: Wan Katee, glutinous rice with mustard, and dumplings with sweet coconut strips inside. They earn 1,600 THB (900 + 300 + 400) on a make-based on orders scheme. When asked whether they needed assistance with marketing their products, she said that they did not need that because they would not be able to handle big orders.

They cook the desserts manually and wake up at around 2 a.m. to cook their products. They prefer small businesses because they do not need to be registered. What

they produce is just enough as a means of their livelihood. They do not like their business to become big. This is because their production capacity only suits the orders of their current customers. It was word of mouth that was the primary marketing tool that they used. The place for cooking was at the back of the house. The preparations are done in the living room area.

At present, there are just three adults and a child residing in the house because their children and other extended family members reside in other places due to their work and already have their own families. There used to be 30 members in all of the house. Each of them has a role to play, and they help one another produce the orders. However, after a few months, the chef who was interviewed first went back to the Maldives for work. Production of desserts was already limited because only the uncle was left to prepare the orders. The business would continue even if the chef left because of the online orders from other places.

### **7.4 Palek-The Small Restaurant**

A third house is adjacent to the coffee shop. It is called Palek, or a small restaurant. It is located along the main road, near the school. The small restaurant is in the owner's house, which is a one-story house where three bedrooms are located. The living area is converted into a small restaurant that serves mostly meals for its customers, usually students and employees of the nearby school. Two families take charge of the restaurant. The mother of those in the dessert house also helps prepare food for the small restaurant. Primarily Thai food is prepared. Production was mainly based on the customers' orders, where foods were cooked based on what was ordered. A menu with pictures presenting a variety of choices is provided to the customers. There are also pictures of Thai foods on small tarpaulins located in the eating area.

Many customers frequent the place, especially during lunch and supper time—however, very few customers during the semester break in December, March, and October. Furthermore, during the Covid-19 pandemic, most classes were held online, resulting in a limited number of customers, referring to the very few staff and students who remained in the area. This small restaurant is temporarily closed mainly due to the lack of customers.

### **7.5 The Duck Farm**

The duck farm has located some distance from the majority of the cited small businesses; however, it supplies the area's business establishments with duck eggs. The owner is a relative of the small restaurant owners and the dessert house. Duck eggs were the main product of the farm in which she supplies some of the teachers of STIC. Thirty (30) pieces of duck eggs amount to 100 THB. An average of 5 orders per week is

received for 30 pieces per order amounting to 100 THB per order or 500 THB. The owner does not understand English and cannot communicate with foreigners. So, she asks a relative, a staff of the nearby school to promote her business.

In this pandemic situation, some customers went home to their provinces, resulting in a lower number of those who ordered duck eggs from the duck farm. The school staff, including the teachers, continued patronizing the business because, although most students are not around due to their online classes, the staff and teachers alike report to their respective offices on the school campus.

### **7.6 The Boarding House**

This is located near the small restaurant and the coffee shop. The students and some employees of the school are its tenants. It comprises 12 rooms, with six on the second floor and six on the first floor. Its owner is also the owner of the duck farm. The monthly rent per room ranges from 2,500 to 3,500 THB. A room can accommodate one to three people. So, when two occupants are in the room, each occupant pays around 1,500 to 1,750 THB per month. When there are three occupants, each pays 1,000 to 1,250 THB per month. The amount of rent inside the campus of the nearby school is a little bit different. The boarding house offered a cheaper amount of rent than the dorm in the school. It is around 2,500 to 3,000 per occupant.

However, most of the rooms are already unoccupied in the pandemic situation. This is due to the occupants who went home to their provinces because of the pandemic situation, and classes were held online instead.

### **7.7 The Laundry Shop**

This laundry shop is located within the same building as most small businesses. The owner used to get the laundry of the staff and students of the nearby school. However, since washing machines are already provided in every dorm, including a separate laundry area with around nine washing machines, this business is not making much money anymore. Customers, except for loyal customers, become scarce. The pandemic situation added to the problem of the laundry shop because some customers went home to their provinces. It was closed after more than a year.

## **8. Characteristics in Common**

Based on the analysis of their short stories, the small businesses in the community were noted as the common characteristics: the size of the business, owners of businesses, business type, customers, marketing of products and services, and sustainability.



The study found that all the covered small businesses were of the same size and owned by a single proprietor, and owners were blood-related. Each business offers a distinct service and product and is home-based. They all share the same market - the school's students, staff, and employees to whom the authors of this research paper are connected. The coffee shop and the small restaurant used signage for their outdoor promotion. Both businesses also utilized social media, particularly Facebook. Other businesses relied on word-of-mouth promotion. In terms of sustainability, businesses are dependent on a small number of customers enough to sustain their operations. These businesses are experiencing difficulty generating income, especially during the pandemic crisis.

