

Challenges Faced by Micro-Scale Traditional Food Entrepreneurs in Beaufort-Membakut During the Movement Control Order Following Covid 19 in Malaysia

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Abstract

The implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic caused various economic sectors to collapse, thus slowing down the micro-scale economy in Beaufort-Membakut. This study examines the challenges faced by the micro-scale traditional food entrepreneurs in Beaufort-Membakut during the MCO period.

The research used an exploratory approach and qualitative methods. The findings show that traditional food entrepreneurs are trying to adapt to the new norms in traditional food entrepreneurship and continue to survive from going out of business.

Keywords: Challenges, Entrepreneurs, Micro-scale entrepreneurship, Traditional food, Movement Control Order (MCO), Covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction

Traditional food serves as a key component to the heritage symbol of cultural identity, status, and communication of a destination. The World Food Travel Association (WFTA) (2018) explains that there are 20 industry domains in food tourism, including production, farms and agricultural products, cooking and culinary institutions, symposiums and events, networks and distribution, food service locations, markets, travel agencies and transportation, entrepreneurship, business organizations, technology platforms and providers, academia, governance and more. Tourists may be motivated to stay longer in a place due to the availability of food products and related activities (Hall & Mitchell, 2005). Therefore, local food is an important element that creates the identity of a place and increases the popularity of a destination (Haven-Tang and Jones, 2006 & Ibrahim, 2023 a&b).

The state of Sabah is famous for its diversity of attractions and tourism products, whether based on the uniqueness of culture and tradition, the beauty of the environment, or the man-made environment. Indonesia is inhabited by more than 30 tribes, among them Kadazan,

Dusun, Murut, Rungus, Bajau, Iranun, and Sungai. Each of these ethnic groups is rich in unique traditions and cultural practices that are still practiced to this day. Sabah's traditional foods such as hinava, ambuyat, pinasakan, tuhau, and kueh sapit are increasingly becoming an interest to visitors and tourists. Traditional food-based tourism products can be a significant catalyst for community development in an area just like Sabah.

For decades, SMEs have contributed a large percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Between 2005-2014, this sector grew at an annual rate of 7.1% compared to 4.9% of GDP supported by growth in all economic sectors (SME Corp, 2015). Yet, the spread of the Corona Virus Diseases 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic that hit the whole world immediately paralyzed various sectors of the country's economy, including traditional food companies in Sabah. This was coupled with the actions of the Malaysian government to implement the Movement Control Order (MCO) in the face of the pandemic (Anas & Irwan, 2020).

Micro-scale traditional food entrepreneurs in Beaufort - Membakut are among the groups affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The implementation of the MCO makes traditional food entrepreneurs adapt to the challenges of the new norm throughout the period. It is noted that, there are a number of entrepreneurs trying to adapt to the new norm and there is also the possibility of failure. Since this pandemic is the first time in Malaysia, there is not much research and documentation related to the challenges of such small entrepreneurs including traditional food entrepreneurs in Beaufort – Membakut.

This study intends to shed light on the multifaceted challenges encountered by micro-scale traditional food entrepreneurs in Beaufort-Membakut during the Movement Control Order (MCO) imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Its aim is to raise awareness of the unique struggles faced by these entrepreneurs, contribute to the understanding of their resilience, and advocate for support systems that enhance their sustainability and growth.

The objective of this study is

1. To identify the specific challenges faced by micro-scale traditional food entrepreneurs in Beaufort-Membakut during the MCO
2. To analyze the short-term strategies adopted by these entrepreneurs to overcome immediate obstacles during the MCO, such as exploring alternative sales channels, adapting business models, and seeking community support.
3. To assess the long-term implications of the challenges faced by micro-scale traditional food entrepreneurs, focusing on the sustainability of their businesses, the need for continued support mechanisms, and the role of policy interventions in aiding their recovery and growth post-MCO and
4. To propose actionable recommendations aimed at policymakers, local authorities, and relevant stakeholders, emphasizing the necessity for tailored support programs, improved access to resources, capacity-building initiatives, and infrastructural development to bolster the resilience of micro-scale traditional food entrepreneurs against future crises.

While the challenges faced by micro-scale traditional food entrepreneurs in Beaufort-Membakut during the MCO were multifaceted and complex, this study endeavors to illuminate these issues, providing a foundation for understanding their immediate struggles and advocating for sustainable, long-term solutions. The objectives outlined are to dissect these challenges, analyze short and long-term implications, and propose actionable recommendations to support these entrepreneurs in navigating adversity and fostering a resilient, thriving business ecosystem.

