

**HOW SME RESTAURANTS IN BANGKOK ADAPT TO SURVIVE
UNDER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

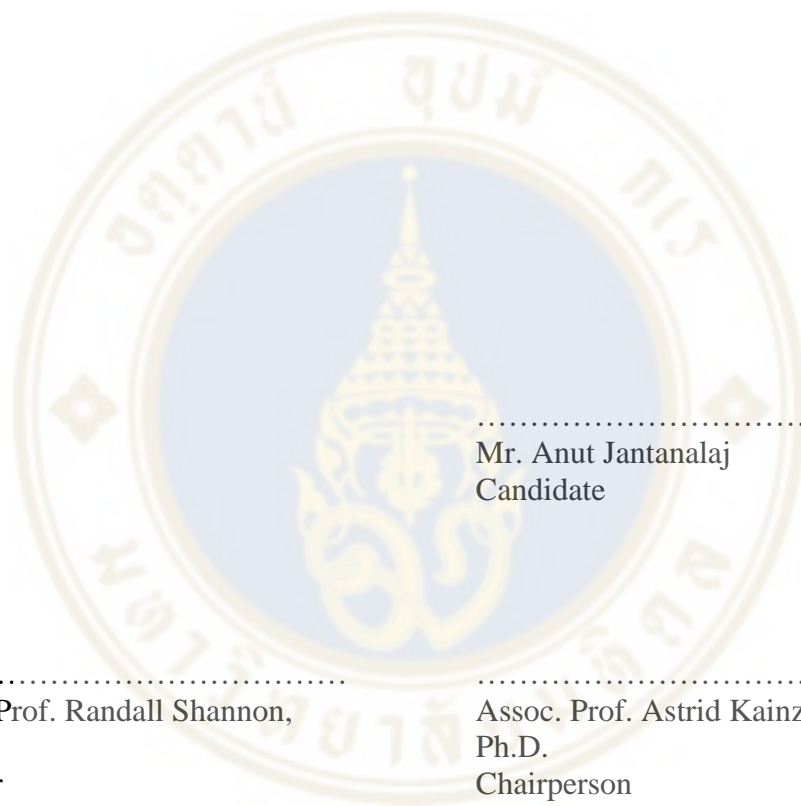


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Thematic paper
entitled
**HOW SME RESTAURANTS IN BANGKOK ADAPT TO SURVIVE
UNDER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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.....
Mr. Anut Jantanalaj
Candidate

.....
Assoc. Prof. Randall Shannon,
Ph.D.
Advisor

.....
Assoc. Prof. Astrid Kainzbauer,
Ph.D.
Chairperson

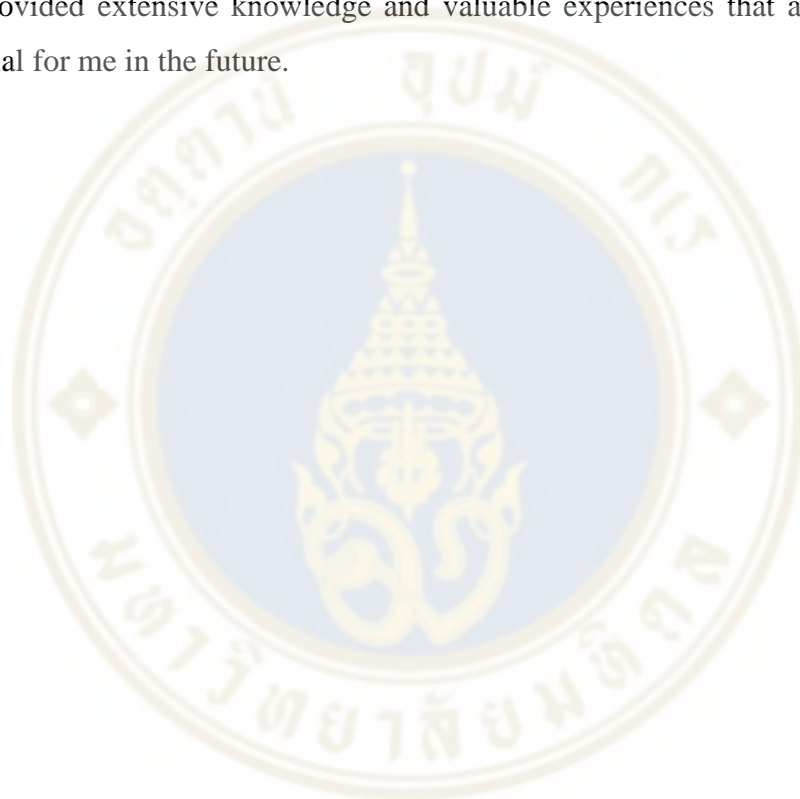
.....
Assoc. Prof. Vichita Ractham,
Ph.D.
Dean
College of Management
Mahidol University

.....
Manjiri Kunte,
Ph.D.
Committee member

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Anut Jantanalaj



HOW SME RESTAURANTS IN BANGKOK ADAPT TO SURVIVE UNDER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ANUT JANTANALAJ 6349110

M.M. (MARKETING MANAGEMENT)

THEMATIC PAPER ADVISORY COMMITTEE: ASSOC. PROF. RANDALL SHANNON, Ph.D., ASSOC. PROF. ASTRID KAINZBAUER, Ph.D., MANJIRI KUNTE, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand, many SMEs restaurants were severely affected, and many had closed down. The purpose of this research is to understand factors affecting their survival during this crisis.

This research aims to study the surviving factors of SMEs restaurants in Thailand. For example, the variables are the government policies, marketing strategies, cost control, and other factors affecting their operation.

KEY WORDS: SME restaurants / Covid-19 / Government Policies

34 pages

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

It has been more than two years since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many restaurants in Thailand were severely affected by the implementation of the government policies. The direct influences would be from curfew restrictions and only take away are allowed while the indirect impact is partly due to the domestic recession and declining purchasing power.

The information obtained from Krungthai compass shows that in 2021, the overall loss from the food industry nationwide is 107,500-214,600 million Baht, approximately 22-44% of the total restaurant's revenue in 2019. In addition, around 50,000-100,000 food businesses had to close down their operations. Kasikorn research has estimated that the widespread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restriction measure caused prevalent impact on the food industry, causing the overall sector's value to fall to 3.5 hundred million Baht in 2021, the worst case would be 3.35 hundred million Baht compared to 4.3 hundred million Baht in 2019.

