

# THE ROLE OF THE 4ES IN DRIVING BUSINESS PERFORMANCE AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE FOR COSMETIC INDUSTRY SMES IN EMERGING ECONOMIES

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## Abstract

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Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are vital engines of economic development, innovation, and employment, particularly in emerging economies where structural constraints intensify competitive pressures (Fajarika et al., 2024; Keelson et al., 2024). Within this landscape, the cosmetics industry has emerged as a dynamic sector, driven by rising consumer demand, digital platforms, and cultural emphasis on personal aesthetics (Jinachai et al., 2016; Shin, 2024). This study explores the role of the 4Es (Experience, Exchange, Everyplace, and Evangelism) marketing framework in shaping business performance and competitive advantage among cosmetic SMEs in Thailand. Using a qualitative design with semi-structured interviews and content analysis, the findings demonstrate that cultural storytelling, ethical value exchanges, omnichannel accessibility, and customer-driven advocacy reinforce both financial outcomes, such as sales growth and export expansion, and non-financial outcomes, including brand trust, loyalty, and equity. The study advances marketing scholarship by highlighting the 4Es as a consumer-centric orientation that supports resilience and sustainable competitiveness in resource-constrained environments.

**Keywords:** Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, SMEs, Cosmetics Industry, 4Es Marketing Framework, Business Performance, Competitive Advantage

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are widely acknowledged as critical drivers of economic development, innovation, and employment creation across both developed and emerging economies. Their flexibility, adaptability, and capacity to innovate make them a vital component of national competitiveness and sustainable growth. In emerging economies, SMEs often represent the backbone of industrial activity, contributing significantly to gross domestic product (GDP) and labor absorption, while simultaneously facing structural constraints such as limited financial resources, technological gaps, and institutional challenges (Fajarika et al., 2024; Keelson et al., 2024). Within this broader SME landscape, the cosmetics industry has gained increasing relevance as one of the most dynamic and rapidly expanding sectors. Rising disposable incomes, shifting consumer lifestyles, and growing awareness of beauty, wellness, and personal care have driven consistent growth in cosmetics consumption worldwide, with Asia emerging as one of the most lucrative markets (Jitpleecheep, 2019; Shin, 2024). Thailand, in particular, has witnessed a robust expansion of its cosmetics sector, benefiting from both domestic consumption and export potential, thereby positioning SMEs as key players in sustaining competitiveness and innovation in this industry (Jinachai et al., 2016; Panitsettakorn et al., 2023; Theerachoksawat et al., 2025). Despite these opportunities, cosmetic industry SMEs in emerging economies face mounting pressures. Competition has intensified due to the entry of global brands, rapid product innovation cycles, and the disruptive influence of digital commerce platforms. Moreover, consumer demands are evolving rapidly, with growing emphasis on sustainability, personalization, and brand authenticity, requiring firms to go beyond traditional transactional strategies and adopt customer-centric approaches that build trust, loyalty, and long-term engagement. Against these challenges, the ability of SMEs to design and implement innovative marketing strategies becomes a decisive factor for sustaining business performance and securing a defensible competitive position in the marketplace (Amrina et al., 2021; Budiman & Sutrisno, 2024; Keelson et al., 2024; Mondello et al., 2024; Sumantri et al., 2025; Tariq, 2025; Yip et al., 2025; Yasa et al., 2025).

In response to escalating competitive pressures and the transformation of consumer expectations in the contemporary digital era, the 4Es framework — comprising Experience, Exchange, Everyplace, and Evangelism — constitutes a progressive marketing orientation that strategically addresses the multifaceted and evolving demands of modern markets. Positioned as a progressive alternative to the traditional 4Ps (Product, Price, Place, Promotion), it shifts the emphasis from transactional marketing toward relational and experiential engagement with customers. The framework underscores the creation of memorable experiences that align with consumer lifestyles (Experience), the cultivation of reciprocal and transparent value exchanges (Exchange), the assurance of accessibility and presence across multiple channels (Everyplace), and the development

of communities of loyal advocates who promote the brand through trust and commitment (Evangelism). This reconceptualization demonstrates how marketing can transcend conventional approaches by fostering value co-creation and consumer-centricity. Empirical evidence indicates that the adoption of the 4Es enhances customer engagement — leading to greater satisfaction and loyalty — strengthens brand equity, and contributes to sustained profitability (Anuntaakalakul, 2022; Fei & Kenikasahmanworakhun, 2023; Limna, 2023; Mada, 2024).

