International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 690-710



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES (IJEMP)
www.gaexcellence.com/ijemp

LEMONGRASS TO LIVELIHOOD: THE INFLUENCE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL COMPETENCY, PRODUCT INNOVATION AND DIGITAL MARKETING READINESS ON COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT AMONG ORANG ASLI PARTICIPANTS IN POS BLAU, GUA MUSANG

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Article Info:
Article history:
Received date: 05.08.2026
Revised date: 30.08.2026
Accepted date: 14.09.2026
Published date: 20.09.2026

Abstract:
Social entrepreneurship is increasingly used to improve livelihood opportunities among marginalised and Indigenous communities. However, limited empirical attention has been given to how enterprise capabilities relate to community empowerment in Orang Asli resource-based initiatives, particularly lemongrass enterprise development in rural Kelantan. This study examines whether entrepreneurial

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 690-710

To cite this document:

Razak, A. A., Hasan, M. F. C., Zaid, M. A. M., Hoque, S. A. B. A., Amin, N. A. M., Zulkifly, N. A. S., Ibrahim, N. S., & Ghapa, N. K. S. A. (2026). Lemongrass To Livelihood: The Influence of Entrepreneurial Competency, Product Innovation and Digital Marketing Readiness on Community Empowerment Among Orang Asli Participants in Pos Blau, Gua Musang. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices, 9*(35), 690-710.

competency, product innovation, digital marketing readiness and social entrepreneurship orientation predict community empowerment among Orang Asli community members associated with the Lemongrass Enterprise Project in Pos Blau, Gua Musang. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted with 120 respondents selected through purposive sampling. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis. The instrument showed good to excellent reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.861 to 0.921 and an overall alpha of 0.947. All variables recorded high mean scores, although digital marketing readiness had the lowest mean (M = 3.71), indicating a need for further digital skills and market-access support. All four predictors were positively and significantly associated with community empowerment. Social entrepreneurship orientation recorded the largest standardised beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.356$, $p < 0.001$), followed by entrepreneurial competency ($\beta = 0.307$, $p < 0.001$), product innovation capability ($\beta = 0.238$, $p = 0.001$) and digital marketing readiness ($\beta = 0.176$, $p = 0.013$). The model explained 70.7% of the variance in community empowerment ($R^2 = 0.707$). The findings highlight the importance of combining social entrepreneurship values with practical enterprise capabilities and support targeted digital marketing, product development, entrepreneurial skills and continuous mentoring for Orang Asli communities.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEMP.935039

Keyword:

Community Empowerment; Digital Marketing Readiness; Lemongrass Enterprise; Orang Asli; Social Entrepreneurship

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Introduction

The Orang Asli community in Malaysia continues to experience socio-economic challenges related to limited income opportunities, low market access, geographical isolation and limited exposure to formal entrepreneurship systems (Cheng et al., 2021; Derani et al., 2020; Rosdi et al., 2018). Although many Orang Asli communities possess valuable local resources, these resources are often not fully transformed into income-generating products due to constraints in entrepreneurial knowledge, product innovation, branding, costing and marketing (Shuhada et al., 2023).

In recent years, social entrepreneurship has been increasingly recognised as a practical approach to community empowerment. It combines business activity with social value creation and community wellbeing (Mair & Martí, 2006; Peredo & Chrisman, 2006; Yunus, 2010). For

marginalised communities, social entrepreneurship can create alternative livelihood opportunities while strengthening skills, confidence, participation and self-reliance.

The Lemongrass Enterprise Project in Pos Blau, Gua Musang was developed as a community-based initiative to empower Orang Asli participants through lemongrass-based product development. Lemongrass was selected because it is a familiar local resource that can be transformed into value-added products such as lemongrass spray, herbal drinks, soap, balm, oil and household products. However, the success of such an initiative depends not only on the availability of local resources but also on the community's entrepreneurial competency, product innovation skills, digital marketing readiness and social entrepreneurship orientation (Wifek et al., 2016).