Theoretical Framework

Entrepreneur and Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurs are individuals who are capable of taking over an organization or management and knowing the risks of the business (Mazzarol, 2011). Ab Aziz (2010) thinks that entrepreneurs are part of members of society who are accepted as an important group in the development of civilization. Barringer and Ireland (2010) explain entrepreneurs as individuals who can take risks between sellers and buyers. An entrepreneur integrates various

necessary resources such as money, people, business models, strategies, and the ability to take risks. They always play an important role in solving the problems faced by the community by providing various alternatives and services.

Baringger (2011) point out that entrepreneurship is a process in which many people wait for opportunities and turn them into resources. In short, entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship are dependent of each other in producing or generating a new product or service and involve various factors, such as resources, capital, and labour. Entrepreneurship is an economic process that moves forward through action, creativity, or innovation (Mazzarol, 2011 & Ariffin, 2023).

Traditional Food

Food plays an important role in meeting the demands of human biology and a balanced diet is necessary to guarantee survival. According to Muhammad (2016), in addition to its basic function of being a human need, food also plays a role as a manifestation of culture because every civilized society usually has its own traditional food.

Harmayani (2017) points out that traditional food is divided into three categories, the first is a traditional food that is almost extinct. This category of food is rarely found as a result of the difficulty in obtaining ingredients. The second category is traditional food which is less well-known, due to the lack of fans of the product but it still exists in the market. Third is the famous traditional food category. In general, this last category still has a place in the hearts of its fans, and the products are many in the market with high demand. Indeed, they have become icons for certain regions.

Movement Control Order (MCO)

As soon as the world was shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic as a global disease, it demanded that every country's government start from WHO's recommendations to implement social distancing and movement between individuals (Doni & Margaretha, 2020). In Malaysia, the MCO is often a phrase in the discourse of some media, whether international or local media, which means "quarantine Malaysia". Peter et al. (2020) point out that Malaysia's MCO 2020 refers to the movement control implemented throughout the country as a measure to prevent and control the spread of cases of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Implementation of the MCO calls for extreme measures such as social distancing, bans on all social activities that lead to contact gatherings in various sectors, and school closures enforced from 18 March 2020 and later lasted until 28 April 2020 (Ekienabor, 2020). Nevertheless, the government expanded the list of industries that can operate throughout the implementation of MCO with strict controls such as healthcare centers, logistics, food supply, and banking centers (Nadzir, 2020).

McClland Achievement Theory

McClland (1975) has presented the achievement desire theory which deals with an individual who has a high desire for achievement towards obtaining something with their own efforts. He linked the science of entrepreneurship with the theory of the desire for achievement which has been tested in developing countries to find solutions to socio-economic problems. This theory is shown in Figure 1.

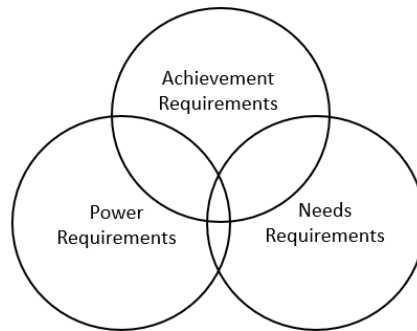


Fig. 1: McClelland Theory of Desire for Achievement
Sources: Akhmad,2008

Akhmad (2008) points out that the theory of the need for achievement is divided into three main aspects, as follows.

- (i) The need for achievement is a drive to achieve success and excellence as well as the set standards:
- (ii) The relationship need is the desire to have a friendly and close relationship with someone and
- (iii) The power needs are the needs to influence the others to behave as expected.

Entrepreneurs have personal characteristics that distinguish them from other individuals with the willingness to achieve success in entrepreneurship because they can see and analyze their environment efficiently (Muhammad & Zurinah, 2021; Yusoh et al., 2022).

Research Methodology

This paper employs an exploratory research design to examine the challenges of micro-scale traditional food entrepreneurs in Beaufort-Membakut during the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia. During that period, only a little research was done in the field of social science. Thus, this study examines the challenges faced by the traditional micro-scale food entrepreneurs in the new norm of entrepreneurship.

It uses a structured interview guide form to collect the data. Eight entrepreneurs based on traditional food in Beaufort-Membakut were selected as a study sample. Coding has been used to analyze data from the informants. The answers were recorded in writing and recorded using a voice recorder and taking photos using a digital camera as research evidence (Chua, 2011).

