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Community markets as informal incubators: Buffering, bridging, and the small-and-stable condition

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1. Introduction

Community markets (CMs), encompassing farmers' markets, craft fairs, night markets, and maker events, constitute distinctive entrepreneurial settings in which maker entrepreneurs can take their products to market and simultaneously develop business acumen (Short et al., 2024; Waddingham et al., 2025). They are increasingly recognised as supportive environments, especially for early-stage ventures (Feenstra et al., 2003; Skytt-Larsen et al., 2022), although the organisational conditions they create for participating stallholders, and the consequences of those conditions for stallholder development, remain theoretically underexplored. This paper examines CMs as *informal incubators* i.e. organic, community-driven environments that, without institutional design, provide the support conditions long associated with formal incubation programmes (Assenova, 2020; Awonuga et al., 2024; Perry III et al., 2025). Although adjacent work on social incubators and community-based enterprise acknowledges community-centred and non-monetary logics (Greene and Butler, 1996), formal incubation scholarship has largely developed in commercial, resource-munificent settings and thus offers little guidance on how such logics shape or constrain informal incubation.

To examine the incubation-like functions in CMs, this study draws on Organisational Sponsorship Theory (OST). Developed by Flynn (1993a) and formalised by Amezcua et al. (2013, p. 1628), OST defines sponsorship as "attempts to mediate the relationship between new organisations and their environments by creating a resource-munificent context intended to increase survival rates" and theorises two core mechanisms of buffering and bridging. Existing scholarship has long assumed that incubation-like support is inherently developmental and that protective and connective support (through buffering-like mechanisms) will, by default, push ventures (via bridging-like mechanisms) toward growth and independence (Amezcua et al., 2013; Assenova, 2020). Additionally, OST in particular has been applied primarily to formal, institutionally designed settings such as university incubators, government-backed accelerators, and science parks (Breivik-Meyer et al., 2020; Lecluyse et al., 2023; Manhart, 2022). This paper investigates whether and how theorised OST mechanisms operate in informal, community-driven settings such as CMs, and how this advances our knowledge beyond filling an empirical gap. Treating CMs as benign sales venues risks overlooking how informal sponsoring environments shape survival, capability development, and outward growth, and risks transferring assumptions from formal incubation settings into contexts where support is relational and community-embedded rather than programme-delivered. Practically, organiser curation, predictable trading routines, peer support, and community norms may reduce risk and build capability without creating a strong pathway to external customers, channels, or growth; so, support that sustains continuity may be mistaken for support that promotes expansion. This study therefore questions the assumption that incubation-like support is uniformly developmental, examining how the configuration of buffering and bridging shapes stallholder development in an informal market setting. It is guided by the research

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question: "How do the buffering and bridging mechanisms of organisational sponsorship theory operate within the distinctive context of community markets as informal incubators?"

The analysis draws on field observations and in-situ interviews with stallholders at a UK CM and finds that OST's core mechanisms of bridging and buffering are present (Amezcua et al., 2013; Osei et al., 2026). The findings suggest atypical incubation outcomes - a dark side of dominant buffering in informal sponsoring environments that may reduce the ability of bridging to generate outward growth. Consequently, rather than functioning as a launchpad, the incubating environment risks becoming a terminus (Morales, 2011; Osei et al., 2026). This paper theorises this condition as the *small-and-stable condition*: a state in which the very support that enables stallholders to survive simultaneously reduces their motivation to grow beyond it. Interestingly, this is driven by motivations rooted in creative identity and community belonging (Friedman et al., 2025), and reinforced by social norms that penalise agentic, growth-oriented behaviour (Waddingham et al., 2025).

2. Literature framing

2.1. Community markets as entrepreneurial settings

CMs are characterised by a dual logic in which social value creation, knowledge sharing, and community belonging operate alongside, and often supersede, financial imperatives (Morales, 2011; Short et al., 2024). Community endorsement, social interaction, and shared norms shape participation (Truong, 2026). This environment can support experiential selling, customer feedback, peer learning, and commercial experimentation. However, the organisational conditions that CMs create for stallholders, and the consequences for stallholder development, remain theoretically underdeveloped. Support practices are enacted through interaction between organisers and stallholders rather than simply delivered by sponsoring organisations (Li and Goswami, 2026). This informal and relational character makes CMs a relevant setting for examining how organisational sponsorship operates beyond formal incubation programmes.

2.2. Business incubation, buffering and bridging

Business incubation has long been recognised as a mechanism through which nascent ventures are shielded from hostile founding environments while being connected to the resources necessary for survival and growth (Assenova, 2020; Awonuga et al., 2024; Skytt-Larsen et al., 2022). Building on Flynn's (1993a, 1993b) incubator-as-sponsor conceptualisation, Amezcua et al. (2013) developed a mechanism-level account of how the sponsoring organisation mediates the relationship between nascent ventures and hostile external environments. This account identifies two interrelated mechanisms, namely *buffering* and *bridging*, as shown in Fig. 1.

Buffering involves protecting new ventures from environmental threats while developing their internal resources and capabilities (Autio and Rannikko, 2016). Bridging connects ventures to external resource providers, legitimising networks and market opportunities (Bøllingtoft and Ulhøi, 2005). The distinction shifts attention from whether an incubator provides support to how different forms of support contribute to venture development. Breivik-Meyer et al. (2020) further distinguish between sheltering, which protects from external shocks, and building, which supports knowledge and capability as distinct types of buffering.

