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Creating Competitive Advantage of Small Private Tutorial Business in Lampang Province

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Received: July 30, 2021 Revised: August 18, 2021 Accepted: February 8, 2022

Abstract

The purposes of this research were to study the current tutorial business environment and demographic characteristics of learners in Lampang; analyze Porter's generic competitive strategies used by small tutorial school business and preferred by learners; provide competitive advantage guidance to small tutorial school business in Lampang. A mixed method research approach was selected and conducted. First, a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews was conducted with five entrepreneurs selected through purposive sampling. Second, a survey instrument for quantitative research using a structured questionnaire was distributed to 400 respondents. Data were analyzed by descriptive statistics (percentage, mean, and standard deviation) and One-way ANOVA, t-tests were used for testing hypothesis. The significant findings revealed that most of the entrepreneurs did not use any particular strategy but rather a mix of different strategies. It was found that differentiation strategy is the most preferred strategy which was confirmed by respondents with the highest mean rating of 4.22; results revealed that learners prioritized the providers who listen to their feedback. Cost Leadership Strategy with mean rating of 4.17 was the second most preferred. Focus Strategy with mean rating of 4.11 was the least preferred strategy; results revealed that learners weighted Cost Focus on fair prices along with high-quality courses and services. Based on the hypothesis testing it was found that learners with different demographic characteristics with the exception of gender yielded a significant difference on all generic competitive preferences. It was found to be consistent with the current strategies used by tutorial businesses at a statistically significant level below 0.01.

Keywords: competitive advantage, private tutorial business, small business, demographic characteristics

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การสร้างรายได้เปรียบเทียบในการแข่งขันของธุรกิจ กวดวิชาเอกชนขนาดเล็กในจังหวัดลำปาง

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วันรับบทความ: July 30, 2021 วันแก้ไขบทความ: August 18, 2021 วันตอบรับบทความ: February 8, 2022

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อ 1) ศึกษาสภาพแวดล้อมทางธุรกิจในปัจจุบันของธุรกิจกวดวิชาและลักษณะทางประชากรศาสตร์ของผู้เรียนในจังหวัดลำปาง 2) ศึกษากลยุทธ์การสร้างรายได้เปรียบเทียบในการแข่งขันของ Michael Porter ของธุรกิจกวดวิชาขนาดเล็กและตรงกับความต้องการของผู้เรียน และ 3) เสนอแนวทางการสร้างรายได้เปรียบเทียบในการแข่งขันสำหรับธุรกิจกวดวิชาขนาดเล็กในจังหวัดลำปาง เป็นการวิจัยแบบผสมผสาน การศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพใช้การสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้างกับผู้ประกอบการจำนวน 5 ราย โดยวิธีคัดเลือกแบบเจาะจงและทำการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงเนื้อหา การศึกษาเชิงปริมาณใช้แบบสอบถามแบบมีโครงสร้างจำนวนทั้งหมด 400 ชุด วิเคราะห์ข้อมูลโดยใช้สถิติเชิงพรรณนา (ร้อยละ ค่าเฉลี่ย ส่วนเบี่ยงเบนมาตรฐาน) และใช้แบบทดสอบ t-test และ One – Way ANOVA เพื่อยืนยันสมมติฐาน ผลการศึกษา พบว่า ผู้ประกอบการส่วนใหญ่ไม่ได้ใช้กลยุทธ์เดียวในการบริหารธุรกิจ แต่ใช้กลยุทธ์แบบผสมผสานที่แตกต่างกัน ซึ่งกลยุทธ์การสร้างความแตกต่างเป็นกลยุทธ์ที่ใช้มากที่สุด สอดคล้องกับผลการศึกษาจากผู้เรียน โดยมีคะแนนเฉลี่ย 4.22 พบว่า ผู้เรียนให้ความสำคัญด้านความแตกต่างของผู้ให้บริการที่รับฟังข้อเสนอแนะเพื่อใช้ปรับปรุงธุรกิจ รองลงมา คือ กลยุทธ์ความเป็นผู้นำด้านต้นทุนมีคะแนนเฉลี่ย 4.17 คือ ด้านราคาที่เหมาะสมกับชั่วโมงเรียน และกลยุทธ์การมุ่งเน้นด้านการเป็นผู้นำด้านต้นทุนที่มีคะแนนเฉลี่ย 4.11 โดยมุ่งเน้นค่าเรียนที่ยุติธรรมเหมาะสมกับคุณภาพของหลักสูตรและบริการที่ดี นอกจากนี้ ยังพบว่า ผลการทดสอบสมมติฐานสนับสนุนความแตกต่างทางด้านประชากรศาสตร์ของผู้เรียนทุกด้านยกเว้นด้านเพศ มีผลต่อการเลือกทุกกลยุทธ์การสร้างรายได้เปรียบเทียบในการแข่งขันแตกต่างกันทางสถิติอย่างมีนัยสำคัญที่ระดับ 0.01. สอดคล้องกับกลยุทธ์แบบผสมผสานที่ผู้ประกอบการใช้บริหารธุรกิจกวดวิชาในปัจจุบัน

