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# Reshaping street and home-based cottage food business strategies through social business after COVID-19 pandemic

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**Abstract:** This impact-driven research investigated how food design, technology, and business strategy can solve social problems as part of a social business initiative. A total of 20 street food vendors and home-based food entrepreneurs were selected, and group-focused discussions were conducted based on the study's purpose. They were assessed and advised through the Mystic Kitchen model and social business concept to make their operations more productive and increase sales to cope with lifestyle changes due to the pandemic. The study found that the primary elements in successful business strategies through social business are communication, trust, resource allocation, and matching technology tools.

**Keywords:** value chain; street food; cooking business; social business; COVID-19; small business strategies.

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## **1 Introduction**

Street food is part of a sizeable informal business sector in many places worldwide, especially in Asia. When considering the total amount of customers or sales, it can probably be considered an industry. Taste and convenience are essential to the success of street food vendors. The market for street food was always booming until the coronavirus altered every business aspect. Many street food vendors had to stop selling after many weeks of lockdowns due to their business coming to a halt. The government has enforced many restrictions and asked people to stay at home to help reduce the spread of COVID-19. Government and companies around the world are also urging employees to work from home. Thousands of street food vendors have stopped selling as the number of people who come out of their residents has fallen dramatically, and those who are out remain in fear of the cleanliness and safety of street food. The situation has forced people to start cooking more at home. They are forced to eat at home or order from local and chain restaurants or online delivery services. Usually, the Thai restaurant industry experiences 10% growth, but growth has slowed to 2% to 3% in recent years (Alcocer, 2017). Before the booming of food delivery services, a concept of one click and you can order your favourite food to deliver to your door Kasikorn Research Center (2019) estimated that the food delivery business in Thailand was about one billion US dollars in 2019, up 14% from the previous year, and accounted for about 8% of Thailand's total restaurant business value in 2019. Food delivery applications such as Grab food, Get, Line Man, and Food Panda are popular in Thailand, especially during the Coronavirus shutdown. The biggest concern of restaurants is that the cost of selling through this app is high. It may deduct 15% to 30% out of each order or increase their total food bill to the customers by the same amount (Kasikorn Research Center, 2019).

After the ban, Thailand stopped people from going out and sitting down in restaurants. However, customers can visit restaurants and order take away meals. The restaurant can provide takeout services over the network of food delivery applications. Some may have their own delivery services. Even though the cost of running the restaurant during COVID is high, and the restaurants' expenses may be deferred, most restaurants can afford to wait. This restriction is not the case with street food vendors and small restaurant owners. They need support. Social business is one way to help street food vendors increase their opportunities and sales of their small food street carts and small food stalls around Bangkok, Thailand. This is not the case with street food vendors and small restaurants owners. These people need support. Social business can help street food vendors increase their opportunities and sales of their small food street carts and small food stalls around Bangkok, Thailand. Thus, our impact-driven research focuses on

street food vendors and home-based food entrepreneurs as we understood their business situations and applied the social business model. Applying the social business concept and impact-driven research helps these two groups make a difference in their home-based cottage food business and improve quality of life amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, this research is timely and relevant in sustaining the people's livelihood. Thus, this made this research different from others.

## **2 Literature review**

Bangkok, Thailand's capital with a population above 10 million people has an estimated 500,000 street vendors and perhaps another 100,000 small food stalls prepared in a residential setting such as a shophouse or single house. Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) suggested that 20,000 street-food vendors are working throughout Bangkok, and 60% of street-food customers earn under \$300 US dollars per month. This number does not include those who cook their food on sidewalks in front of their houses or kitchens. Moreover, selling those by consignment, walking around, leaving them on the shelf in restaurants, offices, or shops to increase family income. However, those with low income are the main customers of street food, and those with higher income, tourists, students, and most office workers. They go for street food because it is convenient, located nearby, inexpensive, and tastes good. Thus, street food has created a food culture in Thailand.

