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Improving the Resilience of Small-Scale Food Entrepreneurs in the New Norm through Government Assistance during Covid-19 Pandemic Era

Harifah Mohd Noor¹, Rima Abdul Rahman², Ubong Imang¹, Adilah Mohd Ramli³, Tatas Hardo Brotosudarmo⁴

¹ Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FSSK), University Malaysia, Sabah, Malaysia,

² Centre for Postgraduate Studies, University Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia,

³ Faculty of Food Sciences and Nutrition, University Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia,

⁴ Faculty of Tourism, Ciputra University, Surabaya

rimar7299@gmail.com, ubong@ums.edu.my, m_adilah@ums.edu.my, tatas.brotosudarmo@ciputra.ac.id
Tel: 019-8161163

Abstract

The presence of small-scale food enterprises contributes significantly to the country's income while also providing numerous job opportunities in the community. The purpose of this study was to look at how small-scale food entrepreneurs try to stay in business while dealing with the effects of COVID-19. The resilience factor was developed using factor analysis, and descriptive analysis was used to examine demography, resilience practices, and the assistance in improving entrepreneurial resilience. This research has identified three resilience factors: add skills, new strategies, and reduce expenses. However, entrepreneurs must improve their resilience by utilizing government assistance. As a result, the government must be vigilant in providing entrepreneurs with the assistance they require to rehabilitate businesses affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: SMEs, New Norms, Resilience, Government Assistance

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1.0 Introduction

In 2018, the contribution of small businesses to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased by RM 521.7 billion, or 38.3 percent, compared to RM491.2 billion, or 37.8 percent, in 2017. (Che Wan, 2019). Every country's existence of small food enterprises has an impact, particularly on the people and the country's development (Buyong et al., 2021). Small food businesses in Hong Kong, the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, and Singapore are among the best because they provide a large labor market and have established a link between fundamental capabilities and good environmental management practices (Jasni et al., 2021). Small-scale food enterprises in Malaysia are often run and developed by people from all walks of life, particularly the rural population, the B40 (bottom 40%), and women (SME. Corp Malaysia, 2020).

However, in early 2020, small-scale food enterprises worldwide were hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, which was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) and spread to entire states, districts, and areas where the outbreak was highly contagious. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the world has experienced an explosion of economic downturn, which has harmed many parties as a result of the declaration of an emergency and the implementation of quarantine to contain the disease's spread. Besides that,

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the government's decision to implement the Movement Control Order (PKP) to combat the spread of this epidemic in Malaysia has restricted the movement of the entire society, preventing all forms of economic activity from taking place as usual. However, small-scale food entrepreneurs bear the brunt of the economic impact even more (Katooro, 2020).

According to Murnaena (2020), there was fear and concern among the local community about the occurrence of COVID-19 infection, which is the cause of the country's economic decline among entrepreneurs. Because of the losses suffered, the implementation of movement control orders (MCO) complicates the situation for food operators (Shaharuddin et al., 2021). Small-scale food enterprises must compete with larger enterprises since most businesses must transition to digital platforms, or information technology, such as the use of social media. Running a business on the internet allows for various forms of marketing, particularly on social media, which was popular during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nurulhayah & Liyana, 2021). Small businesses must also accept that business practices have changed since the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak. If entrepreneurs refuse to adapt to digital business, the transition to digital technology will be difficult (Hazwan, 2020). Many customers will prefer to shop online rather than interact with other shoppers in person. As a result, small traders must accept this new norm and adapt to the current globalization era. Furthermore, small entrepreneurs who continue to conduct business using traditional methods will face sluggish demand and difficulty obtaining production resources (Nor Liza et al., 2020). In summary, the study has two objectives: i) to identify the resilience used by small-scale food entrepreneurs to defend their businesses in a pandemic era, and ii) to investigate the assistance required from government agencies to increase resilience.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Small Enterprise and Resilience

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are defined differently in each country, but in Malaysia, SMEs can be defined by two factors: annual income and employee count. SMEs are classified into three types: micro, small, and medium. With fewer than 30 employees, the annual income for the small category ranges from RM 300,000 to RM 3 million (SME Corp. Malaysia, 2020). Previous researchers, such as Sarafino (1994), defined resilience as the ability to rise above problems or the ability to not dissolve in stress-related feelings. According to Reivich and Shatte (2002), resilience is the ability to respond to life's difficulties in a healthy, productive, and positive manner. According to Reivich and Shatte (2002), resilience not only allows a person to overcome or recover from adversity but also allows a person to improve aspects of his/her life to make them better.

