

Sustainability of Traditional Food Entrepreneurs Amid Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on local entrepreneurs in Malaysia, focusing on those selling traditional food in Selangor and Sabah. Using a qualitative approach, interviews were conducted with 20 entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds across the two states. Open-ended, semi-structured questions were employed to gather detailed insights, and the responses were transcribed, categorised, coded and analysed thematically. From the analysis, one theme emerged. The theme identified is sustainability (coded: adaptation to technology). Entrepreneurs in both states adopted new strategies, including social media and e-commerce, to sustain their businesses during the pandemic. Their willingness and ability to embrace these changes differed according to demographic factors as they navigated the challenges of relearning and adapting with current market trends.

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1. Introduction

Food plays a vital role in shaping our identity, particularly in group settings, as it reflects diversity, hierarchy, and social organisation while influencing personal identity through food choices (Reddy & van Dam, 2020). Moreover, food is deeply connected to a nation's culture and identity, and it is shaped by elements such as social background, language, and beliefs (van Trung & Quoc Dao, 2024). Traditional food plays a key role in establishing regional identity within economic and political contexts (Florek & Gazda, 2021). In light of this, a country needs to prioritise sustainability, particularly in today's modernised world.

1.1 Entrepreneurs

The tourism sector is made up of micro, small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs). According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation, SMEs make up approximately 80% of all tourism businesses globally (Kukanja *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, SMEs constitute over 90% of all business entities within the European Union (Secinaro *et al.*, 2020). These enterprises are defined by specific government criteria, such as employee numbers and annual turnover, which vary by country. For instance, in Malaysia, small enterprises employ between 5 and < 30 people, while medium enterprises have 30 to 75 employees (Azmi, 2020). In contrast, Georgia categorises small businesses as having up to 50 employees and medium

enterprises as having up to 249 employees (Gvelesiani *et al.*, 2020). In Canada, SMEs are defined as businesses with fewer than 500 employees and annual revenues below \$50 million (Ibanescu *et al.*, 2019). SMEs operate primarily in the manufacturing and services sectors, with tourism falling under the service category.

1.2 Shifts in Traditional Food Consumption

The COVID-19 outbreak has significantly altered traditional food preferences and consumer behaviours (Quintiro-Angel *et al.*, 2022). The pandemic's aftermath has brought changes to the food system, including purchasing methods, preparation, packaging, distribution, and accessibility (Gomez-Corona *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, many heritage food providers ceased wholesale operations due to the closure of their premises during the pandemic (Quintiro-Angel *et al.*, 2022). Traditional food, as defined in this study, is a vital aspect of a community's or country's heritage, reflecting unique origins, dietary habits, and cultural identity (Almansouri *et al.*, 2021). It also contributes to local agro-food development, such as traditional cuisines and ingredients, while supporting crafts that attract locals and tourists seeking authentic culinary experiences (Bessiere & Tibere, 2013). This study aimed to investigate the sustainability of local entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Materials and Methods

A qualitative approach was applied in this study, employing semi-structured interviews that were reviewed and refined based on feedback from an academic peer review. Adjustments were made in accordance with their suggestions. The participants for the qualitative method were local entrepreneurs from Selangor and Sabah who sold traditional food listed as recognised as part of the national food heritage. The participants from each state were selected to represent a diverse range of entrepreneurs, including stalls, restaurants, SMEs and home-based businesses. According to Berg (2004), a sample of five to twenty key informants is adequate for qualitative research.

Participants from Selangor and Sabah were invited to participate in the study through telephone and email to confirm their willingness. Upon receiving consent, the researcher scheduled and conducted individual interviews with 20 participants within the study period from October 2020 to December 2021. The interview dates and times were arranged to accommodate the participants' availability. However, one participant from Selangor had to withdraw due to unforeseen circumstances. The study prioritised confidentiality, fostering trust, and encouraging participants to share information willingly. To ensure privacy, the participant's identities were kept anonymous. Given the restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted remotely via online video calls or telephone, recorded with permission, and lasted between 30 to 40 minutes per session.

Semi-structured interview questions were designed to align with the study's objective and were adapted from existing literature (Ramli *et al.*, 2015; Ramli *et al.*, 2016). A total of ten open-ended questions were developed to facilitate in-depth and detailed discussion during the interview sessions. Interviews were conducted in either Bahasa Malaysia or English, with responses later translated into English for analysis. The transcription process involved three analytical steps: categorisation, coding and evaluation. The interviews were systematically categorised using an emerging category scheme, facilitating content verification (Tellström *et al.*, 2006). Data was analysed and organised using Atlas. ti, a qualitative data analysis software that supports the descriptions, analysis, and interpretation of data collected through semi-structured methods. The categorisation of themes and coding emphasised the relative importance of different sections.