Yunus (2008) inspired many organisations, businesses, and entrepreneurs to create a new business embedded with a social purpose. Social business is created and designed to address a social problem; a social business serves as a sustainable solution driven by a business engine. In the social business, the investors or owners can gradually recoup the money invested but cannot take any dividend beyond that point. The purpose of the investment is to achieve one or more social objectives through its operation (Yunus et al., 2010).

The idea of social enterprise is a business individual that works to simultaneously create economic value and social impact (Galera and Borzaga, 2009). In defining social enterprise, it may be difficult with different disciplines and countries around the world. However, most people may define social business and enterprise as this (Beckmann, 2018; Hackett, 2010; Kerlin, 2009). In practice, a Mystic Kitchen project can incorporate these social innovations and create models that allow street food and stay-at-home entrepreneurs to make money and solve social problems simultaneously. Using the home as a workplace is common, especially in Asia. Lawanson and Olanrewaju (2012) suggest that home-based business is different from corporation status because most home-based businesses do not have legal status. Moreover, home-based businesses, particularly home-based food, vary depending on the owner's attention, and most rely on referrals for new customers.

When the Coronavirus outbreak hit Bangkok, street food vendors found themselves fighting for survival. During the outbreak, the street food business closed down public facilities, and businesses lost revenue because of rising unemployment and falling income throughout the city. Some have lost almost 80% of their revenue but still hire all their employees (Symons, 2020). Millions of people left Bangkok as they returned to their hometowns because of being temporarily laid off or furloughed. Some might not come

back soon because they are getting in the growing season for crops. Migrant workers in Bangkok left their homes and may not come back anytime soon as well. Many will not get their job back after the pandemic. Simultaneously, some employees who were forced to stay home struggled to strike the right balance between doing nothing and starting to do something such as making money from their kitchen. These people started a home-based food business without a license to operate out of their homes. However, there is a logistical problem of delivering home-cooked food to their customers, including food safety and regulations. A Mystic Kitchen project provides those eager to be chefs to sell their home cooking to the public via a food delivery application.

The idea of giving home cooks a platform to sell their home-cooked meals is not new. The food delivery-like marketplace had been established by Josephine; a home-cooked food platform founded in 2015 and was shut down in 2018. Josephine's reason to close a business is not because of issues in the business model but because of legal issues selling food from home. US regulations do not allow for food exchange for money without commercial food facilities, business permits. In addition, the company had faced legal issues as the service rolled out across the country as so-called cottage food laws are a patchwork nationally, varying from state to state (Wang, 2016).

It is unlikely that restaurants and the street food industry will be the same after the coronavirus. The new realities of consumers eating trends have begun. Buying ready meals from convenience stores are now found to be expected in Thailand. People are now getting used to ordering their food through mobile applications. The restaurants may rely more on takeout operations to keep the business alive. Severson and Yaffe-Bellany (2020) indicated that large chains and well-funded restaurant groups have the resources to ride out a protracted pandemic, but small restaurants, such as noodle shops that do not have food delivery services in place, may not survive. Besides, public perceptions of street food safety are also a concern for some. They think street food is not clean. Nevertheless, street food has always been popular. On the contrary, home-cooked meals may seem to be cleaner and healthier, but the concern in terms of food safety still exists.

The concept of food design is also added to this project. This study uses food design thinking as the process by which food designers convert knowledge and ideas derived from food science, food psychology, and food culture into creative solutions for street food vendors and those who want to sell home-cooked food from their kitchen at home (Zampollo and Peacock, 2016). It also allows chefs together with our experts to play around with ideas on how to make their food compatible with the desire of consumers, for example, bringing in food items or new ingredients that fit well together or can be combined so that they will harmonise and will end in a flavourful combination (Ottenbacher and Harrington, 2007). Indeed, this project is trying to develop recipes that Mystic Kitchen participants can make the best food at home or at a street food stall.