The observation has shown that restaurants in Bangkok area have adapted to the situation and the consumer's habits have also changed causing new consumer trends under the New Normal scenario. Moreover, many entrepreneurs have paid more attention to the delivery services, which has been even popular since the pandemic. This reinforced that this crisis allows entrepreneurs to come up with creative solutions.

1.2 Problem Statement

Food industries have been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in recent years, especially SMEs. Pandemic, an external factor, makes it difficult for business owners to adjust their marketing strategies. As business policy from individual business is not sufficient, it requires compliance from the governments either as in

regional or national level. In Thailand, when faced with the pandemic in the early days, the government was not handling the problem effectively in the eyes of the citizens. Not to mention unclear policies implementation that subsequently resulted in business closure, mostly small and medium enterprises. As most of business owners were noticed in advanced in regards to the government policy, therefore most of them failed to continue their operation. We want to explore ways to operate under the new normal circumstances and routinely adjust to the changing consumers' behaviors.

1.3 Research Objective

To research the adaptation of Bangkok SMEs' entrepreneur and to explore their strategies to continue their operations and to generate sufficient profit to manage the business under the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.4 Expected Benefit

The expected outcome will lay an overview of the guidelines that small restaurant owners should adopt to operate in post-pandemic times. Simultaneously, the changing consumer's behavior after the pandemic will be studied so that the entrepreneurs know the direction to move forwards.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 SMEs Restaurant in Bangkok

SME refers to “Small and Medium Enterprises” which are micro-medium independent businesses, low-cost of investment, and low staff rates.

The characteristics of SME was clearly stated under the ministry of 2019 small and medium state enterprises to limiting the hiring of workforce not exceeding 30 people, generating the revenue not exceeding 50 million annually for the former, and limiting the hiring of workforce not exceeding 100 people, generating the revenue not exceeding 300 million annually for the latter. As SMEs contribute to the GDP and is one of the determining factors of living quality globally among the developing countries (Alberti et al., 2018; Dahles & Susilowati, 2015; Sabatino, 2016; Williams et al., 2013), including Thailand, it is unsurprised that Bangkok has the highest number of SME restaurants in Thailand, approximately 60,000 stores.

2.2 The COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangkok

On the 13th of January 2019, Thailand met the first patient with the COVID-19 infection and the number kept rising due to close contact with the patients. Undoubtedly, tourism was severely affected as the number of tourists dramatically decline. This is due to the travelling by plane and cruises are listed as top reasons for the global spiral (Chinazzi et al., 2020). Asides from tourism, the aftermaths of transportation and food businesses were also critical.

It was the worrying situation in Bangkok as the spread of this deadly pandemic spiraled in Thailand causing many clusters such as the Muaythai fan cluster or the Thonglor nightclub cluster. The situation scared many people and most of them didn't dare to leave their homes trying to avoid social gatherings to help flattening the curves (Broniec et al.,2020). Within the same timespan, the government had

implemented various policies to suppress the rate of infected patients from increasing. Some of the regulations that are similar to the rest of the world and faced by the global population is work from home policy (Kaplan et al., 2020), lockdown policy in effect since 10PM-5AM daily, and “Khon La Khrueng” policy.

2.3 Government Policies during Covid-19 Pandemic

Public policy refers to guide, action, or decision predetermined from the government body to initiate activities or actions to achieve the goals. Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the Thai government had announced policies to reduce the risk and prevent the Thai citizen from having COVID-19. Most of the policies are similar to other countries such as the lockdown policy which limit people from leaving their territories from 10 PM to 5 AM, ban commuting to other provinces without official notice, and including takeaways at the restaurants only. These policies critically affect the businesses, and it is obvious now that the COVID-19 crisis exert the most intense influences on small business (Cortez and Johnson, 2020). Moreover, the government also established economic boosting policies such as “Kon-La-Krueng” and “M.33 Rao-Rak-Gun.” These economic boosting policies works as a way that government giving money to Thai citizens that have met the requirement and can utilize those funds by purchasing consumption goods and foods.

2.4 Adaptation

Business adaptation is the phenomenon where entrepreneurs change their business conducts according to the current situation for their survivals. In food businesses, adaptation is highly important as consumer eating’s habits constantly changes regardless of the cuisine, Thai, Chinese, Japanese, or Korean. The adaptation also covers the food introduction and various services that needed to be changed, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Adaptation, mentioned as the most important step that entrepreneurs should take, is core in food business practice as many elements changed too. For example, consumer habits, the government policy attract fewer customers and, in some places, eating at the restaurants is a ban. Another

influential factor is the declining economy, shrinking the consumer's purchasing behavior. Many of them chose to cook for themselves at home because it is obviously cheaper than eating out. These factors affect the food industry and hence making those entrepreneurs to adapt and to make profit to survive.

2.5 Cost Reduction

Cost reduction is a method where firms reduce the expense both in terms of monetary and resources in hope to increase the profits. Many SMEs restaurants also adopt the practice to avoid potential losses. Some of the widely adopted are reduced staffs pay, reduce the number of staffs, control the ingredients cost, and avoid unnecessary overhead costs.

2.6 Marketing(online/offline)

Marketing refers to the organization's activities to boost the sales of goods and services either via online or offline platforms.

For SME food businesses, marketing is considered a crucial element in introducing the business to consumers and to increase profit generating channel to survive the COVID-19 crisis. Since it is part of the lockdown policy, eating at the restaurants is not allowed. During this period in Bangkok, less customers dine out obviously harms restaurants' revenue, and the precautionary measures by restaurants also reduce customer satisfaction (Zhong et al., 2021). In fact, it is reported that experts think half of the restaurant businesses are unable to be in operation (Severson, Yaffe-Bellany2020); there is further suggestion that it is significant to establish a policy to attain customer's demand (Sigala, 2020).

Later, it is widely seen many restaurants implement strategies both online and offline channels. One of the offline marketing campaigns arise by selling takeaways instead. This is a proactive solution where SME owners are eager to go and find their customers in their regions rather than waiting for one. Delivery is also widely adopted. Many SMEs provide delivery services which deliver food ordered to the doorsteps of their customers. It discovered that people searched more about the delivery and

takeaway on online platform (Mayasari et al.) In addition, the result from online questionnaire there is strong evidence showing increase customer's demand for private dining places during the pandemic (Kim and Lee., 2020).

Another revolutionized marketing strategy is cooperating with the third party, mostly is mobile application. Though SMEs might lose some of the profit as a fee in using the application services, the tradeoff worth it as more customers are aware of the brand and its promotion. The next online strategy is hiring influencers to write a review via their social media: Instagram, Facebook, YouTube. These channels can well attract customers.