Recent scholarship has increasingly applied the 4Es framework to examine its influence on consumer behavior across diverse contexts. For instance, Anuntaakalakul (2022) investigated the application of the 4Es in the food truck sector and found that the framework significantly influenced both purchase and repurchase intentions, thereby reinforcing its role in fostering customer satisfaction and sustained engagement. Similarly, Limna (2023) explored the role of the 4Es in shaping online shopping behavior in Krabi, Thailand, demonstrating its critical importance in influencing consumer decisions within digital marketplaces. Collectively, these studies underscore the growing relevance of the 4Es in understanding consumer behavior. However, they remain primarily centered on customer-side outcomes, with limited exploration of how the framework translates into firm-level performance and competitive advantage, particularly in the cosmetics industry. This gap is especially evident among SMEs in emerging economies, where firms face resource limitations, navigate cultural specificities, and remain vulnerable to volatile market conditions that complicate marketing strategy implementation.

Building on this identified gap, the present study is guided by the objective of exploring how the 4Es framework influences business performance and competitive advantage in cosmetic industry SMEs in Thailand. The central research question is:

*RQ: How does the 4Es framework influence business performance and competitive advantage in cosmetic industry SMEs in Thailand?*

Adopting a qualitative research design, the study seeks to generate in-depth insights into how SMEs conceptualize, implement, and derive value from the 4Es framework within a highly competitive and culturally specific market environment. By shifting the focus from predominantly consumer-centered perspectives to organizational outcomes, this research aims to enrich both theoretical understanding and practical applications of the 4Es in emerging economy contexts. The findings are expected to provide valuable guidance for business owners and managers seeking to strengthen organizational performance, enhance resilience, and sustain competitiveness in the dynamic cosmetics sector.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a review of the relevant literature. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, while Section 4 presents and analyzes the results. Section 5 offers a discussion of the findings, and Section 6 concludes the paper, highlighting theoretical contributions, practical implications, and directions for future research.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the digital age, the marketing landscape has undergone a profound shift from product-centric approaches, epitomized by the traditional 4Ps, to customer-centric frameworks that emphasize value co-creation and engagement. Among these, the 4Es framework has emerged as a strategic lens for businesses seeking to build stronger customer relationships and achieve sustainable growth (Anuntaakalakul, 2022; Limna, 2023). While the 4Es have been increasingly adopted in consumer-focused industries, limited research has explored their application in SMEs, particularly in the cosmetic sector in emerging economies. Building on this gap, the present study explores how the 4Es influence business performance and competitive advantage in cosmetic industry SMEs in Thailand.

### 2.1. The 4Es framework in marketing

The conceptualization of the 4Es framework emerged as a response to critiques of the traditional 4Ps model, which has been criticized for its firm-centric orientation and its limited capacity to capture the complexity of contemporary consumer behavior. The 4Es shift the focus from transactional efficiency toward relational and experiential value creation. *Experience* emphasizes the design of memorable and immersive interactions that extend beyond the functional attributes of a product, with evidence showing its role in strengthening brand attachment and fostering long-term customer loyalty. *Exchange* reconceptualizes pricing as a value co-creation process in which fairness, reciprocity, and mutual benefit are prioritized, thereby reinforcing trust and sustainable relationships between firms and consumers. *Everyplace* underscores the necessity of omnichannel accessibility in digitally networked markets, where seamless integration across physical and digital touchpoints enhances convenience and significantly shapes purchasing behavior. Finally, *Evangelism* captures the role of customers as proactive brand advocates who generate positive word-of-mouth and contribute to the formation of consumer communities, further reinforcing brand equity and competitive positioning. Collectively, the 4Es framework provides a more dynamic and consumer-centric lens for understanding marketing effectiveness in today's competitive business landscape (Ariyamang et al., 2024; Mada, 2024; Tunpornchai et al., 2024; Tunpornchai et al., 2025). Empirical studies across various sectors, including food delivery (Chantana & Kessadayurat, 2023), food and beverage service supply chain (Vitsentzatou et al., 2022), hospitality (Krongyut et al., 2024; Sukprasoeta et al., 2024), and sports tourism (Santichat & Pooripakdee, 2022), indicate that businesses implementing the 4Es achieve higher customer engagement, brand equity, and long-term profitability. However, evidence from resource-constrained SMEs, particularly in the cosmetic industry of emerging markets, remains scarce.