3. Results and Discussion

During the interviews, twenty participants were asked about the “type of food being sold?” and the “method of selling” they used. From the responses, researchers identified a central theme: sustainability, with a corresponding code being “adaptation to technology,” as presented in Table 4. The subsequent paragraph overviews the participants’ profiles and the coding process under this identified theme.

3.1 Participants profile

Twenty participants, ranging from 30 to 71 years old, took part in the interviews. They came from diverse business backgrounds, including restaurants, stalls, home-based catering, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The participants had varied levels of business experience, ranging from 2 to 24 years. Notably, there was a difference in business experiences between participants from Selangor and Sabah, particularly in the traditional food sector, as illustrated in Table 1. Sociodemographic factors such as age, gender, and experience in business play crucial aspects in business sustainability in the competitive industry as well as creating a niche segment in the agricultural and tourism industry (Wan Ahmad *et al.*, 2011; Abas *et al.*, 2023).

Table 1 Participant profile

| Code | Age | Ethnic | Business experiences |
|----------|-----|--------|----------------------|
| PRSG1 | - | Malay | 23 |
| PRSG 2 | 52 | Malay | 22 |
| PGSG 3 | 56 | Malay | 10 |
| PGSG 4 | 67 | Malay | 3 |
| PGSG 5 | 61 | Malay | 24 |
| PGSG 6 | 40 | Malay | 22 |
| PGSG 7 | 48 | Malay | 4 |
| PHSG 8 | 56 | Malay | 7 |
| PHSG 9 | 37 | Malay | 7 |
| PHSB1 | 30 | Dusun | 2 |
| PGSB 4 | 32 | Jawa | 8 |
| PGSB 6 | 52 | Dusun | 5 |
| PRSB 7 | 55 | Malay | 7 |
| PRSB 8 | 31 | Brunei | 10 |
| PRSB 9 | 71 | Bajau | 7 |
| PRSB 10 | 34 | Bajau | 7 |
| PRSB 11 | 25 | Bugis | 13 |
| PSMESB 1 | 49 | Dusun | 5 |
| PSMESB 2 | 36 | Dusun | 6 |
| PSMESB 5 | 44 | Dusun | 7 |

Note: Location: Selangor – SG; Sabah- SB

Note: Type of business: PR- Restaurant; PG- Stall; PH- Home-based catering; PSME-Small medium enterprise

3.1.1 Food category

Code 1: Type of food

Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the types of food offered by participants, showcasing a range of traditional dishes from *nasi lemak* to *ambuyat* and various dessert cakes. This indicates that participants either sold a wide array of foods (such as *nasi lemak*, *curry*, *sambal goreng*, *kuih akok*) or focused on a single dish,

like *murtabak*. The food is classified into categories, including rice, gravies and accompaniments, appetisers, cake and desserts. The majority of these dishes are included in the Malaysian food heritage (Ramli *et al.*, 2016; Ramli *et al.*, 2023).

Table 2 Traditional food sold by Selangor participants

| Code | Traditional food |
|--------|--|
| PRSG 1 | <i>Masak Lemak, Rebung Perut, Masak Lemak Daging Salai & Gulai</i> |
| PRSG 2 | <i>Lontong, Nasi Minyak, Soto, Nasi Briyani, Sambal Goreng, Tempe</i> |
| PGSG 3 | <i>Kuih Talam, Koci</i> |
| PGSG 4 | <i>Murtabak</i> |
| PGSG 5 | <i>Pau, Donut, Keria, Kasturi, Ketayap, Lempeng. Karipap, Bingka Ubi, Kuih Koci, Pulut Panggang</i> |
| PGSG 6 | <i>Satay</i> |
| PGSG 7 | <i>Cendol</i> |
| PHSG 8 | <i>Kuih Akok, Tepung Pelita</i> |
| PHSG 9 | <i>Kuih Talam Tradisional, Kuih Seri Muka, Kole Kacang, Kuih Lapis, Kuih Cara Berlauk, Nona Manis, Popia</i> |