The effects of sponsorship thus depend on the fit between the support and resources provided, as well as the conditions in which ventures operate (Amezcua et al., 2013; Samuelsson and Jutterström, 2024), making CMs a relevant setting for examining informal incubation.

2.3. Community markets as informal incubators and the small-and-stable condition

CMs may function as informal incubators particularly for maker entrepreneurs with limited access to formal support. In these settings, ventures develop through experiential selling, customer feedback, peer interaction, informal mentorship and shared community norms, making the market a key environment for early business learning, legitimacy building, and commercial experimentation (Friedman et al., 2025; Short et al., 2024). Support is therefore co-constructed through interaction rather than delivered through a formal support programme (Li and Goswami, 2026). Additionally, participation in CMs is not necessarily motivated by financial

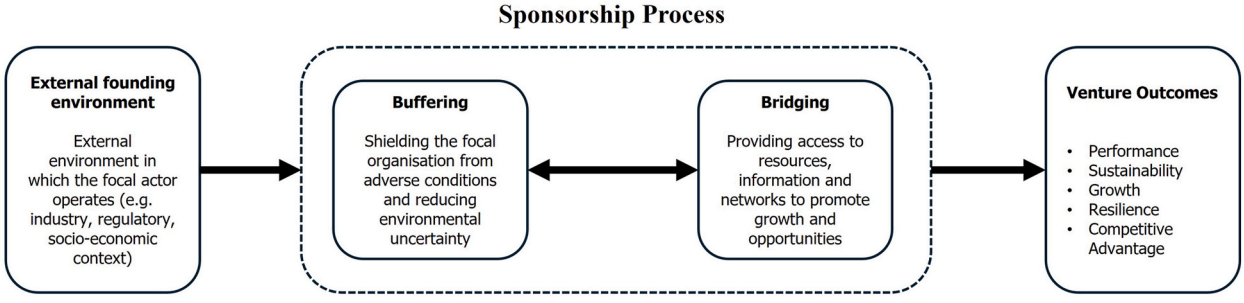


Fig. 1. llustration of Organisational Sponsorship Theory.

expansion. Creative identity, community belonging, meaningful interaction, and the opportunity to experiment may be important reasons for participation (Friedman et al., 2025; Short et al., 2024; Waddingham et al., 2025). This does not mean that stallholders reject growth, nor that remaining small is necessarily a negative outcome. Instead, stallholder development may take forms not captured by conventional measures of venture expansion.

Against this background, this paper uses the term *small-and-stable condition* to describe a possible development pattern in which stallholders achieve continuity, capability development, and community embeddedness without necessarily expanding beyond the CM setting. The concept highlights a potential growth-stability tension: the conditions that make participation safe, manageable, and meaningful may not be accompanied by practices that support expansion. This study therefore examines how buffering and bridging operate in CMs and whether their configuration helps explain the emergence of a small-and-stable condition.

3. Method

This study used an inductive, ethnographically informed design (Brett, 2024; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Knoblauch, 2005) to examine how CMs operate in practice and how stallholders utilise the support given to them. The chosen CM sits on the outskirts of a large UK city, occupies over 900 square metres of trading space and hosts 40-60 stalls per market day. It was chosen purposively around three criteria (a) well-known, with a structured admission process (b) diverse stall types and stallholder tenures and (c) unmetered access for observation and interviewing.

3.1. Data collection

Data collection was deliberately iterative and took place in two phases, combining non-participant field observation with short in-situ interviews with stallholders. This design enabled the study to connect observed market practices with participants' own accounts and to support theory development (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gioia et al., 2013). In the first phase of data collection, only non-participant

Table 1
List of participating stallholders.

Participant	Business Type/Sector	Length of Time at Market	Regularity
Cond14	African Food/Tea	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular
Drink06	Artisan Spirits	Long-term (over 7years)	Regular
Service36	Author and Spiritual Counselling	First-timer	n/a
HWell30	Beverage Mixes	Mid-term (3-7years)	Regular
Baked09	Bread	Mid-term (3-7years)	Regular
Baked11	Cakes	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular
Baked10	Cakes	Mid-term (3-7years)	Regular
Baked12	Cakes	Long-term (over 7years)	Regular
HGoods34	Candles	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular
HGoods35	Candles, Home Fragrance	First-timer	n/a
Food22	Caribbean Food counter	Mid-term (3-7years)	Regular
HWell31	CBD Products	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular
Food23	Chai, Tea counter	Mid-term (3-7years)	Regular
Cond15	Chili Sauces	Long-term (over 7years)	Regular
Cond20	Chocolates and chocolate crafts kit	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular
Cond21	Chocolates and Cordials	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular
Food24	Churros counter	Long-term (over 7years)	Regular
Craft40	Crafts and handmade goods	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular
Service37	Entertainment	Mid-term (3-7years)	Regular
Craft01	Felt Flowers	Mid-term (3-7years)	Seasonal
Food25	Greek Food counter	Mid-term (3-7years)	Regular
Craft02	Handmade Accessories	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular
HWell32	Herbal Supplements	Short-term (less than 3years)	Irregular
Food26	Italian Prepared Meals counter	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular
Cond16	Jams and Preserves	Long-term (over 7years)	Irregular
Craft03	Jewellery	Long-term (over 7years)	Regular
Craft04	Jewellery	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular
Food27	Juice and Cakes snack counter	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular
Food28	Korean Fried Chicken counter	Mid-term (3-7years)	Regular
Drink07	Liqueurs	Mid-term (3-7years)	Regular
Drink08	Non-alcoholic and Low-alcohol Wines	Short-term (less than 3years)	Irregular
Cond17	Olive Oil and Chilli Oil	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular
Food29	Organic Produce Delivery Service	First-timer	n/a
Craft05	Personalised Items	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular
Cond18	Preserved Fruit	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular
Cond19	Salsa and table sauces	Long-term (over 7years)	Irregular
Baked13	Savory Pastries	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular
Service39	Services/Events	Mid-term (3-7years)	Regular
HWell33	Skincare, Massage	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular
Service38	Tarot Reading	Short-term (less than 3years)	Regular

