




Empowering Thai Small Businesses Through Community-Based Capacity Building in Environmental Responsibility and Digital Marketing

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Abstract

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Thailand face challenges in adapting to sustainable practices and digitalization in the Industrial Revolution 4.0 era. This Community Service program aimed to enhance sustainability literacy and digital marketing capacity of SMEs at Save One Go Market Yaek Kor Por Aor, Thailand. The topic was selected due to significant gaps between global sustainability demands (SDGs) and actual practices of local SMEs, particularly regarding plastic packaging use and digital technology utilization. The implementation method employed a community-based capacity building approach with experiential learning, involving 30 SME owners through interactive workshops, hands-on practice, and participatory mentoring. Evaluation was conducted using outcome-based evaluation without pre-posttests, including structured observation, written reflection, and action plan assessment. Results demonstrated attitudinal shifts among participants from perceiving sustainability as "cost burden" to "business value-added", increased collective awareness on plastic reduction, strengthened digital content creation capacity, and formulation of sustainable SME action plans for 3-6 months implementation. This program proves that participatory approaches effectively drive SME transformation toward sustainable practices and digital marketing adoption, producing an international capacity building model replicable in similar SME ecosystems across ASEAN region.

Keywords *sustainable MSMEs; digital marketing; capacity building; international community service; Thailand*

INTRODUCTION

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a strategic role in Thailand's economic structure, serving as a backbone of national productivity and a primary engine of employment. According to the Office of Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion (OSMEP, 2023), MSMEs contribute approximately 42.4% to Thailand's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and absorb more than 80% of the total national workforce, with over 3.1 million business units operating across manufacturing, trade, and services. As one of the developing countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand has undergone rapid economic transformation over the past few decades. However, in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the digital economy, Thai SMEs face major challenges in enhancing their competitiveness in an increasingly globalized market (Chonsawat & Sopadang, 2020). Digital transformation has been recognized as a critical enabler for SME competitiveness and customer value creation through dynamic capabilities (Matarazzo et al., 2021; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Thai MSMEs are increasingly compelled to adapt through digitalization and sustainable innovation in order to maintain competitiveness in global markets. Sustainability has emerged as a central global agenda that requires business actors—including MSMEs—to embed the triple bottom line principles (profit, people, planet) into their operations, particularly following the [United Nations' launch of the Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\) \(2015\)](#). The Thai government

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has integrated SDG principles into the Thailand 4.0 policy framework, which promotes innovation-driven, digital, and sustainability-oriented economic transformation. Concurrently, rapid advances in digital technology have transformed Thailand's business landscape, shifting marketing paradigms from conventional approaches toward data-driven and online interaction-based systems. Sustainability-oriented innovation in SMEs has been extensively studied, revealing that organizational design and dynamic capabilities serve as key drivers for sustainable business model innovation (Bocken & Geradts, 2020; Terán-Yépez et al., 2020).

Thailand's digital landscape has expanded significantly, with internet penetration reaching 85.3% of the total population and 61.21 million internet users at the start of 2023 (DataReportal, 2023; Bangkok Post, 2023). Social media usage was prevalent, with 52.25 million users representing 72.8% of the total population (DataReportal, 2023). The e-commerce sector has shown robust growth, with the online shopping sector valued at USD 19.26 billion in 2022 (U.S. International Trade Administration, 2023).

According to the E-Commerce Association Thailand, the market value reached USD 23.4 billion in 2022 and is projected to grow to USD 32 billion by 2025 (Cube Asia, 2025; U.S. International Trade Administration, 2023). Digital marketing has thus become an essential capability for MSMEs seeking to compete in increasingly contested markets, as it offers relatively more efficient, measurable, and wide-reaching solutions than traditional marketing. Nevertheless, the adoption rate of digital marketing among Thai MSMEs remains relatively low compared to their counterparts in more advanced economies. Digital entrepreneurship scholarship further emphasizes that digital technology creates fundamentally new entrepreneurial opportunities and business models, particularly for resource-constrained firms in emerging economies (Sahut et al., 2021). Indeed, the integration of digital tools with sustainable business strategies has been identified as a critical source of competitive advantage for MSMEs operating in resource-scarce environments (Nambisan et al., 2019). Many MSMEs, particularly in rural areas, continue to rely on conventional marketing methods and face difficulties in understanding and applying digital technologies as well as sustainable practices due to limited knowledge, financial resources, and access to environmentally friendly technologies.

