

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CRISIS ON MICRO-ENTREPRENEURS IN MALAYSIA: IMPACT AND MITIGATION APPROACHES

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Abstract: *This study aims to explore the impact of the outbreak during movement control order (MCO) to micro-entrepreneurs under Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM) program and the current approach used to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on their business. This study conducted using a qualitative approach, an in-depth interview using a semi-structured interview format with six women micro-entrepreneurs under Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM) program. The selection of respondents through the non-probability sampling technique (purposive sampling) via the e-commerce platform of AIM is known as BazarSahabat. The paper provides two main themes for the impact on micro-entrepreneurs, namely financial issues and operational disruptions. Meanwhile, for mitigation approaches, the consensus pattern among respondents was related to adopting new norms, including changing business operation locations from the physical shop to home-based and online platforms. This study has a limitation in terms of generalizations of the findings and study focus. However, despite the limitations, the researchers believe, the outcomes of the study able to be a steppingstone for future research in this study area. Thus, future research may further explore using survey analysis to a larger group of respondents to understand the impact and survival mechanism adopted by them in response to the crisis. The paper includes implications of valuable insights to assist the regulator and related agencies, including Islamic micro institutions that are involved in micro-business development in conjunction with the crisis. This research is a pioneering attempt to understanding the impact of the outbreak during MCO to micro-entrepreneurs in Malaysia's microfinance program and thus explores the current approach used to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on their business.*

Keywords: *Covid-19 Pandemic, Micro-entrepreneurs, Malaysia, Impact, Mitigation Approach*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The acute respiratory outbreaks crisis or known as Novel Coronavirus (Covid-19) has affecting billion of people and spread worldwide to more than 200 countries, including Europe, America, Middle East, and Asia (WHO, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) has categorized this outbreak as a pandemic when it indicates an increase in human-to-human infections (Qiu, Rutherford, Mao, & Chu, 2017) and leading to more than 200, 000 deaths within three months of the outbreak (WHO, 2020). Unsurprisingly, this outbreak has exceeded the infection rates and the number of deaths for other coronavirus such as SARS-CoV, MERS-CoV, and Influenza (Liu, Gayle, Wilder-Smith, & Rocklöv, 2020; Peeri et al., 2020). Realizing this pandemic has fastened contagious, previous studies have contended that restriction of movement is seen as the best approach to control the spread of infectious diseases (Chinazzi et al., 2020; Smith & Freedman, 2020; Sohrabi et al., 2020). Many countries have imposed travel restrictions, social distances, and postponements of events for at least 14 days in their respective countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand (Fabeil, Pazim, & Langgat, 2020).

The Malaysian government is among the earliest country in Asia to announce a Movement Control Order (MCO) which has started on March 18, 2020, as a precautionary measure in response to the outbreak of Covid-19 in the country (Prime Minister's Special Message, 2020). Among the restrictions mentioned are the closure of government and private premises, except those related to key national services such as health and safety, telecommunications, retail, finance, and transportation (National Security Council, 2020).

Although the approach of MCO was able to curb the spread of the virus, the negative impacts have been executed to the global economy, industries, corporations, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) including small enterprises. From Global Capital Confidence survey by Ernst and Young (2020) reported that 73 percent of respondents perceived a significant impact on the global economy while the remaining 27 percent perceived a slight impact. Meanwhile, Congressional Research Service (2020) reported that as of March 2020, the crisis had trimmed the global economic growth by 0.5 percent to 1.5 percent.

For micro-enterprises, the impacts of this outbreak have tremendously affected their business activities. Among the hurdles faced by micro-entrepreneurs such as problems in cash flow due to losses of daily income, operation disruption, laying off workers, and supply chain disruption (Che Omar, Ishak, & Jusoh, 2020; Fabeil et al., 2020). Moreover, Bartz and Winkler (2016) emphasize that micro-enterprises show relatively long growth in times of crisis compared to large companies growing faster and more flexible. Fabeil et al., (2020) also found that small business in rural areas experiences more significant challenges than enterprise in urban and developed areas due to their remoteness, especially in terms of infrastructure constraints, labor availability and limited financial reserves. Hence, the effects of the outbreaks and challenges are distinctive to an individual, types of business activity, geographical areas, size, and resources owned (Cassia & Minola, 2012; Lai and Scheele 2018).