คำสำคัญ: ความได้เปรียบทางการแข่งขัน ธุรกิจกวดวิชาเอกชน ธุรกิจขนาดเล็ก ลักษณะทางประชากรศาสตร์

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Introduction

In recent years, private tuition or tutoring has become a burgeoning phenomenon in many parts of the world. According to Global Industry Analysts (GIA), the global market for private tutorial learning is projected to reach US\$218 billion by the year 2027. The huge market is due to the failure of education systems being unable to fulfil learners' needs and parents' desire to provide a better education for their children. Parents are keen to send their children for tutoring because they strongly believe that tutoring would help their children to excel in examinations and enable for them a good future.

Despite this global rising trend, tutorial businesses in Thailand are facing real challenges. According to the Office of Private Education Promotion Board Meeting (OPEC) in February 2021, it was reported that the number of tutorial businesses in Thailand dropped from 2,801 in 2020 to 1,712 in 2021, which means that there were 1,069 businesses, accounting for 38.16%, that permanently closed their businesses within a year. Lampang is no exemption, it is having been reported that the tutoring market has seen a downtrend resulting in five private tutorial businesses out of 59 permanently closing their businesses. This is caused by various factors: overall economic conditions slowdown, increasing options from tutoring institutions, online tutoring systems as well as more options for university entrance examinations, freelance tutoring, and the burden of tax costs. As a result of the above factors, the number of tutoring schools has dropped to a record low and it is expected that many more tutoring businesses will close by the end of 2021 (Tens of billions of “tutoring businesses surge”, closing thousands of places, 2021).

Moreover, the population data of Thailand by Office of the National Economics and Social Development Council for the period of 2010-2040 (Thailand National Statistical Office [NSO], 2013) found that population aged 15-19 years dropped from about 4,523,000 in 2015 to 4,207,000 in 2020. This number is expected to decrease year after year. In 2019, Lampang was reported to be one among 22 provinces in Thailand to have the critical number of births be below annual national births despite the growing percentage of aging population within the province, which ranked the highest in the country in 2020. These demographic factors have resulted in closing down the businesses among the smaller groups of tutorial providers or reducing the number of business branches where it was reported to have a very low number of learners (Tutoring schools adapted to escape death: Major players sold - reduced branches, 2019). Moreover, the Covid-19 outbreak is hitting hard, leaving this shadow education in a serious situation. Small tutorial businesses have been hit more due to the above reasons as they are more vulnerable due to their underlying

characteristics. Unlike well-known tutorial providers, in an increasingly dynamic and competitive environment of tutorial market in Thailand small tutorial business with no goodwill or strengths of their businesses would easily collapse (Jatute & Thawinkarn, 2019).

Hence, to survive the competition and current economic and demographic changes, private small tutorial businesses need to adapt and change according to the current scenario. Private tutorial businesses need to understand the importance of adapting as per the need of the consumers to be more competitive and look at proper strategies to be able to find a market and be sustainable in the long run. One of the well-known concepts on strategy is Porter generic strategies model which consists of Cost Leadership, Differentiation and Focus and which has been used by many researchers (Anwar & Shah, 2021; Chaikla, 2016; Gecheo, 2020). Porter's generic strategies explains and outlines how a business attains competitive advantage in its chosen market.

However, it has been found that most of the research focus is on schools and well-known tutoring centers, ignoring the small-sized ones, and there is very little research focusing on regional towns and cities such as Lampang even though Lampang is well known as an educational hub for nearby towns (Ratchakhom, 2016; Wongma, 2013). Furthermore, previous studies did not heed the importance towards the learners' perception, toward strategies preference particularly on small private tutorial business in Lampang but rather focused their study only on one side whether being entrepreneurs or customer behavior (Akkharamaeteephan, 2018; Arayakul, 2016; Chulanutrakul, 2019). Consequently, a more insightful investigation of private tutorial business in the local context with particular size is needed.

Research Objectives

1. To study the current tutorial business environment and demographic characteristics of learners in Lampang.
2. To study generic competitive strategies used by small private tutorial business and preferred by learners.
3. To provide a competitive advantage guidance to small private tutorial business in Lampang.

Literature Review and Hypothesis

External Environment of Tutorial Small Business Context

External environment analysis is vital to an organization as it lays the foundation to strategies

and objectives being the very existence of the organization. It is widely accepted that Thailand is going through demographic changes (old age, birth rates) which can affect the tutorial business. Thus, it is imperative that businesses should analyze the underlying environmental changes to be able to align with the foreseeable changes. Morgunova and Bolkina (2021) explained that, “analysis of the external environment is the initial process of strategic management, as it provides the basis for determining both the mission and goals of the organization, and for developing strategies that allow the organization to fulfill the mission and achieve its goals” (p. 2). The external environment consists of the macro environment and micro environment, which can affect the performance of the relevant businesses and also Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).