### 2.2. Small and medium-sized enterprises in emerging economies

Small and medium-sized enterprises play a vital role in fostering economic development, innovation, and employment in emerging economies. They are

characterized by limited financial capital, constrained resources, and heightened competitive pressures, which demand innovative, cost-effective, and adaptive marketing strategies (Alaghbari, 2022; Keelson et al., 2024). In Thailand, there are over 3.2 million SMEs, representing approximately 90% of all enterprises in the country and employing around 50% of the national workforce (Krisanaraj, 2025). Within this landscape, the cosmetic industry is a rapidly growing sector, propelled by rising consumer demand, digital commerce penetration, and cultural emphasis on personal aesthetics (Jinachai et al., 2016; Moongvicha, 2016; Kaewpetch et al., 2024). Despite its potential, cosmetic SMEs face challenges such as brand saturation, global competition, and evolving regulatory standards. These pressures create an imperative for SMEs to adopt marketing strategies that are not only efficient but also customer-centric and differentiation-focused (Amrina et al., 2021; Panitsettakorn et al., 2023; Ustymenko, 2023; Zare et al., 2025). In this study, the 4Es framework emerges as an especially relevant model for cosmetic SMEs in emerging markets, as it enables differentiation through value co-creation and relationship-building rather than resource-intensive approaches. The framework's emphasis on experience, personalized exchange, omnichannel accessibility, and advocacy aligns with SMEs' need to foster strong customer connections without relying on extensive capital investments.

### 2.3. Business performance and competitive advantage

Business performance in SMEs encompasses both financial outcomes — such as profitability, sales growth, and return on investment — and non-financial outcomes, including customer satisfaction, brand equity, and innovation capacity (Kafetzopoulos et al., 2023; Grove et al., 2024). Contemporary marketing research increasingly underscores the importance of non-financial performance as a strategic driver of long-term sustainability and competitive advantage (Cupertino et al., 2023; Darwish & Al Astal, 2025; Shahbaz & Malik, 2025; Voto, 2025). For SMEs, competitive advantage seldom derives from economies of scale; instead, it is shaped by agility, niche market positioning, innovative marketing approaches, and deep customer intimacy (Clara et al., 2025; Tariq, 2025). Within the cosmetic industry, SMEs face intense competitive pressures and brand saturation, making differentiation critical for survival. These enterprises rely heavily on brand authenticity, trust, and emotional engagement to cultivate distinctiveness in the marketplace. Building strong consumer-brand relationships through experiential strategies has been shown to enhance loyalty and encourage repeat patronage, thereby reinforcing both brand strength and market resilience (Gamage et al., 2020; Efendi et al., 2023; Jeon & Park, 2024). In this context, the 4Es framework offers a strategically relevant model for SMEs, aligning closely with the drivers of competitive advantage. By integrating Experience-driven value creation, Exchange as equitable value co-creation, Everyplace for seamless omnichannel presence, and Evangelism as customer-driven advocacy, the framework equips SMEs to foster deeper engagement and sustainable differentiation (Budiarto et al., 2024; Hasani et al., 2024; Keelson

et al., 2024; Mada, 2024). This approach not only enhances financial and non-financial performance but also strengthens relational capital — an increasingly vital asset for SMEs in dynamic markets. Nevertheless, empirical investigation into the practical adoption and effectiveness of the 4Es in resource-constrained settings — particularly among cosmetic SMEs in emerging economies — remains limited, representing a salient gap in both academic knowledge and managerial practice.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Guided by the objective of exploring how the 4Es framework influences business performance and competitive advantage in cosmetic industry SMEs in Thailand, this study adopted a qualitative research design. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate given its ability to capture in-depth insights, nuanced perspectives, and context-specific meanings, particularly in an emerging economy setting where cultural, economic, and market dynamics shape business practices. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews served as the primary data collection method, enabling participants to articulate their experiences and perceptions while ensuring consistency across the study's thematic focus.

#### 3.1. Interview guide design and validation

To address the exploratory research question, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to examine how cosmetic industry SMEs in Thailand apply the 4Es framework in shaping business performance and sustaining competitive advantage. The guide was structured into six thematic sections: 1) firm background, 2) application of each of the 4Es, 3) perceived benefits and challenges, 4) impact on business performance, 5) strategies for sustaining competitiveness, and 6) closing reflections.

Open-ended questions encouraged participants to discuss their practices and strategies in detail, while probes were used to elicit examples of customer engagement, value creation, distribution innovations, and word-of-mouth marketing. To ensure validity and contextual appropriateness, the guide was reviewed by academic experts in marketing and entrepreneurship as well as practitioners from the cosmetic sector. A pilot test with two SME managers provided feedback on terminology and flow; for instance, questions related to “evangelism” were clarified by substituting technical language with terms such as “customer advocacy” and “brand community building”. These refinements enhanced clarity, flow, and cultural relevance, ensuring that the instrument captured authentic managerial perspectives on the operationalization of the 4Es.