This comparative landscape reinforces the rationale for cross-country collaboration and knowledge transfer within ASEAN, whereby more digitally prepared countries can share good practices and practical mentoring models with those that are still catching up. Saraswati, et al. (2025) demonstrated that community-based approaches to digital marketing and branding training can foster sustainable entrepreneurship by emphasizing local collaboration and the reinforcement of small-business brand identity. Similarly, Assyofa et al. (2025) reported that a training-mentoring-workshop model strengthened participants' digitalpreneurship skills and their ability to optimize digital media for product marketing while also improving competencies in innovative learning models. Akbar, et al. (2025) find that the use of artificial intelligence (AI) can empower halal-based creative economies and generate new community-level entrepreneurial opportunities through more innovative product and service designs. Utami and Mulyaningsih (2016) further confirm that entrepreneurial competence has a significant influence on MSME performance, indicating that entrepreneurship skill development is a critical prerequisite for enhancing small-business competitiveness. Collectively, these findings strengthen the argument that interventions combining training, mentoring, and technology utilization have substantial potential to increase MSME self-reliance and sustainability. Holzmann and Gregori (2023) further argue that digital technologies hold transformative potential for sustainable entrepreneurship by enabling new pathways for value creation that integrate economic viability with environmental and social responsibility.

Within the context of globalization and ASEAN economic integration, international

cooperation in education and community empowerment is increasingly critical. Thailand and Indonesia, as two countries with large MSME populations, have significant opportunities to learn from one another and exchange best practices in MSME empowerment and sustainable entrepreneurship development. International community service programs can serve as platforms for knowledge transfer, cross-cultural learning, collaborative research opportunities, and the establishment of durable academic networks. At the local level, Save One Go Market Yaek Kor Por Aor represents a microcosm of Thailand's MSME ecosystem. This community market constitutes a primary livelihood source for small business owners operating with limited resources, low levels of digital literacy, and traditional packaging practices that require sustainable transformation. The program engaged 30 MSME actors as its target beneficiaries, with approximately 66.7% operating in the consumer goods segment—particularly food and beverages.

Most entrepreneurs still rely on single-use plastic packaging in daily operations, and only a small proportion have begun experimenting with eco-friendly alternatives. High dependence on plastic not only increases solid waste volumes and intensifies pressure on local landfill facilities, but also risks undermining the image of traditional markets amid rising consumer environmental awareness and national policy commitments toward a circular economy. From the digital perspective, preliminary interviews and on-site discussions indicate that many MSME actors at Save One Go Market are familiar with platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and local marketplaces. However, they lack practical, step-by-step guidance on: (1) capturing appealing product photographs for social media feeds, (2) writing persuasive captions and storytelling grounded in sustainability values, and (3) developing and managing basic paid advertisements or marketplace promotions. Consequently, digital marketing efforts—when present—tend to be sporadic, unstructured, and not integrated with branding strategies or broader sustainability objectives. Thus, the gap is not merely about access to technology, but also about the capability to convert digital tools into competitive advantage—particularly when combined with green positioning. This capability gap aligns with findings that SME digitalization requires not only technological access but also managerial learning capabilities and step-by-step development approaches to generate competitive advantage (Denicolai et al., 2021; Kraus et al., 2022).