Nevertheless, most of the previous studies had given concern solely on the impact of crisis which has not been fully explored on the mitigation approaches to lessen the impact. The same outcomes were also found by Cook's (2015) finding, which indicates that 75 percent of businesses without a continuity plan would collapse within three years after a disaster or crisis occurs. Therefore, this study aims to explore the impact of the outbreak during MCO on micro-entrepreneurs and the current approach used to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on their business. This study provides valuable insights to assist the regulator and related agencies, including Islamic micro institutions that are involved in micro-business development in conjunction with the crisis.

2. Literature review

2.1 Impact of Covid-19 pandemic crisis on micro-entrepreneurs

A crisis can be defined as a situation faced by individuals, groups, or organizations that they cannot manage using standard routine procedures (Booth, 1993; Anthony, Rosliza and Lai, 2019; Lai, 2020). From the study, the author classified crisis into three types, namely gradual threat, periodic threat, and sudden threat. Concerning Covid-19 pandemic crisis, it categorized as 'sudden threat' which happen unexpectedly that not only affect health condition but significant caused global economic shock (Booth, 1993). For small enterprises, major hurdles faced by them are disruption of business operation where temporary closure in the lockdown period and some sector had permanently close due to financial problems (Bartik et al., 2020). Bartz and Winkler (2016) assert that micro-enterprises show relatively slow growth in times of crisis, indicating fragilities compared to large firms that grow faster and more flexible.

Besides, Bartik et al.,(2020) surveyed 5,800 small businesses in America found that the financial fragile is one of the more significant impacts on this group. From the result, the median firm with under \$10,000 in monthly expenses has a month of cash on hand. The median firm typically has less than 15 days of cash for all the higher expenditure levels based on their pre-crisis expense levels. Besides, the pandemic has been exposed to the negative impact on laying off workers and supply chain disruption. For example, a study by Che Omar et al., (2020) found that the respondents express their difficulty to obtain raw material where it is mostly imported from China and limited numbers of suppliers available.

Meanwhile, Fairlie (2020) provides an analysis of impacts of the pandemic on the active small businesses in the United States using nationally representative data from the April 2020 CPS. The results revealed that it was incredibly hard for African-American businesses to experience a 41 percent drop. While business owners of Latinx dropped by 32 percent and business owners of Asia dropped by 26 percent. From the past researchers, this pandemic has triggered all over the world economic growth.

2.2 Resource-Based View Theory and Crisis mitigation approaches

Resource-based view theory (RBV) has recognized the role of idiosyncratic approaches, organizational resources, and certain internal factors as firm tools in enhancing the efficiency and sustainability of the firms (Warnier, Weppe, & Lecocq, 2013). Thus, in

the situation of crisis and disaster, applying strategies and mitigation approaches are essential as a focal organizational tool for evaluating firm decision making, competitive advantages, efficiency, and performance (Azmi, Aida, & Diana, 2020; Mahani & Suraiya, 2019). It is also supported by Quarantelli, Lagadec, and Boin (2007) that planning and managing process is vital to have during disaster and crisis. They define managing as a contingency tactic used in dealing with a crisis, while planning refers to strategies that need to be done in dealing with future situations. Cook (2015) added that the business continuity strategy should be accompanied by crisis recovery plans involving resumption and restoration of operation.

Fabeil et al., (2020) and Lai and Scheele (2018) also highlighted that strategy is essential for business enterprises as it affects the performance of current and future business. McCarthy (2003), in his study of crisis management of entrepreneurial firms, shows that crisis experience causes entrepreneurs to be more rational and guided by orderly behavior in decision making. Several approaches can be undertaken by entrepreneurs during the crisis such as innovation in marketing through promotion or pricing (Naidoo, 2010), alternative distribution channels (Yu-lian, 2008), product reengineering, and use of cheap and effective online campaign (Bourletidis & Triantafyllopoulos, 2014), new products and services caring for the social-environment (Lai, Toh, and Alkhrabsheh, 2020).