#### 3.2. Sample selection

Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants with direct experience managing cosmetic industry SMEs in Thailand, as these individuals were best positioned to provide rich insights into how the 4Es framework is applied in practice. The inclusion criteria required participants to: a) be SME owners or senior managers in the cosmetic sector, b) have at least three years of

operational experience, and c) actively implement marketing or strategic initiatives linked to customer engagement and business growth.

In this study, 12 participants were selected, representing a diverse mix of firm sizes, product categories, and market orientations within the Thai cosmetic industry. This number was sufficient to capture a range of perspectives while ensuring analytic depth, aligning with established qualitative research guidance that saturation is typically reached within nine to 17 interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

#### 3.3. Data collection

The primary method of data collection for this study was semi-structured interviews, chosen for their flexibility and ability to elicit rich, detailed responses from participants. The interviews were carried out in Thai, either face-to-face or through secure digital platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet, depending on participant availability and preference. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, providing ample opportunity for participants to elaborate on their strategies and experiences related to the 4Es. This study adhered to national and institutional ethical standards governing research in the social sciences. Participants were fully informed of the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights, including the option to withdraw at any point without consequence. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and eligibility was restricted to individuals aged 18 years or older. Participation was entirely voluntary, and the research posed no medical, physical, or psychological risks, nor did it involve vulnerable populations. Anonymity and confidentiality were rigorously maintained by excluding personally identifiable information and reporting responses only in pseudonymized or aggregated form. In accordance with the criteria established by Thailand Science Research and Innovation (TSRI) No. 3(3), ethics approval may be waived for social science studies that do not affect the body, mind, cells, genetic materials, or behavior, and where data are collected anonymously through interviews or questionnaires that preclude direct or indirect identification of participants (Phuangsuwan et al., 2024). While this study qualifies for ethical exemption under these provisions, it was conducted with a strong commitment to safeguarding participants' rights, ensuring confidentiality, and maintaining the integrity of the research process.

#### 3.4. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis to systematically interpret the interview transcripts. This method allowed the identification of both explicit practices and underlying strategic orientations related to the 4Es framework. Transcripts were coded line by line, with initial codes clustered into categories representing the four elements of the 4Es as well as their perceived impact on performance outcomes such as customer retention, sales growth, and brand differentiation. Higher-order themes were then synthesized to reveal how the integration of the 4Es contributes to competitive advantage within the Thai cosmetic SME sector. To enhance rigor, a collaborative coding process was adopted: the primary researcher

conducted the initial coding, while two additional coders independently analyzed selected transcripts. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, improving inter-coder reliability and reducing interpretive bias. An audit trail of coding decisions and analytic memos was maintained, ensuring transparency and traceability. Data saturation was monitored and confirmed by the tenth interview, with the final two interviews reinforcing established categories. This process yielded a comprehensive thematic framework that captured the complex ways in which the 4Es influence business performance and competitive positioning in emerging economies.

#### 4. RESULTS

The results are presented to offer both descriptive and analytical insights. Initially, an overview of respondent profiles (see Table 1) is provided to contextualize the data, followed by a content analysis of how the 4Es impact business performance and competitive advantage. This structure ensures that the findings are firmly grounded in the practical experiences of SME managers and owners, thereby enhancing the validity and contextual relevance of the study.

**Table 1.** Respondents' demographic information

No.	Gender	Age	Position	Firm size (Employees)	Product category	Market orientation
R1	Male	42 years old	Owner	Medium (50-100)	Herbal skincare	Domestic and export
R2	Male	38 years old	Marketing manager	Small (10-30)	Organic haircare	Domestic
R3	Male	47 years old	Co-owner	Medium (40-70)	Anti-aging creams	Export-focused
R4	Male	35 years old	Operations manager	Small (15-25)	Men's grooming products	Domestic
R5	Male	50 years old	Owner	Medium (80-120)	Premium skincare	Domestic and export
R6	Male	41 years old	Sales director	Small (20-35)	Makeup and cosmetics	Domestic
R7	Female	36 years old	Marketing manager	Small (12-20)	Natural face masks	Domestic
R8	Female	39 years old	Product manager	Medium (60-90)	Herbal and wellness products	Export-focused
R9	Female	44 years old	Co-owner	Small (25-40)	Organic soaps	Domestic
R10	Female	33 years old	Owner	Small (10-15)	Handmade cosmetics	Domestic
R11	Female	48 years old	Operations manager	Medium (70-100)	Luxury skincare	Export-focused
R12	Female	37 years old	Marketing manager	Small (15-25)	Herbal shampoo and conditioner	Domestic