Based on the foregoing, the main challenges can be articulated concretely as follows: (1) limited sustainability understanding and practice among MSME actors at Save One Go Market, particularly related to plastic reduction and business waste management; (2) limited capacity for structured digital marketing that is integrated with sustainability values; and (3) the absence of a systematic and sustainable mentoring model capable of strengthening both dimensions simultaneously. Accordingly, the community service program aimed to: (1) enhance partners' sustainability literacy regarding the triple bottom line, green business practices, and their linkage to the SDGs; (2) strengthen partners' digital marketing capabilities through practical training and mentoring covering content creation, account management, and the effective use of promotional features; and (3) develop and implement a sustainable MSME action plan at Save One Go Market that integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions over a medium-term horizon.

Within this framework, the international community service program was designed as an education- and mentoring-based intervention to improve sustainability and digital marketing competencies among Thai MSMEs, while also piloting an international capacity-building model. This model is expected not only to deliver direct benefits for partners at Save One Go Market, but also to generate replicable good practices for similar MSME ecosystems across the ASEAN region.

METHOD

This international community service employed a community-based capacity-building approach grounded in participatory methods and experiential learning. This approach was selected

because it is well suited to the context of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which typically face resource constraints, exhibit diverse educational backgrounds, and require learning processes that are practical and contextually embedded. Prior research suggests that experiential learning enables MSME actors to acquire knowledge through direct experience, reflection, and social interaction, making it more effective for fostering attitudinal and behavioral change in business practice than evaluation-oriented approaches relying primarily on formal testing (Kolb, 2015; Saraswati et al., 2025). Pedagogical research on entrepreneurship education further supports this approach, confirming that experiential and action-based pedagogies—rather than didactic instruction—are most effective for developing entrepreneurial competencies and fostering behavioral change among adult learners (Hägg & Gabrielsson, 2020).

In addition, the capacity-building approach has been shown to enhance entrepreneurial competencies, readiness for innovation adoption, and business sustainability—particularly when training is combined with mentoring and hands-on practice within participants’ business environments (Utami & Mulyaningsih, 2016). Accordingly, the implementation method in this program was intentionally designed to integrate cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions simultaneously. The program was implemented at Save One Go Market Yaek Kor Por Aor, Thailand, a community market that represents a community-based local MSME ecosystem. Based on field observations and activity data, this market hosts 30 active MSME operators who conduct business regularly, operate in consumer goods (food and beverages), in the creative economy sector, and in services. Most enterprises are micro and small businesses employing 1–3 workers per unit. In terms of operational practices, the majority of MSMEs still rely on single-use plastic packaging and do not yet have a planned waste management system.

Meanwhile, in relation to digitalization, most participants are familiar with social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok; however, their use remains sporadic, unstructured, and not integrated into branding strategies or broader sustainability values. These conditions indicate a clear capability gap that warrants a capacity-development-oriented community engagement intervention. The implementation method was organized into three main stages: preparation, implementation, and evaluation.

1. Preparation Stage

The preparation stage aimed to develop contextual understanding and ensure program readiness. Activities included observation and mapping of MSME conditions related to sustainability practices, packaging use, and digital marketing utilization; initial discussions with MSME actors to identify needs, constraints, and readiness for change; and design of non-test evaluation instruments, including observation sheets, reflection guidelines, and action-plan templates.

2. Implementation Stage

The implementation stage was conducted through interactive workshops, hands-on practice, and mentoring, emphasizing a learning-by-doing principle. Activities included the delivery of conceptual materials on sustainable business and digital marketing, case-based discussions drawing on MSME contexts, practical training in digital marketing content creation (product photography, caption writing, and digital account management), and small-group mentoring to integrate sustainability values into marketing strategies.

3. Evaluation

The evaluation did not employ pre-test and post-test instruments. Instead, it adopted an outcome-based evaluation approach focused on participants’ observable achievements. This approach is considered more appropriate for community engagement programs because it emphasizes changes in practice, commitment, and implementation readiness—particularly

among MSME groups with varied levels of formal literacy (Rossi et al., 2019; OECD, 2018).