### **3 What is a Mystic Kitchen project?**

Mystic Kitchen is a project under Yunus Social Business Centre at Kasetsart Business School in Thailand that uses social business to solve a social problem. In this case, it is a social business that improves street and home-based cottage food in taste, freshness, ingredients, presentation, healthiness, and nutritiousness. People should be able to eat well and enjoy excellent food. This project focuses on improving street food quality and helping people who stayed home during the lockdown period or those who lost their jobs

and started a home-based cottage food business by selling a home-cooked meal. We provided them with the tools and strategies to bring their small-scale operations to the general public without worrying about not knowing where to start and how to solve issues that may arise.

#### **4 Research design**

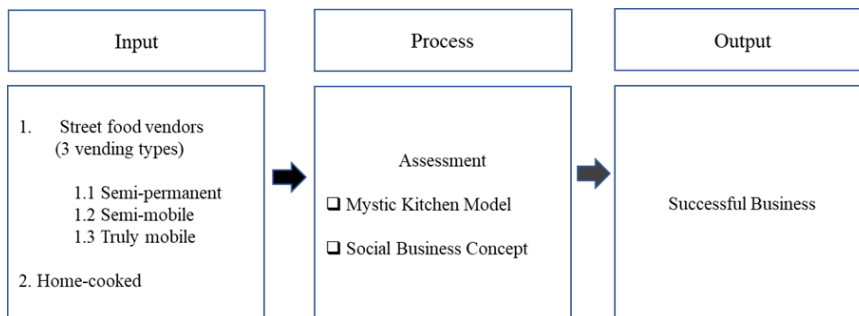
This study is designed to solve street food vendors and home-based food entrepreneurs forced to stay home and start a home-based food business, by improving the quality of their food. The study participants have been selected through the purposive sample, wherein the participants are limited only to the street food vendors and people who sell their food from home. The researchers also utilised a convenient sample in choosing 20 participants: ten street food vendors and ten people who sell their food from home, wherein most of them live around the university campus in Bangkok, Thailand. The 20 samples are sufficient for this case since it is impact-driven research designed. Both are struggling to make a living during the coronavirus pandemic. They are experiencing difficulty selling their food during the coronavirus pandemic and in an increasingly delivery world. We experiment with how food design, technology, and business strategy can transform street food and home-based cottage food to satisfy consumers' hunger. It provides a real-world impact by building physical and online platforms that make it easy for street food vendors and home-based food businesses to sell their foods, improve their sales, and increase revenue streams. It also determines the impact of social business on street food and home-based cottage food businesses after the coronavirus pandemic and develops a social mission strategy that can help provide affordable gourmet and healthy street food and home-based cottage food for everyone. Profit generated from this project will be used to fund social business that improves people's lives in the communities. The participants of this study are street food vendors and home-based food entrepreneurs.

#### **5 Methodology**

This study is impact-driven research; thus, we focused on the real problem. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of the study wherein the input was designed for this research by conducting two focus groups and informed our experiment's design to selected samples. The first group is street food vendors from three vending types: semi-permanent, semi-mobile, and truly mobile. The second one is those who want to make money selling home-cooked food from their kitchen. We assess the process by asking our focus group participants to measure their cooking perceptions, confidence, attitudes, and behaviours to select ten from each group to participate in our study. These 20 people will get help and suggestions in the method of preparation, the degree of effort and the types of ingredients used, ways to prepare meals, a selling position, food design, help to find customers, help with social media marketing, assistance in engaging with the food delivery apps or ways of delivering, inspections to ensure safe cooking, and secure payment. We started Mystic Kitchen as a social business pilot project and only took a small cut once the participants started making sales. This experiment focuses on getting results in know-how, lessons, and developing a social business strategy that can reshape

street and home-based cottage food businesses in Thailand and other countries. The expected output of the study is a successful business to the participants.

**Figure 1** Conceptual framework (see online version for colours)



## 6 Implementation process

This project involved two groups of participants. There are ten street food vendors and ten people who sell their food from home. Most of them live around the university campus in Bangkok, Thailand. The implementation process of designing and improving the recipe and quality of a dish begins with a team of business students meeting almost daily to talk and assess cooking and business skills, ingredients, costs, expenses to establish a business, and planning an attractive menu. As a result of working together, they came up with an improved healthy recipe that tastes good and is cheap. The team then explores the online food delivery service and helps street food vendors sign up with food delivery app services.

