



UNDERGRADUATE-LED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH DRIVING A SMALL RESTAURANT'S DIGITAL TRANSITION

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ABSTRACT

This Participatory Action Research (PAR) study assessed the integrated digital platforms Meta Business Suite, TikTok, and WhatsApp business as tools to support operational efficiency, customer engagement, and youth outreach for Sahana Veg Hotel, a traditional vegetarian restaurant in Jaffna. The study used PAR cycles of planning (digital audits), action (creating accounts on Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp business), observation (analyzing usage with Meta's insights), and reflection (revising ideas and action plans with the owner), which allowed students to track metrics in real time, automate customer engagement, and train students in digital literacy in a scalable model. Over a four-month period, the process was effective and resulted in 6,400 Facebook views, 106 new Facebook followers in a 24-hour period, youth engagement through TikTok user-generated content, improved WhatsApp business communication through automated replies and message replies, and a QR menu as a new service that allows customer access are indicators that participatory methods can help vulnerable micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) overcome the digital divide. The emphasis of this study is to introduce Meta Business Suite in a low-tech environment that facilitates learning through practical experiences, connecting theory with practice. This is the first study to use digital platform ideas initiated by marketing undergraduate students of University of Jaffna targeting vegetarian food experiences. The results show that integrating digital tools can provide a traditional small restaurant with the opportunity to become a customer-responsive business for today's digital marketplace. To replicate this success, the education sector should embed these platforms into their curricula, telecommunications providers should offer affordable business-focused data packages, and local councils should transform community spaces into digital training centers for MSMEs and undergraduates. With additional support from municipal marketing grants, these combined efforts will help traditional restaurants across Sri Lanka thrive in the growing digital economy.

Keywords: *Digital Transition, Marketing Undergraduate Students, Participatory Action Research, Platform Integration, Small Restaurants*