External macro environment is an environment that has no direct influence, such as economic conditions, changes in technology, politics, and social matters (Handoko, 2011). Banham (2010) explained that the changing demographics and the challenges to SMEs in attracting and retaining skilled workers was identified as their number one challenge. The analysis results revealed that tutorial business trend is in saturation with new entrepreneurs entering the industry. However, the number of learners has decreased, thus making the supply lines tendency higher than demand. As a result, small tutorial businesses find it hard to gain a foothold and compete in a competitive industry, which can be related to their characteristics and approach to business. Despite the intense challenges, learners and parents are still interested in tutoring. Technological change is very much prevalent, and adaptability to technological changes can be a game changer for small-sized businesses. It has been found that the small-scale business tends to abstain from investing in technology as the investment can be high along with the learning curve. Hence, they need support from external economic mechanisms, such as government funding and a favorable regulatory environment. According to Thammasak Eapithorn, General Manager of Enconcept English School, “the fast-paced development of technology has changed the picture of teaching and learning” (‘Tutoring in crisis’ 50% of learners decline: Discount – star tutors as selling point, 2019, para. 7). Learners are turning to online learning rather than the classroom, which can be the result of the Covid-19 pandemic whereby learners’ movements have been restricted. It is expected that due to the changing demographics and preference of consumers whereby they prefer online classes due to the current Covid-19 pandemic, tutorial services will provide more online courses for learners and there will be adaptability of technology in a big way.

External micro environment is an environment that has direct influence on businesses and its related activities. Currently, the competition between education providers in Thailand is increasing

greatly due to the changes in perception regarding education and its output. Customers – it is a well-known fact that local schools are ill-equipped to prepare learners for the university admissions exams, being extremely competitive, hence parents have no choice but to send their kids to private tutoring schools. This has given rise to tutorial schools which are also called ‘Shadow Education’. Learners choose tutorial education for benefits related to entrance into the limited number of Thai public universities. In Thailand GPA is one of the main indicators of academic success, and it has worked as a catalyst for the growth of the tutorial business. Competitors – research done by Kasikorn Research Center (Kasikorn Research Center expected to open the big semester in 2018, parents spend 27,500 million baht, 2018) showed that tutoring schools face intense competition due to new entrant in the market and competition from independent tutors who teach one-on-one or in a group. Some operators gradually shut down some branches to reduce the burden of their business expenses.

Lampang Province is a province with many schools located in Muang District, and most big players from Bangkok set up several branches. There are also tutorial businesses owned by entrepreneurs in Lampang Province. Therefore, regardless of size, competition among tutoring businesses is very high. To sustain and compete SMEs need to successfully deal with the external environment to survive and meet the expectations of its valued customers (Banham, 2010). It can be concluded that successfully adapting to external environment factors such as demographic changes, technological advances, understanding customers, and knowing their competitors can play a major role in sustainability of small-scale businesses and help them to gain competitive advantage. Hence, businesses should analyze the underlying environmental changes to be able to align with the foreseeable changes and to gain competitive advantage; business entrepreneurs should find appropriate strategies to strengthen their business operations. While numerous studies have discussed the importance of different strategies, Porter's competitive strategy remains effective in theorizing and explaining practical contexts in Europe and Asia. The majority of strategic management researchers believe in Porter's generic competitive strategies as a key to a firm performance (Anwar & Shah, 2021; Islami, Mustafa, & Latkovikj, 2020).

Generic Strategy and Competitive Advantage

Porter (1996) observed that one strategy is to create a competitive advantage through the method of achieving the best product quality. Another is providing services to consumers where the cost is lower than competitors; still others include more suitable location or performing better than competitors.

Cost leadership strategy: entails being the lowest cost manufacturer or provider of services for a given quality level. Porter (1985) suggested that such a strategy is characterized by tight control of costs and overhead, minimization of operational costs, reduced labor costs and reduced input costs. Pearce and Robinson (2005) stated that business success built on cost leadership requires the business to be able to provide its product or service at a cost below what its competitors can achieve.

Differentiation strategy: entails offering a product or service that is perceived as unique throughout the industry and as such offers unique attributes that are valued by customers. According to Porter (1985), on differentiation, this uniqueness may permit the organization to charge premium prices for its products and/or services. A firm differentiates itself from its competitors if it can be unique at something that is valuable to buyers.

Focus strategy: According to Baltzan, Phillips, and Haag (2010), a focus strategy concentrates on either cost leadership or differentiation. Johnson, Scholes, and Whittington (2008) argued that a focus differentiation strategy provides high perceived product/services benefits typically justifying a substantial price premium usually to a selected market.