observations were conducted over 4 h, which sharpened the study's focus on the CM as an entrepreneurial setting (Short et al., 2024). It raised questions about (a) how stallholders grow beyond the market, (b) how they manage stock and demand, (c) what support the CM organiser provides, and (d) whether that support acts as buffering and bridging (Amezcua et al., 2013). In the second phase, which happened several months after phase 1, two researchers spent a full market day (5 h) combining observations with in-situ interviews. One researcher introduced the other as a curious friend to reduce research reactivity. Once rapport was established, we identified ourselves as researchers, provided institutional identification, shared more details about our research project, and requested permission to record the conversation. All 51 stalls present were approached; 40 shown in Table 1 consented (approximately 80 percent), although only 23 were interviewed thoroughly due to customer interruptions. For example, none of the food counters could speak with us for long enough because of consistent customer influx, but it was useful to observe their activities and recognise their importance in the CM as a whole.

Interviews began with open questions about visibility, stock levels, organiser support, growth, forms of buffering and bridging. The conversation continued as led by the stallholder, which kept the process flexible while maintaining analytical focus (Tracy, 2019). This sequence encouraged open discussion before formal consent became salient, while adhering to institutional ethics and reducing recall bias by capturing responses close to the trading moment (Olorunfemi, 2024).

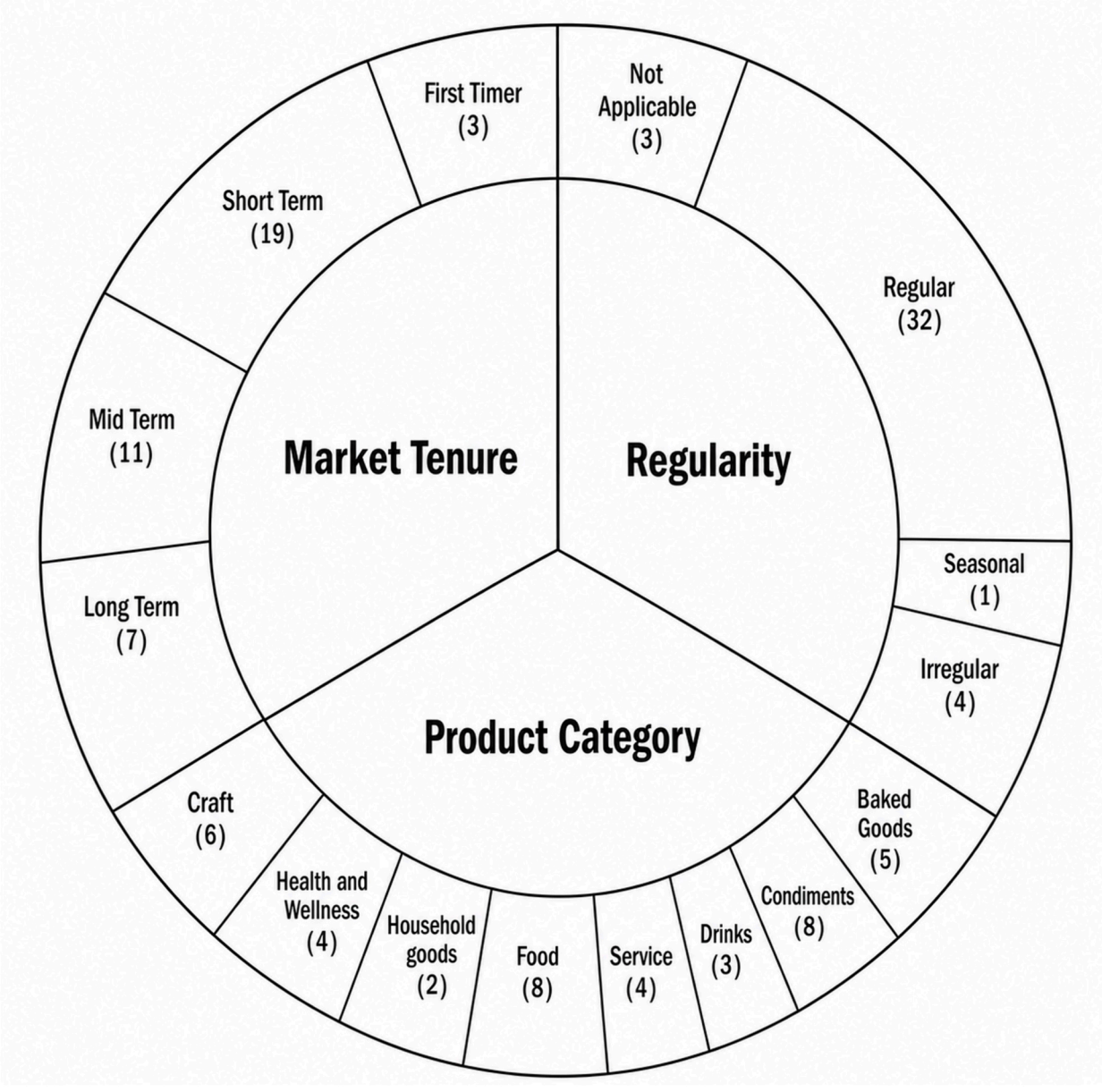


Fig. 2. Stallholder classification by market tenure, regularity and product category.

