

THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND ADAPTATION POLICY OF BUFFET RESTAURANT UNDER PANDEMIC SITUATION

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Abstract - The objectives of this study are: 1) to learn the opinions of entrepreneurs regarding the adjustment of buffet restaurant business in Bangkok under the epidemic situation; 2) to suggest a guideline for the adjustment of buffet restaurant business in Bangkok under the epidemic situation. The study used phenomenological research methodology by collecting data with in-depth interviews using semi-structured interviews from key informants of buffet restaurant entrepreneurs to apply with a descriptive analysis. The results showed that most entrepreneurs pay more attention to cleanliness in the on-site restaurants and use social media as an additional channel to help their business grow quickly. Moreover, there are suggestions for adaptation using TOWS Matrix format, including: 1) Strengths and Opportunities strategy (SO) is a proactive marketing in offering products and services via social media; 2) Weaknesses and Opportunities strategy (WO) is using information technology in buffet restaurants and limiting the number of daily customers; 3) Strengths and Threats strategy (ST) is building consumer confidence in the quality and safety of businesses; 4) Weaknesses and Threats strategy (WT) is using online channels to create awareness and transfer to delivery platform.

Keywords: Business adaptation; Buffet restaurant; Transformation

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1. Introduction

Recently global society is affected by the epidemic of many pathogens, especially from COVID-19 (Chen et al., 2021) that damages a large number of people on their life-threatening and has a rapid impact on the global economy and society. Every epidemic plague took away many human's lives. As a result, humans have to change their way of life in order to survive. In the previous outbreak may not have much evidence for later generations. However, later generations can find some information that is useful for new generations to generate a guideline dealing with new disease outbreaks.

In the modern era, humanity is facing a serious threat of an epidemic type known as COVID-19. refers to the epidemic of the coronavirus that spread at the end of 2019. The first case was found in December 2019 in Wuhan, a capital city of Hubei (Hao et al., 2020), in central of China which is a big crowded city. Therefore, this outbreak has caused a rapid epidemic and this crisis has taken the lives of the world citizens. The situation reported as of August 1, 2021 said that 4,234,090 people worldwide



have died and 198,579,091 people have been infected worldwide by the COVID-19 pandemic which causing massive deaths and affected in many dimensions in terms of the rapidly declining global economy, society, politics, health, including the well-being of people that need to be adapted to survive in the Covid-19 situation. Hence, many countries have to strive finding a cure to stop and control the spread of this dangerous disease as urgently as possible (Hao et al., 2020).

COVID-19 epidemic situation in Thailand, where the epidemic continues to be found. Bangkok has the highest number of COVID-19 cases with the number of infected patients as high as 1,046 cases, the cumulative number of infections was 387,875 cases. In December 4, 2021, there was an update on the area with the highest number of infections, it was found that Bangkok still has the national highest number of infected people with 892 new cases, the cumulative total of 425,223 cases (Srisathan and Naruetharadhol, 2022, Abdulai et al., 2021, Bai et al., 2021) . The Center for COVID-19 Situation Management set control area by using color as a divider of severity to issue epidemic control measures in which Bangkok is classified as a highly restricted area using dark red color. The government has adjusted measures to control the epidemic to reduce the spread of infection according to the level of the area that the maximum control area refrains from eating in the restaurant, customers can buy takeaways no later than 21.00, the event with more than 20 people is banned, convenience stores and night markets open 04.00-23.00 only, crowded places or places with risky activities are closed. From such principles, people must inevitably follow but it also has negative effects on many dimensions (Bonfanti et al., 2023).

Phasi Charoen is one of the 50 districts of Bangkok that are the most controlled areas and it is an area with a population growth of 122,823 people because the general condition is semi-rural-urban. Due to the dense population, people choose to make a living around this area because they foresee the economic prosperity that people come out to spend continuously. When there is a problem that affects the economy, people in Bangkok are often heavily affected by both buyers and sellers. According to the new wave of Covid-19 epidemic that has spread heavily in all areas, a total of 912 new cases have spread across all 50 districts, with the highest number of cases reported in Phasi Charoen District where 36 cases were reported. An investigation of the disease found that most infected clusters spread in buffet restaurants, and as a result of the outbreak, the government has taken strict measures by temporarily closing the service, suspending inhouse service, limiting opening-closing hours, and etc., which such measures affect entrepreneurs in Bangkok to cause in debt from making a loan because the money is needed to run their business. Even though the business is temporarily closed, the expenses still need to be paid, including rental fee, employee wages. When this crisis continues in the long term, entrepreneurs are unable to bear the costs that incurred continuously. Whereas, the business had to be shut down finally.