Moreover, others alternative approaches are used for business operations are changes of business strategies by produce emerging product to meet current customer's needs (Fabeil et al., 2020, Lai, 2020), utilizing digital marketing through social media and e-commerce platform (Palmatier, Sivadas, Stern, & El-Ansary, 2020), change to electronic payment (Fabeil et al., 2020; Lai, et al., 2020) as well as adopted cash on delivery (COD) transaction (Halim, 2020). All these mitigation approaches are essential to lessen the impact of the crisis on their business activities and survival strategies.

2.3 Economic stimulus package for micro, small, medium and enterprises

Understanding that the pandemic has triggered economic shocks, most countries provide extraordinary stimulus funds to enhance the business sector as well as their employees (OECD, 2020). For the Malaysian government, a stimulus package known as the PRIHATIN Economic Stimulus Package was launched on 26 March 2020. From the Prime Minister's speech, an estimated RM3.3 billion has been allocated to assist small, medium, and enterprises in maintaining the domestic business, employment, and investment operations. The funds are channeled to various sectors through financial institutions, including commercial banks, Islamic banks, and other development financial institutions. The Special Relief Facility (SRF) from Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM) amounting to RM3.0 billion is allocated to ease the burden of SMEs in terms of short-term cash flow and working capital. The loan package is equipped with a financing rate of 3.75% per annum including a guarantee fee by Credit Guarantee Corporation (CGC) reserved for SMEs with a maximum shareholder fund of RM5 million (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2020).

Besides, considering the hardship face by the business sector, particularly SMEs, the additional package had allocated under the Additional PRIHATIN SME Economic Stimulus Package (PRIHATIN SME+) amounting to RM10 billion (Muhyiddin, 2020).

The additional package is used to support SMEs' cash flow problems. Throughout the new scheme, a special allocation of wage subsidies from RM600 to RM1200 per month is introduced for retaining the SMEs workforce for the next six months. The new financing facility of RM2.1 billion was also announced in terms of micro-enterprises loan with the maximum amount of RM3000 per eligible company.

Meanwhile, BNM had also announced for automatic deferment of all loans and financing repayments for 6 months to individuals and SMEs to relieved their burden that was affected by the pandemic crisis. Similarly, government agencies such as MARA, TEKUN Nasional had given six months of an automatic moratorium to their client effective 1st March 2020 (Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives, 2020). For TEKUN Nasional, several schemes are being offered to micro-enterprises that are affected by this crisis. These include TEKUN Business Recovery Scheme (TBRS), TEKUN Mobilepreneur 2.0 financing scheme, and Micro Sector Business Recovery Financing Scheme (CBRM) (TEKUN, 2020).

Likewise, micro-business who obtain financial aids from Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM), introduced the Economic Stimulus Package that assisted in reducing the negative impact of the client's economic activities over the outbreak (AIM, 2020b). Their efforts were in line with the government's call to support the fight against Covid-19. According to the statement by Managing Director of AIM, Shamir Aziz, the allocation of RM682.36 billion under the package to assist clients which affected their livelihood and ability to repay their loans (AIM, 2020b). Under the package, firstly the moratorium that offered has extended from two weeks of financing repayment deferment started from March 18, 2020, until June 30, 2020, which made after given current development of the outbreak. Secondly, clients are allowed to make a one-off withdrawal of RM300 from their Compulsory Savings which involves an allocation of RM112.5 million. Thirdly, this package offers a three-month deferment of the *I-Lestari* and *I-Usahawan Koop Sahabat* financing repayment with no additional charge for 400 borrowers involving a sum of RM300,000. Fourth, a deferment of the *Sahabat Ar-Rahnu* Auction involving 1,500 borrowers/ pawnbrokers totaling RM120,000 until the end of the MCO. Fifth, for 17,444 *sahabat asnaf* (deserving recipients), they will get cash RM250 from distribution of the Koop Sahabat's business zakat distribution amounting to RM621,104, AIM Welfare Aid Fund of RM2.6 million, and AIM Corporate Benefit Fund of RM1.14 million. In this package, Group Fund financing is provided for 10,000 *Sahabat* AIM at a maximum limit of RM1,000 per loan involving a sum of RM10 million.