Table 1 classifies stallholders on three dimensions, namely (1) length of time at market, (2) Product type/category and (3) regularity, all based on organiser classification and refined through conversations with participants. The length of time aligns with the CM's bands: short-term (under 3 years), mid-term (3-7 years), long-term (over 7 years), and first-timer. Product type reflects the

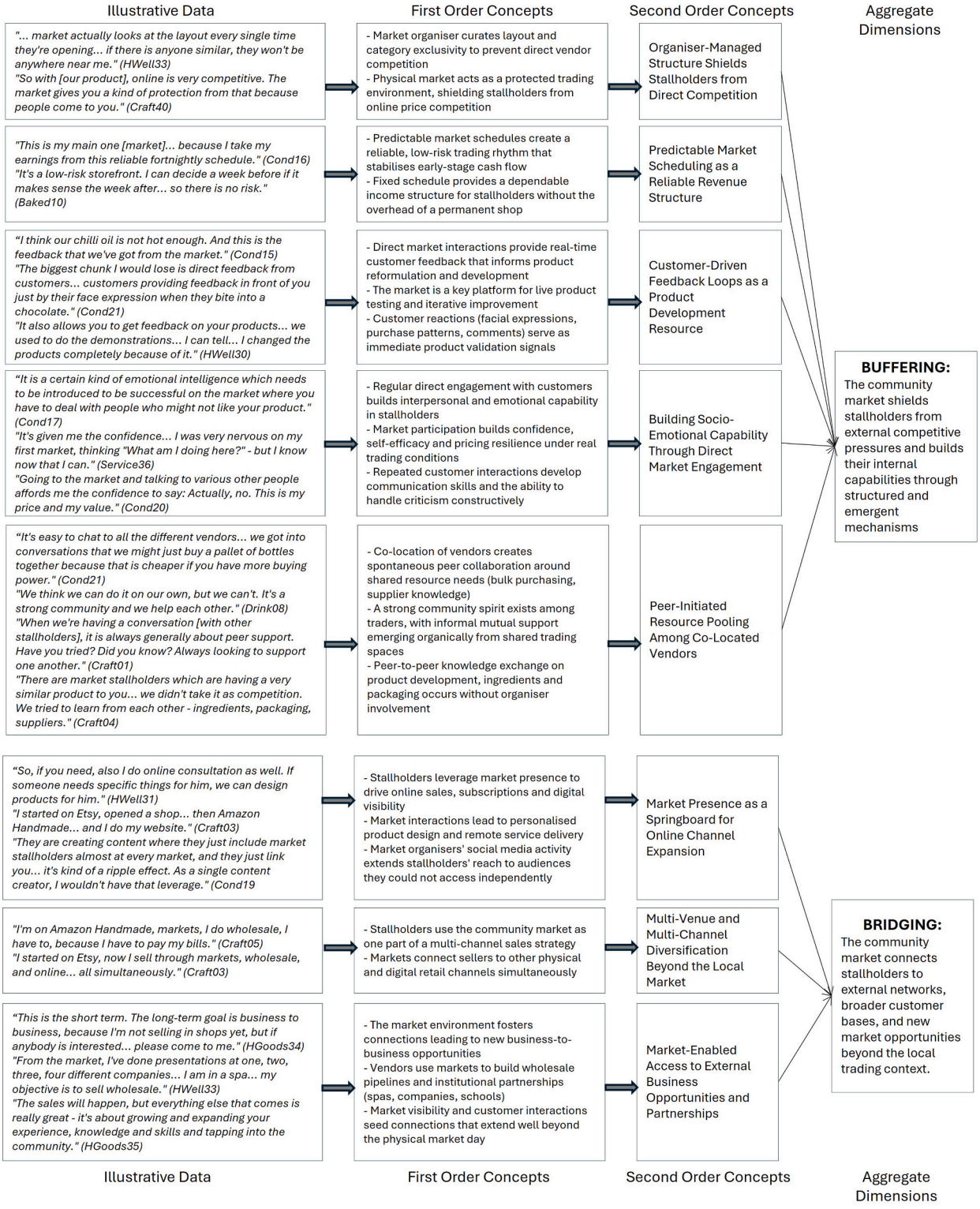


Fig. 3. Data structures for buffering and bridging in community markets.

category stallholders specified to the organisers on acceptance (i.e. condiments, food counters, baked goods, crafts, household goods, health and wellness, drinks and services) and is generally used to balance segment mix/representativeness. Regularity also follows the organiser agreement where regular stallholders attend at least once a month (the market runs fortnightly), and irregular stallholders choose a non-committal option. Also, a few seasonal stallholders operate only during festivities, and first-timers are currently not classified because they are still in a trial, non-committal period. Fig. 2 summarises this classification.

3.2. Data analysis

Analysis followed a thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006), supported by Gioia-style coding to move from participant language to higher-order concepts (Gioia et al., 2013). The two primary researchers conducted coding through an iterative process of comparing interpretations and refining the coding structure. Initial coding produced a disagreement rate of approximately 10%, reflecting a high level of consistency between coders. Disagreements were resolved by discussing the relevant excerpt against the surrounding transcript or field note until consensus was reached; when needed, an independent researcher provided a further reading to reduce coder bias. This process refined the first-order codes, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions shown in Fig. 3a and b, keeping the analysis close to the data while enabling conceptual development.