Although previous studies have documented challenges in Orang Asli entrepreneurship, including limited business exposure, marketing capacity, capital and continuous guidance, there remains limited empirical evidence on how entrepreneurial competency, product innovation, digital marketing readiness and social entrepreneurship orientation jointly predict community empowerment within a local-resource social enterprise. Evidence is particularly limited for lemongrass-based enterprise development among Orang Asli communities in rural Kelantan. Accordingly, this study examines the relationships between these enterprise-related factors and community empowerment among community members associated with the Lemongrass Enterprise Project in Pos Blau.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the level of entrepreneurial competency, product innovation, digital marketing readiness, social entrepreneurship orientation and community empowerment among Orang Asli participants.
2. To determine the relationship between entrepreneurial competency, product innovation, digital marketing readiness, social entrepreneurship orientation and community empowerment.
3. To identify the predictor with the largest standardised regression coefficient (β) for community empowerment among Orang Asli respondents associated with the Lemongrass Enterprise Project.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the level of entrepreneurial competency, product innovation, digital marketing readiness, social entrepreneurship orientation and community empowerment among Orang Asli participants?
2. Is there a significant relationship between entrepreneurial competency, product innovation, digital marketing readiness, social entrepreneurship orientation and community empowerment?
3. Which factor records the largest standardised beta coefficient (β) in predicting community empowerment?

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Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were developed:

H1: Entrepreneurial competency has a significant positive relationship with community empowerment.
H2: Product innovation has a significant positive relationship with community empowerment.
H3: Digital marketing readiness has a significant positive relationship with community empowerment.
H4: Social entrepreneurship orientation has a significant positive relationship with community empowerment.
H5: Entrepreneurial competency, product innovation, digital marketing readiness and social entrepreneurship orientation significantly predict community empowerment.
Conceptual Framework
This study consists of four independent variables and one dependent variable.

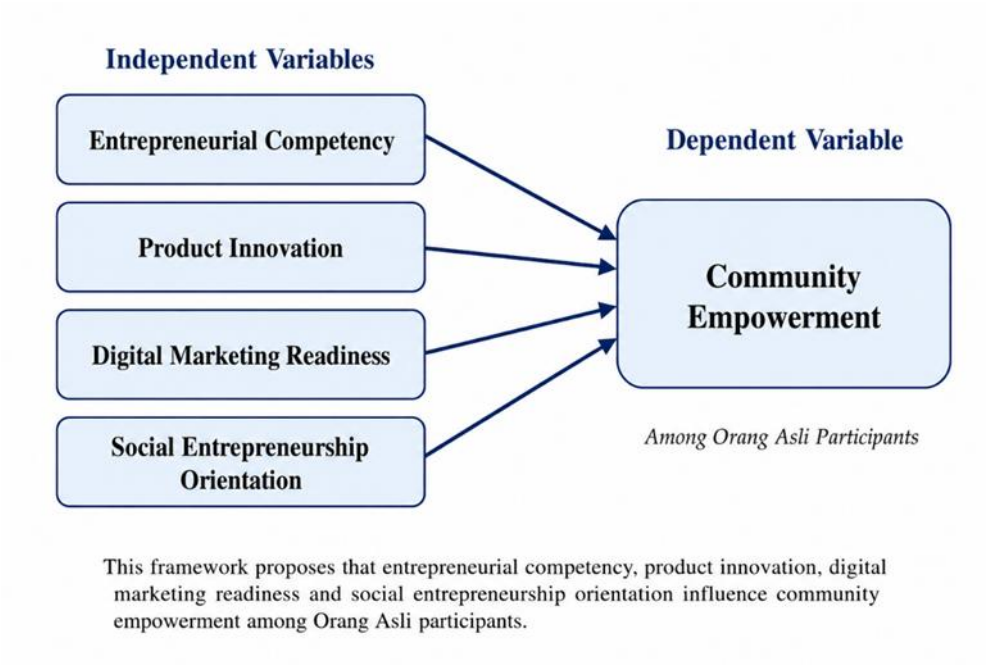


Figure 1: Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Entrepreneurial Factors Predicting Community Empowerment among Orang Asli Participants in the Lemongrass Enterprise Project

Literature Review

Social Entrepreneurship and Orang Asli Community Development

Social entrepreneurship refers to business-oriented initiatives that aim to address social problems, improve community wellbeing and create sustainable social value. Unlike conventional entrepreneurship, which focuses mainly on profit generation, social entrepreneurship combines economic activities with social objectives (Haugh, 2007). In the context of Orang Asli community development, social entrepreneurship provides an important platform for communities to use local resources, develop marketable products and generate

income while maintaining their cultural identity, community values and traditional knowledge (Shamsuddin et al., 2023). This approach is relevant because it encourages economic participation without separating the community from its local environment and way of life.