**8.1 Business Size.** The six small business organizations in Klong 15 are all family-owned and operated from their homes. The businesses are in their own houses, except for the apartment, where the owner has his own house separate from the business. They are all sole proprietorship business organizations.

**8.2 Owners of businesses.** The business owners are blood-related. The coffee shop is owned by the brother of the husband of the staff of the nearby school. The duck farm and the apartment's owner is the cousin of the dessert house's proprietor. The restaurant's owner is the aunt of the owner of the house of sweets. The laundry shop's owner is the cousin of the owners of the other small businesses.

**8.3 Business type.** Most of the six businesses are service-oriented. Some are product-oriented, such as the duck farm and the house of sweets. Even the coffee shop and the small restaurant produce foods and beverages and serve them to customers per order. Both the laundry shop and the apartment are service-oriented.

**8.4 Customers.** The production of a dessert called Kanom Thai was usually dependent on customers' orders. So, when there were no orders, there was no production. But because of the word-of-mouth, it is at present supplying Thai desserts in another place known as Klong 6 (Canal 6). Most of the customers in the place had tried their products in the past. There were also walk-in customers who were referred to by those who had tried their products.

A steady group of customers patronized the small businesses due to word-of-mouth marketing. The customers were the students, staff, and lecturers of the nearby school known as St. Theresa International College. Students come and go because of the nature of the course and the limit of their stay in the place. For the dormitory, the friends of those who have experienced occupying the place take over the occupancy of

the available rooms. Some students singly occupy a room, while others prefer to be with co-occupants to save on the rent payment.

The duck farm also has the teachers, staff, and students of St. Theresa International College as its main customers. They ordered it from one of the staff members of the said school. Almost every week, she delivers the ordered duck eggs to the customers. There were also other customers, like the relatives and friends of the owners of the duck farm.

**8.5 Marketing of Products and Services.** The coffee shop and the small restaurant have signage that can be seen at the alley entrance leading to the place and written in the Thai language. The direction of the place is also included in the signage. All the other business establishments did not have any signage.

The use of social media has also been reported. Using Facebook and Line group, one of the relatives invites her friends and relatives to try the coffee shop and the small restaurant. The coffee shop relied on word-of-mouth and signage on the small street corner. It also utilized a promotional tool where a specific number, like five (5) of any beverages ordered from the shop, entitles the customer to a complimentary glass of coffee or tea.

Another way to market the businesses was through word-of-mouth. Customers who tried and were satisfied with the coffee shop and the small restaurant go back and invite their families and friends to patronize the businesses. Through this strategy, more customers come to patronize the two businesses.

The use of word-of-mouth is also evident in the marketing of the duck farm, the apartment, and the laundry shop. The reason is that the customers who ordered duck eggs only came to know of the business from those who had tried the product. The same is true in the promotion of the apartment because the occupants inform the prospective occupants about the availability of the rooms, especially for those looking for cheaper accommodation. For laundry services, loyal customers inform others of the satisfactory services.

**8.6 Sustainability.** Small businesses relied heavily on daily sales. Due to the nature of the business, the generated revenue is also tiny, affecting its financial and operational sustainability. The dessert house, which is also dependent on customers' orders, continues to produce based only on the volume of orders. The coffee shop continuously operates when walk-in customers go to their place and when there are orders online requiring delivery services using the motorcycle of the salesperson. The duck farm continuously supplies duck eggs to the coffee shop and dessert house, as well as waits for the orders of the customers for 100 THB per order.

**8.7 Difficulties of the Small Businesses.** Difficulties during the pandemic were felt by small businesses, which are related to the narrow focus on product and service offerings, marketing of services and products are limited, and the sustainability difficulty of small business operations discussed as follows:

**8.7.1 Narrow focus on product or service offerings.** Most small businesses are service-oriented, and each establishment has a narrow focus on product or service offerings. Because of that, the difficulty of diversification was felt during the pandemic when the customers were limited. The distinct type of service or product offered by each type of small business could have been an advantage because there was practically no competition. However, because of the pandemic, all business operations became limited and posed difficulties.