3.3. Research rigour

Research rigour was assessed against Lincoln and Guba (1985) trustworthiness criteria. Credibility was achieved through researcher triangulation (one familiar with CMs and the other neutral). Transferability is supported by a detailed description of the CM setting, including its location and the specificity of stallholder selection and classification. As the analysis was inductive and iterative rather than aimed at mutually exclusive quantitative classification, the process was supported through researcher discussion, consensus resolution, independent review of disputed material, structured field notes and fixed typologies. Lastly, the traceable path from participants' language to aggregate dimensions (as shown in Fig. 3a and b) strengthened confirmability.

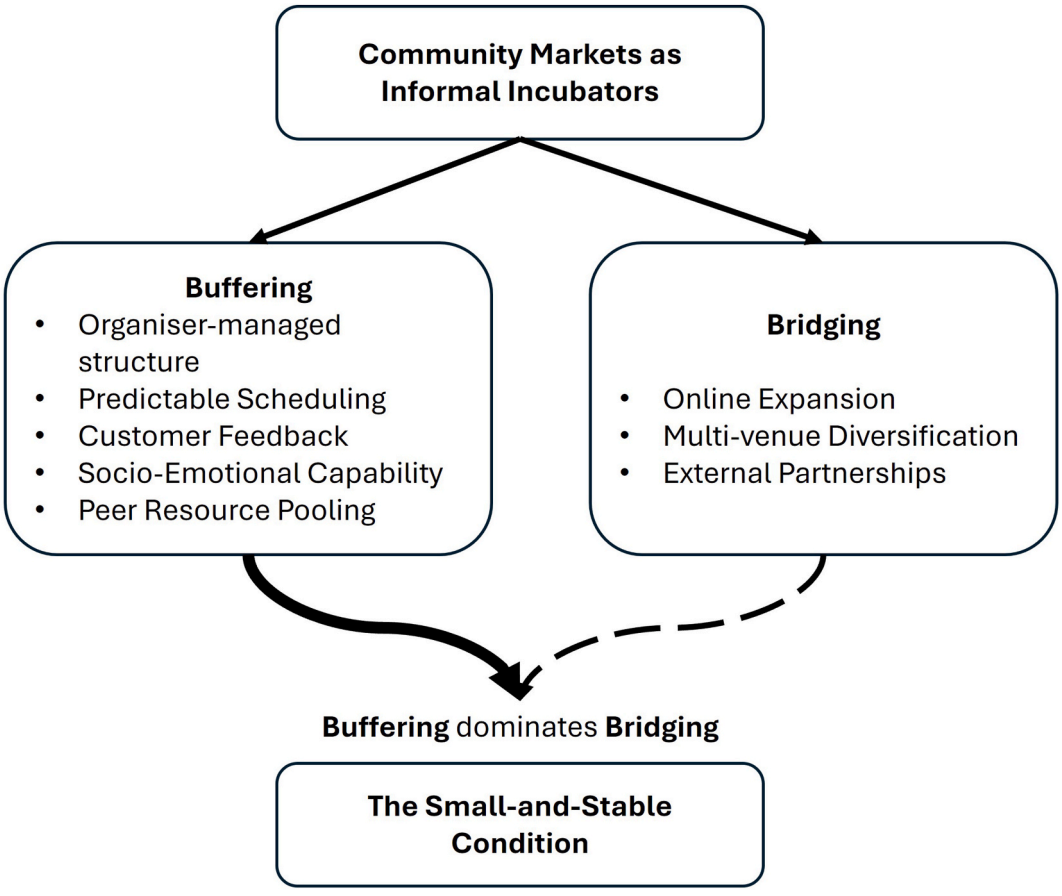


Fig. 4. Community market functioning as an incubator through mechanisms of buffering and bridging.

4. Findings

4.1. Community markets as informal incubators

Stallholders consistently describe participation in the CM as more than just access to a regular trading space. Their accounts characterise the market as an informal incubator: an organic, community-oriented setting that actively shapes early-stage businesses and the entrepreneurs running them. Across interviews, three characteristics of the market's incubation function emerged, as shown in Fig. 4.

First, the market operates as a live learning environment where stallholders develop their venture through repeated practice. Stallholders describe learning to refine what they sell and how they sell it through ongoing exposure to customers and trading conditions: "*This is where I figured out my product, my pricing, my customer. I wouldn't have a business without what this market taught me*" (HWell31). The data also show that this learning changes over time. Stallholders who had been trading at this CM for less than three years described a different kind of learning from other mid-term or long-term stallholders. Table 2 describes the differences in this learning.

Second, the market's selective admission process confers legitimacy and reinforces identity. Access is not described as automatic; stallholders emphasise quality standards and values alignment as part of entry: *"I liked the fact that you couldn't just pitch up and quality was very important to them"* (Service36). Being accepted is therefore experienced as a credibility signal: *"if you are at the market, that then says that you are a good trader too"* (Baked10), which could be useful for expanding beyond the market.

Finally, the market's ethos privileges genuine makers and growth-oriented businesses. Several participants distinguish the CM from other trading spaces through its emphasis on authenticity and ethics, and its preference for stallholders building real ventures rather than casually selling: *"they want businesses … they want people who are running businesses and pushing to grow and develop"* (Baked13).