2.7 Innovation

Innovation is a new idea or a new invention and can enhance the already existing version to look more modern and to efficiently utilize its benefit. A successful innovation possesses economic value. And it has long been recognized as a vital component for company's success (McAdam and Keogh, 2004). Because restaurants' quality can be enhancing, reputation can be widely spread, and cost can be greatly reduced via innovation (Ottenbacher and Gnoth, 2005). This further provides each restaurant with competitive advantages. Restaurants is one of the most innovated especially in the COVID-19 crisis. Many restaurants such as Shabu or Grill hub provide set menu which include foods and cooking tools for customers to be able to mimic the experience at their comfort at home. The phenomena are hardly seen before the pre-pandemic time. Another tactic is utilizing technology to collect customer's data and sending messages program to ignite customer's interest and come back again for another service.

2.8 Surviving

In food business, generating more income than expense guarantees the survival. Some of the expenses are overhead costs, hiring staff cost, rent. The survival of each place depends on the management process of each entrepreneur.

2.9 Theoretical Framework

1.The COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand (-): The COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand negatively affected the survival of SMEs.

2.Government policies during Covid-19 pandemic (+/-): Government policies during Covid-19 pandemic positively and negatively affected the survival of SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.Cost Reduction (+): Cost Reduction creates positive effects to the survival of SMEs in COVID-19 crisis

4.Marketing(online/offline) (+): Marketing positively affected the survival of the SEs in the COVID-19 crisis.

5.Innovation (+): innovation positively affected the survival of SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6.Surviving (+): surviving positively affected the survival of SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

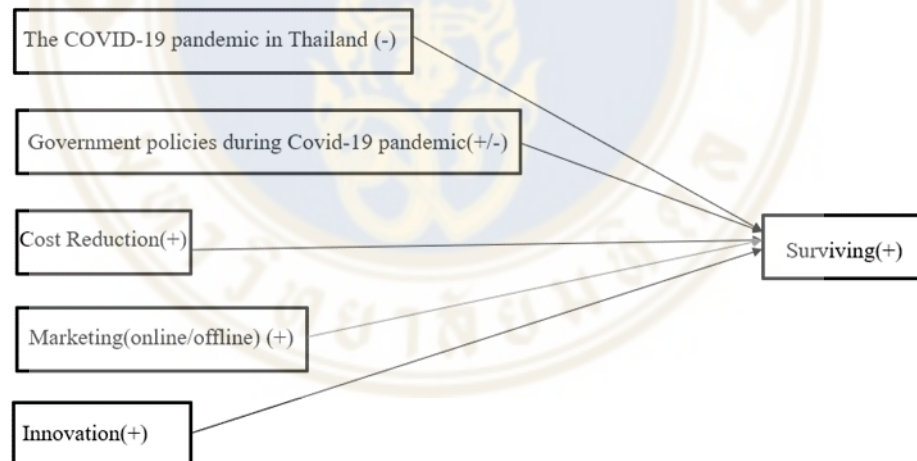


Figure 2.1 Theoretical Framework

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

From the topic of this research: How SMEs restaurants in Bangkok adapt to survive under the COVID crisis, we would like to explore further in terms of the process in adapting to survive under the COVID-19 crisis. Hence, we employ interview as a qualitative method. This is the most suitable for data collection as businesses adapt differently. In addition, interview will portray a concrete view of the restaurant owners and can truly understand their emotion when going through those obstacles.

3.2 Data Collection

We are planning to interview 5 SMEs food owners. They will be entrepreneurs who still own food SMEs both pre and post COVID-19 pandemic at least for 6 months, each of them has different ways of adapting to fit the circumstances. Moreover, we will collect data from 5 customers who regularly buy foods from SMEs restaurants to detect any variations in consuming behavior patterns.

3.3 Interview Question

There are two set of questions: questions for food SME food entrepreneurs and questions for customers eating at SME restaurants. The question for entrepreneurs will be analysis factors that help the business to survive in the COVID-10 pandemic, while the consumers will be asked about their habits and factors in decision making when it comes to choosing restaurants.

Question for SME food entrepreneurs

1. What kind of the food you're selling and how long have your business been in operation?
2. A comparison of your daily revenue before and after the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What were your biggest challenges during covid-19?
4. How have the government policies such as no eating at the restaurants or M.44 affect your business?
5. In a normal circumstance, what are the main expenditure of your restaurants? in comparison to the COVID-19 situation?
6. If you implemented marketing strategies, how much did you spend both offline and online platforms to survive the situation?
7. Does your restaurant possess something different when faced with the pandemic? i.e., the implementation of the new technology or a change in service
8. In your opinion, what is the most critical factor that help you survive this pandemic?

Question for SME food customers

1. How often do you eat out?
2. Does the COVID-19 pandemic affect your food's decision making? If so, how?
3. To what extent do you think the government policies such as no eating at the restaurants or M.44 affect your decision?
4. Do the current marketing strategies affect your food decision during the pandemic time?
5. Is there any innovation during the pandemic time that attract you and trigger your spending?
6. What are some key factors that contribute to your food decision making?

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDING AND ANALYSIS

From analyzing factors and variables contributing to the survival of the Bangkok SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic, we found out that most entrepreneur perceived the fast-adaptive practice, careful management, allocation of store's expenses, and maintaining customer's satisfaction as their survival factors.

4.1 Factors Contributing to the Survival of the Bangkok SMEs During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Government policies during Covid-19 pandemic

“When the government prohibit opening at night, we were severely affected as our restaurant normally opens at night. And our revenue from selling alcohol beverage was gone.” “Sometimes the policies were consistently changing and ambiguous. We were also confused and didn't know what to do.” Restaurant A

“The effect can be divided into three parts. The first part is that having meals at the restaurants. If there are four customers that come together, they have to be seated separately which doesn't make sense at all. Our place is not spacious, but customers must be seated far apart. This reduced the number of customers that we can accommodate and caused direct impact to our business. Another severe impact was when the announcement of closing down all the restaurants. We lost tremendous amount of income. Fortunately, Kon-La-Krueng policy helped us a lot; there was one period where this policy accounted for 80% of our income.” Restaurant C

“The delay in vaccination. Poor management and prohibiting in-house dining. Every wave, the government would announce the shutdown of the restaurant without advanced notice. Sometimes we had already prepared the ingredients, those were wasted. And about the compensation, when the policy was announced, there was no further follow up. Kon-La-Krueng policy was good and helped speeding the financial

flow. Customers were more confident in spending and the policy was part of survival.”