For Orang Asli communities, social entrepreneurship can function as a practical strategy to strengthen livelihood opportunities and reduce dependency on external assistance (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006; Rahim et al., 2025). Through community-based enterprise activities, participants can be exposed to basic business skills such as product development, costing, pricing, packaging, marketing and financial management. These skills are important in helping the community transform available local resources into income-generating products or services. At the same time, social entrepreneurship can encourage confidence, cooperation and self-reliance among community members, especially when the activities are designed according to their needs, abilities and local context.

However, previous studies have highlighted that Orang Asli entrepreneurship remains limited due to several challenges, including low business exposure, weak marketing capacity, limited access to capital and lack of continuous guidance (Cheng et al., 2021; Derani et al., 2020; Rosdi et al., 2018; Shuhada et al., 2023). These challenges show that entrepreneurship programmes for Orang Asli communities should not focus only on business creation, but also on long-term capacity building and continuous support. Effective social entrepreneurship initiatives should include training, mentoring, market access, institutional support and community participation. Therefore, social entrepreneurship can contribute more meaningfully to Orang Asli community development when it is implemented as an inclusive and sustained empowerment process rather than a short-term income-generating activity.

Entrepreneurial Competency

Entrepreneurial competency refers to the knowledge, skills and abilities required to plan, manage and sustain business activities. It includes important business-related skills such as costing, pricing, sales management, customer service, record keeping, communication and decision-making. For community-based enterprises, entrepreneurial competency is a key factor because it enables participants to manage their business activities more systematically. Without basic entrepreneurial competency, participants may face difficulties in determining product prices, controlling costs, managing customers and sustaining their enterprise over time (Pepple & Enuoh, 2020).

In the context of Orang Asli community development, entrepreneurial competency is important because it helps participants transform local resources into products or services with economic value. Many rural and indigenous communities have access to natural, cultural and community-based resources, but these resources may not generate income if participants lack the skills to process, package, market and manage them effectively (Derani et al., 2020). Therefore, entrepreneurship programmes should provide practical exposure to business planning, product development, financial calculation and marketing strategies. These skills can help participants become more confident in making business decisions and responding to market needs.

Entrepreneurial competency also contributes to empowerment because it strengthens self-reliance and reduces dependency on external support. When Orang Asli participants are equipped with business knowledge and management skills, they are more capable of sustaining their enterprise, improving household income and participating in the local economy (Awang

Tuah et al., 2023). However, competency development should not be delivered through one-off training only, as experiential and practice-based learning is important in strengthening applied skills (Kolb, 1984). It requires continuous mentoring, hands-on guidance and follow-up support to ensure that the knowledge gained can be applied in real business situations. Therefore, entrepreneurial competency is an important foundation for building sustainable community-based entrepreneurship among Orang Asli participants.

Product Innovation

Product innovation refers to the ability to develop, improve and package products according to market needs and consumer preferences. It involves the process of transforming raw materials into value-added products that are more attractive, usable and marketable. In community-based entrepreneurship, product innovation is important because local resources often have limited economic value if they are sold only in their original form. Through innovation, these resources can be processed, diversified, branded and packaged to create products with higher market potential (Phuthong, 2026).

In the Lemongrass Enterprise Project, product innovation involves transforming lemongrass into value-added products such as sprays, soaps, balms and herbal-based products. These products demonstrate how a simple agricultural resource can be developed into various forms that meet household, health, hygiene and lifestyle need. Product innovation also includes improvements in product quality, scent, design, labelling, packaging and presentation. These elements are important because consumers are more likely to purchase products that appear clean, practical, attractive and professionally prepared.

Product innovation can also strengthen community empowerment by increasing income opportunities and encouraging participants to think creatively about local resources. For Orang Asli participants, the ability to innovate products can help them move beyond basic raw material production and participate more actively in small-scale enterprise development (Tiofanny et al., 2025). However, product innovation requires continuous guidance, technical knowledge and market feedback to ensure that the products produced are safe, consistent and suitable for wider marketing. Therefore, product innovation is an important factor in enhancing the sustainability and competitiveness of the Lemongrass Enterprise Project.