Generic Strategies, Competitive Advantage and Tutorial Business Context

Competition is the truth which every business must face to exist, and tutoring businesses are no exception. Every parent desires to provide children with the best possible education due to a more competitive global landscape for higher education. Hence, the level of expectation on the tutorial business and their output is becoming tougher. This makes it harder for tutoring entrepreneurs to compete in this very competitive market today with ever-changing consumer expectations. Therefore, to survive the business needs to have good strategies not only to be competitive in the market but also to ensure to be able to provide value in a way that they can compete and sustain in the long run.

A study conducted in Bangkok by Imyim (2020) explained that business advantage of tutorial schools can be done by focusing on a specific part of market segment, creating differentiation, providing fast response to both customers and the changing business environment, and implementing cost leadership. Tutorial business entrepreneurs should use the strategy that suits their target market which can be done by understanding the business environment in which they operate. It can be done by creating things that are not like other tutoring institutions, whether

it is the introduction of technology media to be used in online teaching or adapting curriculum as per the needs of the client.

Demographic Characteristics of Consumers

The characteristics of the customers are defined by the demographics including age, gender, income, education, marital status, employment, geographical location, etc. There are several demographics factors that can affect a business and the purchase decision-making process of a consumer, which can be used to determine product preferences or buying behaviors of consumers (Kotler & Keller, 2012; Woodruff, 2019). According to Serirat, Serirat, Patavanij, and Laksitanon (2003), personal factors such as age, family, occupation and education all result in different demands for goods and services leading to different decision-making processes. The demographic statistics can be used to analyze the target group of goods and services which comprises the following factors:

Gender differences – males and females have entirely different needs and preferences that affect their buying selections of products and services. Nuchma (n.d.) found that for high school learners their different genders affected the decision-making differently. In a study by Moyer (2003), women were predicted to prefer collaborative classroom environments to individual or competitive classroom environments, and males were predicted to prefer competitive/individual over collaborative classroom environments. Age differences have a positive effect toward learners' preferences, which is also confirmed by previous studies (Purković, Suman, & Jelaska, 2021; Serirat et al., 2003). *Income* also has a significant effect on consumer behavior and product decisions. Regarding family income towards tutorial business, Yimniyom (2016) found that most learners chose to participate in tutorial classes with above average family incomes because the cost of some specific courses was very expensive. Consumer behavior at different *educational levels and curriculum* have the characteristics of purchasing goods and services to meet different needs because they have gone through a different learning process. For instance, in tutorial classes, Wootmongcolpanit (2016) showed that learners who are in Grade 12 were more likely to study more hours than those who are at lower educational levels because competing in entrance examinations is the main reason at their advanced educational level, while learners at lower levels study rather for improving their school grade outcome.

Geographic location – learners who study in big famous schools located in the town center may not buy or use the same products or services as some learners who study in smaller schools

located in suburban areas (Kasikorn Research Center , 2015; Wongma, 2013; Wootmongcolpanit, 2016). Prior researchers have looked at demographics and behavioral usage, yet have not directly investigated strategy preferences. Based on this discussion, the following research hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: *Learners with different demographic characteristics have different preference on generic strategies for competitive advantage of a small private tutorial business.*

H1.1: Learners with different gender have different preference on generic strategies toward competitive advantage of a small private tutorial business.

H1.2: Learners with different age have different preference on generic strategies for competitive advantage of a small private tutorial business.

H1.3: Learners with different education level have different preference on generic strategies for competitive advantage of a small private tutorial business.

H1.4: Learners with different school location have different preference on generic strategies for competitive advantage of a small private tutorial business.

H1.5: Learners with different curriculum have different preference on generic strategies for competitive advantage of a small private tutorial business.

H1.6: Learners with different family monthly income have different preference on generic strategies for competitive advantage of a small private tutorial business.

Research Scope

During the literature review it was found that there were very few research papers which shed light on the Lampang region, and most papers focused on bigger cities. Hence, this paper focuses on small regional private tutorial business to be able to guide them and give an overview on the problem faced which will enable policymakers to have a look at this important sector. This research addresses several gaps in the literature. First, there is a paucity of published research on small private tutorial business, and previous research falls short of rechecking whether the current strategies used by small tutorial business match with the learners' preferences. Second, despite the profound role of tutorial services in the shadow educational context for the last several decades, there is little understanding of the consequent effect of generic competitive strategies on demographic characteristics relationship.

Thus, this study addresses the gaps, gaining insight into this domain and subsequently expanding the implications and contributions underpinning Porter's generic competitive theoretical

foundations by exploring demographic characteristics and competitive advantage of small private tutorial business in Lamphang.