During epidemic crisis, all size restaurant business has the most risk of being affected by the COVID-19 outbreak and more at risk of default than other businesses because they are service businesses. In addition, there are government lockdown that affects business liquidity, showing that restaurant businesses are highly susceptible to the epidemic situation and considering the restaurant type that gets the most affected by the crisis is full-service restaurants which is a group of buffet restaurants that usually focuses on self-service, mainly sit-down dining at the restaurant and no takeaway service that resulting in a lower rate of adjustment than other types of restaurants. When this crisis spread, eating buffet becomes an activity that implicitly causes the risk of contracting COVID-19.

Most of restaurants in Bangkok are buffet restaurants because this area is a crowded community and counted as a source of prosperity. The behavior of the people in the neighborhood is urban, they always go fast, gathering as a group together for a party, quite a lot of them consume protein and high fat foods. The buffet restaurant is one of the choices that meet the lifestyle of people in Bangkok when under the epidemic situation with strict state lockdown to prevent the spread. Thereupon, the buffet restaurant business was temporarily closed according to the government's measures. In order to strictly control and prevent the epidemic, some severely affected restaurants need to be closed permanently because were unable to bear the debt issues that arise when there is no working capital. After two months, many buffet restaurants in Bangkok were able to reopen under pressure from the

epidemic situation and strict government measures. It shows that the buffet restaurant business has to adjust a lot. Strategies have been adjusted to meet the needs of consumers in the new normal era. This is a challenge for full-service businesses with the lowest adaptation rates in the restaurant industry. This is the reason that the researcher is interested in conducting a study in order to learn the opinions of entrepreneurs regarding the adjustment of buffet restaurant business in Bangkok under the epidemic situation. The researcher aims to apply the research results, conclusions and recommendations based on knowledge from this study to be a guideline for adjusting the buffet restaurant business in Bangkok under the epidemic situation and as a guideline for those who are interested in the buffet restaurant business and to suggest a guideline for interested persons in buffet restaurant business.

2. Research Objective

1. To learn the opinions of entrepreneurs regarding the adjustment of buffet restaurant business in Bangkok under the epidemic situation.
2. To suggest a guideline for the adjustment of buffet restaurant business in Bangkok under the epidemic situation.

3. Research Methods

This research was qualitative research using phenomenological research methodology to study the experience, phenomena from the actual environment, and understand the opinions of buffet restaurant entrepreneurs in Bangkok regarding the adaptation in the epidemic situation and suggest a guideline for adjusting the buffet restaurant business, details of the research conducted as follows:

3.1 Research Scopes

3.1.1 Scope of Content

Studying related documentary research and collecting data from individual in-depth interviews by learning contents related to buffet restaurant business in Bangkok, epidemic situation including the adjustment of the buffet restaurant business under the epidemic situation using the Covid-19 epidemic variants as a case study in this research.

3.1.2 Scope of Key Informants

The researcher studied a group of buffet restaurant entrepreneurs based on a theory of Miles and Huberman (1994) that modeled the strategy of selecting a sample with more relevant information on the subject of the research (Intensity Sampling) and the most cited in qualitative research. To determine the sample size, the researcher will collect the data from key informants until the data saturation is reached.

3.1.3 Scope of Area

The determination of this research area, the researcher will study the buffet restaurant business in Phasi Charoen District, Bangkok. Due to the epidemic in Bangkok, Phasi Charoen District is the most risky and controlled area. The buffet restaurant is very strict from the government both in regards to the prohibition of sitting and eating at the restaurant and limit the opening and closing time of the service. It is also an area with a large number of buffet restaurant businesses. The researcher therefore recognizes the importance of the area in obtaining quality information.

3.1.4 Scope of Time Period

The duration of this study was from October 2021 - April 2022.

3.2 Research Tool

The research tool was in-depth interview that the researcher used semi-structured interview which questions are predefined because they can easily be flexible in their actions and a continuation of the questions so that key informants can express their opinions freely to receive information from a variety of perspectives.

3.3 Data Collection

This research data was collected from the following sources:

- 3.3.1 Primary source data obtained from in-depth interviews from buffet restaurant entrepreneurs in Bangkok.

3.3.2 Secondary source data is information obtained from research such as information from news, books, articles, and related documents on the Internet to collect information about buffet restaurants in Bangkok and epidemic.

3.4 Data Analysis and Presentation

The researcher analyzed the data that has been studied from research documents and information from interviews with entrepreneurs follow the process of qualitative research, that is, analyzed the key issues obtained from the interviews according to the research objectives and present the research results by descriptive analysis.