4.2. Buffering and bridging as experienced mechanisms

Buffering captures the market conditions that lower risk and support capability development. Bridging captures how market participation links stallholders to resources beyond the market day.

4.3. Buffering

The market organiser provides two forms of direct protection. Organisers curate layout and category exclusivity, limiting the proximity and number of similar offerings. This is reflected in first-order concepts emphasising organiser curation and the physical market as a protected trading environment. Stallholders described the exclusivity arrangement as critical to their ability to price fairly and trade confidently. Others who were in more open categories (e.g. craft and health and wellness stallholders) relied more on product differentiation to price products and trade with confidence. Organisers also provide a reliable trading rhythm, such as fixed market routines, that stabilises early cash flow and reduces overhead pressures associated with permanent retail.

Table 2
Learning typology amongst stallholders.

Tenure	Nature of Learning	Indicative Quotes
First Timers	Not applicable, as they hadn't been in the market long enough to discuss learning.	Not applicable
Short Term (less than 3years)	Foundational for business development e.g. product pricing, customer service	*"This is where I figured out my product, my pricing, my customer. I wouldn't have a business without what this market taught me"* - HWell31 *"Every market you do, you learn something new … It's not just selling, it's training yourself"* - Craft02 *"I've put now together a stand so Q and A is about skincare … what I've tried to do is constantly try to upgrade me. What am I not doing? What am I missing? What trick am I missing in order to ensure that I can maximize the marketing on that day"*. - HWell33
Mid Term (3-7 years)	Relationship Management e.g. working with peers, expansion and collaboration	*"We* (me and other bakers] *all help each other out and it's really nice."* - Baked10 *"it's easy to like chat to like all the different traders as well like when you're in the bar so that's the other thing about this market it's like there's a community spirit."* - HWell30 *"When we're having a conversation, it is always generally about peer support. Have you tried? Did you know? Always looking to support one another."* – Craft01
Long Term (over 7years)	Product and service refinement e.g. leveraging peer strengths, innovation,	*"I've learned so much over the few years that I introduced a little bit more acidity into the product, which makes it smoother for the customers and makes it more interesting for the customers"*. - Drink06 *"to give you some honest feedback, I think our chilli oil is not hot enough. And this is the feedback that we've got from doing this market as well because it helps. Also, there's different demographics as well. So some demographics prefer hot chilli oil. Some are like, no, mild is perfect for us. So it allows us to go back to the drawing board and think, okay, maybe we should spice it up a little bit."* - Cond15 *"I think it's the learning curve of how to behave around criticism which … you might learn from it. But you just need to go back to being like, 'I'll take it in, thank you very much … 'kind of thing. And you need to move on … "* - Cond19

The data structure identifies the development of socio-emotional capability through direct market engagement. Participants highlight how repeated customer interactions cultivate confidence, self-efficacy, pricing resilience, and communication skills under real trading conditions. Alongside organiser-led buffering, a distinct form of buffering emerges from the stallholders themselves. Stallholders share supplier contacts, buy ingredients in bulk together, and pass on practical knowledge about what works and what does not. The market does not organise this support; it grows naturally from shared space and repeated contact. This peer-led buffering is particularly visible among stallholders where shared supply chains make collective purchasing practical, and especially among craft stallholders, where knowledge about materials and pricing circulates freely between neighbours. Together, organiser-led and peer-led buffering mean stallholders at this CM are protected through the organiser's curation and scheduling and through the informal support of fellow traders.

4.4. Bridging

Bridging works in three ways. First, market presence as a springboard for online channel expansion captures how stallholders leverage market engagement to drive online visibility and sales. Our analysis indicates that market interactions support personalised product design and remote service delivery, and that organisers' social media help extend stallholders' reach. Second, multi-venue and multi-channel diversification beyond the local market reflects first-order concepts that describe how stallholders position the CM within a broader channel portfolio, with markets connecting sellers to other physical and digital outlets simultaneously. Third, the CM enabled access to external business opportunities and partnerships. Our analysis shows that market interactions and connections lead to business-to-business opportunities, wholesale pipelines, and institutional partnerships (e.g., companies, spas, schools).

4.5. Summary of findings

Table 3 summarises the full pattern of findings. CMs provide both core incubator functions of buffering and bridging in the OST literature. These happened through organiser practices, peer relationships, and market participation rather than through a formally designed programme. Additionally, buffering is strong and constant, while bridging is available but depends on stallholder initiative to choose and use it. This gap between a well-protected trading environment and a less certain path outward is theorised to contribute to

Table 3
Summary of findings that confirm and extend theoretical stance.