Research Methodology

This research seeks to fill the research gap by adopting the mixed methodology which includes quantitative and qualitative research. The study employs generic strategies, demographic characteristics as variables in the conceptual framework. A mixed methods design is appropriate for answering research questions that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods could answer alone (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006; Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007; Wisdom & Creswell, 2013). Mixed methods can be used to gain a better understanding of connections or contradictions between qualitative and quantitative data, and they can facilitate different avenues of exploration that enrich the evidence and enable questions to be answered more deeply (Wisdom & Creswell, 2013). This methodology can facilitate greater scholarly interaction and enrich the experiences of researchers as different perspectives illuminate various studies on the tutorial business context (Khanthap, Chusorn, & Phusrisom, 2017; Kraivutinundh, Netpradit, & Awirothananon, 2018; Pakawanchat & Jiyachan, 2018; Pisanwacharin & Suwanarak, 2021).

Sample Population and Sampling Method Researchers obtained the list of licensed tutorial businesses in the education industry in Lamphang from the Lamphang Provincial Education Office which comprised 59 tutorial businesses. The study narrowed the population size to small private tutorial businesses with the maximum number of learners not exceeding 150 learners. Almost 20 businesses were found in accordance with the criteria as the sample size. The sampling technique for qualitative research was done by a purposive sampling technique selected from small-sized private tutorial business in Lamphang province which reported to have the number of learners enrolled not more than 150 and have been in operation for at least a minimum duration of 10 years. Therefore, 5 businesses were able to pass the criteria and were chosen. Face-to-face and telephone call in-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire to ensure that the generated questions capture and relevant to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018, as cited in Erawan, 2021). The purpose of this qualitative approach was to get key informants' opinions and to measure the current business situation and the strategies used in managing the tutorial business, and moreover any recommendation which they thought will support the competitive advantage and the overall sustainability of the industry.

For quantitative approach, according to the data on information systems for the academic year 2019 by the Lampang Provincial Education Office, there are total number of 1,449 learners enrolled in small private tutorial school businesses in Lampang. To get a sample that was a good representation of the research data, the researchers used the Taro Yamane's formula to calculate the sample size with an error of 5% and with a confidence coefficient of 95%, which resulted at least 313 respondents (Yamane, 1967). Overall, there were 400 respondents being entitled to receive the questionnaire for this study.

Data Collection and Research Tools The qualitative research started from selecting respondents and conducting interviews. The study first started the qualitative research by getting a purposive sampling from a selected group of 5 small private tutorial business and interviews of 5 respondents in order to get individual opinions along with the detailed facets of current strategies. A semi-structured questionnaire was organized into four parts, including entrepreneur profile (working experience, position), tutorial business characteristics (types of business ownership, teaching method, number of subjects, number of personnel, number of learners), and current business environment; multiple-items of three generic strategies (Differentiation, Cost Leadership, and Focus) were adopted from Chaikla (2016); Imyim (2020); Intharapong (2014); Jatute and Thawinkarn (2019); Ratchakhom (2016).

Variables for quantitative method were framed by the conclusions from the synthesis of principles, concepts and theories which were analyzed in order to summarize the factors and create structured questionnaires using Google Forms, and handouts were distributed to 400 respondents. The sampling participants who filled in questionnaires was classified into two relevant groups of respondents: a) learners aged above 15 years old, b) as well as the learners aged under 15 years old being guided by respective guardians. Quantitative method is employed to gather information about the learners' characteristics and understand the generic competitive strategies that learners preferred which matched in managing the tutorial business and how different variables recognized through qualitative research are affecting the competitive advantage of the tutorial business. The questionnaire comprised three sections, including multiple-items of demographic characteristics (gender, age, education, school location, curriculum, and family income), multi-items of three generic strategies (Differentiation, Cost Leadership, and Focus), and additional space for open-ended suggestions or recommendations placed at the end to allow respondents to include further information. A 5-point Likert rating scales was adopted to measure multi-items, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

Data were gathered during the period of November 2020 to June 2021. The questionnaire was translated by means of the back-translation from English to the Thai-version, and the Thai version back into the English. The validation of the questionnaire in the research was done by three professors of Business Administration studies to verify the content validation. According to the examination results, it was found that the questionnaire had an IOC (Index of Item Objective Congruence) equal to 0.875. As a result, it was deemed that the content of the questionnaire was complete and could be used. The reliability was also examined by means of the Cronbach's alpha coefficient which resulted in a reliability value of the entire questionnaire equal to 0.948. The composite reliability was greater than .70 threshold value (ranging from 0.940 to 0.945), which confirmed the internal consistency (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010).

Research Results

1. Qualitative Research Data Findings

Current Business Environment: The qualitative research findings revealed that most entrepreneurs believed that the business environment of tutorial schools will gain more attention from learners who are seeking extra classes to help them cope with current lessons in the classroom as well as to increase their knowledge in specific subjects. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the business had to temporally close in accordance with the Ministry of Education protocol. This has led to a decrease in income and revenue of the small tutorial business while expenses remained the same, resulting in losses. Moreover, due to the demographic changes resulting in a decrease of population, tutorial schools are having a lower number of learners that has been declining year by year. The study by Uea-umakoon, Niamsanit, and Jarernsiripornkul (2015) added today's general environment factors that negatively affect the business, such as more options for admission to higher education, giving learners more opportunities for admission whether in an international program or a private university. It will affect the business in terms of cost and number of enrolled learners.