2.2 Practice of Resilience in Businesses

Small entrepreneurs who practice resilience can help them overcome the challenges and impacts they face, particularly during this pandemic era. According to Emmons and McCullough (2003); Doern (2016), SME entrepreneurs use various strategies to maintain positive thinking, such as focusing their minds on positive things and making comparisons with severely affected enterprises to feel their enterprises are better.

Furthermore, Rima et al. (2021) stated that research discovered that this pandemic crisis was a blessing to small entrepreneurs because the presence of this outbreak improved entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial quality. This is because the crisis has created more opportunities for entrepreneurs to innovate, solve problems, and grow their businesses. Personal life, such as family, is a source of strength for an individual to be more efficient in dealing with any problem, according to Eddleston and Powell (2012). This is because to the fact that an entrepreneur who prioritizes his or her family will find more ways to keep the business running during a pandemic. A family factor can motivate a working person to stay in their current position, especially if they have dependents such as children or wives. According to Hofer (1980), when faced with a disaster, a company's strategy should be to cut costs, be thrifty, and reduce assets. This means that businesses must prioritize digitization in their operations because it is a resilience that can assist SMEs in remaining operational as online sales can attract more consumers to buy the products offered (Noor et al., 2021).

2.3 Improving the Resilience of Small Scale Entrepreneurs

According to the National SME Development Council (2006), resilience in enterprises has been improved with government assistance to help entrepreneurs be more resilient during this pandemic era. The Human Resource Development Portal (HRD Portal) has been launched by Pembangunan Sumber Malaysia Berhad (PSMB) to assist SME entrepreneurs. Some information, such as courses, seminars, and conferences, will be shared through this portal to help entrepreneurs get accurate online training. Furthermore, employers and employees can increase their productivity online by using this portal (National SME Development Council, 2006). In this pandemic era, the government also offers several seminars for SMEs on how to market e-commerce so that they can develop digital marketing skills. Ali and colleagues (2020). According to Zutshi et al. (2021), there are four steps that small businesses can take to increase their resilience during this pandemic: openness, victory, innovation, and cooperation. The first step is 'openness,' which encourages entrepreneurs to be transparent and maintain open communication channels with stakeholders who can assist with the entrepreneur's enterprise. Second, increasing resilience through 'victory' requires stakeholder intervention as well as creative thinking, such as government initiatives and streamlining policies by regulations. The third step is to be innovative. This includes a variety of investments in skills and resources that can be transferred from the individual to the organizational level in the context of business transaction support. The final step is collaboration, which involves collaboration with key organizations as the final strategy in increasing business resilience, particularly during this pandemic era. The importance of cooperation among raw material suppliers can improve business management efficiency while avoiding disruptions in the raw material stock cycle in enterprises (Zutshi et al., 2021).

3.0 Methodology

Respondents for this study were selected from among small-scale food entrepreneurs who had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey forms were handed out to 476 people. The questionnaire employed a five-level Likert scale, with responses ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Disagree,' 'Not Sure,' 'Agree,' and 'Strongly Agree.' In this study, a quantitative approach was used, with purposive and snowball samplings. Factor analysis was applied to 14 items related to the resilience used by entrepreneurs to sustain their existing businesses. Furthermore, descriptive analysis with frequency, percentage, and mean score values was used to examine the resilience factors and the assistance needed by entrepreneurs to improve resilience. Based on Table 1, Likert scale levels were interpreted through three levels as used by Pepe and Fleming (1994).

Table 1: Mean Score Index

Mean Score Index	Level
1.00 to 2.33	Low (L)
2.34 to 3.66	Moderate (M)
3.67 to 5.00	High (H)

Source: Pepe and Fleming (1994)

4.0 Findings

4.1 Demography of the Respondents

Females outnumbered males (392 respondents) (84 respondents). With 173 respondents, the age group of 21 to 30 years old was the majority operating food enterprise. The Bugis ethnic group had the most respondents in terms of ethnicity (198). The majority of respondents (285 in total) who ran this business were married. With a total of 265 respondents, the majority of those working in food products had a secondary level of education.