## 7 Recipe generation and preparation

The process is different for those who want to start a home food business because they want to remain anonymous. They want a chef's identity to be unknown because they only want to sell food from their home during the pandemic. Most of them love to cook, but some are insecure about their cooking ability and are concerned about the process, legal requirements and cost to sell homemade food. The preparation process, getting equipment, and time spent sourcing ingredients are not worth the effort for many of them. The business student team's task is to find the simplest way to help them start a home cooking business hassle-free and as quickly as possible.

A Mystic Kitchen project attempts to solve these stay-at-home entrepreneurs' concerns and help them achieve entrepreneurial success. We found that many people in this group are amateurs and only want to cook, so we set up a service responsible for shipping and delivering groceries and needed materials such as meal containers and utensils, ample pots, and pans for cooking on a daily basis. Thus, we become a source for this group and a guide to start a food business from home.

The big challenge for a Mystic Kitchen is how to set up an operating platform to help sell food from home. Although food taste is essential, proper food safety and kitchen

safety standards surrounding food preparation were of concern. For example, no children or pets can come near the kitchen. Therefore, we needed to keep the kitchen clean and sanitary even when people cannot see it. This is to avoid the possibility of getting involved in any legal issue about selling from the home kitchen. Our team visited every home and participated in this project to ensure that every stay-at-home chef handled, prepared, and stored food according to the food safety standard. We did the same for street food vendors by figuring out how to have good hygiene practices.

Most street food vendors participating in this project showed good food hygiene practices. However, the poor hygiene practices of street food vendors and hawkers lack water access (Dahiya et al., 2019). Street food carts are usually placed on the sidewalk and without piped water connection. They may have potable water, but it is usually not enough to last for the entire day's operation. As a result, there is a shortage of water and a disposal bin, preparation area, and waste collection that may also be inadequate for vendors. Most street food carts only focus on cooking one kind of food, such as noodle cart, chicken and rice cart, fried noodle cart, coffee and tea cart, fried chicken cart, and dessert cart. The team helped design better use of preparation area for street food carts by using the user-centred design approach to meet the need of cooks who usually are good at doing one kind of dish. We established the link between the cooking sequence and how food presentation and taste should come out. Norman (2013) suggests that there is a relationship between functions and controls. If doing something is effortless with the right action, proper control would come out good at the right time. We put a cook at the centre of the design process by arranging to neatly put all condiments and ingredients for easy reach and keep the food preparation area clean while cooking and reducing cross-contamination, such as using different cutting boards for meat and vegetables. We also put up a splatter screen to keep the cooking area and the cart clean from the oil spillover stovetop and cooking area. As a result, the cart became more attractive, and the spotless push food cart stall served the best plates to customers.

## **8 Getting food online**

After figuring out what food to make and sell, we wrote a food story for each participant. Digital storytelling is important because it can visually look good and create a convincing appearance for people to order dishes. We have worked with multiple food delivery apps to sell street food and home-cooked food by linking with food delivery apps. For street food, it is not difficult to sign up with food ordering applications as there are many options to choose from. In Thailand, the top four are GRAB FOOD, LINE MAN, FOOD PANDA, and GOJEK. To participate, we helped every street food sign up and submit their food details, locations, bank information, etc. Then, the food delivery app usually sends someone to look at the operation before completing the registration. Finally, we gave our menu to them for unveiling in their application.