Competitive advantage strategy

According to generic competitive strategies – Differentiation, Cost Leadership, and Focus presented in Table 1 – the current strategies used by small tutorial school business in Lampang was not an individual strategy but rather mixed of all strategies. All entrepreneurs (100%) confirmed that Differentiation strategy is being used, while 4 entrepreneurs (80%) responded that they used

a Focus strategy emphasizing on delivering better products and services rather than being low cost. Cost Leadership strategy was the least adapted with 3 entrepreneurs (60%) agreeing that they provide affordable courses with quality of teaching, so that lower income families can be able to send their children to learn. These findings suggest that using one sole strategy alone cannot enable to gain competitive advantage and be sustainable long term in the education business.

Table 1 Current Strategies Used by Tutorial Providers

| Generic Competitive Strategies | N | Percentage |
|--|----------|-------------------|
| Differentiation Strategy | 5 | 100.0% |
| - Courses have specific expertise which meet the needs of learners | 5 | 100.0% |
| - Learning outcome are guaranteed | 2 | 40.0% |
| - Learner's progress is regularly measured and evaluated | 5 | 100.0% |
| - Learner's satisfaction | 5 | 100.0% |
| - An instructor's expertise, good personality, and positive attitude | 4 | 80.0% |
| - Technology is applied in teaching and learning | 2 | 40.0% |
| - Good reputation and success story | 5 | 100.0% |
| - Publicity advertisement and word of mouth | 4 | 80.0% |
| - Listen to learner feedback for improvement | 3 | 60.0% |
| Cost Leadership Strategy | 3 | 60.0% |
| - Promotion and discount | 2 | 40.0% |
| - Reasonable price with quality | 3 | 60.0% |
| - Suitable price with the study hours | 3 | 60.0% |
| - Course fee is lower than other tutorials | 2 | 40.0% |
| Focus Strategy | 4 | 80.0% |
| - Fair prices but very high-quality of courses and services | 3 | 60.0% |
| - Different price for different group | 1 | 20.0% |
| - Serve needs and preferences of specific group or individual | 1 | 20.0% |
| - Affordability of products and services | 3 | 60.0% |

One of the respondents involved with a well-known tutoring school informed that they offer tailor-made courses targeting a certain group of learners with certain goals and objectives.

All the respondents informed that they provide learning courses which meet the needs of learners. Moreover, learning progress is regularly measured and evaluated as well as learners' satisfaction being the most important for tutorial business as they will continue repeat courses and recommend to their peers.

During the research 80% of the respondents informed that subject expertise is the most important personality trait that they look for in an instructor; most of their customers were from publicity advertisement and word of mouth. The second most important factor was advertisement and communication with the target customers. It is very important to reach the target customers through various channels and provide proper communication so that the customer can make a choice. This finding is consistent with the study done in Bangkok by Imyim (2020) indicating that "business owner focuses differentiation strategy by creating things that are not like other tutoring providers whether it is the use of technology or media, online teaching and learning system, facilities, and things which meet the needs of learners and parents" (p. 349).

2. Quantitative Research Data Findings

Demographic Characteristics of Learners: The frequency distribution of 400 respondents according to gender was the following. Female learners accounted for 256 (64.0%) of the total sample while male learners were 142 (35.5%). In terms of respondents' ages, most of the learners were less than 15 years, equivalent to 182 (45%), followed by learners with ages ranging from 16 to 20 years accounting for 132 (33.0%). Through quantitative analysis, it was found that the majority of respondents were pursuing their education at High School/Vocational level around 33.5% and in primary reached 112 (28.0%) while kindergarten showed the least among the group accounting for 32 (8%). They are currently attending the schools located predominantly in Muang district with 277 (69.3%), and studying in Thai curriculum 272 (68.0%), Bilingual and International curricula accounted for 88 (22%) and 40 (10.0%), respectively. The majority of respondents' family income was found to be less than 20,000 baht monthly representing 182 (45.5%), from which it may be inferred that they are concerned for their children's education believing that better education brings better life. While the minority of family income of respondents ranged between 30,001 to 40,000 baht accounting for 57 (14.3%).

Table 2 presents learners' purchasing decision on overall strategies toward competitive advantage of small tutorial business in Lampang province. The findings revealed that Differentiation Strategy is prioritized by learners as very high with the highest ($\bar{x} = 4.22$), followed by Cost Leadership Strategy and Focus Strategy ($\bar{x} = 4.17$), ($\bar{x} = 4.11$), respectively.