Table 2. Demography of the Respondents

Demography of the Respondents	Percentage (%)	Frequency (person)
Sex		
Male	18	84
Female	82	392
Age		
<20 years old	2	7
21-30 years old	36	173
31-40 years old	23	111
41-50 years old	22	103
>51 years old	17	82
Ethnicity		
Bugis	42	198
Bajau	23	108
Malay	10	47
Dusun	5	24
Others	21	99
Marital Status		
Single	34	162
Married	60	285
Widowed/Divorced	6	29
Education Level		
Primary	12	58
Secondary	56	265
High School	20	93
Degree	13	60

4.2 Analysis of Factors on Resilience Used by Entrepreneurs

If the KMO value is greater than 0.60, factor analysis is appropriate. This resilience has a KMO value of 0.835, indicating that the data does not have multicollinearity issues and that the items in question are suitable for factor analysis. To determine whether correlations between items were sufficient to perform factor analysis, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was used. The p0.05 significant test result for resilience indicated that the correlation between the items was suitable for factor analysis. The KMO test, Bartlett's test, factors, items, loading factor, eigenvalues, percentage of variance, and Cronbach's alpha analysis for resilience are shown in Table 3. The extraction method used the principal component, and the rotation method used varimax with the lowest value of 0.30, as suggested by Field (2013). Following that, the Cronbach's alpha values for all factors were 0.895, 0.725, and 0.794 for resilience (Table 3), with values greater than 0.70 indicating high validity.

Table 3: Factors Analysis on Resilience Used by Entrepreneurs

Item	Factor		
	1	2	3
Add Skills			
Be creative in business	0.877		
Improve product quality	0.848		
Increase entrepreneurial knowledge	0.824		
Diversify products	0.760		
New Strategies			
Make COD delivery		0.837	
Work with food delivery agencies		0.789	
Place the product in grocery stores		0.767	
Doing business at gas stations		0.541	
Become an agent		0.512	
Reduce Expenses			
Reduce the number of employees			0.825
Reduce employee salaries			0.824
Hire family members as employees			0.759
Prepare when requested			0.691
Sell long-lasting food products			0.371
Cronbach's Alpha	0.895	0.725	0.794
Total Variance Explained	3.164	3.001	2.652
Percentage Variance Explained	17.579	16.672	14.736

Notes: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy= 0.835; $\chi^2 = 4533.046$; Bartlett's Test of Sphericity Significance= 0.000; df=153

Figure 1 shows three factors deduced from a factor analysis test: the skills factor, which contains four items and contributes a total variance of 17.579 with an eigenvalue of 3.164; and the new strategies factor, which contains five items and contributes a total variance of 16.672 with an eigenvalue of 3.001. The third factor, reducing expenses, has five items and contributes to total variance of 14.736 with an eigenvalue of 2.652. According to the literature review, the built resilience factor could give entrepreneurs a positive mindset to defend their business.



Figure 1: Food Entrepreneur Resilience Factors

4.3 Resilience Used in Sustaining Enterprises during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Table 4 shows that the majority of small-scale food entrepreneurs practice 'be creative in business' under the add skills factor (mean=4.40). Respondents who use the online sales method said they edit product photos before posting them on social media to make the products sold look appealing. Meanwhile, a respondent who traditionally sells amlang chips and trades used the method of giving free plates for the first ten purchases. With a mean of 4.40, the item 'make COD delivery' is the most dominant resilience used by respondents in the new strategies factor. Next, the reduced expenses factor indicates that one of the dominant resiliences used is 'reduce the number of employees,' with a mean=4.40.

Table 4: Resilience of Small-Scale Food Entrepreneurs to Survive During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Add Skills Factor	Mean	Scale
Improve product quality	4.30	H
Be creative in business	4.40	H
Increase entrepreneurial knowledge	4.20	H
Diversify products	4.30	H
New Strategies Factor	Mean	Scale
Make COD delivery	4.40	H
Place the product in grocery stores	3.90	H
Doing business at gas stations	3.40	H
Doing business online	4.30	H

Work with food delivery agencies	4.20	H
Reduce Expenses Factor	Mean	Scale
Reduce the number of employees	4.40	H
Reduce employee salaries	4.30	H
Hire family members as employees	4.20	H
Sell long-lasting food products	4.30	H

4.4 Enhancing Resilience Through Government Assistance

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on respondents has prompted them to consider the resilience required to sustain existing businesses. However, the respondents continue to require government assistance to improve their resilience. The assistance required by respondents to improve their existing resilience is shown in Table 5 below. The results show that respondents need the most help with 'training to expand the product market through online advertising,' with a mean=4.40. Following that, 'to create a website for the product' and 'government marketing assistance' each received a mean=4.30, followed by assistance in 'training to sell products live,' which received a mean=4.20. Finally, 'assistance in automation and digital facilities' received a mean score of 3.10, indicating a moderate level.