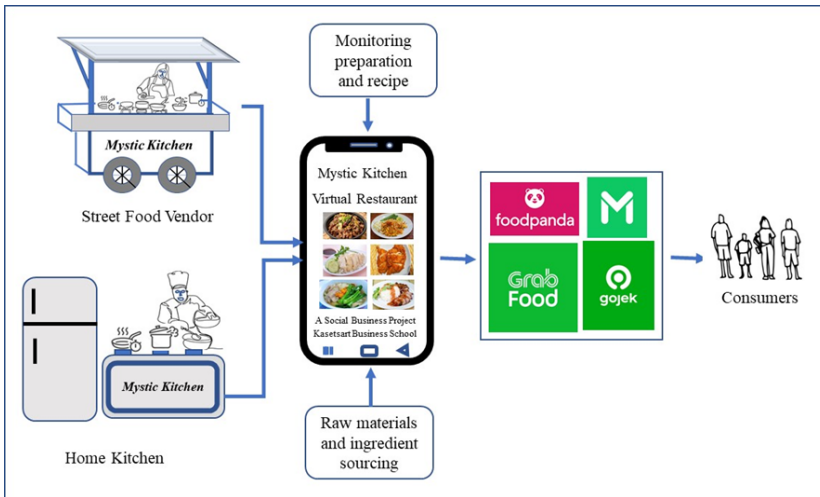
Most project participants consider selling food from home during a pandemic; however, they find it hard. They want to sell online but do not want to set up their home cooking business account online, fearing they may be identified. Some do not want to invest in cooking tools because selling food during the pandemic may be temporary. They want to return to work after lockdown. They want to cook, but they do not want anyone to know that they are cooking and selling what they have prepared to the public.



The Mystic Kitchen project intends to make sure a cook maintains an anonymous identity. The reason for this is because they are not confident and fearful about their cooking skills, when putting their food service online. Some do it because they want to make an extra income; for some, it is just for fun during the pandemic. They do not want anyone to know who they are and only want people to know them through their cooking quality. For some reason, they enjoy cooking and love to prepare, boil, and chop ingredients for cooking.

We create a system that interacts between customers and helps this second group to be able to sell their food to our virtual restaurant listed in the online food delivery service. The Mystic Kitchen menu is the only menu listed in the food delivery app. Customers do not know who and where the food gets made. To run a home-based food business is more than just cooking. The cook needs to get the raw materials and ingredients from the supermarket or directly from farmers. But instead of doing this, they have been advised to stay at home by the government to help reduce the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, the Mystic Kitchen project also provides groceries, raw materials, and ingredients to every home-based cook in our network. Because it may be difficult for the cook to have ample space to store food supplies, we sought to become a central procurement for them by purchasing groceries in large quantities from supermarkets or farmers and distributing them to each kitchen. Buying in bulk helps us save costs. This way, we can also control the quality of food prepared in multiple facilities and lower our members’ operating costs. The Mystic Kitchen has become a virtual restaurant to deliver a home cooked meal only available by delivery.

**Figure 2** Workflow of Mystic Kitchen (see online version for colours)



The workflow of the Mystic Kitchen is presented in Figure 2. Because we do not have a food delivery platform, we are using third-party delivery platforms. Once a customer places an order from the Mystic Kitchen menu on display via a mobile food delivery application, an order is forwarded to our participating kitchens. For street food vendors, the process is simple. Mystic Kitchen street food vendor gets instant new order notification, prepares the order, and waits for a delivery person to pick up the food and deliver it to the drop-off location. We also displayed our project information, and buyers

realised they might have to pay a little extra to order through a Mystic Kitchen. However, there are no fees to get started and participate in the Mystic Kitchen project because customers are expected to pay more for the food, they order from our Mystic Kitchen project. They can expect to pay a per delivery fee of around 10 to 20 Baht or less than a US dollar per order in addition to the small service fee from the food delivery application. Yunus (2006) suggests that for the social business program to succeed, someone may have to give away their time, talent, skill, or other contributions, which are helpful to others. In this case, customers who order their food from the Mystic Kitchen project are the ones. In our case, the subsidy comes from customer out-of-pocket spending. We also pay for food delivery apps based on a commission-based model.