Digital Marketing Readiness

Digital marketing readiness refers to the ability, confidence and willingness of participants to use digital tools and online platforms for business promotion and customer engagement. In the context of community-based entrepreneurship, digital marketing readiness is important because it allows small enterprises to promote their products beyond the local community. Platforms such as TikTok, Shopee, Facebook, WhatsApp Business and other online selling channels can help participants introduce their products, communicate with customers, receive orders and build product visibility. This is especially useful for rural communities that may have limited access to physical markets.

For the Lemongrass Enterprise Project, digital marketing readiness can help Orang Asli participants promote value-added lemongrass products such as sprays, soaps, balms and herbal products to a wider group of customers. Through digital platforms, participants can share product photos, short videos, customer feedback, promotional messages and simple product

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EISSN : 2600-8750
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descriptions. WhatsApp Business can be used for direct communication and repeat orders, while Facebook and TikTok can help create awareness and attract new customers. Shopee or other online marketplaces may also support wider product distribution if participants are ready to manage online orders, payment and delivery (Asmayanti et al., 2022).

However, digital marketing readiness requires more than access to a mobile phone or internet connection. Participants also need digital literacy, content creation skills, product photography skills, customer communication ability and confidence to use online platforms consistently. Challenges such as weak internet access, limited experience with online selling, lack of confidence and difficulty in producing attractive content may affect the effectiveness of digital marketing. Therefore, entrepreneurship programmes should include practical training and continuous mentoring in digital marketing. With proper guidance, digital marketing readiness can strengthen market access, increase product visibility and support the sustainability of Orang Asli community enterprises.

Social Entrepreneurship Orientation

Social entrepreneurship orientation refers to the extent to which business activities are guided by social values, community benefit, collective participation and sustainable livelihood. Unlike conventional business orientation, which often focuses mainly on profit and individual success, social entrepreneurship orientation emphasises the balance between income generation and social value creation. In community development, this orientation is important because it ensures that business initiatives do not only generate economic returns but also contribute to social wellbeing, community resilience and shared progress (Castillo-Villar et al., 2025).

In the context of the Lemongrass Enterprise Project, social entrepreneurship orientation can be seen through the way participants view the enterprise as a community-based initiative rather than an individual business activity. The project encourages Orang Asli participants to use local resources, work together, share responsibilities and develop products that can benefit both households and the wider community. This orientation is particularly relevant in Orang Asli community development because cooperation, family support and collective wellbeing are important elements in sustaining livelihood activities. When participants understand that the enterprise can create benefits for the community, they may become more motivated to participate and contribute to the project (Diansyah et al., 2022).

Social entrepreneurship orientation also plays an important role in strengthening long-term empowerment. When participants are guided by social values and collective purpose, they are more likely to support one another, maintain commitment and develop a sense of ownership toward the enterprise. This can help the project move beyond short-term income generation and become a sustainable community development strategy. Therefore, social entrepreneurship orientation is an important factor in this study because it connects business activities with community empowerment, social responsibility and sustainable livelihood among Orang Asli participants.

Community Empowerment

Community empowerment refers to the process of strengthening the ability of community members to make decisions, use available resources, develop practical skills and improve their socio-economic wellbeing. In community development, empowerment is not only measured

by income improvement, but also by increased confidence, participation, self-reliance and the ability to take action for personal and collective progress (Malta, 2023). For Orang Asli communities, empowerment is important because it can help reduce dependency on external assistance and encourage more active involvement in livelihood and enterprise activities.

In the context of the Lemongrass Enterprise Project, community empowerment can be understood through the participants' involvement in lemongrass-based product development, business learning and income-generating activities. The project provides opportunities for participants to recognise the economic potential of local resources and to develop skills related to product innovation, costing, marketing and business management. Through this process, participants may become more confident in using local resources to support household income and community wellbeing. Empowerment also occurs when participants feel that they are able to contribute meaningfully to the project and participate in decisions related to product development and enterprise activities (Rahmawati, 2025).

In this study, community empowerment is measured through confidence, self-reliance, participation, income potential and collective motivation. These elements are important because they reflect both individual and community-level changes. Confidence shows participants' belief in their ability to engage in livelihood activities, while self-reliance reflects their capacity to reduce dependency and manage small-scale enterprise activities. Participation and collective motivation indicate the strength of community involvement and shared commitment toward the project. Therefore, community empowerment is treated as the main outcome of this study, as it reflects the extent to which the Lemongrass Enterprise Project can support sustainable livelihood development among Orang Asli participants.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey approach, which is suitable for examining relationships between variables at a specific point in time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Study Location

The study was conducted in Pos Blau, Gua Musang, Kelantan. The location was selected because it is an Orang Asli settlement with potential for community-based lemongrass enterprise development.