According to interviews with Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority (FAMA) officers, they collaborated with Shopee in 2021 and registered food entrepreneurs' products, specifically Sabah food products, in Shopee e-commerce marketing. As a result, he encourages small-scale food entrepreneurs to use information technology so that they can participate in marketing through Shopee e-commerce.

“...we also collaborated with Shopee last year (2021) where we helped entrepreneurs to market their products there (Shopee), especially for Sabah products...yes, the products we market at Shopee are only for registered entrepreneurs, with a license, at least...”

(Informant: FAMA Company Officer)

Table 5: Improving Resilience

Improving Resilience	Mean	Scale
Training to expand the market through online advertising	4.40	H
Training to create a website for the product	4.30	H
Marketing assistance from the government	4.30	H
Training to sell products 'live'	4.20	H
Providing a website for entrepreneurs to market their products	4.10	H
Discount on course/class/training participation fees	3.90	H
Assistance in internet data	3.70	H
Assistance in automation and digital facilities	3.10	M

5.0 Discussion

The resulting resilience is a result of the impact that small-scale food entrepreneurs had during the pandemic era. With the implementation of new business norms, enterprise activities have changed (Aziz et al., 2021). According to Rosita et al. (2017), food entrepreneurs must use brand identity to build stronger and more resilient corporate entities in the market. This can demonstrate an entrepreneur's business creativity. Entrepreneurs must be creative in giving their products a good brand in terms of graphic design, attractive and informative labels, and having value (Rosita et al., 2017), According to Mahani and Suraiya (2018), entrepreneurs should use smart packaging in their businesses to make them appear more creative and appealing to customers.

According to a study conducted by Muhammad Zakwan et al. (2021), food entrepreneurs use a cash-on-delivery (COD) strategy to deliver to the customer's location. This is to boost entrepreneur profits as a result of many people being afraid to gather in large numbers at business premises due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in the country. Furthermore, food entrepreneurs are implementing initiatives to reduce the number of employees to keep businesses from becoming overburdened. Respondents stated that because of the declining demand, this pandemic does not necessitate a large amount of manpower to produce the product.

However, respondents required government assistance to boost the existing resilience used during the pandemic. Doing business online is one of the resiliences with the highest value, as it was used by the majority of respondents. However, because doing business online has become a priority for marketing products in the new norm, respondents who lack the necessary skills must also comply and present themselves in this manner. Entrepreneurs who were inefficient in their use of online marketing, according to Ali et al. (2020), were unable to sustain their businesses. As a result, with assistance such as training to expand the market through online advertising and training to create a website, respondents' resilience in terms of online business can be increased. Furthermore, resilience, such as being creative in business, can be enhanced with government marketing assistance. This can increase consumer trust and ensure the product's safety before it reaches the consumer. Finally, the study's findings reveal three built-in resilience factors: the skills addition factor, the new

strategy factor, and the expense reduction factor. 'Be innovative in business', 'make COD deliveries', and 'reduce the number of employees' are resilient items that are frequently used. To increase resilience, respondents required 'training to expand the market through online advertising.'

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Finally, this study looks into how small-scale food entrepreneurs kept their businesses running after the COVID-19 outbreak. However, it has been discovered that the existing resilience used by food operators needs to be improved with the assistance of the government. In general, new norms have prioritized online businesses for entrepreneurs. Because there are still entrepreneurs who lack skills in using digital technology to market their products online, entrepreneurs require government assistance in the form of 'training to expand the market through online advertising.' These findings can be used by entrepreneurs as a guide to help them better prepare for the challenges that their businesses may face. Furthermore, this research can assist authorities in developing strategies to assist small-scale food entrepreneurs in increasing their resilience, particularly those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A limitation of this study is the lack of articles on enhancing resilience through government assistance among small food entrepreneurs during pandemic crises. Previous studies, on the other hand, have provided the best definition knowledge, ensuring that this study is on the right track. As a result, future researchers are encouraged to conduct additional research on the assistance needed by food entrepreneurs in order to improve the existing resilience.

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Contributions of this Paper to Related Fields of Study

This study is intended to serve as a guide for entrepreneurs on how to keep their businesses running in the event of a disaster that disrupts business operations. Furthermore, this study may open stakeholders' eyes to the possibility of developing various strategies to help small-scale food entrepreneurs improve their resilience.

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