4. Research Results

1. According to the key informants' interviews can analyze the data on the strengths of the buffet restaurant that all key informants focused on showing the strengths of the product with regard to the quality of raw materials that can meet the needs of customers efficiently. The quality in the opinion of the entrepreneurs means that it must be fresh, clean and safe, including the taste that is the unique recipe of the restaurant and has been accepted by customers also a variety of raw materials whether appetizers or desserts which allows customers to have the options of receiving services. However, some key informants showed the strengths of the price which commented that the price is considered to determine the needs of the target audience and it is a strategy for competing or creating market share of a business because setting "low price" makes it easy to reach consumers and make customers dare to spend more as well. Furthermore, some key informants focused on shop interior design, they believed that decoration style creating a good atmosphere both inside and outside which is the main factor in creating first impression of customers and helps in repeat purchases and word of mouth. Especially the first impression that can make customers decide to get the service immediately, including creating a unique identity and selling point of the shop as well. There are also a few key informants showed strengths in terms of customer capacity with the opinion that facilities are the heart of service business to have equipment, parking areas, toilets and proper facilities that are sufficient to accommodate customers who come getting the service to make the customers are comfortable when they come.

2. According to the key informants' interviews that were able to analyze the weaknesses of buffet restaurants, most of the key informants had their opinions about the weaknesses in the buffet restaurant. The small number of in-house staffs makes it impossible to provide proper care or service to customers. and resulting in service delays. There is an opinion that the most important service providers are employees. Although the buffet restaurant business focuses mainly on self-service but consumers still prefer good service from staffs because they will be one of the factors in determining customer satisfaction also will cause word-of-mouth and repeat purchases. It also has a weakness on marketing promotion by using a storefront promotion that is not attractive and is rarely promoted via social channels due to lack of knowledge about social media use, therefore the shop is not well known to the customer group and cannot to reach the target group. Some key informants have their opinions on the weaknesses of using the preparation period and the process of working in the shop is complicated and there are errors in the work which affects service and customer satisfaction. One of the key informants commented on the weaknesses of inadequate facilities, such as parking and restrooms which are important factors that results in lower levels of customer satisfaction although the main service is good. Therefore, it is an important factor that should be improved.

3. According to the key informants' interviews, almost every entrepreneur has an opinion that social media, such as Facebook, Twitter which are social media that make communication without borders is a great opportunity to increase revenue and to be a voice of the business. There is also a platform that supports the restaurant business in particular, it is more likely that consumers will decide to use the service through these convenient channels. Besides, entrepreneurs also mentioned that they were given opportunities from government support policies whether Kon La Krueng project (half-paid project), Rao Chana project (remedial measures to help those affected by COVID-19), section 33 which these are good sales boosters for businesses in situations where no one dares to spend money outside and there are measures to remedy entrepreneurs to help businesses affected by the

Covid-19 outbreak which entrepreneurs consider opportunities that the government can see the trouble and know the needs of the business therefore can help meet the needs of entrepreneurs.

4. According to the key informants' interviews can analyze the data that key informants of all stores are affected by the COVID-19 situation in terms of lost income due to state control measures to regulate abstaining from grouping, and there is also spreading negative news about the epidemic from government gathering places causing people to become paranoid and not dare to use the service, therefore the buffet restaurant is inevitably closed. It also caused a debt condition while closing because no income in the business. There are some key informants who have opinions about the fierce competition in the industry, when an epidemic occurs, customers choose to use other types of restaurants to reduce the risk of spreading the infection whether fast food or a la carte, which is an indirect competition that causes buffet restaurants to reduce income and consumer demand.

5. According to the key informants' interviews can analyze the data that almost all restaurant entrepreneurs focus on adjusting follow the government's cleanliness measures to prevent the spread of the epidemic, such as checking the temperature before entering the shop, alcohol gel service at each point follow a suggestion of the Ministry of Public Health and the Department of Disease Control, employees wear masks throughout the service, and adjust the store layout to be in line with social distancing. There is an opinion that preventing the spread of the virus requires cleanliness. Therefore, social media is increasingly being used to operate businesses through food delivery platforms that facilitate the delivery of products to consumers in Thailand such as Grab, Lineman, Foodpanda as additional channels to help the business grow quickly. As social media plays an increasingly important role in daily life, social media is a convenience for people in many ways in which the introduction of social media to businesses can be a medium of communication to create awareness for customers, make the business known easier and faster, including delivery of goods. Therefore, the use of social media and online channels are the most suitable tool and medium in the epidemic situation that causes social distancing in offline.