Population and Sample

The study population consisted of Orang Asli community members in Pos Blau who were directly involved in, exposed to, or interested in the Lemongrass Enterprise Project. A total of 120 respondents were selected using purposive sampling (Tajik et al., 2025) because the study required participants with direct relevance to the entrepreneurship initiative. The sample was therefore broader than active project participants alone: it included community members who were directly involved in project activities, those who had been exposed to the initiative, and those who had expressed interest in it. Consequently, the findings represent perceptions within

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a project-related community sample and should not be interpreted as outcomes experienced exclusively by active enterprise participants.

Research Instrument

This study used a structured questionnaire developed from the research objectives, conceptual framework and relevant literature on social entrepreneurship, Indigenous entrepreneurship and community empowerment.

The instrument consisted of two sections. Section A captured respondents' demographic profile, including gender, age, education level, occupation, household income and previous business experience. Section B contained 25 items measuring the four predictor constructs and community empowerment, with five items for each construct (Soomro et al., 2019).

A five-point Likert scale was used to measure respondents' level of agreement with each statement:

1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Not Sure
4 = Agree
5 = Strongly Agree

Section B comprised 25 items in total, with five items for each construct. This structure provided sufficient item coverage for reliability and subsequent statistical analysis.

Measurement of Variables

Entrepreneurial Competency

Entrepreneurial competency refers to the knowledge, skills and confidence of participants in managing basic business activities related to lemongrass-based products. This includes costing, pricing, sales management, record keeping and customer handling.

Code	Item
EC1	I understand how to calculate the cost of producing lemongrass-based products.
EC2	I am able to set suitable prices for lemongrass-based products.
EC3	I understand how to record sales, expenses and profit from the business.
EC4	I am confident in explaining lemongrass-based products to potential customers.

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EC5	I am able to manage small-scale business activities with guidance and practice.

Product Innovation Capability

Product innovation capability refers to the ability of participants to transform lemongrass into value-added products that are attractive, useful and suitable for market needs. This construct includes product ideas, packaging, labelling, quality improvement and product differentiation.

Code	Item
PI1	I am able to suggest new product ideas using lemongrass as the main resource.
PI2	I understand the importance of improving the quality of lemongrass-based products.
PI3	I am able to identify suitable packaging for lemongrass-based products.
PI4	I understand the importance of product labelling and branding.
PI5	I believe lemongrass can be developed into products with market potential.

Digital Marketing Readiness

Digital marketing readiness refers to the willingness, confidence and ability of participants to use digital platforms for promoting and selling lemongrass-based products. This includes the use of social media, online selling platforms, product photography, content creation and customer communication.

Code	Item
DMR1	I am confident in promoting lemongrass-based products through social media.
DMR2	I am willing to learn how to sell products through online platforms such as Shopee.
DMR3	I am able to use WhatsApp, Facebook or TikTok to communicate with customers.

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DMR4	I understand the importance of taking attractive product photos for online promotion.
DMR5	I believe digital marketing can help the community reach more customers.

Social Entrepreneurship Orientation

Social entrepreneurship orientation refers to participants' understanding and commitment to business activities that create both economic and social value. This construct measures the extent to which participants view the lemongrass enterprise as a community-based initiative that benefits households, families and the wider community.

Code	Item
SEO1	I believe the lemongrass enterprise can benefit my household and the community.
SEO2	I am willing to work together with other community members in this enterprise.
SEO3	I believe business activities should also contribute to community wellbeing.
SEO4	I am motivated to use local resources to generate income for the community.
SEO5	I believe the success of this enterprise depends on cooperation among community members.

Community Empowerment

Community empowerment refers to the perceived improvement in confidence, self-reliance, participation, skills and livelihood opportunities among Orang Asli participants. In this study, community empowerment is the dependent variable.

Code	Item
CE1	This project increases my confidence to participate in income-generating activities.
CE2	This project helps me become more confident in using local resources for livelihood.

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CE3 This project encourages the community to be more self-reliant.