For the home kitchen, the process is a little bit more complicated. Every dish from different home kitchens is displayed in a Mystic Kitchen banner. When customers order the food, a notification is sent to the home kitchen on their mobile phone. Once a home kitchen accepts the order, a notification from the Mystic Kitchen is sent to the nearest delivery person, who arrives at the home kitchen location to pick up the food. This is a double process, but it must be done this way because a home kitchen cook may only temporarily participate in our project during tough economic times, and they do not want to deal with the food delivery app companies. We provide a seamless process for a home kitchen cook by managing all of the food delivery processes. The money that we charge extra from customers is used for creating opportunities for future growth. We have created one of the distinct paths for social business in Thailand.

## **9 Results**

The study found that a Mystic Kitchen project under Yunus Social Business Centre at Kasetsart Business School in Thailand is a timely and relevant solution for street food vendors and home-based food entrepreneurs to improve their businesses affected by the pandemic. It provides tools and strategies for promoting online platforms in distributing food. Amidst the pandemic, Nguyen and Vu (2020) suggested that promoting online shopping platforms, including pre-prepared meals, is one of the solutions to this pandemic. The study also found that the primary elements in successful business strategies through social business are communication, trust, resource allocation, and matching technology tools; thus, related companies can learn by adopting the Mystic Kitchen model to improve their business operations.

## **10 Discussion**

The triumph of the restaurant industry depends on many factors, including social business communication, trust, resource allocation, and matching technology tools based on the results of this study. It is confirmed that after the COVID-19 pandemic; the restaurant sales continued to decline. However, the COVID-19 pandemic changed everything; before the COVID-19 pandemic, restaurants relied only on the number of food selling practices, which regrettably will be outdated before the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has wholly changed the standards of life. Therefore, this impact-driven research is

appropriate and applicable to help the participants of this study and other related sectors in improving their business operations affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **11 Conclusions**

A Mystic Kitchen is a project that encourages university students in Thailand to become social entrepreneurs. This project's primary goal is to focus on students coming up with solutions to the social problems at hand. In this case, we focus on reshaping street food and home-based cottage food business during the lockdown slowdown. Ten street food vendors and ten people who are selling food from their homes participated in this project. All participants feel the impact of the coronavirus pandemic; for home-based food businesses – they got into this business because of temporary layoffs or unemployment, and for street food vendors – they lost sales. These two groups are getting advice and tools to bring their small-scale operations to consumers in a more productive way. The project focuses on improving the quality of street and home-cooked foods and the potential to increase sales to cope with lifestyle changes due to the coronavirus pandemic.

We want to be one of the supporters to develop another way to help street food vendors and those who have no choice but to stay home during the outbreak. Mystic Kitchen project implicates the project's stakeholders by productively helping their business after a pandemic. Adopting the Mystic Kitchen model helps street food vendors, home-based food entrepreneurs, and the government stop spreading the COVID-19 virus. The focus is on the street stall economy, an essential part of the informal economy (Reid et al., 2010; Song, 2020). We have formulated the expected results of this project and conclude that it has contributed to society by developing a business strategy and turning it into action. We have formed the strategy and technology connection (Kantrow, 1980). A project's success turns out to be a function of how stakeholders are communicated, create trust, allocate resources, careful matching of existing business technology tools such as social marketing and food delivery applications, and support from customers. This is a crucial element in successfully implementing business strategies through social business after the coronavirus pandemic.

## **12 Limitations and future research**

The Mystic Kitchen project model can be their guideline to be productive and efficient; while applying the social business concept, they can help their community and the economy. In addition, the study results can serve as the basis for other researchers to better understand the Mystic Kitchen and social business dynamics that cater to other online food delivery industries. The study is limited only to the participants of this study, which are street food vendors and home-based food entrepreneurs within the vicinity of the Yunus Centre, Kasetsart Business School. It also limits food deliveries and is conducted during Bangkok's COVID-19 pandemic period. Therefore, access to the participants was complex during that stage. However, a future study can investigate the changes done by the restaurants in their business after the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, they can examine the new changes embraced by the restaurants to defend their customers and employees from this contagious disease.

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