Table 1 summarizes the demographic and organizational characteristics of the 12 respondents, offering important context for interpreting the subsequent qualitative analysis. The participants represent a balanced mix of genders, with an equal number of male and female respondents, spanning an age range from early thirties to late forties. Their professional roles include owners, co-owners, and senior managers, reflecting diverse managerial perspectives within the cosmetic SME sector. Firm sizes range from small enterprises with 10-30 employees to medium-sized operations employing up to 120 individuals, ensuring coverage of both resource-constrained and more established firms. Product categories are varied, encompassing herbal skincare, organic haircare, men's grooming, premium skincare, makeup, and natural cosmetics, which highlights the heterogeneity of Thailand's cosmetic industry. Market orientations also differ, with some firms focusing exclusively on domestic markets while others actively pursue export opportunities or balance both. This diversity of backgrounds underscores the robustness of the dataset, as it captures a wide spectrum of strategic orientations and operational contexts, thereby strengthening the study's ability to generate nuanced insights into the role of the 4Es in shaping business performance and competitive positioning among cosmetic SMEs in emerging economies.

Furthermore, the qualitative content analysis revealed in-depth insights into how the 4Es framework was operationalized by cosmetic SMEs in

Thailand to enhance business performance and sustain competitiveness. To strengthen academic synthesis, direct quotations from respondents are included to provide authenticity and illustrate the lived experiences of SME owners and managers.

##### 4.1. Experience: Crafting memorable and differentiated consumer interactions

Respondents consistently highlighted that customer experience was central to building loyalty and securing differentiation in a saturated cosmetic market. As R1 (herbal skincare, medium-sized firm) explained, "Our products are not just about beauty; they tell a story of Thai herbs and traditional practices. Customers remember us because they feel part of that story" (personal communication, September 11, 2025). This approach demonstrated how cultural storytelling can strengthen brand authenticity and deepen consumer connections, emphasizing the role of experience in shaping long-term loyalty.

For premium-positioned SMEs, experiences were tied to exclusivity. R5 (premium skincare, medium-sized firm) noted, "We host skincare workshops where customers learn directly from specialists. It makes them feel part of a premium community, and they are willing to pay more because they trust our expertise" (personal communication, September 11, 2025). This illustrated how experiential strategies can elevate perceived value and support premium pricing.

Digital platforms were equally significant. R7 (natural face masks, small firm) observed, “*Live streaming our product launches makes customers feel like insiders. They can ask questions, see real results, and it builds trust instantly*” (personal communication, September 14, 2025). Such practices highlighted how digital experiences bridge physical distance while sustaining engagement, reinforcing the omnipresence of experience in consumer-brand relationships.

These findings confirmed that Experience operated as a critical mechanism for customer attachment and differentiation. By combining cultural storytelling, exclusivity, and interactive digital engagement, SMEs elevated perceived value beyond product attributes. Experiential marketing served as a pathway to brand loyalty and premium positioning. For SMEs with limited resources, experience-based strategies provide a cost-effective yet powerful tool to secure long-term competitiveness.

#### 4.2. Exchange: Redefining value and trust

The concept of Exchange was closely tied to fairness, transparency, and mutual value creation. Several respondents emphasized that consumer expectations had shifted away from price alone. R2 (organic haircare, small firm) reflected, “*We are open about every ingredient we use. Customers value honesty more than a small discount, especially when they care about health and sustainability*” (personal communication, September 11, 2025). This indicated that transparency is increasingly central to trust-building in consumer relationships.

Value-added offerings were framed as relationship-building gestures rather than transactional tactics. R10 (handmade cosmetics, small firm) shared, “*We include small gifts with every purchase, not as a promotion but as a way of saying thank you. Customers feel appreciated and they always come back*” (personal communication, September 14, 2025). Similarly, R9 (organic soaps, small firm) underscored sustainability as an exchange mechanism: “*Using biodegradable packaging costs more, but customers see it as a sign of respect for both them and the environment*” (personal communication, September 14, 2025). These accounts illustrate how SMEs conceptualize Exchange as extending beyond financial value to encompass symbolic, ethical, and relational dimensions.

The findings highlighted that Exchange extended into symbolic and ethical dimensions that built trust and relational capital. SMEs competed not by lowering prices but by demonstrating fairness, authenticity, and responsibility, thereby strengthening long-term loyalty. Moreover, the results emphasized value co-creation as a relational asset that sustained competitiveness in resource-constrained contexts.