Moreover, realizing the outbreak is possible to recover in a short-term period, from time-to-time AIM is to continue planning to assist its clients. Thus, with the growing opportunity from digital transformation, AIM has taken proactive action to give training on digital marketing to their clients. The incentives can be seen, initially, during this crisis period, a total of 200 clients or *sahabat* were selected to participate in the "*Bengkel Keusahawanan Sahabat AIM 2020*" which highlighted on the effective marketing techniques especially using the digital platform. In the new norms practice, it is vital to understand the concept and marketing platforms in order to increase sales and business

growth. This workshop was officiated by the Minister of Defense of Malaysia, YB Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri (AIM, 2020a).

Despite, various efforts and assistance are provided by the government as well as NGOs, each of the entrepreneurs has different experiences in facing this pandemic as well as their ability to mitigate the impact on their business activities. Therefore, this study aims to explore the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on AIM's micro-entrepreneurs and to identify the mitigating approaches in dealing with this pandemic crisis.

3. Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative methodology with an in-depth interview. As currently, the pandemic outbreak is still ongoing, the safest communication channel is using telephone interviews (Che Omar et al., 2020) and allows the participant to express their thought and belief based on their life experience (Fabeil et al., 2020). Thus, a semi-structured interview via telephone was selected to gain in-depth insight from the participants. The selected participants in these studies were female as the majority of the micro-entrepreneurs under AIM's program were women. The participant selected to gain their experience, business, and survival strategies during Covid-19. A total of six micro-entrepreneurs was interviewed and selected through a non-probability sampling technique (purposive sampling) via the e-commerce platform of AIM known as *BazarSahabat*. The interview was conducted in July 2020.

The interview protocol begins with the researcher first call the micro-entrepreneurs to inform and get the consent of the interview session. Out of twenty selected participants, three of them were free to be interviewed immediately, and others were set on a specific time to be interviewed due to having some work. Based on the interview, it is believed that the data has reached saturation at six (6) interviews. While the guidelines for sample size in the qualitative research suggested by Morse (2000) are 30-50 interviews, Creswell (1998) is 20 to 30 interviews for grounded methodology, and Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) are 15 interviews for all qualitative study, there is evidence that certain researchers may not strictly adhere to them. Besides, according to Walker (2012), data saturation is achieved when sufficient information is available to replicate the study, the ability to obtain new information has been achieved (Guest et al., 2006) and further coding is no longer feasible (Guest et al., 2006) hence, this study has met the requirement for data saturation.

Each of the interview sessions took 15-20 minutes each and was audio-recorded with the participant's permission. The interview recording was later transcribed and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. This approach involved the coding, thematization, summarizing, and interpretation of data which follows by previous studies in the qualitative method (Austin & Sutton, 2015; Che Omar et al., 2020). Participant characteristics as follows:

Table 1.0 Sample characteristic

Abbreviation	Age	Location	Type of business	Operation Method
Participant 1	56	Johor	Food and beverages	Premise
Participant 2	45	Selangor	Food and beverages	Mobile
Participant 3	42	Pahang	Beauty and cosmetic	Premise
Participant 4	38	Perak	Beauty and cosmetic	Online
Participant 5	46	Selangor	Direct Selling	Premise
Participant 6	42	Selangor	Beauty and cosmetic	Home-based