RESULT

Community service constitutes a systematic effort to disseminate knowledge, technology, and applied practices to targeted beneficiaries with the overarching aim of generating sustainable value added. In the context of this program, the anticipated value added consists of shifts in business attitudes and behaviors, strengthened socio-cultural capacity for entrepreneurship, and improved economic readiness among micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) at Save One Go Market Yaek Kor Por Aor, Thailand. The implementation results demonstrate that the intervention produced tangible changes at both the individual and business-community levels, evident in the short term and serving as a foundation for medium-term impact.

Program Implementation and Achievement of Objectives

The community service activities were delivered through a sequence of interactive workshops, hands-on practice sessions, and participatory mentoring, focusing on two core pillars: sustainable business practices and MSME digital marketing. All activities were attended by 30 MSME actors representing the consumer goods sector, the creative economy sector, and service businesses. Participant engagement was high, as reflected in active involvement during discussions, practical digital content production exercises, and the development of business action plans. The program's primary objectives—enhancing sustainability literacy and strengthening MSME digital marketing capacity—were achieved through a learning-by-doing approach that enabled participants to connect training content directly to their respective business contexts. This approach proved effective for MSME communities characterized by diverse educational backgrounds and varying levels of digital literacy, consistent with the community-based entrepreneurship literature (Saraswati et al., 2025).



Figure 1. Interview with the MSME actors

Indicators of Objective Attainment

Achievement of program objectives was evaluated using an outcome-based evaluation approach that emphasized observable outcomes and behavioral change. A summary of achievement indicators is presented in Table 1. Overall, Table 1 indicates that the program achieved its targets across the attitudinal, socio-cultural, and economic readiness dimensions among the intended MSME beneficiaries.

Table 1. Summary of Outcome Indicators and Key Results

Dimension	Indicator	Measurement Tool	Key Result
Attitudinal Change	Perceptions of sustainability	Written reflections, discussion	Perceptions shifted from “cost burden” to “business value added”
Socio-cultural Change	Collective awareness & participation	Observation, group discussion	A shared commitment emerged to reduce plastic use and exchange practices
Digital Capacity	Ability to create content	Practice observation	Most participants were able to independently upload promotional content
Implementation Readiness	Action plan development	Action plan documents	All participants produced 3–6 month action plans
Potential Economic Impact	Readiness for market expansion	Proxy indicators (self-report)	Participants indicated readiness to leverage digital channels

MSME Attitudinal Change Toward Sustainability

One of the most significant findings of this program is the shift in MSME actors’ attitudes toward sustainable business practices. Prior to the intervention, sustainability—particularly the adoption of environmentally friendly packaging—was perceived as a cost burden that was difficult to implement for micro-enterprises. Following the intervention, participants increasingly recognized sustainability as part of a product differentiation strategy and a means of strengthening business image. This attitudinal shift can be interpreted through Sustainable Entrepreneurship Theory, which posits that sustainability orientation emerges when entrepreneurs perceive alignment between economic goals and socio-environmental value creation (Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). This finding is also consistent with Saraswati et al. (2025), who report that community-based training can cultivate sustainable entrepreneurial awareness among MSMEs through reflection and social interaction. Bonfanti et al. (2024) similarly argue that sustainable entrepreneurship converges with social entrepreneurship when entrepreneurs identify and exploit opportunities to simultaneously generate economic, social, and environmental value, which resonates with the observed shift among participants toward viewing sustainability as a competitive strategy rather than a regulatory burden.



Figure 2. Observation of the MSME actors at Save One Go Market Yaek Kor Por Aor.