Theoretical Exploration	Functional Findings	Context-specific Findings
Community Markets as Informal Incubators	More than a temporary sales venue.	Stallholders experience the community market as an organisational environment that actively shapes venture development.
	Live learning through repeated practice (learning-by-doing)	The market operates as a continuous learning setting where stallholders iteratively refine offerings and selling practices through repeated exposure to real customers and trading conditions.
	Event-by-event learning and skill development	Learning is cumulative and routine: participation builds practical capabilities and personal discipline through repetition, not one-off advice or formal training.
	Legitimacy via selective admission and quality standards	Entry is curated; acceptance serves as an endorsement mechanism that signals credibility and alignment with standards to customers and peers.
	Legitimacy as reputational signal	Presence in the market conveys status and perceived competence, strengthening legitimacy beyond what individual ventures could signal alone.
	Ethos: preference for "real" ventures and growth-oriented makers	The market's values emphasise authenticity and "proper" business-building; organisers' selection and norms shape who belongs and what behaviours are encouraged.
Buffering	Layout of market environment	Market conditions that reduce risk and enable internal capability building
	Organiser-managed protection from direct competition	Organisers curate stall mix and positioning, shielding vendors from immediate head-to-head competition and making trading conditions more survivable while capabilities develop.
	Predictable scheduling as stabilising revenue rhythm	Regular market cadence creates a dependable trading routine that stabilises early cash flow and reduces pressure compared with permanent retail overheads.
	Socio-emotional capability building via customer engagement	Repeated real-time interaction strengthens "soft" entrepreneurial capabilities, including confidence, resilience, and communication, developed under live market conditions rather than classroom settings.
	Peer-initiated resource pooling among co-located vendors	Co-location enables informal, horizontal support (sharing know-how and resources) that emerges from proximity and is peer-led rather than formally designed.
Bridging	Linking stallholders to customers, channels and opportunities beyond market day	Bridging is experienced as outward connections created through market participation
	Market presence as springboard to online channel expansion	Market participation fuels online growth through visibility, personalised interaction, and organiser amplification; the market acts as a conversion engine into digital channels.
	Multi-venue & multi-channel diversification	Vendors use the community market as one node in a portfolio of outlets (other physical/digital venues), reducing dependence on a single channel and expanding reach
	Access to external opportunities & partnerships	Visibility and relationships formed at the market seed external deals (e.g., wholesale/B2B and institutional links), translating local presence into wider commercial opportunity

the small-and-stable condition: a state where stallholders are supported enough to keep going but not pushed enough to grow beyond the market.

5. Discussion

The findings confirm that CMs function as informal incubators. As seen in Fig. 4, they fulfil OST's core mechanisms of buffering and bridging - they protect stallholders, build their capabilities, and connect them to wider opportunities without a structured formal programme. However, buffering and bridging do not work equally. Buffering is constant and mostly organiser-driven, while Bridging is available but depends on the stallholder taking the initiative, which could lead to buffering exceeding bridging. This imbalance, which we summarise as strong protection and weaker outward push, helps explain the small-and-stable condition.

5.1. CMs as informal incubators

Our first contribution extends OST beyond the formal, institutionally designed incubator settings in which it has predominantly been examined (Amezcua et al., 2013; Breivik-Meyer et al., 2020; Lecluyse et al., 2023; Samuelsson and Jutterström, 2024). While previous research has shown that markets and other community-based entrepreneurial events support learning through selling, customer feedback, and peer interaction (Feenstra et al., 2003; Short et al., 2024; Friedman et al., 2025), this study advances the conversation by providing a theoretically grounded account of *how* this function is achieved. Regarding learning, we see clear evidence that the CM facilitates learning in distinct ways. Newer stallholders focus on Foundational learning, such as product pricing, customer interactions and service, with a view to increasing the customer base and ascertaining profitability. Mid-tenure stallholders build on this foundation, emphasising relationship management with peers, suppliers, and organisers while expanding into other channels. Long-term stallholders describe a more settled form of learning that embeds innovation through deep customer knowledge, understanding their place in the market community, and focusing on refining rather than reinventing. This tenure-differentiated pattern of learning extends Friedman et al.'s (2025) account of experiential selling by showing that the nature of market-based learning is not fixed but develops as the stallholder develops.

Stallholders also describe the market as the primary organisational environment in which business identity is tested, capabilities are built, and legitimacy is established. This reinforces Waddingham et al.'s (2025) finding that market participation legitimises maker-originated businesses, and Friedman et al.'s (2025) observation that maker entrepreneurs rely on experiential selling and peer observation as substitutes for structured support. The CM therefore performs incubation-like functions of learning, capability development and experimentation (Assenova, 2020) without replicating the formal programme structure of a conventional incubator. Its support is embedded in repeated participation, organiser practices, customer interaction, and relationships among stallholders. This finding contributes to OST by showing that sponsorship in an informal setting is not delivered through a discrete package of services. Instead, it is distributed across the market's physical arrangements, participation rules, communication practices, customer relationships, and peer interactions. This is consistent with Greene and Butler's (1996) early observation that community-based enterprise support operates through relational and embedded practices rather than formal programme delivery, and with Li and Goswami's (2026) argument that support is co-constructed through interaction rather than simply provided by one party and received by another.

5.2. Buffering and bridging: confirming, extending and discovering

Our second contribution demonstrates how buffering and bridging operate within the CM context, both confirming mechanisms of OST and extending it in new directions by identifying aspects not previously articulated by the theory.

On buffering: applying the dimensions of sheltering and building theorised by Breivik-Meyer et al. (2020), competitive sheltering operates at two levels simultaneously: internally, through organiser-managed layout and category exclusivity; and externally, through the physical market as a shield from online competitive pressure - a distinction not previously articulated in the incubation literature. The building dimension is equally evident, with customer-driven feedback loops providing real-time product development intelligence that corresponds to active capability transfer. At the same time, there is socio-emotional capability development, with participants describing confidence, pricing resilience, and emotional intelligence, which extends building beyond the cognitive and technical dimensions previously emphasised in the literature.

On peer-led buffering: the findings go further than OST asserts. Stallholders describe bulk purchasing arrangements and supplier knowledge sharing that arise organically from proximity, not organiser design. This is a form of buffering that is horizontal, peer-led, and emergent, rather than top-down and designed, consistent with Short et al.'s (2024) observation that community-based environments generate social capital through peer interaction, and with Hinrichs et al.'s (2004) finding that co-location can, under the right social conditions, support knowledge exchange and innovation.