CE4 This project increases my motivation to improve household income.

CE5 This project strengthens community participation in economic activities.

Findings

This section presents the findings from 120 Orang Asli respondents associated with the Lemongrass Enterprise Project. Results are reported for instrument reliability, descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, multiple regression and hypothesis testing.

Reliability of the Instrument

A reliability analysis was conducted to determine the internal consistency of the questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the reliability of each construct. A Cronbach's alpha value above 0.70 is generally considered acceptable, while values above 0.80 indicate good reliability (Hair et al., 2019).

The reliability findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis of the Research Instrument

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Entrepreneurial Competency	5	0.912	Excellent
Product Innovation Capability	5	0.884	Good
Digital Marketing Readiness	5	0.861	Good
Social Entrepreneurship Orientation	5	0.903	Excellent
Community Empowerment	5	0.921	Excellent
Overall Instrument	25	0.947	Excellent

The results show that all constructs recorded Cronbach's alpha values above 0.80, indicating good to excellent reliability. The highest reliability value was recorded for community empowerment, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.921, followed by entrepreneurial competency at

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0.912 and social entrepreneurship orientation at 0.903. Product innovation capability and digital marketing readiness also recorded good reliability values of 0.884 and 0.861 respectively.

The overall Cronbach's alpha value for the 25-item instrument was 0.947, indicating that the questionnaire had excellent internal consistency. Therefore, the instrument was considered reliable and suitable for further statistical analysis.

Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive analysis was conducted to determine the level of entrepreneurial competency, product innovation capability, digital marketing readiness, social entrepreneurship orientation and community empowerment among Orang Asli participants involved in the Lemongrass Enterprise Project. The mean score interpretation was based on the following range:

1.00–2.33 = Low
2.34–3.66 = Moderate
3.67–5.00 = High

The findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Entrepreneurial Competency	4.08	0.56	High
Product Innovation Capability	4.12	0.53	High
Digital Marketing Readiness	3.71	0.68	High
Social Entrepreneurship Orientation	4.24	0.49	High
Community Empowerment	4.19	0.52	High

The descriptive findings show that all variables recorded high mean scores. Social entrepreneurship orientation recorded the highest mean score at 4.24, indicating that respondents strongly agreed that the lemongrass enterprise should benefit both households and the wider community. Community empowerment also recorded a high mean score of 4.19, suggesting that respondents perceived the project as useful in increasing confidence, self-reliance and participation in livelihood activities (Adila et al., 2023).

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Product innovation capability recorded a mean score of 4.12, while entrepreneurial competency recorded a mean score of 4.08. Digital marketing readiness recorded the lowest mean score (M = 3.71), although it remained within the high category. Relative to the other constructs, this lower score indicates that digital readiness is the clearest capability gap in the current enterprise context. It suggests a need for targeted support in digital literacy, product photography, content creation, online customer communication, platform use, internet access and repeated hands-on mentoring rather than assuming that willingness to use technology is equivalent to independent digital marketing competence (Hasan et al., 2021).

Pearson Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the independent variables and community empowerment. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation between Independent Variables and Community Empowerment

Independent Variable	Community Empowerment
Entrepreneurial Competency	$r = 0.742$, $p < 0.001$
Product Innovation Capability	$r = 0.716$, $p < 0.001$
Digital Marketing Readiness	$r = 0.628$, $p < 0.001$
Social Entrepreneurship Orientation	$r = 0.781$, $p < 0.001$

The findings show that all independent variables had positive and significant relationships with community empowerment. Social entrepreneurship orientation recorded the strongest relationship with community empowerment, with $r = 0.781$, $p < 0.001$. This indicates that participants who strongly valued community benefit, cooperation and social purpose were more likely to report higher levels of empowerment.

Entrepreneurial competency also showed a strong positive relationship with community empowerment ($r = 0.742$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher reported business knowledge and confidence were associated with higher reported empowerment. Product innovation capability was also strongly related to community empowerment ($r = 0.716$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that stronger perceived capability to develop value-added lemongrass products was associated with higher empowerment.

Digital marketing readiness had a moderate-to-strong positive relationship with community empowerment ($r = 0.628$, $p < 0.001$). Although this association was smaller than those of the other predictors, it remained statistically significant, suggesting that digital readiness is relevant to perceived empowerment and to the community's capacity to access wider markets.