This study was conducted in the Beaufort-Membakut district, Sabah. The area is estimated to be about 1,735.0 square km. Beaufort has 8 mukims and 81 villages, while Membakut has 4 mukims and 38 villages. The position of the Beaufort-Membakut district is strategic in terms of economic activities because this district is located between the Sipitang route leading to the capital of Sabah, which is Kota Kinabalu City (Official Website of the Beaufort District Office, 2020).

Research Findings and Discussion

Demographic Profile of the Informants

Table 1: The informants interviewed comprising eight women
Source: authors, 2021

Informant	Age	Gender	Status	Race	Education	Residency
I1	31	Female	Married	Bisaya	SPM	Kuala Balik Village
I2	36	Female	Married	Bajau	PMR	Padas Damit Village
I3	45	Female	Married	Bisaya	SPM	Kabajang Village
I4	52	Female	Married	Kadayan	Pry School	Karangan Village

I5	46	Female	Divorce	Bisaya	SPM	Taman Sri Panglima
I6	22	Female	Married	Melayu	SPM	Saga-saga Village
I7	21	Female	Single	Bisaya	STPM	Taman Sri Arjuna
I8	34	Female	Married	Kadazan	SPM	Limadang Village

The respondents who were interviewed consisted of various age groups and were divided into four different age ranges, namely 21 to 30s, 31 to 40s, 41 to 50s, and 51 to 60s. From all the informants interviewed, it can be seen that the majority of small-scale traditional food entrepreneurs in Beaufort-Membakut are generally aged 30 and over. All the informants are female.

According to the informants, many entrepreneurs are full-time housewives and women who are interested in traditional food entrepreneurship than men. The number of informants who are married is the highest. This shows that the informants have responsibility to cater for daily life as well as children's schooling expenses. The majority of informants are Bisaya because the study was conducted in the interior of Beaufort where Bisaya is dominant in the area. As for the level of education, almost half of the informants interviewed had an SPM education. The main job of the informant is to focus on an entrepreneur only. Informants stated that the field of entrepreneurship is their interest in addition to taking advantage of the opportunity as their economic resource.

Challenges of the Micro-scale Traditional Food entrepreneurs during the Movement Control Order (MCO) period

Following are the five aspects studied regarding the challenges faced by Beaufort-Membakut entrepreneurs in traditional food entrepreneurship.

Capital and Finance

Financial factors are among the main challenges that informants must face in traditional food entrepreneurship. This situation is similar to the findings of a study conducted by Yahaya and Norsiah (2006) which shows that the aspect of capital or finance is an important priority for the local community in Tioman Island. However, informants interviewed in this study stated that finance does not present a major challenge in cultivating their traditional food products. The first informant asserted that:

“Financially, there are no challenges. Because we do have financial capital, then it is developed. So, we just run the business as usual. After doing this sagu products, packing, selling, and getting the sales revenue. After that, buy more reeds. Process again. It's just like that”.

I1, 31 years old, Traditional Food Entrepreneur of Kuala Balik Village

The fourth informant explained further:

“I always make sure that there is always a round of capital so that if there is an order, we directly buy the ingredients. That is how we manage the finances properly so that the money is not affected to continue doing business”

I4, 52 years old, Traditional Food Entrepreneur of Karangan Village

However, the case is different to others for whom the financial aspect is a challenge. For instance, the fifth informant declared that the household financial status is still limited due to all children still schooling and having no other source of income. She said:

“In terms of the challenge, yes, because there is no income from any work anymore, the children are still in school. Only to make this product, so the challenge in terms of finances is indeed, that we must have household necessities”

I5, 46 years old, Traditional Food Entrepreneur of Taman Sri Panglima

These findings show that most entrepreneurs do not have financial challenges because they only use the income from the sales to proceed their products. However, only one out of eight informants stated that financial problems still occur despite running a business, because the business is her only source of income.

Response to Local and External Requests

The reception and requests from local and foreign residents are also among the challenges faced by a traditional food entrepreneur during the period of MCO implementation. One of the informants explained as follows:

“During the PKP, if someone asks for a reservation, we will make it. It's just that during the MCO period, there are quite a few events, and all of us can't sell our products outside the home area, so if someone makes an online reservation, we will do it”

I5, 46 years old, Traditional Food Entrepreneur of Taman Sri Panglima

Another informant further said that meeting the demand and needs of daily food in the area where she lives is one of the advantages in terms of response and demand for his products. This finding is supported by social entrepreneurship theory which coincides with the characteristics of entrepreneurs applying innovative business methods to solve social problems (Nur Sa'adah & Khairul, 2013). This research found that the entrepreneur's product indirectly succeeded because Tepung Sagu is the food of most of the villagers, especially the elderly. The informant who is a sago flour entrepreneur said:

“Mostly the villagers, if they want to buy, they just come here. The reception is permanent and increases sometimes because this sago is the daily food of the villagers. Especially old people, they always eat sago like my father”.