5. Conclusion

1. Intangible abstractions to be tangible.

The research results found that the adjustment of all entrepreneurs always pays attention to cleanliness in accordance with the measures of the Department of Disease Control, Ministry of Public Health which reflects that building confidence in cleanliness is difficult to measure as cleaning services are intangible also known as abstract. However, when the situation requires strict cleanliness, entrepreneurs decide to make a safety service visible to their customers by making a matter of cleanliness that customers can easily realize by having a screening pint of visitors, checking temperature, wearing a mask during services, providing alcohol gel service, preparing disinfectant spray for cleaning in the restaurant, and setting a partition for social distance. These actions are tangible solutions in this epidemic situation that can make customers realize the restaurant's attention about cleanliness. If the customer has to choose between one of the restaurants, the restaurant where does not have a hygiene service adjustment comparing with the restaurant that offers cleanliness services to customers at the first start, customers tend to definitely choose the restaurant that prepare a visible hygiene service. This is consistent with the study of Bonfanti et al. (2023) mentioned that a service is the result of activities that is conducted to meet customer service needs which this must be abstract, tangible and touchable at the service point, it cannot be kept but can be tangible and measurable the quality by the feelings of the service recipient.

2. Buffet restaurants have not used social media as the main business channel.

According to the epidemic situation, restaurants have adapted in various aspects and the adjustment in the dimension that increases sales mainly focuses on using online media as the main sales channel because of the various government measures that prevent you from getting service on-site. This matter causes entrepreneurs to reduce costs in the on-site restaurants and focusing on selling through online channels and allowing food couriers to be an intermediary to deliver products to

consumers. Although buffet restaurants have been adjusted to use online channels to generate sales but it is only a secondary channel or a short-term strategy. The on-site restaurants are still open as usual because entrepreneurs still adhere to the original concept of the buffet business that wants to deliver the main service at the restaurants whether it is a variety or worthy services. This causes buffet restaurants unable to reduce the costs of on-site restaurants. It is in line with the study of Iranmanesh et al. (2022) said that entrepreneurs focus on distribution channels through the storefront the most, using social media as one of marketing communications must consider consistency of an online channel support towards an offline distribution with an appropriate storefront promotion.

3. Consideration of purchasing decisions through the application.

The customer’s purchasing decision through the application is primarily decided by the value or attractiveness of the content then they will make a consideration whether they like those content that is presented or not. Moreover, if the content is useful or attracts a lot of interest, the customers will decide to buy without hesitation. This is consistent with the concept of delivering value content that consists of the following 5 attributes: Helpful - useful to meet the needs of the target audience, Entertaining - emotional or inspiring, Authentic - original and accurate content, Relevant - related and meaningful to the target audience, Timely - appropriate for the moment.

Any contents that customers engaged, it is judged as interesting contents which meet the needs of customers according to mentioned features that the customers will consider to purchase through the applications. Otherwise, if any contents have been judged as uninteresting contents or unable to attract enough interest which may lack some features, such as not meeting the needs or cannot attract enough attention so the customers will not decide to buy that product through the application.

4. Suggestions of the TOWS Matrix Model Adaptation

According to the analysis of internal and external factors of the buffet restaurant business in Bangkok under the epidemic crisis using the COVID-19 outbreak as a case study through the analytical process with the TOWS Matrix model which includes 4 alternative strategies: Strengths and Opportunities strategy (SO), Weaknesses and Opportunities strategy (WO), Strengths and Threats strategy (ST), and Weaknesses and Threats strategy (WT), as follows:

Table 1: TOWS Matrix Model Adaptation

Internal Factors	Strengths S1: Raw materials are good quality, fresh, clean, standardized and delicious. S2: Cheap price.	Weaknesses W2: Rarely promotes marketing. W3: Few employees.
External Factors		
Opportunities O1: Government support projects O2: Online social media is very popular nowadays.	SO Promoting aggressive marketing of products and services on social media. (S1+S2+O1+O2)	WO The use of information technology in buffet restaurants (W2+W3+O1+O2) Limiting the number of customers in each round. (W3+O2)
Threats T1: COVID-19 Situation T3: Direct and indirect competitors.	ST Building consumers’ confidence in business quality and safety. (S1+T1+T3)	WT Using online channels to create awareness and transform sales model to delivery platforms. (W2+W3+T1)

The buffet restaurant business can adjust in the epidemic crisis, if patterns and strategies are formulated with comprehensive data analysis with decisions based on real-world environments and



always adapt. When dealing with the covid-19 epidemic crisis, as Amado dos Santos et al. (2020) said, if consumers have to live with anything for more than 6 months, it will become a permanent behavior.