On bridging: The market does not simply open doors, as it builds the reputation and relationships that make those doors worth opening. Organiser social media activity, market reputational legitimacy, and relational capital accumulated through regular participation collectively function as a bridging infrastructure that stallholders actively leverage. This extends Manhart's (2022) account of bridging by showing that, in informal settings, organisers and stallholders build the bridging infrastructure collectively rather than having an institution design it in advance.

Buffering and bridging are therefore present, but they are informal, relational, and partly participant-generated rather than delivered through a formal incubation programme.

5.3. The small-and-stable condition

The third contribution explains why strong buffering and bridging that is available but not initiated by stallholders do not automatically lead to growth beyond the market. Amezcua et al. (2013) demonstrated that high levels of buffering can paradoxically reduce venture survival by insulating ventures from the market signals necessary for adaptive development. In the CM context, an analogous dynamic operates through a different mechanism: the social and motivational architecture of the market itself. Three forces combine to produce the small-and-stable condition. First, maker entrepreneurs' non-monetary motivations, which include creative identity, community belonging, and intrinsic satisfaction, mean the CM is a destination, not a stepping stone (Friedman et al., 2025). Second, communal norms actively penalise agentic, growth-oriented behaviour. Waddingham et al. (2025) found that stallholders who talk about community, shared values, and collective benefit attract more support from customers and peers. Those who focus on personal ambition and individual growth attract less. In a CM, fitting in matters more than standing out, inadvertently shaping stallholders' choices. Third, buffering comfort reduces the urgency of independent market exposure (Lecluyse et al., 2023), and stallholders may find themselves living out Peter Pan syndrome, unconsciously choosing comfort over growth and appearing not necessarily expansion-focused (Choi and Lee, 2020).

These three elements are not separate from the OST framework as they explain why bridging, though available, is underused. Li and Goswami (2026) show that support is co-constructed through interaction, and in this CM, that co-construction reinforces staying put rather than leaving, because both organisers and stallholders benefit from continued participation. The very features that make the CM an effective informal incubator-its warmth, its community norms, its protective structure-are also the features that make leaving it difficult. This is the small-and-stable condition.

6. Conclusion

The CM does not fail to incubate. Rather, it incubates toward a form of continuity that is not necessarily equivalent to the expansion the traditional formal incubator pursues. This paper has examined CMs as informal incubators, drawing on organisational sponsorship theory (Amezcua et al., 2013; Breivik-Meyer et al., 2020) to theorise how buffering and bridging work in a CM setting and how the gap between these two mechanisms helps explain the small-and-stable condition. Buffering is constant and organiser-driven; bridging is available but stallholder-initiated; and the social architecture of the market, such as its communal norms, non-monetary motivations, and identity rewards, reduces the urgency of moving beyond it.

Three contributions emerge. First, we extend OST beyond formal incubation settings (Amezcua et al., 2013; Manhart, 2022; Samuelsson and Jutterström, 2024), showing that its core mechanisms, including novel collective resource buffering, operate in informal, community-driven environments. We also identify peer-led collective buffering as a new form of buffering. Second, we advance the CMs literature (Feenstra et al., 2003; Hinrichs et al., 2004; Short et al., 2024; Waddingham et al., 2025) by providing a theoretically grounded conceptualisation of CMs as informal incubators. Third, we introduce the small-and-stable condition as a novel concept and identify it as the dark side of informal incubation in CMs, responding directly to Short et al.'s (2024) call for research on the unintended consequences of CMs. We theorise that this condition happens when buffering dominates and bridging is underutilised.

The study is not without limitations, which include the qualitative, single-site design of a CM. While the qualitative design reinforces theoretical depth over statistical generalisability, future research could test these mechanisms across multiple CM settings and cultural contexts. The sample also excludes some stallholder types present in the market. Although all 51 stalls were approached and 40 stallholders consented, only 23 could be interviewed thoroughly, as customer interruptions limited available time. Notably, no live-serviced food-counter stallholders completed a substantive interview, since sustained customer demand prevented an extended exchange. Live-serviced food vendors are likely among the most prominent occupants of CMs, and those who cook or assemble to order during market hours are also likely to experience the most intense buffering conditions, with near-continuous footfall, high dependency on organiser-managed layout, and the greatest reliance on the market's trading rhythm. Their absence therefore represents a meaningful boundary on the findings, and future research should examine whether their accounts would reinforce or complicate the buffering-dominant pattern identified here. This could include using methods suited to time-pressured trading environments, such as follow-up interviews conducted outside market hours, which would enrich understanding of demand management and peer support among high-footfall vendors specifically. Lastly, the selective nature of this CM in only accepting prospective stallholders who are growth-focused qualifies the interpretation and limits the transferability of the findings.

For practitioners, this paper reframes CMs not merely as trading venues but as informal incubators with both enabling and constraining effects: a recognition that creates responsibilities for CM organisers, local authorities, and entrepreneurial support agencies alike.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Doyin Olorunfemi: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ainurul Rosli:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Claude Sonnet 4.6 for language clarity and coherence, and to check that the

argument addressed the research question. Grammarly was used for spelling and grammar checking. All AI-generated suggestions were reviewed against the study's results and literature to ensure theoretical concepts were not misrepresented. The authors take full responsibility for the content of this article.

Declaration of competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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