Table 3 Traditional food sold by Sabah participants

| Code | Traditional food |
|----------|--|
| PHSB 1 | <i>Tausi Homemade, Bambang, Hinava</i> |
| PGSB 4 | <i>Kuih Sapit, Kuih Jala</i> |
| PGSB 6 | <i>Hinava, Tuhau, Ambuyat</i> |
| PRSB 7 | <i>Nasi Lemak, Curry gravies, Umbut Pisang</i> |
| PRSB 8 | <i>Cendol, Kuih Muih (variety)</i> |
| PRSB 9 | <i>Ambuyat, Ikan Ampap</i> |
| PRSB 10 | <i>Hinava, Ikan Bakar, Latok, Agal-Agal</i> |
| PRSB 11 | <i>Chicken Rice, Ikan bakar, Nasi Kuning</i> |
| PSMESB 1 | <i>Sambal Tuhau, Sambal Lada</i> |
| PSMESB 2 | <i>Serunding Tuhau, Bambang</i> |
| PSMESB 5 | <i>Sambal Tuhau, Sambal Lada</i> |

3.2 Theme 1: Sustainable

Code 1: Adaptation to technology

The type of business operated by participants from Selangor included selling from their locations and utilising social media platforms. This is illustrated in Table 4, where participants PGSG 3 and PHSG 8 receive substantial order through catering and hotel functions. They also delivered to their customers' locations. Additionally, one of the participants from Selangor utilised social media to process online orders. On the other hand, participants from Sabah, PGSB 6 and PSMESB 5 employed electronic media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp to promote their food and accept orders. They typically deliver large quantities to their customers, as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4 Adaptation to electronic media

| | |
|---|----------|
| "...we are more towards catering and hotels... it is usually in large quantities... such as catering or feasts, events... if it is for a gathering we will deliver it of course... we have our own vehicle for deliveries..." | PGSG 3 |
| "...makcik only makes a little... after that anything left over is sold online using Whatapp application because makcik would not put it at the stall..." | PHSG 8 |
| "...we do it ourselves... we make food delivery..yes.. I use Facebook and WhatsApp..." | PGSB 6 |
| "...there are two types... the daily and bulk buyers which we send it over with local supermarket... initially I sold via WhatsApp to friends and at Tamparuli day market every Wednesday... where I started trading every week..." | PSMESB 5 |

Table 1 displays the demographic background of the participants, who were all aged between 40 and 55. They shared their experience selling their food using two methods. The first method uses the traditional selling methods, where they supply their food straight to customers, such as deliveries to events (i.e. catering), hotels and supermarkets. The second method uses electronic media such as social media platforms (i.e. WhatsApp) and social networking sites (i.e. Facebook) for business transactions and promotion. They utilised electronic media as an alternative means to promote their products throughout the pandemic. These results correspond with the insight of Petrescu-Mag *et al.*, (2020), who indicated that entrepreneurs could opt for either traditional techniques or technology to uphold their business and attract new customers, particularly as online purchases increase. In contrast to the observation made by Skalkos., *et al* (2021), which suggest that customers primarily purchase traditional food items from supermarkets or grocery stores if available, online purchases remain relatively low despite a general shift toward more online shopping due to the pandemic. The insights focus more on the entrepreneurs' viewpoints. They are closely aligned with Petrescu-Mag *et al.*, (2020) who asserts that entrepreneurs aim to sustain their business and customer base during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Conclusion

Entrepreneurs in Selangor and Sabah are offering similar types of food. Most of Selangor's entrepreneurs have over 24 years of experience in the industry, in contrast to their Sabah counterparts, who have less than 13 years in the traditional food sector. This disparity may be linked to the age of entrepreneurs, as the youngest individual from Selangor is 37 years old, while the youngest in Sabah is 25. Age can influence how people respond to change, which is particularly crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic. Local entrepreneurs must balance traditional business methods (e.g., direct customer delivery and bulk supply) with modern technological adaptations. Utilising social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook can help retain existing customers and attract new ones.

With the country opening its borders to international tourists in mid of 2022, these local entrepreneurs are anticipated to attract local and international customers interested in traditional food by adapting new technology to expand their market. Entrepreneurs need to be ready to learn technology knowledge and skills on different social media platforms and e-commerce to sustain their business after the pandemic. As for potential customers, it opens up a new category of customers who prefer to purchase products online. Studying and documenting traditional food-based entrepreneurs locally is essential to understand how far COVID 19 has affected local businesses. However, it is important to note that the study mainly involved Malay individuals from Selangor state, whereas Sabah has a more diverse range of ethnicities. This could lead to biases when interpreting information about multiculturalism in Malaysia.

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