#### 4.3. Everyplace: Expanding omnichannel accessibility

The theme of Everyplace revealed SMEs’ efforts to expand market reach through diversified physical and digital channels. Respondents unanimously acknowledged that multi-channel accessibility had become indispensable for survival. As R3 (anti-aging creams, export-focused firm) stated, “*Without being on Shopee or Lazada, we would not exist in this market. Customers expect to find us everywhere —*

*online, in shops, and at fairs*” (personal communication, September 11, 2025). This reflects the literature on omnichannel strategies as key drivers of competitive advantage.

Resource constraints shaped approaches to accessibility. R6 (makeup and cosmetics, small firm) admitted, “*We don’t have the staff to manage every platform, so we focus mainly on TikTok and LINE. That’s where our customers are most active, and we put all our energy there*” (personal communication, September 11, 2025). This highlights the adaptive strategies SMEs employ when faced with resource limitations, aligning with research that smaller firms often pursue focused rather than diversified channel strategies.

Offline presence remained a critical trust-building mechanism. R11 (luxury skincare, export-focused firm) explained, “*International buyers only trusted us after meeting us at trade fairs. Online platforms are important, but face-to-face builds credibility*” (personal communication, September 14, 2025). This demonstrates how SMEs strategically combine digital expansion with traditional networks to reinforce legitimacy and market access.

The findings suggested that Everyplace was not simply about ubiquity but about strategically balancing digital and physical accessibility. SMEs that combined online scalability with offline credibility gained both visibility and trust. Furthermore, the results highlighted omnichannel integration as a key determinant of consumer convenience, purchasing behavior, and brand legitimacy.

#### 4.4. Evangelism: Building communities of advocates

Evangelism emerged as a powerful mechanism for amplifying brand visibility through customer advocacy. SMEs relied heavily on word-of-mouth, online reviews, and influencer partnerships to generate organic promotion. R7 (natural face masks) commented, “*When customers post before-and-after photos, it is more powerful than any paid ad. Their friends see it and trust it*” (personal communication, September 14, 2025). This highlighted the credibility of peer-generated advocacy in shaping consumer decisions.

Community-building was also identified as a driver of loyalty. R11 (luxury skincare) remarked, “*We built a members’ club for loyal buyers. They feel part of an exclusive community, and many of them recommend us to new customers without us even asking*” (personal communication, September 14, 2025). This reinforced the role of emotional belonging in sustaining brand evangelism.

Micro-influencer strategies were also widely used. R8 (herbal wellness products, export-focused firm) shared, “*Working with small influencers is better than big names. They have closer relationships with followers, and customers trust their recommendations*” (personal communication, September 14, 2025). These perspectives demonstrated how SMEs operationalize Evangelism as a cost-effective and authentic marketing tool, particularly when formal advertising budgets are constrained.

The findings demonstrated that Evangelism leveraged relational capital and social networks to expand market reach cost-effectively. Advocacy and peer influence provided credibility that traditional

advertising could not match, particularly in markets where trust barriers were high. Moreover, the findings underscored the centrality of word-of-mouth and customer-driven communities in enhancing SME brand equity.

#### 4.5. Integration of the 4Es and business outcomes

A cross-cutting insight from the findings was that the 4Es were most effective when applied holistically rather than in isolation. Firms that successfully integrated immersive experiences, transparent exchanges, omnichannel accessibility, and customer-driven advocacy reported stronger performance outcomes.

As R5 (premium skincare) summarized, *“When we connect storytelling, transparency, and digital presence, customers don't just buy — they stay with us, and they bring others along. It's all connected”* (personal communication, September 11, 2025). Similarly, R12 (herbal shampoo, small firm) emphasized, *“Customers want to see us everywhere, trust our values, enjoy our products, and then tell their friends. That combination is what makes us survive against big brands”* (personal communication, September 14, 2025).

These integrated practices translated into both financial and non-financial outcomes: increased sales, expanded export markets, stronger brand equity, and higher customer trust. The results suggest that the 4Es framework provides SMEs in emerging economies with a customer-centric model that mitigates resource constraints and sustains competitive differentiation.

The integration of the 4Es generated both financial benefits, such as increased sales and market expansion, and non-financial outcomes, including brand trust, customer loyalty, and innovation capacity. These findings affirmed that when applied holistically, the 4Es reinforced one another to create sustainable competitive advantage. Overall, the 4Es represented a consumer-centric orientation that transcended transactional models like the 4Ps by embedding relational and experiential value creation.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide meaningful insights into how cosmetic SMEs in Thailand applied the 4Es framework to enhance competitiveness, customer relationships, and long-term sustainability. When interpreted in light of previous scholarship, the findings reveal how the 4Es offer SMEs a consumer-centric orientation that extends beyond transactional models, enabling them to overcome structural constraints and differentiate themselves in saturated markets.