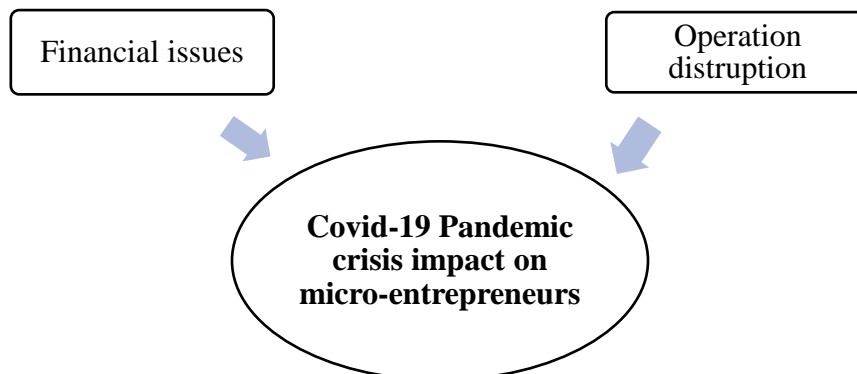
4. Findings and discussion

Based on the interview, three major themes emerged for the studies as follows:

Research Objectives	Key Findings
To investigate Covid-19 pandemic crisis impact on micro-entrepreneurs	- Financial issues - Operation disruption
To investigate mitigation approaches used by micro-entrepreneurs in managing the Covid-19 impact	Adapting to the new norm

Covid-19 Pandemic crisis impact on micro-entrepreneurs

Two main themes emerged from the data as follows:



The finding of the studies illustrates that majority of the participants are facing operation disruptions, and financial issues during the Covid-19 pandemic. The situations believed associates with the movement control order (MCO) by the governments. The government order on the closure of all non-essentials business premises has standstill the micro-entrepreneurs in the traveling. Although, some of the micro-entrepreneurs are involved in domestics needs and necessities of people and classified under essential industry yet some of the micro-entrepreneurs still face issues in terms of logistic supply. In addition to that, some of the micro-entrepreneurs interviewed in these studies do not have a physical shop and depending on logistic supply from their suppliers, thus with the existence of MCO their

operations had to stop and burdened by unexpected operational cost. Extract from the interview as follows:

Since our production during the first week of MCO closed, our operation thus had to fully stop at that time. Then, even in the second week, the government has lifted MCO order for essential business we still face some operation issues since our traveling period getting longer and logistic supply and delivery facing delayed...-Participant 1

It hard for me during MCO since I cannot travel anywhere, plus I have to pay for shop lot rental, etc. Besides, AIM loan repayment usually in a short period of time it hard for me to roll up the capital.-Participant 4

Based on the interview responses, it can be seen that MCO had led some micro-entrepreneurs towards financial distress and had to close down their physical shop to support the unexpected increase in production cost due to operational disruptions. The prolonged of the MCO period hard burdens those micro-entrepreneurs and probably turn the company into bankrupt position. The size of the monthly loan's repayment, especially the physical shop and business capital loan believed to contribute to a higher risk of bankruptcy consistent with (Cassia & Minola, 2012; Svatsova, 2017) proposition. Some of the interview extract as below:

I have to close my shop since I don't have enough cash to pay the rental even to pay AIM for the loan I make. The MCO had banned me from traveling thus it hard for me to get supply, etc.. -Participant 3

I cannot operate since MCO, I have to close my kiosk and it is really struggled for me to continues my business with all the rent, loan, etc- Participant 5

I have to close my business since I don't have any physical shop. Usually, I will park my food truck in front of the school. So when the school closed for MCO, I have no place to go ..- Participant 2

In addition to that, the pandemic had lead micro-entrepreneurs in these studies to struggle with financial issues even after MCO banned lifted. The situation believed associates with their knowledge and poor financial management. Some of the interview extract as below:

Since its MCO, I cannot go anywhere to promote my cosmetic product. Although I used an online platform to promote my business still delivery delayed during MCO had affected my business, even after MCO I found it hard for me to restart my business since we solely depending on the business income, so it hard for me to make a profit and marketing at the same time-Participant 6

Due to the MCO, I have to close down my shop and begin selling at home, still, it is hard since I had to restart everything and lots of money has been spent on the shop and other expenses-Participant 3