Restaurant E

Cost Reduction

“During the pandemic, the amount paid for fresh produce were harder to control and was hard to predict the right quantity. As customers did not come regularly. The solution was to cancel some of the menus to be able to control the cost of the ingredients. Other expenses are cleaning equipment, air-conditioning cleaner, sanitizer. These are expense that we have been paying for the last two years to comply to the government policies.” “For us, during the first phase, we didn’t cut their wage. But as time went on, we were severely in a bad position and told them that there would be a 25% reduction from their revenue.” Restaurant B

“In terms of staff, we reduced their wage to 75% and changed it from monthly to daily. During the worst time, there was no marketing and advertising activities at all. But when the situation got better, we resume those activities. Another rising expense was the cleaning cost such as alcohol gel and plastic for packaging and gloves.” Restaurant A

“We paid less electricity bill and some of the staff wage. We let some staff go or took a break.” Restaurant E

“We were trying to keep everything at the same level. Even if we face loss, we still wouldn’t want to decrease that portion cost. Maybe there might now be a bonus, which would allow us to keep operating. “

Marketing

“Facing the pandemic had prevented us from spending more, we try to cut costs as much as possible. We can’t afford hiring influencers for sure. Even if we have one, the customers will not visit our business anyway as it was at the peak of the pandemic. During the peak situation, we applied for LINE MAN and GRABFOOD, we did some promotions on the applications. And the foods were different; they were all a la carte such as Kaprao pork” Restaurant B

“We mainly hired influencers to promote us on Facebook page and the cost of hiring was cheaper during the pandemic. We also tried promoting on YouTube, but it wasn’t working. As for offline, we did some posters, gave out brochures and introduce more a la carte menu.” Restaurant A

“We spent more on advertising because it was really important.”
 “Influencers possess wide customer bases. We searched for one that has similar style to us.” Restaurant E

Innovation

“Yes, there are a lot of them. Normally our signature food would be dining with the family, but during the pandemic, we introduce more than 20 a la carte menus. In addition, we have the packaging, branding, and we need to have a standard in delivering our food to the customers.” Restaurant E

“Most menus are the same. The slight difference is the packaging. We used more packaging in separating the source and pasta.” Restaurant D

Surviving

“I tried to reduce as much cost as possible. Another is compromising. If the staff are willing to stay with us, from earning 300 THB a day to 200 THB revenue, they still stay” Restaurant B

“The most important thing is adjusting your mindset. We shifted the mindset to not making profit. We just maintain our restaurant quality and look after our staff. Some of them have been with us for so long and we should keep them. During the period when we were closed down, we also gave them jobs so that they have something today while waiting for the situation to get better.” Restaurant A

The researcher found that the most important factor contributing to the survival of the SMEs is the government policy, especially one that induces spending like “Kon-La-Krueng” policy. The next factor is to decrease cost. For example, removing of the unpopular dish from the menu, laying off employees, reduce pay. The next factor is introducing marketing and innovation which put an emphasis on delivery service.

4.2 Influential Factors in Customer’s Consumption during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Government policies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Will aim for restaurant that join Kon-La-Krueng policy during lunchtime”
 Khun Nut.

“Policy partly plays huge role, I will chose restaurant in the LINE MAN application where Kon-La-Krueng is applicable.” Khun Nan

“I always use Kon-La-Krueng but there are few restaurants joining the campaign.” Khun Sun.

Marketing and Influencers

“Marketing plan and influencers help propel the decision. I will look at the promotion and chose the menus that look attractive or newly created.” Khun Nan

“I spent my time using the application and order the foods online as I don’t want to leave my house. I think hiring influencers affect my decision. I will be introduced to more products and want to try, coupled with promotion, the foods are more attractive” Khun Nut

Innovation

“I prefer restaurants that provide clear plastic division, if I order the foods online, I will want a clean and completely sealed packaging.” Khun Sun.

Researcher has discovered the most critical factor influencing consumer’s choice during the COVID-19 pandemic is price. Part of the reason comes from domestic recession which forced people to be more conservative about the budget. At a closer look, price is divided into three parts: the food price, delivery fee and special discount from joining the government policies. Next is various marketing strategies implemented. From the interview, consumers are interested in restaurants where they hire influencers to help promote their services either via YouTube or Facebook. This help increase consumer’s awareness and they are more eager to try something new. The promotion at a particular period is also important as reduced price greatly attracted more customers. Lastly, it’s about the innovation. Here, innovation refers to packaging in delivery services. If they are clean, and can sustain the taste of the food very well, consumers will priorities them as their top choices.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

The research shows that factors influencing the survival of SME restaurants in Bangkok both from the perspective of customers and entrepreneurs are decreased in daily revenue and cost control in terms of staff.

From the interview, it is found that during the COVID-19 crisis, the SME's restaurant revenue fell by 50-70%. Moreover, the government policies such as seat distancing, only takeaways, or alcohol prohibition accelerated the reduced in entrepreneur's revenue. Some of them decided to close down at the peak of the crisis. From asking the entrepreneurs and customers, factor that can encourage revenue is government's policy, implementing delivery services, and online marketing.

The most influential factor in increasing restaurant's revenue is financial incentive from the government. For example, Kon-La-Krueng policy, it is found that those who joined the policy could see an 80% increase in the revenue. In addition, the respondents stated they will look for places that participated in the policies to help save their expense.

The next factor is providing delivery services. All of the restaurants interviewed have provided delivery services, some joined via applications and some provide their own services. More menus were added too; some restaurants have added 20 new menus especially for delivery purpose. Moreover, they were particularly concerned of the packaging that can preserve the taste and the quality of the food. On the other hand, consumers behavior has changed since delivery service became the prime choice in choosing where to order during the crisis. And adding delivery services can add 20% more revenue to restaurants.

The last factor in boosting SME's revenue is to conduct online marketing, especially hiring influencers for YouTube or Facebook reviews. Some of them were able to do so as the conduct require considerable funds while they have declining income.

Restaurants that were able to adopt online marketing strategy saw significant increase in their income. And from the customer's interview, most of them were attracted by the presentation made by influencers and learning about the marketing promotion through Facebook page even trigger their decisions.

The next factor is the cost control within the restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the restaurants have cut unnecessary cost such as light control hours. Some have cut out menus to reduce ingredient's expense. However, the rising expenditure is employee's wage. From the interview, most of the entrepreneurs didn't want to reduce staff's wage and want to retain quality staff as many as possible. Because it is difficult for them to replace staff who can get along very with them, especially those who are skilled and have been staying for so long. Reducing staff's wage can reduce the overall expense for 25%, some of the restaurants have changed from monthly wage into daily wage, while some didn't reduce the wage as they want to keep their staff.