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Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify the most significant predictors of community empowerment. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Community Empowerment

Predictor	Unstandardised B	Standard Error	Standardised β	t-value	Sig.
Entrepreneurial Competency	0.286	0.071	0.307	4.028	<.001
Product Innovation Capability	0.224	0.068	0.238	3.294	.001
Digital Marketing Readiness	0.139	0.055	0.176	2.527	.013
Social Entrepreneurship Orientation	0.337	0.074	0.356	4.554	<.001
Model Summary: $R = 0.841$ $R^2 = 0.707$ Adjusted $R^2 = 0.697$ $F = 69.365$ $p < 0.001$					

The regression analysis showed that entrepreneurial competency, product innovation capability, digital marketing readiness and social entrepreneurship orientation significantly predicted community empowerment. The model explained 70.7% of the variance in community empowerment ($R^2 = 0.707$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.697$; $F = 69.365$, $p < 0.001$). These results indicate strong explanatory power within the study sample but do not establish causal effects because the data were collected cross-sectionally.

Social entrepreneurship orientation recorded the largest standardised beta coefficient in the regression model ($\beta = 0.356$, $t = 4.554$, $p < 0.001$) and was therefore the strongest statistical predictor among the four variables. This suggests that stronger endorsement of community benefit, cooperation and social purpose was associated with higher perceived community empowerment (Cahyaningrum et al., 2024).

Entrepreneurial competency recorded the second-largest standardised beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.307$, $t = 4.028$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a significant independent association between business-related knowledge and perceived community empowerment after the other predictors were taken into account.

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EISSN : 2600-8750
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Product innovation capability also significantly predicted community empowerment (β = 0.238, t = 3.294, p = 0.001). The result indicates that stronger perceived ability to develop lemongrass into value-added products was associated with higher perceived economic potential and self-reliance.

Digital marketing readiness was also a significant predictor (β = 0.176, t = 2.527, p = 0.013). Although it recorded the smallest standardised beta coefficient among the four predictors, it remained statistically significant, indicating that digital readiness contributes useful predictive information for community empowerment within the model.

Overall, the findings suggest that perceived community empowerment in the Lemongrass Enterprise Project is associated with both practical enterprise capabilities and socially oriented values. Social entrepreneurship orientation recorded the largest standardised beta coefficient, highlighting the importance of collective benefit, cooperation and community wellbeing within the study context.

Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 5: Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Entrepreneurial competency has a significant positive relationship with community empowerment.	Supported
H2	Product innovation capability has a significant positive relationship with community empowerment.	Supported
H3	Digital marketing readiness has a significant positive relationship with community empowerment.	Supported
H4	Social entrepreneurship orientation has a significant positive relationship with community empowerment.	Supported
H5	Entrepreneurial competency, product innovation capability, digital marketing readiness and social entrepreneurship orientation significantly predict community empowerment.	Supported

The hypothesis testing results show that all proposed hypotheses were supported. Within this cross-sectional sample, entrepreneurial competency, product innovation capability, digital marketing readiness and social entrepreneurship orientation were significantly related to and predictive of perceived community empowerment.

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 690-710

Discussion

The findings indicate that respondents generally perceived the Lemongrass Enterprise Project positively in relation to community empowerment. The high mean score for community empowerment reflects strong reported confidence, participation and self-reliance; however, the cross-sectional design does not permit causal conclusions about project effects (Hou et al., 2024).

Social entrepreneurship orientation recorded the largest standardised beta coefficient (β = 0.356) and was therefore the strongest statistical predictor in the model. This result suggests that higher perceived empowerment was associated with viewing the lemongrass enterprise not only as an income-generating activity but also as a community-based initiative that benefits households, families and the wider community. In the Orang Asli context, collective participation, cooperation and community wellbeing remain important elements because livelihood activities are closely connected to family support, shared responsibility and local community values (Cheng et al., 2021; Rahim et al., 2025).

Entrepreneurial competency recorded the second-largest standardised beta coefficient. The finding indicates that practical business skills such as costing, pricing, sales management, record keeping and product handling were positively associated with perceived empowerment. These capabilities may be particularly relevant for building confidence to participate in income-generating activities and manage small-scale enterprise tasks.

Product innovation capability was also a significant predictor of community empowerment. The finding suggests that participants who reported greater ability to transform lemongrass into value-added products also reported higher empowerment, supporting the relevance of product development as part of a local-resource enterprise strategy (Setini et al., 2025).