One of the small businesses is the apartment that offers only accommodation. So, when there are no occupants, income suffers. Another is the small restaurant that usually offers full meals at lunch and dinner times; when there are few customers, they do not have as much revenue. The coffee shop that mainly offers snacks and beverages also felt the same problems due to the few customers they had during the pandemic. Although there is a similarity between the small restaurant and the coffee shop in terms of the food products, they still differ in the type of food they serve and cater to different customers based on the time of the day. The laundry business also felt the same difficulty because it only does laundry services. After more than a year of being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the apartment no longer has occupants. At the same time, the laundry shop is already closed, and even the tiny restaurant is temporarily closed. This difficulty in the limited focus on product or service offerings is considered risky. The absence of a variety of choices affects the customers. This finding of the difficulty is supported by Bhasin (2019) when he says that it is risky for businesses to place their reliance only on a single product or market and suggests diversification to reduce the company's overall risk.

**8.7.2 Marketing activities are limited.** Word-of-mouth is the leading marketing tool for small businesses, and by using social media, one person receives orders for all of them. Small businesses have problems with marketing, which relies only on one of the school's staff members nearby to market for the small businesses covered in this study. According to the staff, she receives orders via social media, specifically Facebook and Line. As soon as she receives orders, she will immediately notify the related small business of the order. However, during the pandemic, messages and orders became fewer due to the lack of customers following the mandate of the government to conduct the classes online. As a result, the students, mostly the customers, went home to their provinces. This finding confirms the identified problem of small businesses by Sallem et al. (2017) regarding the lack of information and communication technology usage

because only one staff member of the nearby school in the study does the online marketing.

**8.7.3 Sustainability is a difficulty.** All the businesses were of small size, making it difficult for them to sustain their operations, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have a limited number of customers, so their limited income was not financially sufficient. Furthermore, it resulted in the laundry, small apartment, and small restaurant closure.

Because of the pandemic, the sales and profit earned generation became challenging. Small businesses lost many of their customers due to the implementation of measures by the government to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The educational institutions are mandated to hold their classes online. Most of the students went back to their hometowns. Only a very few students stayed and remained in the dormitory for their online classes. For the small businesses to continue, they accepted orders for delivery, but few orders were received during the pandemic. This finding confirms that of Sun et al. (2021) and Bartik et al. (2020, July 28) that the significant decline in consumer demand would affect the financial condition of small businesses.

### 9. Improvement Measures

The ways to survive and become resilient during and after a pandemic situation are imperative. Improvement measures should be implemented as follows:

**9.1 Offering of other products or services.** Small businesses should be flexible in their operations, like applying diversification, which offers a variety of products or services to their customers. This is recommended for the boarding house business. Some rooms can be converted into small business areas to generate income. They can be offered for lease to other businessmen. Other small businesses should also have additional related or unrelated products to reduce risk.

**9.2 Digital Marketing.** Small businesses need to be digitally-driven. It is recommended that online marketing can also be used. They can tap other types of customers, and since social distancing is a mandate, instead of the customers having to personally go to their business place, they have to accept orders online and provide delivery services. This is appropriate for the coffee shop, small restaurant, and duck farm. Furthermore, if their problem is technology, they can have a focal person to accept orders for them and tap into a common delivery service. The laundry business could also do the same if it were to open again.

**9.3 Sustaining the Small Business Operations.** At the height of the global health crisis, small businesses need financial support from the government or non-government

institutions to have a sustainable business operation. Financial assistance could help them expand their services or offer a related or unrelated product. Small businesses should also try to develop their market by tapping other types of customers in their place and other places, just like what the dessert house did, selling in other places, making their business sustainable even during the pandemic.

### **10. Recommendation and Conclusion**

The pandemic had no mercy on small businesses. They were organized using the sole proprietorship type, and the owners were related by blood. Most of them were service-oriented. The small businesses felt the same difficulty brought about by the lack of customers during the pandemic. The typical difficulties were the limited marketing activities, mainly the narrow focus on product or service offerings. Because of the limited number of customers in the area, sustainability has become a grave concern to the extent of the closure of three small businesses. Although still resilient, the difficulty of surviving, in the long run, can still be a problem for the remaining small businesses.

It is then recommended that small businesses have to find ways to continue surviving by implementing improvements in their performance and profitability in this pandemic situation and adapting to the new standard practices. A contingency plan containing improvement measures should be formulated for the broader or diversified product or service offerings, online marketing services, and sustained small business operations.

The findings of this study only constitute a small part of the whole area of Ongkharak, Nakhon Nayok, and cannot be considered a generalization for all small businesses. However, because the study aimed to assess only the small business community located at Klong 15 in its condition during the COVID-19 pandemic situation, the results and the recommendations are for its perusal.

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