

Experiential Learning as a Participatory Action Research on Digital Transformation of A Traditional Business

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Abstract

This study explores the digital transformation of Mr. Perfect Saloon, a traditional micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) in Kondavil, Jaffna, Sri Lanka, through a participatory action research (PAR) approach. This research aims to address the needs of local businesses to cope with the evolving nature of the digital era. The main objective was to collectively develop and implement effective digital strategies to enhance customer engagement, streamline business procedures, and support the competitiveness of the saloon in the local economy. Marketing students at the University of Jaffna offered themselves as part-time PAR team members and participated throughout three planned cycles of planning, action, and reflection. Data collection methods included customer satisfaction feedback, interviews with owners and customers, and continuous social media monitoring. Some of the key issues were highlighted by the PAR team, which included poor digital marketing initiation, no social media management formally in place, and no online booking system. Students responded by creating and implementing a collection of digital tools and platforms including a business website and official social media profiles on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook to promote services and interact with clients. Students also organized a targeted Facebook ad campaign and implemented online customer interactions and booking processes. Afterwards, the saloon observed sensational changes in customer interaction, accessibility of services, and brand visibility. The owner enjoyed improved operational efficiency, whereas student learners gained experiential learning and assurance in handling digital marketing tools. This learning and engagement process not only enabled a sustainable digital transformation for Mr. Perfect Saloon but also demonstrated the power of low-cost, context-based methods in enabling grassroots business development and digital empowerment through collaborative learning.

Key Words: Customer engagement; Digital transformation; Experiential learning; Grassroots business development; Participatory action research (PAR); Social media monitoring.