Table 2 Strategies Preferred by Learners

| Generic Competitive Strategies | \bar{x} | SD | Interpretation |
|--|-----------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| Differentiation Strategy | 4.22 | .450 | Very High |
| - Courses have specific expertise which meet Learners' needs | 4.23 | .637 | Very high |
| - Learning outcome are guaranteed | 4.25 | .678 | Very high |
| - Learner's progress is regularly measured and evaluated | 4.26 | .688 | Very high |
| - Learners' satisfaction | 4.26 | .656 | Very high |
| - An instructor's expertise, good personality, and positive attitude | 4.19 | .662 | High |
| - Technology is applied in teaching and learning | 4.26 | .635 | Very high |
| - Good reputation and success story | 4.22 | .658 | Very high |
| - Publicity advertisement and word of mouth | 4.26 | .668 | Very high |
| - Listen to learner feedback for improvement | 4.34 | .613 | Very high |
| Cost Leadership Strategy | 4.17 | .530 | High |
| - Promotion and discount | 4.10 | .725 | High |
| - Reasonable price with quality | 4.24 | .625 | Very high |
| - Suitable price with the study hours. | 4.27 | .669 | Very high |
| - Course fee is lower than other tutorials | 4.15 | .670 | High |
| Focus Strategy | 4.11 | .558 | High |
| - Fair prices but very high-quality of courses and services | 4.15 | .730 | High |
| - Different price for different group | 4.09 | .764 | High |
| - Serve needs and preferences of specific group or individual | 4.11 | .647 | High |
| - Affordability of products and services | 4.08 | .685 | High |

Differentiation Strategy results revealed that learners prioritized the providers who listen to their feedback for improving the businesses ($\bar{x} = 4.34$). Secondly, the progress of learners is regularly measured and evaluated, learners' satisfaction in using the service, technology is applied in teaching and learning to create a different experience for tutors and learners, publicity advertising and word of mouth to improve its efficiency in the conduct of its operations distributed mean rating equally ($\bar{x} = 4.26$). These may indicate that the small-sized tutorial business providers should be fully utilized in order to maximize individual learning experience. The more emphasis on learners' satisfaction will show favorable results. While other responses resulting in high level

or mean score below ($\bar{x} = 4.21$) are found in learning outcomes are guaranteed ($\bar{x} = 4.25$), courses have specific expertise which meets the needs of learners ($\bar{x} = 4.23$), good reputation and success story ($\bar{x} = 4.22$), the instructor has an expertise in the teaching subject, good personality and attitude towards learners ($\bar{x} = 4.19$).

Regarding Cost Leadership Strategy, on average learners all responded with “agree” responses which might mean that they agree that price also is a factor with which learners are concerned in purchasing decision for tutoring. In detail, with the mean rating ($\bar{x} = 4.27$), it is the top priority according to the respondents by recognizing that the tutorial school that provides a suitable price with the study hours enables the learners to purchase the course and followed by reasonable price with quality ($\bar{x} = 4.24$). Furthermore, with the mean rating of ($\bar{x} = 4.15$), it is agreeable by the respondents that the tutorial school should provide course fee that is cheaper than other tutorials along with promotion and discount ($\bar{x} = 4.10$) as an option for learners which can help greatly to lower expense pressure for guardians in these slow economic conditions. The findings are consistent with the results of the study of Siring and Sangchai (2018) on factors affecting primary learners and parents’ decision making for choosing English tutorial institutes were price must be suitable, not too expensive to be able to afford.

Focus Strategy outcome revealed that learners weighted Cost Focus on fair prices but high-quality courses and services the highest ($\bar{x} = 4.15$) and followed by needs and preferences of specific groups or individual learners in Differentiation Focus ($\bar{x} = 4.11$). While different prices for different target groups of learners as well as well-known in the market due to the affordability of its products and services compared to its competitors distributed ($\bar{x} = 4.09$) and ($\bar{x} = 4.08$) almost equally as revealed overall findings at the high level. These findings might indicate that all of these criteria are very important for tutorial business providers in order to create a strategy to gain competitive advantage in this market.

In summary, the findings confirmed the matching between key information providers from both tutorial businesses and learners.

Hypotheses Test Results

This research has set hypothesis test on creating competitive advantage of small private tutorial businesses in Lamphang province which comprise Differentiation Strategy, Cost Leadership Strategy, Focus Strategy using One Way ANOVA and Independent Sample t-test as a tool for testing via SPSS version 22 to find significant differences among research samples.

According to these research hypotheses on creating competitive advantage of small private tutorial businesses in Lampang province, it yielded a significant effect on Focus Strategy, Differentiation Strategy, and Cost Leadership Strategy, respectively, resulting in statistical significance difference at below .01 (Table 3). The same finding has been confirmed by the study done in Bangkok by Imyim (2020), on marketing strategies to create competitive advantages for high school learners, whose results showed that learners preferred Focus strategy with the highest mean score, followed by Differentiation, Rapid Response, and Cost Leadership, respectively.