I1, 31 years old, Traditional Food Entrepreneur of Kuala Balik Village



Fig. 2: Tepung Sagu product ready for commercialization

Source: authors, 2021

However, the other informants gave different opinions on this aspect. Some of them explained that demand from customers sometimes increases and decreases. The third informant said as follows.

“The reception of our Kueh Sapit sometimes increases and sometimes decreases. But the order for the recent holiday celebration was well received, so we lack the energy to work”

I1, 43 years old, Traditional Food Entrepreneur of Kuala Balik Village



Fig. 3. Kueh Sapit product by entrepreneurs in Kabajang Village

Source: authors, 2021

Overall, the results of the interviews with all the informants, responses, and requests of most of the informants dealt with the fluctuations in traditional food experiences throughout the MCO period. However, the findings of this study differ from the study by Hameeza et al. (2019) which concluded that elderly entrepreneurs in Selangor venture into the world of entrepreneurship due to the lack of social support from the youth and the environment.

Competition with Other Employers

Most of the informants said that they had no problem with the challenge in the aspect of competition between traditional food entrepreneurs with a variety of other food products. In fact, one of the informants said that they each received a response even during the MCO period. Two of the eight informants interviewed expressed the uniqueness of the taste of the kueh products they produced. The informant explained as follows:

“Yes, there is competition. Many people produce the same product, but the taste, it tastes a little different. Alhamdulillah, there are a lot of people selling too, the villagers sometimes stop by and go to my house, asking if there is another kueh product available for today”

I2, 36 years old, Traditional Food Entrepreneur of Padas Damit Village

The third informant gave the following opinion:

“It is true that but the uniqueness of our Kueh Sapit flavour makes many customers satisfied with our Kueh Sapit. Apart from that, in terms of price. For other sellers, they will increase the price of Kueh Sapit because, during the PKP, Kueh Sapit sold very well. So, they taking advantage of that. But we don't, we still maintain that price, so that the customer is satisfied”

I3, 46 years old, Traditional Food Entrepreneur of Kabajang Village

Therefore, it appears that most of the informants have no problems or challenges in competition with other entrepreneurs, especially in micro-scale traditional food entrepreneurship throughout the MCO period. The findings of Norhashimah and Hairunnizam's (2020) however are different from this research findings which is that SME entrepreneurs based on halal food products have the challenge of fierce competition with other market products, not to mention when the COVID-19 pandemic hits. This situation is driven by the presence of existing products in the market and already having a strong brand in the market. Researchers believe that micro-scale industrial products have more challenging obstacles since micro-economic products are more difficult to develop.

Promotion

The aspect of lack of knowledge to promote the product was not a challenge for all the informants interviewed. According to the fourth informant, the promotion aspect is not a

problem or a challenge for her. This is because entrepreneurs have the skills to use mass media as a dissemination tool in promoting traditional food products. One of the informants explained this as follows:

“Thank goodness it's not difficult, because there are many acquaintances who support our business, so we must be diligent and consistent in posting so that people know us and know what we sell because posting all sales groups on Facebook must be diligent”

17, 21 years old, Traditional Food Entrepreneur of Taman Sri Arjuna

Another informant supported this by saying that:

“In terms of promotion, we do promote our sales from WhatsApp and Facebook applications only. Because this media is used by parents as well, it's good that you can find out from there, instead of posting on IG. That's even more difficult for us to use because we don't know how to use it”

13, 46 years old, Traditional Food Entrepreneur of Kabajang Village

Thus, all these coincides with the statement by Uzaidi Udani who is the President of the Malaysian Tourism Association (MITA) that the most effective and best way to promote the country's tourism sector to the global stage is through the public who play an important role by using social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Utusan Online, 2017). The study of Shahriziz et al. (2020) also found that the changing industrial landscape has created a dynamic environment for micro and small enterprises at this point. This paper asserts that micro and small entrepreneurs need to adapt to digital platforms to build relationships with customers and function as digital literacy.

Other informants stated the same thing:

Unlike the results of the interviews, the fifth informant did not use social media. She only takes orders from regular customers, even those regular customers who will be promoted to others. According to the fifth informant:

“In terms of promotional challenges, so far, we have not used any media for promotion, because we are waiting for orders from people, namely our regular customers. If they want to book, they will let us know through WhatsApp”

15, 46 years old, Traditional Food Entrepreneur of Taman Sri Panglima

For that, the findings from this interview show that most entrepreneurs applying social media have no problem using it. This is because they have existing expertise to handle social media and get help from people around them if necessary. However, there are some informants who do not use social media to advertise their traditional food products, but instead, they only get orders from the regular customers.