The adjustment of the buffet restaurant business in Bangkok, the strategy that should be taken proactively (SO strategy) includes an aggressive marketing in the presentation of goods and services on social media, emphasizing the use of modern media, process with understanding of the current behavior of the target audience, what customers looking for, what channel customers use, what kind of presentation style customers prefer (e.g., clips, images, tone of voice) and then choose the right content to get the most engagement of your target audience. Creating public relations materials such as short video content in Tik Tok or writing a restaurant review on Facebook, these will increase the chances of the target audience engaging with the content to become a business opportunity and become a customer of the business. In terms of raw materials, the quality of the main products and services of the buffet restaurant should be constantly improved in accordance with the needs of customers in the new normal life following the Clean Food Good Taste standard (CFGT). As Van Nguyen et al. (2021) said, customers place importance on cleanliness and food safety as the first priority when choosing a restaurant, also there is a need for restaurant operators to have massive awareness and attention to food safety. In addition, the identity of the ingredients should be distinguished, such as the delicious taste from the restaurant's unique recipes. Radojevic et al. (2018) said that entrepreneurs earn most of their income from selling products and have new domestic and international customers due to their online marketing, participating in government campaign which is an important marketing strategy that helps create more business opportunities.

The strategy that can adapted to improve and correct weaknesses (WO strategy) includes: 1) the use of information technology in buffet restaurants, 2) limiting the number of customers in each round. These can be processed by using social media to connect with customers, focusing on using customers' popular media as a communication channel, public relations to provide customers with information, restaurant's desire, including promotions. These perceptions can help a business be known as well. Monteiro et al. (2022) said that another important strategy that has made the reputation of "Jek Meng" noodle shop spread quickly is using social network, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and the website of the shop, etc.

Restricting the number of customers in each round can help reduce the problem of insufficient staffs to provide services thoroughly because there is a limit of the number of employees that can fully serve customers in each round which processed by using social media as a medium for cooperating and using the registration method to reserve the queue according to the cycle that customers booked. On the other hand, if the staff is less per demand for services, social media can also be used as an announcement for recruiting employees as well.

Defensive strategy to avoid constraints by using strengths (ST strategy) includes building consumer confidence in the quality and safety of the business despite the epidemic crisis. The approach should develop a crisis management plan to reduce the impact that will occur on buffet restaurants and present it through social media whether it is a method of managing the cleanliness of raw materials, adjusting the layout of the restaurant, providing services in accordance with the standards of cleanliness of the CCSA and the Department of Health, supporting social distancing, wearing a mask to stay safe. These operations are to create awareness and confidence among consumers about the cleanliness of the business so that customers can trust to come and receive the services by using the available main ingredients to make the restaurant stand out differently, for example, raw materials are adapted to be more conducive to consumption, have secrete recipes, or design a food pairing process to enhance the taste of eating, such as soft pork eaten with cheese will increase the deliciousness, etc. As Padave et al. (2021) said that consumers decide to use restaurant services based on product differences first. Therefore, restaurant entrepreneurs should create a highlight and uniqueness.

The strategy that must find a solution to overcome weaknesses and avoid constraints (WT strategy) includes using online channels to create awareness and change sales model to delivery

platforms by using a food delivery rider as a medium for delivery because businesses face obstacles from the Covid-19 situation that causes social distancing which resulting in various measures to reduce congestion and cluster in offline society. Using online channels is the most suitable method for the epidemic crisis. It also helps to reduce the problem of shortage of employees because customers do not come to use the services at the restaurants, no staff needed. Thus, online channel is the best choice for mitigation strategy and avoid obstacles. Hao et al. (2020) said that social media marketing strategy affects the level of purchasing decisions on the website during the Covid-19 crisis of customers in Bangkok because the behavior of using social media of the sample found that most of them access social media on average 3-4 hours per day. As a result, entrepreneurs should adjust the advertisement and public relations to promote on social media to suit the target group social media using behavior to stimulate purchasing decisions. This can increase sales because social media costs less than other media channels to reach the target audience and can measure results more quickly.

Additional Suggestions

1. If the buffet restaurant has a higher price than other restaurants, it should make a difference other than the raw materials used because every restaurant always shows the strength of using fresh and clean ingredients which has a cheaper price. Therefore, buffet restaurants should focus on creating a good customer experience for them to be impressed with the feeling of worthwhile and willing to pay.

2. In terms of marketing promotion, the restaurant should have advertisements and public relations through various media both offline and online. A promotion to offer a discount during the festival should be launched to gather customers to participate in the lucky draw during the event.

3. In terms of physical appearance, the restaurant should have a clearly distinctive sign and related with the brand image. There should be a restaurant layout to facilitate services and have strict cleanliness in all working processes in accordance with government measures hygienically.

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