Socio-cultural and Business-Cultural Change

From a socio-cultural perspective, the program facilitated collective awareness and a culture of shared learning among MSME actors at Save One Go Market. Group discussions and experience-sharing sessions created space for dialogue regarding business constraints, plastic use, and the utilization of digital media. These developments reflect strengthened MSME social capital, which entrepreneurship theory identifies as a critical factor for small-business sustainability (Kraus et al., 2019). Interactions among MSME actors not only reinforced local networks but also increased participants' confidence to experiment with new practices—both in digital marketing and in managing environmental impacts. The role of social capital in fostering organizational resilience has been further substantiated by Martín-Rojas et al. (2023), who demonstrate that social media-enabled interactions strengthen corporate entrepreneurship and organizational resilience among SMEs, particularly in post-crisis recovery contexts.

Enhanced Digital Capacity and Its Implications

Observational evidence indicates improved practical capacity for digital marketing among participants. Most MSME actors demonstrated the ability to create basic promotional content, manage social media accounts, and understand the strategic importance of consistent business communication. These outcomes reinforce the logic of Digital Entrepreneurship Theory, which suggests that digital technology adoption serves as a primary enabler for MSMEs to expand market reach at relatively low cost (Kraus et al., 2019). Sahut et al. (2021) further contend that the age of digital entrepreneurship transcends mere technology adoption, encompassing the reconfiguration of entrepreneurial processes and outcomes through digital artifacts and platforms. Matarazzo et al. (2021) provide empirical evidence that SMEs leveraging digital transformation through sensing and learning capabilities can create new distribution channels and enhanced customer value. Akbar et al. (2025) likewise emphasize that digital literacy is an essential prerequisite for MSMEs to adopt more advanced technologies in the future. Within this program, strengthening foundational digital literacy served as an initial stepping stone toward more sustained digital transformation.

6. Action Plans and Potential Economic Impact

A key program deliverable was the sustainable MSME action plan developed by all participants. These plans reflect implementation readiness and commitment to change, and thus represent an important marker of community service success. While short-term financial impacts could not be quantified, the potential economic effects are suggested by participants' increased readiness to expand market reach through digital channels and to build sustainability-based product differentiation. This pattern aligns with the Resource-Based View (RBV), which emphasizes that strengthened internal capabilities—such as knowledge and skills—constitute sources of competitive advantage for MSMEs (Barney, 1991; Utami & Mulyaningsih, 2016). Kraus et al. (2022) extend this perspective through the digital transformation lens, arguing that sustained competitive advantage depends not only on existing resource stocks but also on the firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing digital environments—a process directly facilitated by the action planning component of this program.

Strengths, Limitations, and Implementation Challenges

The principal strength of the program lies in the alignment of its method with the characteristics of the target community. A participatory, practice-oriented approach proved effective for MSMEs with heterogeneous backgrounds. The integration of sustainability issues with digital marketing also generated value added that is highly relevant to the partners' contemporary

challenges. However, several limitations were observed. The main implementation challenge concerned participants with very low digital literacy, who required more intensive mentoring. Additionally, the limited program duration constrained deeper engagement with advanced topics such as digital advertising optimization and content performance analytics.



Figure 3. The members in front of Save One Go Market Yaek Kor Por Aor.

The program outcomes also provide pathways for future development, including sustained mentoring, strengthening inter-MSME networks, and collaboration with stakeholders to expand access to eco-friendly packaging and advanced digital training. Moreover, this program model has strong potential for replication in other community markets with similar characteristics across the ASEAN region. Overall, the results and discussion demonstrate that the international community service program generated meaningful value added for MSMEs at Save One Go Market—evident in attitudinal change, strengthened entrepreneurial culture, and enhanced economic readiness—and that these outcomes are strongly supported by entrepreneurship theory and prior empirical evidence.