Lastly, it is known that the most critical factor in surviving this crisis is financial management, adapting the mindset from making profit into the survival of the business and staff to maintain their standards.

5.2 Recommendations

Government policies during Covid-19 pandemic

Announcing new government policies during the COVID-19 pandemic indeed affected both entrepreneurs and consumers. Hence, before announcing any policy, there should be enough time for Thai's people to prepare and plan their operating system. To illustrate, Thai's citizen was not informed of the incoming in-store dining, many entrepreneurs wasted a lot of money by preparing the ingredients and staff already just to learn that they will have to sell only takeaways. The reasonableness of the policy was also debated. People were asked to be seated separately even if they visit the restaurant together. This also reduce the chance of the restaurant to accommodate more customers.

During the pandemic, entrepreneurs had focused on the survival of their businesses such as reducing costs or shifting management styles. However, the most

influential decision making from the customer's end is the food quality, taste, and hygiene.

5.3 Limitations

The limitation for this research is small sample size. We only interviewed 10 respondents age between 25-30 years. The information obtained from the study may allow us to see only their perspectives and the result might vary if we interview people with older age. But due to the time limit, the researcher was able to interview 5 restaurant owners and 5 consumers, which they can't represent the population in Bangkok.

5.4 Future Research

The next potential research is to dive deeper into the government's policies during the pandemic. Since each policy directly affected both entrepreneurs and consumers. Studying how government's policies handle the next crisis and additional studies for all age and scale will help build more concrete idea of what to expect during the pandemic crisis.

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1. SME food customers

EARN-engineer

Interviewer: How often do you eat out?

Khun Earn: Not often. Normally I will eat out about twice a week. Other times I will order via LINE MAN delivery service.

Interviewer: Does COVID affect your food consumption behavior?

Khun Earn: Eating out was not allowed, so I only eat at home.

Interviewer: Does the government policy (e.g., Kon-La-Krueng or Takeaways) affect your food consumption?

Khun Earn: I have never used Kon-La-Krueng. I only use “Tiew-Duay-Gun” policy

Interviewer: Does restaurant’s marketing (e.g., hiring influencers or social platforms) influence your decision?

Khun Earn: Not really

Interviewer: How would you select the restaurant?

Khun Earn: Cheap delivery fee, Attractive foods, and not too expensive. Normally I will eat a lot of the same food from the same restaurant.

Interviewer: How would you select the restaurant especially during the crisis time?

Khun Earn: Cheap delivery.

NUT-engineer

Interviewer: How often do you eat out?

Khun Nut: About twice a day. Someone at home will cook for me only one meal.

Interviewer: Does COVID affect your food consumption behavior?

Khun Nut: I have to be more concerned with my spending due to the recession. And because nothing is predictable, I want to save rather than spending my money.

Interviewer: Does the government policy (e.g., Kon-La-Krueng or Takeways) affect your food consumption?

Khun Nut: I will use Kon-La-Krueng policy during lunch time.

Interviewer: Does restaurant’s marketing (e.g., hiring influencers or social platforms) influence your decision?

Khun Nut: Yes. The marketing campaign will intrigue me to try something new, especially with the promotions.

Interviewer: Does any new innovation from the restaurant increase your spending?

Khun Nut: I use more delivery applications and I didn't want to leave my house.

Interviewer: How would you select the restaurant especially during the crisis time?

Khun Nut: Price and taste

NEW-engineer

Interviewer: How often do you eat out?

Khun New: Always. Because I didn't cook.

Interviewer: Does COVID affect your food consumption behavior?

Khun New: I use LINE MAN delivery service every day, maybe 2-3 times a day.

Interviewer: Does the government policy (e.g., Kon-La-Krueng or Takeaways) affect your food consumption?

Khun New: At the first stage they did but as time went on they didn't anymore. My favorite place is still open. I also use Kon-La-Krueng policy but not many of my favorite places deliver via applications. In addition, it is harder to make a payment via GRAB FOOD if you want to use Kon-La-Krueng quota.

Interviewer: Does restaurant's marketing (e.g., hiring influencers or social platforms) influence your decision?

Khun New: Not really

Interviewer: Does any new innovation from the restaurant increase your spending?

Khun New: No.

Interviewer: How would you select the restaurant especially during the crisis time?

Khun New: Quality comes first, followed by taste and price.

NAN-engineer

Interviewer: How often do you eat out?

Khun Nan: Always. Prior to the pandemic I sometimes cook.

Interviewer: Does COVID affect your food consumption behavior?

Khun Nan: Yes. I visited fewer small restaurant and chose restaurant on the malls more often.

Interviewer: Does the government policy (e.g., Kon-La-Krueng or Takeaways) affect your food consumption?

Khun Nan: Yes, I will choose restaurant where they deliver via LINEMAN and Kon-La-Krueng policy is applicable.

Interviewer: Does restaurant's marketing (e.g., hiring influencers or social platforms) influence your decision?

Khun Nan: Influencers and reviews play substantial roles, but I will look at the promotion and the attractiveness. I would usually love trying something new.

Interviewer: Does any new innovation from the restaurant increase your spending?

Khun Nan: No. But I ordered sushi frequently as it looks clean. I will avoid small restaurants that are exposed to roads as they look unattractive.

Interviewer: How would you select the restaurant especially during the crisis time?

Khun Nan: The price is not expensive, the food is clean, Appropriate social distancing, staff wearing facemask, and the place is also clean.

SUN-business owner

Interviewer: How often do you eat out?

Khun Sun: Sometimes I cook, but if I'm lazy, I will either order food or eat out.

Interviewer: Does COVID affect your food consumption behavior?

Khun Sun: Yes, highly. I prefer restaurant will glass division for each table. And for order via application, I want one with clean and completely sealed packaging.

Interviewer: Does the government policy (e.g., Kon-La-Krueng or Takeaways) affect your food consumption?

Khun Sun: Yes, I will choose restaurant where they join Kon-La-Krueng policy, but I think there are too few restaurants.

Interviewer: Does restaurant's marketing (e.g., hiring influencers or social platforms) influence your decision?

Khun Sun: Only to some degree.

Interviewer: Does any new innovation from the restaurant increase your spending?

Khun Sun: No.

Interviewer: How would you select the restaurant especially during the crisis time?

Khun Sun: The cleanliness.