The findings confirmed that Experience functioned as a vital mechanism for fostering customer attachment and differentiation. SMEs leveraged cultural storytelling, exclusivity, and interactive digital tools to elevate perceived value beyond product functionality. This aligns with Ardini et al. (2024), who emphasized the role of experiential marketing in creating emotional bonds that sustain loyalty, and Okanga (2018), who identified experiential strategies as essential for premium positioning. In the Thai context,

respondents' emphasis on heritage and authenticity resonates with Taecharungroj and Prasertsakul (2023), along with Bhrannachote (2024), who argued that SMEs often draw upon cultural resources to craft distinctive experiences that resonate with both domestic and international consumers. Thus, the study underscores how experiential branding can be both a competitive tool and a cultural asset in emerging economies.

The evidence also highlighted that Exchange extended beyond monetary value to encompass fairness, transparency, and ethical responsibility. Respondents underscored that transparency in ingredients, sustainability commitments, and gestures of reciprocity were critical for building customer trust. This finding is consistent with Iglesias et al. (2020) and Yu et al. (2022), who described value co-creation as a key driver of consumer trust, and Uysal and Okumuş (2022), who argued that authenticity is increasingly central to long-term customer loyalty. In the SME context, where competing on price often disadvantages smaller firms, Exchange represents a relational mechanism that sustains competitiveness by embedding symbolic and ethical dimensions into business practices. This further reinforces the notion that SMEs in emerging markets must emphasize responsibility and reciprocity to cultivate durable consumer relationships.

Furthermore, every place emerged as indispensable for SMEs seeking visibility and credibility in an increasingly digitalized marketplace. Respondents indicated that while online scalability was crucial through platforms such as Shopee, Lazada, and TikTok, offline channels — such as trade fairs and flagship stores — remained essential for establishing legitimacy. This finding aligns with Asmare and Zewdie (2022) and Massi et al. (2023), who emphasized the role of omnichannel strategies in shaping consumer behavior, as well as Gao and Huang (2021), who highlighted that seamless channel integration enhances customer engagement and loyalty. Importantly, the study reveals that SMEs with limited resources often adopt focused channel strategies, concentrating on one or two high-impact platforms. Strategic focus, rather than ubiquity, enables resource-constrained firms to maximize their impact. The evidence thus suggests that Everyplace is not merely about presence across platforms but about strategically balancing scalability and credibility to strengthen brand positioning.

The study also demonstrated that Evangelism functioned as a powerful growth mechanism for SMEs, enabling them to leverage relational capital and consumer trust to expand market reach organically. Respondents emphasized the centrality of customer advocacy, word-of-mouth, and micro-influencer partnerships in generating authentic promotion. These insights support Efendi et al. (2023) and Santichat and Pooripakdee (2022), who demonstrated that word-of-mouth exerts a stronger influence than conventional advertising, and align with Hsu et al. (2011) and Mulyana and Wasitowati (2021), who highlighted that customer communities strengthen SME competitiveness. Particularly in export markets, where trust barriers are high, brand advocacy amplifies credibility and reduces consumer hesitation. Evangelism thus represents not only a marketing strategy but also a sustainable approach

to resource efficiency, enabling SMEs to achieve growth without heavy reliance on formal advertising.

A cross-cutting insight from the study is that the 4Es are most effective when applied holistically. Firms that integrated experiential branding, transparent exchanges, omnichannel accessibility, and customer-driven advocacy reported stronger outcomes, including sales growth, export expansion, brand equity, and consumer trust. This finding supports Anuntaakalakul (2022) and Limna (2023), who both argued that the 4Es represent a consumer-centric orientation that surpasses the transactional 4Ps by embedding relational, ethical, and experiential dimensions into value creation. In the Thai context, this holistic adoption provided SMEs with a resilient model for navigating resource constraints, market volatility, and intense competition.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study examined how cosmetic SMEs in Thailand applied the 4Es framework — Experience, Exchange, Everyplace, and Evangelism — to strengthen competitiveness and sustain long-term growth. The findings revealed that the 4Es, when adopted holistically, generated both financial outcomes, such as sales growth and export expansion, and non-financial outcomes, including enhanced brand equity, customer trust, and loyalty. By embedding cultural storytelling, ethical exchanges, omnichannel accessibility, and customer advocacy into their strategies, SMEs were able to differentiate themselves in a saturated market and overcome the resource constraints characteristic of emerging economies. Collectively, these results affirm the 4Es as a consumer-centric orientation that extends beyond the traditional 4Ps by embedding relational, experiential, and ethical value creation at the heart of business practice.