Digital marketing readiness recorded the lowest mean score (M = 3.71) but remained a significant predictor of community empowerment (β = 0.176, p = 0.013). This pattern is important because it identifies digital readiness as a relative development need despite generally positive attitudes toward technology. Participants may be willing to learn and use digital tools, but willingness should not be equated with independent competence. Practical training in product photography, content creation, WhatsApp Business, Facebook, TikTok, online selling, order management and customer communication should therefore be accompanied by internet access, repeated hands-on practice and mentoring.

Overall, the findings suggest that entrepreneurial competency, product innovation, digital marketing readiness and social entrepreneurship orientation are important predictors of perceived community empowerment. The results support an integrated approach in which practical enterprise skills are developed alongside collective values, community ownership, market linkage and continuous mentoring rather than through one-off entrepreneurship activities.

Implications of the Study

This study contributes theoretically by showing that community empowerment in a local-resource Orang Asli enterprise context is associated not only with practical entrepreneurial capabilities but also with social entrepreneurship orientation. By positioning collective social

value alongside entrepreneurial competency, product innovation and digital readiness, the study extends community-based social entrepreneurship discussion toward an integrated view of empowerment that combines enterprise capability with community-oriented purpose.

Practically, support should be organised around specific capability gaps identified in the findings. First, digital marketing training should include basic digital literacy, product photography, content creation, WhatsApp Business, Facebook/TikTok promotion, online order handling and repeated mentoring. Second, product development support should focus on quality consistency, packaging, labelling, branding and market testing of lemongrass-based products. Third, entrepreneurial skills development should strengthen costing, pricing, record keeping, customer service and simple financial management. Fourth, agencies should facilitate market access through local retail partners, community events, institutional buyers, online channels and suitable market-linkage networks. Universities, NGOs and government agencies can coordinate these forms of sustained support rather than relying on short-term training alone.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationships of entrepreneurial competency, product innovation capability, digital marketing readiness and social entrepreneurship orientation with community empowerment among Orang Asli respondents associated with the Lemongrass Enterprise Project in Pos Blau, Gua Musang. All four predictors were positively and significantly related to community empowerment. In the regression model, social entrepreneurship orientation recorded the largest standardised beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.356$), followed by entrepreneurial competency ($\beta = 0.307$), product innovation capability ($\beta = 0.238$) and digital marketing readiness ($\beta = 0.176$), with the model explaining 70.7% of the variance in community empowerment ($R^2 = 0.707$).

The findings suggest that lemongrass-based social entrepreneurship provides a promising context for community empowerment when collective participation is accompanied by practical business skills, product development, digital readiness, market access and continuous mentoring. Because the study used cross-sectional survey data, these relationships should be interpreted as associations and predictive relationships rather than causal effects. Future studies may use longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs, compare different Orang Asli settlements and examine whether changes in enterprise participation are followed by sustained changes in empowerment and livelihood outcomes.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) and the Institut Penyelidikan dan Pengurusan Kemiskinan (InsPeK) for the support and resources provided throughout this research. Special appreciation is also extended to the Orang Asli community in Pos Blau, Gua Musang, for their participation and cooperation during the data collection process.

Funding Statement: No Funding

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices (IJEMP)

Ethics Statement: This quantitative study was conducted in accordance with accepted ethical research principles involving human participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained prior to the administration of the questionnaire. Respondents were assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous, and the data collected were used solely for academic and research purposes.

Author Contribution Statement: Ateerah Abdul Razak: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing; Review & Editing. Muhamad Faaiz Che Hasan, Muhamad Amirul Mohd Zaid, Siti Ayuni Balqis Anamul Hoque, Nurfarhana Amira Md Amin, Nurul Aliya Syuhadaa Zulkifly, Nur Syuhada Ibrahim, and Nurul Khairah Safiah Abdul Ghapa: Data Collection, Data Analysis, Literature Review, and Writing. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) The authors declare that generative AI and AI-assisted technologies were used during the preparation of this manuscript. ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Gemini (Google) were used for language editing, grammar improvement, and manuscript refinement. All AI-assisted content was critically reviewed, edited, and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, integrity, and final content of the manuscript.

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
IJEMP
EISSN : 2600-8750
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 690-710

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