2. SME food entrepreneurs

Restaurant A

Interviewer: Can you introduce your restaurant and how long have you been in operation?

Restaurant Owner: Our restaurant is a porridge style with a variety of menu suitable for various customer groups. The first customer group is normal customers, and the menus are, for example, Stir-fried Chinese Olives with Minced Pork and Stir-Fried crab with Curry. The next group would be niche market such as elderly or people with Chinese ethnicity and the food will be quite rare. For example, Braised Pork Belly with Preserved Mustard Green, Chinese Vegetable Stew, pickled food, and Stewed Cabbage with Shiitake Mushrooms. The third group would be fusion rice porridge perfect for kids and teenagers. For example, Sour and Sweet Stir-fry, and we are good at fusion food. Images are also important as we will use it to advertise. This will be our fifth year in operation.

Interviewer: After the COVID-19 pandemic, was there any fluctuation in the revenue?

Restaurant Owner: Before the COVID-19 pandemic, our business was doing great, the revenue was around 40,000-50,000 per night during weekends or after the promotion of influencers. However, after the pandemic, our revenue was gone by half. And we would be able to increase the sales only after the influencers recommended us. During the period when the government didn't allow in-house dining, we closed the restaurant and send the cook to the market, at least they still have an income. We also did delivery service, and we were completely online, we did it for the cook and we laid some staff out too.

Interviewer: What is the most challenging thing during the crisis?

Restaurant Owner: Facing the uncertainty of the future and bearing all the expenses, these are hard to plan our business in the long-term. We are small porridge restaurant; hence, it is hard to service through the delivery. Our foods are, for example, fried or boiled, it was challenging to fit porridge into delivery service. Moreover, maintaining customer and the quality of the food after the reopening period were somewhat difficult too.

Interviewer: Does any of the government policy affect your restaurant?

Restaurant Owner: When the government prohibit opening at night, we were severely affected as our restaurant normally opens at night. And our revenue from selling alcohol beverage was gone. There was nothing we can do. So, we started to learn about the delivery mechanism, packaging and competing with bigger restaurant. Cleaning policy also complicated our operation. But it was still fine as it also raises the cleanliness standard higher. Sometimes the policies were consistently changing and ambiguous. We were also confused and didn't know what to do.

Interviewer: Are there any fluctuation in expense comparing pre and post pandemic?

Restaurant Owner: Adjusting the menu and the portion size. The we also adjusted the price to be more reasonable. In terms of staff, we reduced their wage to 75% and changed it from monthly to daily. During the worst time, there was no marketing and advertising activities at all. But when the situation got better, we resume those activities. Another rising expense was the cleaning cost such as alcohol gel and plastic for packaging and gloves.

Interviewer: During the crisis, did you employ any offline or online marketing strategy or hire an influencer?

Restaurant Owner: We mainly hired influencers to promote us on Facebook page and the cost of hiring was cheaper during the pandemic. We also tried promoting on YouTube, but it wasn't working. As for offline, we did some posters, gave out brochures and introduce more a la carte menu.

Interviewer: Did you have the delivery service before the pandemic?

Restaurant Owner: Yes, we do. But we treated it as a trial and wasn't giving much concern to it. Because most food we sell is not a la carte. Our signature foods are hot food that require immediate serving.

Interviewer: What is the most important factor that help you survive this crisis?

Restaurant Owner: The most important thing is adjusting your mindset. We shifted the mindset to not making profit. We just maintain our restaurant quality and look after our staff. Some of them have been with us for so long and we should keep them. During the period when we were closed down, we also gave them jobs so that they have something today while waiting for the situation to get better.

Interviewer: Thank you.

Restaurant B

Interviewer: Can you introduce your restaurant and the opening hours, please.

Restaurant Owner: It's a la carte, there are also karaoke rooms, and we sell alcohol too. The restaurant has been opened for 10 years since my father generation. I have been running the business for the past 3-4 years.

Interviewer: Is there any difference in revenues before and after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Restaurant Owner: There is one thing to keep in mind, our place is the karaoke-style restaurant, we will open from 11 AM to around 2 AM. We will have a short break for cleaning, but other than that, we are open almost 24 hours a day. Before the pandemic invaded Thailand, our daily revenue was at 100,000 THB. But afterwards, it had fallen to the range of thousands.

Interviewer: Did you close your restaurant on the worst day of the pandemic?

Restaurant Owner: During the worst situation, we were closed for 6 months. Because all the restaurants were closed. When the situation had gotten better and we reopened again, but there were lots of infected patients during that period too. That's why many people were still afraid of nighttime restaurants with alcohol. We followed the protocol and reopened again, the revenue during those periods were around thousands too.

Interviewer: What was the most challenging obstacle for you during the pandemic?

Restaurant Owner: I don't want to close down the business. I still want to look after the staff because they all are afraid of the pandemic. Everyone wants to go back to their hometown. But if I let them go, there might be new policy announcement on their ways back making their journeys more difficult. Moreover, I was afraid they will be tested positive on their returns too. Therefore, the most challenging task is trying to look after all the staff. During those difficult moments where we incurred losses, we were trying to exist on GRAB FOOD and LINEMAN application. We completely changed how we operate; prior to the pandemic, we solely focus on in-store service. But due to the scenario, we had to expand our platform to sell our food online.

Interviewer: Did government policies create any positive or negative effect to your business, for example, takeaways, limit opening time, M.44?

Restaurant Owner: There is almost none of the positive effect because we did not receive any compensation from the government.

Interviewer: Did you participate in any of the government projects?

Restaurant Owner: We did not join any of them. There was only a scanner check-in to comply with the government policy. There was no positive consequence at all. The bad things were that we can welcome fewer customers as we need to follow the social distancing practice, contributing to fewer seats and we spent a lot on the cleaning equipment.

Interviewer: What is the main expense in your restaurant? And were there any change after the pandemic (i.e., wages, cleaning costs, marketing expenses)

Restaurant Owner: During the pandemic, the amount paid for fresh produce were harder to control and was hard to predict the right quantity. As customers did not come regularly. Some days we fix the problem by going out and by extra produce we need for each dish instantly. Sometimes we bought too much, and the ingredients perished; pork, shrimp, squid, and fresh produce are easily perished. But before the pandemic, we were able to predict the number of customers, most days our table were full, and we were able to efficiently operate. After the pandemic, another solution was to cancel some of the menus to be able to control the cost of the ingredients. Other expenses are cleaning equipment, air-conditioning cleaner, sanitizer. These are expense that we have been paying for the last two years to comply to the government policies.