The study provides significant insights for scholars, professionals, and decision-makers. Theoretically, this research contributes to marketing and SME scholarship by demonstrating that the 4Es framework functions as a strategic model for value creation in contexts where scale and price competition are less accessible. The evidence reinforces prior studies emphasizing the growing importance of experiential marketing, relational trust, and advocacy-driven growth, extending these insights into the Thai SME context. Academically, the study underscores the need to view the 4Es not only as a marketing tool but also as a business philosophy capable of fostering resilience in volatile

markets. From a practical perspective, the findings provide clear guidance for SME managers. Firms are encouraged to cultivate experiential branding through cultural narratives and interactive digital engagement, to adopt ethical exchange practices that emphasize transparency and reciprocity, to pursue strategic omnichannel presence by balancing digital scalability with offline credibility, and to strengthen customer evangelism through loyalty programs, user-generated content, and micro-influencer collaborations. For policymakers, the study highlights the importance of enabling conditions — such as training in digital marketing and sustainability, incentives for eco-friendly practices, support for e-commerce integration, and facilitation of SME participation in international markets through certifications and trade fairs. Taken together, these insights, alongside concrete recommendations, position the 4Es as both a guiding framework and a strategic roadmap for SMEs and policymakers seeking to build resilient, competitive, and culturally distinctive businesses.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. First, the research was confined to cosmetic SMEs in Thailand, which may limit generalizability across industries and cultural contexts. Future studies could extend the analysis to other sectors — such as food, hospitality, or technology — to explore variations in how the 4Es are applied. Future research should also emphasize more explicitly how the 4Es framework extends or challenges existing corporate governance mechanisms and organizational behaviour within SMEs, particularly as these internal dynamics may influence how sustainability-oriented strategies are adopted and institutionalized. Second, the study relied primarily on managerial perspectives, which may not fully capture consumer perceptions of the strategies employed. Subsequent research could incorporate customer-side data to evaluate the effectiveness of 4Es practices in shaping purchasing decisions and brand loyalty. Third, the qualitative design provided in-depth insights but did not allow for statistical generalization; thus, future work could adopt mixed-method approaches, combining large-scale surveys with qualitative interviews, to validate and extend the findings. Finally, as the study was situated within the Thai context, comparative cross-cultural studies could examine whether the 4Es framework operates universally or requires adaptation to align with different cultural values, market structures, and regulatory environments.

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## APPENDIX

The questions used in the interviews are listed below.

### ***Firm background:***

- Can you describe your role and responsibilities within the company?
- How would you characterize your firm's position in the Thai cosmetics market (e.g., niche, premium, mass market)?

### ***Experience (customer engagement and differentiation):***

- How does your business create memorable experiences for customers beyond the product itself?
- What role does cultural or local storytelling play in shaping your brand identity?
- In what ways do you use digital platforms (e.g., live streaming, social media) to enhance customer experiences?
- How do you measure or evaluate the effectiveness of these customer experiences in terms of loyalty or repeat purchases?

### ***Exchange (value and trust):***

- How do you communicate fairness and transparency to your customers, particularly regarding product quality and ingredients?
- What non-price strategies do you use to strengthen trust and loyalty with customers?
- Can you provide an example of how reciprocity or symbolic value (e.g., gifts, eco-friendly practices) has influenced customer relationships?
- How do you balance customer expectations for affordability with the need to maintain ethical and sustainable practices?

### ***Everyplace (omnichannel accessibility):***

- Which channels (online and offline) are most important for reaching your customers?
- How do you balance limited resources with the need to maintain a presence across multiple platforms?
- What role do offline events, such as trade fairs or exhibitions, play in building credibility for your business?
- How do you ensure consistency of brand messaging and customer experience across different sales channels?

### ***Evangelism (customer advocacy and communities):***

- How do you encourage customers to share their experiences and recommend your products?
- In what ways have online reviews or user-generated content impacted your business performance?
- What strategies do you use to build communities of loyal brand advocates?
- How important are micro-influencers or opinion leaders in promoting your brand compared to traditional advertising?

### ***Business performance and competitive advantage:***

- How has adopting the 4Es framework contributed to your firm's financial outcomes, such as sales or market expansion?
- In what ways has the 4Es approach improved non-financial outcomes, such as brand trust, loyalty, or equity?
- What challenges have you encountered in implementing the 4Es strategies within your business?
- How do you assess whether these strategies provide a competitive advantage over larger or global brands?
- What recommendations would you offer to other SMEs in the cosmetics industry seeking to apply the 4Es to strengthen their competitiveness?

Within the survey design, not all questions were administered to every participant. Specific items were intentionally omitted to ensure their relevance to the characteristics and context of particular respondents.