Table 3 Hypotheses Test Results

| Hypotheses | Generic Competitive Strategies | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|--------|
| | Differentiation | Cost Leadership | Focus |
| H11. Gender | .092 | .054 | .213 |
| H12. Age | .005** | .386 | .006** |
| H13. Education | .012** | .006** | .004** |
| H14. School Location | .096 | .012** | .001** |
| H15. Curriculum | .000** | .000** | .001** |
| H16. Family Income | .001** | .677 | .014** |

Note: **p-value < 0.01

Discussion

Tutorial business as a type of education shadowing the public education system is an option used by the population to bridge the gap in our education system. Providing flexibility and efficiency towards individuals and their needs, small tutorial business plays an important role in society. The same was confirmed through qualitative analysis as most of the entrepreneurs agreed that the small tutorial businesses used a mix of different strategies to be able to provide satisfaction to their learners. They perceived consumer satisfaction as being an important factor to be able to be competitive. Whereas through quantitative analysis it was found that Differentiation strategy was the most preferred generic strategy by the respondents followed by Cost Leadership and Focus strategy. The results of the analysis demonstrate the close connection of individual factors towards generic competitive strategies. From the findings of this study, the phenomenon of tutorial enterprises cannot be ignored.

Small tutorial businesses should have clear objectives along with a plan and strategy to be able to be sustainable and competitive in an ever-competitive business scenario. After-school tutoring classroom attracts customers through different strategy techniques. The results of the research identify that small tutorial businesses do not confirm or use a single strategy but a mix of different strategies. This can be explained by the dynamic nature of the market along with the changing demographic patterns of the region. Small tutoring businesses try to provide product as per consumer needs along with pricing in the range which customers can pay; hence, little attention is paid to focus strategy. It is aligned with the learners' response whereby they prefer differentiation along with cost strategy, they favor paying for a course and with not so high a fee. It can be attributed to the fact that the research was carried during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the local population was sensitive to paying high and expensive pricing.

It has often been found that small businesses lack expertise in promoting their strategy and objectives to the local population due to their characteristics and other disadvantages. However, social media platforms are a popular way to reach targeted customers as more and more learners are being exposed to social media.

Contributions and Implications

This research can be beneficial and worth for entrepreneurs involved in tutorial business as it gives guidelines to competitive strategy which is essential for any type of business.

1. *Differentiation Strategy*: Results revealed that learners prioritized the providers who listen to their feedback for improving the businesses, followed by the development of learners regularly measured and evaluated. Tutoring schools should focus on expanding additional curricula for elementary school children to continuing education due to an increase of aging population.

2. *Cost Leadership Strategy*: According to the respondent's recognition, the tutorial school that provide a suitable price with the relevant study hours is learners' top priority and followed by reasonable price with quality, providing an installment payment method as an option for learners which can assist to lower expense pressure for guardians in these slow economic conditions. It has been confirmed by Yimniyom (2016) that the entrepreneurs of the tutoring institutes can apply to use the results as a guideline for determining marketing strategies to create in order to gain a competitive advantage.

3. *Focus Strategy*: Research results revealed that learners weighted Cost Focus on fair prices along with high-quality courses and services. Private tutorial business entrepreneurs should adjust the price by promotion, e.g., discounted fees on registering of more than one person at the same time. Entrepreneurs should provide tutorial services according to the needs and preferences of a specific group or individual learners.

4. *Demographic Characteristics Differences among Learners*: According to the findings, differences in age, education, curriculum, school area, and family monthly income prefer competitive advantage strategies differently. Therefore, private tutorial business entrepreneurs should understand the demographic changes and the characteristics of the population. This will help them to develop strategies to gain competitive advantage and design additional courses for specific groups.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

With regard to the limitations of the study, suggestions for further research include the following:

1. This study focuses mainly on the theoretical concept of Porter's generic competitive strategies, which is just one of many strategies that emphasize competitive advantage; there are many more theories to study. According to Moon, Hur, Yin, and Helm (2014) Porter's generic strategies have been well received in the field of strategic management. However, this does not mean that the generic strategy concept itself is without criticism. Some scholars have argued that "small firms have a choice of successfully competing only through focus strategy whereas bigger firm choice of either cost leadership or differentiation will not suffice and be attractive enough. Secondly, his strategy schema does not fit the empirical reality, and there is no support that these generic strategies are route to superior profit" (Wright, 1987, p. 96). Moreover, Porter's generic strategies model was proposed during the late 20th century, but in the current 21st century things have changed with more demanding consumers and the wave of digitalization. Hence, further research should be conducted focusing on new concepts of business strategy which is relevant to tutorial school business.

2. The study was based only in Lampang province which cannot provide a clear information on other regions in Thailand. Future works can investigate the other areas or provinces and compare the results of the studies.

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