Interviewer: Is the any increase or decrease in staff's wage?

Restaurant Owner: We use to let our staff vote if they want to close the restaurant. During the first phase of the pandemic, the revenue drastically fell but many of them voted not to close because they lack their income. In addition, other restaurants were closed long ago too. For us, during the first phase, we didn't cut their wage. But as time went on, we were severely in a bad position and told them that there would be a 25% reduction from their revenue.

Interviewer: Does your restaurant still make profit?

Restaurant Owner: There was no profit since the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic,

Interviewer: Did you employ any marketing strategy both online and offline during the pandemic?

Restaurant Owner: Facing the pandemic had prevented us from spending more, we try to cut costs as much as possible. We can't afford hiring influencers for sure. Even if we have one, the customers will not visit our business anyway as it was at the peak of the

pandemic. During the peak situation, we applied for LINE MAN and GRABFOOD, we did some promotions on the applications. And the foods were different; they were all a la carte such as Kaprao pork.

Interviewer: From your opinion, what factor made you survive this crisis?

Restaurant Owner: I think it's the management. I tried to reduce as much cost as possible. Another is compromising. If the staff are willing to stay with us, from earning 300 THB a day to 200 THB revenue, they still stay. And I am grateful for them and hope to overcome the crisis as a teamwork and dependent upon each other.

Restaurant C

Interviewer: Can you introduce your restaurant and how long have you been in operation?

Restaurant Owner: We are French cuisine with a little Thai fusion-inspired restaurant. And we have been opened for seven years.

Interviewer: After the COVID-19 pandemic, was there any fluctuation in the revenue?

Restaurant Owner: There are three stages of the pandemic. The first stage was when people were totally afraid to leave their houses. The revenue fell significantly during that period. Later there was a government policy prohibiting having meals in the restaurants, our revenue fell 70%. We still have the delivery service during the period but obviously we were at loss. The next part is the increased expense which was the staff wage. We didn't decrease the wage as we have a variety of menus, and we didn't want our staff to leave. If they leave, we need to find another counterpart and to train them to be able to do all the tasks that the existing ones can do, which takes a long time. In addition, our staff are good at servicing, which we want to keep this as our core strategy.

Interviewer: Before the COVID-19 pandemic, what was your revenue?

Restaurant Owner: I will just keep this private.

Interviewer: What was the most challenging thing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Restaurant Owner: Our staff was having plenty a lot of free time. We had to check if there was anything we can offer them during that time. Our revenue was gone for sure, but how do we develop or take advantage of this scenarios? We spent those time reorganizing our business, meetings, kitchen makeover, menu update, delivery services.

We tried to keep pushing and to achieving accomplishments. The most important thing is that our staff is still with us.

Interviewer: Does any of the government policy affect your restaurant?

Restaurant Owner: The effect can be divided into three parts. The first part is that having meals at the restaurants. If there are four customers that come together, they have to be seated separately which doesn't make sense at all. Our place is not spacious, but customers must be seated far apart. This reduced the number of customers that we can accommodate and caused direct impact to our business. We had to rely on delivery service and takeaways. Another severe impact was when the announcement of closing down all the restaurants. We lost tremendous amount of income. Fortunately, Kon-La-Krueng policy helped us a lot; there was one period where this policy accounted for 80% of our income.

Interviewer: What is the main expense when comparing pre and post pandemic?

Restaurant Owner: The highest portion would be staff wage and electricity bills. Earning or not earning income, the fixed cost remains, we have to pay it no matter what. Fortunately, our family help reduce the rent cost. Obviously, we sell less food, less ingredients, that period we were trying to cut as much cost as possible.

Interviewer: Did your staff get lesser wage?

Restaurant Owner: There was only a brief moment only for a week when they work two days and take a day off.

Interviewer: Are there any increase or decrease in the cleaning cost of the restaurant?

Restaurant Owner: There was, but not significant. During the first stage the cleaning cost was high, but the cost fell as time went by. Prior to that, I was already bought them in bulk just in case, so there was not a problem.

Interviewer: During the crisis, did you employ any offline or online marketing strategy or hire an influencer?

Restaurant Owner: We used both. We tried to do as much as we can, either Facebook PR or hire influences.

Interviewer: Did your restaurant have delivery service before the COVID-19 pandemic, or it was introduced when the crisis was prevalent?

Restaurant Owner: We just implement delivery service during the crisis. Right now, we have GRAB, LINEMAN and ROBINHOOD. We also have our own delivery service

from our end. Previously, ROBINHOOD application didn't deduct fees, but in the near future they will.

Interviewer: Was there any new idea or innovation that help increase the sales?

Restaurant Owner: Mostly we cut costs. For example, we try to control the quality of the food, tried to limit food waste as much as possible. We were closely concerned of the kitchen atmosphere and changes needed to develop the menus.

Interviewer: Did you create any new menu for delivery?

Restaurant Owner: Mostly will be Thai food as we still lack Thai food menu here. If I can fix anything, it would be establishing a restaurant selling only Thai food.

Interviewer: What is the most important factor that help you survive this crisis?

Restaurant Owner: There are two parts. The first part is the staff. We still have staff that we can trust, and they are highly skilled. If we have high turnover rate, it would be hard to maintain the standard. The next part is financial management. If it's poorly managed, or we have no savings, that will be the end. As we might not be eligible for loans, and we have no clue how long the recession will last.

Restaurant D

Interviewer: How long has your business been in operation?

Restaurant Owner: We sell homemade pasta with four options available, and we have been in business for two years.

Interviewer: Did you open the restaurant before the COVID-19 pandemic?

Restaurant Owner: Yes, right around the same time.

Interviewer: Can you mention about the revenue comparison between pre and post pandemic?

Restaurant Owner: The revenue was gone by 50%. There was some period that we incurred too much lost that it was better to close to restaurant. During the timespan, some staff were tested positive and needed quarantine, so we had to close the restaurant too. After the reopening phase, there has been a constant revenue, not too much, but no loss has incur. This is why we still survive today.

Interviewer: What was the challenging thing under the COVID-19 crisis?

Restaurant Owner: Creating new products that prompt customers to order a delivery service. Personally, I didn't want to adopt the delivery service because the pasta needs

to be consumed immediately after it is cooked to get its real taste. Providing delivery service is a challenging task. Another task would be coming up with new menus suitable for delivery service. We tried to do the “set box” menu. This allows customers to cook by themselves so that the ingredients and the final outcome of the menu remains fresh and tasty.

Interviewer: Please talk about the impact of the government policies.