Since during MCO I have several logistic issues, I had to make loan and everything to cover several costs, then after the government lifted MCO banned, I still struggled to start my business as usual since I had to pay the loan and etc. -Participant 4

The outcomes of the studies, however, did not surprising since, the same outcomes also reported by Che Omar et al., (2020) in their study on Covid-19 pandemic impact on SMEs. In contrast to SMEs, the outcomes reported by micro-entrepreneurs thus as expected since they are less exposed to the business and financial management and usually operated without long term strategies. Nevertheless, the impacts of Covid-19 towards these micro-entrepreneurs are not to be neglected since; this group of people depends solely on the government's efforts to improve their quality of life.

The mitigating approach used by the micro-entrepreneur in managing Covid-19 Pandemics

Meanwhile, in mitigating the impact of Covid-19 pandemics, the strategies used by micro-entrepreneur can be themed as adapting to the new norm. The majority of the participants decided to adapt to the new norms and take advantage of the situation. Despite affected financially during MCO, the majority of the micro-entrepreneurs still consistently operating their business. The economic stimulus package provided by the governments is among the contributing elements that help this small business operating during and after MCO. Although some of the participants reported requesting an additional loan from AIM, etc. still, the majority of the participants, decided to adapt to the new environment by using an alternative strategy such as changing business operation locations from physical shop to home-based and online platform. Extract from the interview as follows:

Since during MCO I had to close my shop, I decided to operate my business at home until now-Participant 3

My business at first is not on an online platform, but due to MCO I started to get involved with online marketing and until now I continue using both online and physical business-Participant 5

During MCO I cannot go anywhere, so I started to get involved with an online business. - Participant 4 better`

In addition to that, they also diversified their business by diversifying their product and marketing strategies. Some of the example as follows:

If before I traveled to promote my business, now I promote it online, it reaches more audiences and saves cost. -Participant 4

I diversify my product, I not only focus on beauty, I also begin to sold food delivery online-Participant 1

Now, I sold everything online, I make food delivery, I sold household equipment, clothing, makeup, etc.. all online-Participant 2

The outcomes thus indicate that, despite having little exposure on business strategy, this micro-entrepreneur, however, had a strong desired to maintain and save their business in these

crisis. Even though their size is much smaller as compared to other types of business, still business operators such as micro-entrepreneurs indeed embrace innovative marketing platforms and strategies to increase their business capabilities. Abilities for these micro-entrepreneurs to switch to alternative business strategies while others unable to do so indicate their valuable competency's strategies (Wanier et al. 2013; Lai and Scheele 2018).

5. Conclusion

This study summarizes the findings from semi-structured phone interviews with six micro-entrepreneurs under the AIM program, which was conducted in July 2020. The study seeks to investigate the Covid-19 pandemic crisis impact on micro-entrepreneurs and understand the mitigating approach in dealing with the crisis. As the crisis is categorized as a 'sudden threat', the business challenges faced by micro-entrepreneurs can be categorized into two main themes, namely operation disruptions and financial difficulty. Meanwhile, the approaches used by micro-entrepreneurs in reducing the effects of the crisis can be viewed as adjusting to the new norm. The majority of the participants agreed to adapt to the new norms even though the economic stimulus package provided by the governments and AIM's package assist them during and after MCO. These include using an alternative strategy such as changing business operation locations from the physical shop to home-based and online platforms. However, the results suggest that there is no structured and formal management employed by micro-entrepreneurs as they are more ad hoc to reduce the impact. Thus, it is crucial for agencies in providing assistance and support facilities, especially knowledge and skills in mitigating the impact of the crisis.

As with other prior studies, this study also had a limitation. Among the limitations is in terms of generalizations of the findings and study focus. However, despite the limitations, the researchers believe, the outcomes of the study able to be a stepping stone for future research in this study area. Thus, future research may further explore using survey analysis to a larger group of respondents in order to understand the impact and survival mechanism adopted by them in response to the crisis.

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