Distance and Accessibility

All the informants interviewed stated that the distance and accessibility to urban areas were not a big challenge for them. One of the informants said that their location was indeed not far from the urban area. She added that she never delivered their products to the informant's house. The fifth informant expounds as follows:

“Our house is not far from the city of Beaufort. In terms of Cash on Delivery (COD), we do not do any COD. Our customers will take their order at our house. If there is a large order, we will prepare a container, so they will take it by themselves at home. So, the distance factor is not a challenge for us”.

15, 46 years old, Traditional Food Entrepreneur of Taman Sri Panglima

The third informant said that she makes deliveries to customers' homes that are quite far away, and some customers come to their homes to pick up their own Kueh Sapit orders. However, the informant does not take orders from customers who need postal services because it is feared that their products will be damaged during the journey before reaching the customer. The informant makes it clear that:

“Actually, the nearby areas will pick up by themselves at home and while some also request for COD. But that depends on distance, if it's far away we don't, because we're afraid it might smash before it reaches the customer. Our Kueh Sapit is crispy”

I3, 46 years old, Traditional Food Entrepreneur of Kabajang Village

Another informant explained this differently:

“My place is far from town, but we also have our own car, so it's quite easy to execute COD to the town. After all, we will collect the order first, for example in three days, after it is ready, we will send it to the customer in town, and we will carry out all the COD orders at one time. We can save money, no need to fill up the fuel back and forth, right?”

I4, 52 years old, Traditional Food Entrepreneur of Karangan Village

In general, the informants stated that the aspect of distance and accessibility was not a problem and a challenge for them. This is because the residence location of those who carry out traditional food entrepreneurship does not take long from the town of Beaufort nor the informant from Membakut. Most of the informants said that the food delivery service provided was not a challenge for them. In fact, a few customers took their orders themselves at the operator's house.

In the same manner, Wan Nur Izzati Hazwani Kashfi (2022) has noted that the family members' educational background plays a significant role and is a great determinant on how children study. Of course, among any other members of the family, the education status of the mother is surmising and has an exceeding influence. The worthwhile situation observed by Rahman (2019), was that in a circumstance where mothers are more educated, cases of dropout are usually low. They leave no stone unturned in ensuring that their children completed their studies.

Conclusions

This paper examines the 'lockdown order' initiative by the Malaysian Government through the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) and presents the challenges to traditional food entrepreneurs in entrepreneurship throughout the MCO period. It shows that there are five aspects of challenges faced by Beaufort-Membakut entrepreneurs in traditional food entrepreneurship, namely financial aspects, response to local and foreign demand, competition with other entrepreneurs, promotion as well as distance and accessibility. The main challenge in entrepreneurship during the MCO period however, is from the financial aspect because the income of family members only depends on the income of product demand. Entrepreneurs should reuse the money from the sales as a circular capital to do business.

The challenge of facing competition with other entrepreneurs is the least significant because the entrepreneurs say that they have their own regular customers for the traditional food products. This shows that customer demand for traditional food products continues to run smoothly even though the micro-entrepreneurial industry is seen to be affected. The role of traditional food entrepreneurs is significant in developing rural areas in Sabah, in addition to improving the national economy. It can be seen at this time that various parties play their role in contributing to micro-scale entrepreneurs to ensure the development of traditional food entrepreneurship in rural areas continues to grow.

As conclusion, this paper focusing on the challenges encountered by micro-scale traditional food entrepreneurs in Beaufort-Membakut during the Movement Control Order

(MCO) in Malaysia presents several notable strengths. It effectively addresses a timely and relevant topic, offering a specific focus on a niche sector affected by the COVID-19 restrictions. By concentrating on this specific group, the paper has the potential to provide detailed insights into the unique challenges faced by micro-scale traditional food entrepreneurs during crisis situations. Moreover, if the paper incorporates local perspectives through firsthand accounts or interviews, it can offer an authentic portrayal of the challenges experienced at the grassroots level, adding depth to its analysis. However, the paper might face potential weaknesses such as a limited scope, a lack of comprehensive data or empirical evidence to support the identified challenges, potential bias or subjectivity in discussing these challenges, and a need for actionable recommendations or solutions to enhance its practical applicability for stakeholders and policymakers. Addressing these weaknesses could strengthen the paper's overall impact and credibility in contributing valuable insights into the struggles faced by micro-scale traditional food entrepreneurs during the MCO in Malaysia.

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