Restaurant Owner: Actually, the effect was substantial. Admittedly, during the worst day of the pandemic, there were people who still had the courage to leave their home and eat at the restaurant and enjoy their lives. However, when the government ban eating at the restaurants, the consequences were severe. Our beverage revenue fell drastically. Fortunately, we still were able to sell a certain amount of food.

Interviewer: Did your restaurant join “Kon-La-Krueng” policy

Restaurant Owner: No, we did not join the program at all. Price is not a concern for our target customers. But our target group were impacted as the crisis went on. Our customers still have the purchasing power to buy things that might be unnecessary, which is why we were able to acquire some sales during the lockdown period.

Interviewer: During the crisis, did you employ any marketing strategy? (i.e., online, offline, influencers)

Restaurant Owner: No, we have never hired anyone. In fact, during the peak days, we did try something new, but many we are not an expert, that why the result was not effective. Promoting via social media involves a lot of money, and the payback is not worth it. The result is not as powerful as the word-of-mouth practice can yield.

Interviewer: So, you just started doing the delivery service during the COVID crisis right?

Restaurant Owner: Actually, we have it long ago, it was just that we did not invest heavily on that area. Because of the food taste when delivered through delivery service, although there might be a slight fade in taste, it was still acceptable.

Interviewer: Did you create any new menu to fit the delivery trend?

Restaurant Owner: Most menus are the same. The slight difference is the packaging. We used more packaging in separating the source and pasta.

Interviewer: Did packaging incur higher cost?

Restaurant Owner: Yes, it was. But because the price of our food is not cheap, the profit margin might be narrower, but overall, still acceptable. We tried to focus on the sales volume to compensate with lesser margin.

Interviewer: Comparing to the overall revenue, delivery is amount to what proportion?

Restaurant Owner: Right now, it is almost 20%. Delivery is also a distributing channel and we have added more platforms. Previously, there was only LINEMAN, but we added GRAB FOOD and FOOD PANDA too. When we had negotiating power, we asked them if they can reduce the application fee.

Interviewer: What is the most critical factor that allows you to survive this crisis?

Restaurant Owner: We have to be the best at what we do. It means that our food needs to be good enough to impress the customers in order for word-of-mouth to occur. The most important thing is to maintain excellent quality.

Interviewer: Comparing the restaurant's expense before and after the crisis, do you think there is any difference?

Restaurant Owner: It was not going up for sure. The revenue kept falling down. The ingredient cost was surely minimized as we sold less.

Interviewer: Did you leave any menu out?

Restaurant Owner: No, we didn't. We prepare our ingredients daily. The things that we have added were the equipment necessary during the pandemic crisis such as ATK kits, facemasks, and alcohol gel.

Interviewer: Did the staff wage decrease?

Restaurant Owner: We were trying to keep everything at the same level. Even if we face loss, we still wouldn't want to decrease that portion cost. Maybe there might now be a bonus, which would allow us to keep operating.

Restaurant E

Interviewer: Can you introduce your restaurant and how long have you been in operation?

Restaurant Owner: We are Thai restaurant and we have been opened for fifteen years. Before this we open the restaurant named "Chim-Lang" before changing it into Restaurant E

Interviewer: After the COVID-19 pandemic, was there any fluctuation in the revenue?

Restaurant Owner: Before the pandemic, our revenue was 10,000 to 20,000 THB per night. But after the pandemic our revenue fell to only 10% of the normal circumstance which is very low.

Interviewer: Did you have to close down the restaurant?

Restaurant Owner: We survived every pandemic wave, and we didn't have to close down. We fought with all efforts, no matter what we have, we need to bring it out. We also need to look after our staff, otherwise they won't know where to go.

Interviewer: What was the most challenging thing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Restaurant Owner: I think it's strategy; what should we do to increase orders, to create repeated orders, staff wage, packaging, promotion. Every action needs to be fast because the government didn't compensate us. So, we have to quickly adapt. Some tasks take a week, some take a month until we can master them.

Interviewer: Does any of the government policy affect your restaurant?

Restaurant Owner: The delay in vaccination. Poor management and prohibiting in-house dining. Every wave, the government would announce the shutdown of the restaurant without advanced notice. Sometimes we had already prepared the ingredients, those were wasted. And about the compensation, when the policy was announced, there was no further follow up. If we want compensation, we will only need to rely on social insurance, right? We did apply online, but it wasn't working. We need to hand in all the document by ourselves at the ministry. During the peak time, we would be scared to go out and to be exposed to the public. The turning point is that it's us who must fix the problem. Kon-La-Krueng policy was good and helped speeding the financial flow. Customers were more confident in spending and the policy was part of survival.

Interviewer: What is the main expense when comparing pre and post pandemic?

Restaurant Owner: We paid less electricity bill and some of the staff wage. We let some staff go or took a break. In fact, we really want to take care all of them. That's why we did delivery service, advertising, marketing, and packaging.

Interviewer: During the crisis, did you employ any offline or online marketing strategy?

Restaurant Owner: Prior to the pandemic, we did some online marketing, but we didn't put that as the priority. For offline channel, we tried to emphasize the influence of the word-of-mouth. And when the pandemic started to be more serious, we spent more on advertising because it was really important.

Interviewer: Did you hire an influencer or famous review page services?

Restaurant Owner: Yes, because influencers possess wide customer bases. We searched for one that has similar style to us.

Interviewer: Was there any new idea or innovation such as introducing new menu to increase the sales?

Restaurant Owner: Yes, there are a lot of them. Normally our signature food would be dining with the family, but during the pandemic, we introduce more than 20 a la carte menus. In addition, we have the packaging, branding, and we need to have a standard in delivering our food to the customers.

Interviewer: Who are your target group?

Restaurant Owner: Originally, there are people who live in this neighborhood, but when we seriously concentrated on studying the market, we realized that our customers live further and there are more of them than originally thought.

Interviewer: Did your restaurant have delivery service before the COVID-19 pandemic?

Restaurant Owner: Yes, we did, and we were lucky that we started this channel before the pandemic.

Interviewer: Did you deliver by yourself, or you join third party application?

Restaurant Owner: If it is still in the proximity, we will deliver by ourselves or hiring people who ride the motorcycle. But if the customer live further, we will deliver via the third-party application instead.

Interviewer: What is the most important factor that help you survive this crisis?

Restaurant Owner: We need to adapt. We need to differentiate each component; the virus, the social distancing policy, cleaning procedures, wearing protection. The most important is adjusting the business, if we are well-adapt, we will be able to survive

Interviewer: Thank you