DISCUSSION

The results are significant because they demonstrate that a community-based capacity-building intervention—grounded in participatory engagement and experiential learning—can generate practical, observable improvements in MSME sustainability orientation and digital marketing readiness within a relatively short implementation window. The documented shift in participants' perceptions of sustainability from a “cost burden” to a source of “business value added,” alongside the emergence of collective commitments to reduce plastic use and the ability of most participants to independently create and upload promotional content, indicates that the program effectively strengthened both individual capabilities and community-level entrepreneurial culture. These outcomes are consistent with experiential learning principles, which emphasize that knowledge becomes actionable when acquired through direct practice, reflection, and social interaction (Kolb, 2015), and align with community-based entrepreneurship

evidence showing that collaborative, practice-oriented training can foster sustainable entrepreneurship among MSMEs (Saraswati et al., 2025) and with evidence that experiential and action-based pedagogies are most effective for developing entrepreneurial competencies in adult learning contexts (Hägg & Gabrielsson, 2020).



Figure 4. Capacity building in collaboration with Shinawatra University

Moreover, the observed gains in foundational digital marketing skills support digital entrepreneurship perspectives that position digital tools as critical enablers for MSMEs to expand market reach at relatively low cost (Kraus et al., 2019), while the completion of realistic 3–6 month action plans by all participants reflects implementation readiness and reinforces capacity-building best practices advocated in MSME development agendas (OECD, 2017; OECD, 2018). Importantly, these results suggest a clear pathway for replication and scaling across other community-market ecosystems in ASEAN and beyond: the model can be standardized into modular training units (sustainability fundamentals, green branding, content production, basic promotion), combined with tiered mentoring intensity to accommodate varying digital literacy levels, and extended through post-program clinics and peer networks to sustain behavior change and advance toward higher-level competencies such as advertising optimization and content analytics. Adaptation to different contexts can be achieved by tailoring case examples, platform selection, and environmental priorities to local conditions (e.g., waste management systems, packaging availability, consumer preferences), while maintaining the program’s core mechanism—hands-on practice coupled with participatory reflection and action planning—which functions as a transferable community development framework for strengthening MSME resilience, competitiveness, and sustainability.

These findings echo the broader digital transformation literature, which identifies dynamic capabilities—particularly sensing, learning, and reconfiguring—as foundational mechanisms through which SMEs translate digital technology adoption into sustainable competitive advantage (Matarazzo et al., 2021; Kraus et al., 2022). Furthermore, the integration of sustainability with digital strategy aligns with emerging evidence that SMEs simultaneously pursuing digitalization and sustainability can achieve synergistic effects on business resilience and market expansion (Denicolai et al., 2021; Holzmann & Gregori, 2023).

This finding holds important implications for policymakers and development practitioners in ASEAN who are seeking scalable approaches to sustainable MSME development within constrained public budgets. Within the program, participants who had previously used social media in an unstructured, ad hoc manner began to reconceptualize these

platforms as deliberate business tools for market expansion and customer engagement. This cognitive reframing—from social media as personal communication channel to social media as marketing infrastructure—constitutes a form of entrepreneurial opportunity recognition enabled by the capacity-building intervention. The linkage between this outcome and Matarazzo et al.'s (2021) dynamic capabilities framework is apparent: sensing new market opportunities through digital channels, learning how to create effective promotional content, and reconfiguring existing digital behaviors toward strategic ends are precisely the sensing, learning, and reconfiguring capabilities that the program operationalized through its workshop design.

Martín-Rojas et al. (2023) demonstrate that social media-enabled interactions strengthen organizational resilience and corporate entrepreneurship among SMEs, particularly in post-crisis recovery contexts. The community market setting of Save One Go Market amplified this dynamic: because participants operate in geographic and commercial proximity, the collective awareness forged during the program has a natural structural foundation for sustained peer-to-peer accountability and knowledge exchange. This finding suggests that community market environments may be particularly fertile sites for capacity-building interventions, given their built-in social networks and shared territorial identity. Policymakers and development practitioners designing MSME empowerment programs in ASEAN should consider community markets as priority intervention points, given their high concentration of resource-constrained entrepreneurs and their inherent peer network infrastructure.

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