



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v11-i1/8408>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v11-i1/8408

Received: 14 December 2020, **Revised:** 01 January 2021, **Accepted:** 20 January 2021

Published Online: 02 February 2021

In-Text Citation: (Ramli & Jamri, 2021)

To Cite this Article: Ramli, M. W., & Jamri, M. H. (2021). The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic: A Closer Look at the Night Market Traders' Experience in Penang, Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 11(1), 741–760.

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Vol. 11, No. 1, 2021, Pg. 741 - 760

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The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic: A Closer Look at the Night Market Traders' Experience in Penang, Malaysia

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic which spread around the world evidently has impacted various sectors in Malaysia including the economic sector. Many that profoundly affected by this ongoing pandemic are small local business owners, such as night market traders. Therefore, this study aims to identify the problems as well as the impacts faced by the night market traders in Penang during the pandemic. A total of 15 informants were recruited to engage in an in-depth interview by purposive sampling. Findings indicate that there is a drop in sales and profits for a significant number of informants. The problems that have been identified are the reopening status and diversion of night market location, the increase of night market site rental fee and essential items price for business, lacking of marketing promotion by organisers have made the public unaware of the night market reopening status, issues related to standard operating procedure (SOP) as well as acceptance of government assistance initiative. Even though online sales platform has become a popular alternative by a large number of informants throughout the pandemic, the return and profit received have not reached a good proportion. All in all, the COVID-19 pandemic has produced various daunting problems that have had multiple impacts on night market traders. Restructuring or remodeling of business strategies should be done by the night market traders to adjust to the new norm as advocated by the government, as well as to minimize the risk of profit loss.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Economic, Impact, Night Market, Trader

Introduction

In general, communities around the globe are threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Globally, the first confirmed case was detected in Wuhan, China (Dawood et al., 2020). COVID-19 or also scientifically known as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus has been reported to spread rapidly in more than 200 countries in Europe, Asia, American, and Australian continents (Fabeil et al., 2020a). This crisis has been referred to as extremely severe

(or serious) when The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared COVID-19 as a pandemic for the first time on 11th March 2020 (WHO, 2020a). As such, Malaysia was not exempted and has become one of the many countries facing with the threat of COVID-19, in which the first cluster, which was detected on 24th January 2020 involving 22 cases. From these 22 cases, 12 cases were recorded with history of travelling abroad to affected countries and territories (WHO, 2020b). While the first death in the country was recorded in Sarawak on 17th March 2020 involving a 60-year-old patient who was also a priest (Ling, 2020).

In an attempt to curb the spreading of COVID-19 pandemic (or a term well known in Malaysia as breaking the chain), the Malaysian government has declared Movement Control Order (MCO) for the first time from 18th March 2020 to 31 March 2020. After considering the current cases of infection, MCO was then extended to the second phase from 1 April 2020 to 14 April 2020 and the third phase from 15 April 2020 to 28 April 2020. These phases are known as Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO), Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) and Targeted Enhanced Movement Control Order (TEMCO). Recently, the government has announced that the RMCO will be extended until 31st March 2021.

While the government is attempting to control the spreading of COVID-19 pandemic, there are many sectors which are relentlessly affected including the economic sector. This is due to the fact that sudden temporary halt of business has become a contingency and unexpected risk from the business owner's point of view, besides the challenge of sustaining business operation, remunerating supplier's debt, paying monthly premise rental, on top of that, the obligations of employee retention, and lastly but probably the most perplexing is income deficiency. The night market traders are not exempted from being affected by this pandemic because they need to cease business operations during MCO. Therefore, this research aims to study the impact of COVID-19 pandemic towards the night market traders, especially in Penang who may be harshly impacted by this pandemic.

Night Market and COVID-19 Pandemic in Malaysia

Night Market (or reputedly known as Pasar Malam in Malaysia) refers to a market in which temporary stalls are set up and they will start to sell goods from evening to night, on weekly basis, and the setting is normally on public sidewalks or in open areas near residential neighbourhood (Ministry of Housing and Local Government Malaysia, 2019). The night market business concept is in a form of flea market or marketplace in which each seller is given a square space for them to put up their stalls. The night market has many physical features, including an open space atmosphere, a long square table for the display of their products, a canvas canopy fitted to the size of the rented stall and identical to the other night market traders in the same area. Usually, the site of the night market is planned by the local authority in which the location must not disrupt the traffic or public roads. In terms of the night market location it may change on daily basis depending on areas or territories and some may be rotating on weekly basis as endorsed by the city council (Iqbal et al., 2017). Normally it is located in a residential area which make it easier for the residents to come (Aziz & Yeng, 2011) as well as strategic location which enable customers from other places to access using private vehicle or public transportation such as taxi or bus (Ahmad et al., 2019).

Night market is very popular and is regarded as an essential among the community in Asian countries (Nguyen & Pena-Garcia, 2019). One of the countries included is Malaysia, in which night market has become a preferred shopping destination amongst the local communities (Kamaaruddin et al., 2015). It enables the customers to eat, entertain and take a stroll at night (Chiang, 2016). Night market has been established in the country since a few

decades ago (Karim et al., 2017). More than hundreds of night market shops are put up on the sidewalks in which all kinds of goods, fruits, vegetables, games, apparels, food, compact discs, and decorative items are sold a cheap or affordable price (Mazlan et al., 2017). Night market is also the best location to try all kinds of local cuisines (Chin & Harun, 2015).

From the economic point of view, if viewed from two perspectives, seller and consumer, the night market has provided an incentive for traders to produce more revenue from the perspective of the customer,, the night market allows them to buy daily essentials with a bargain (Salleh et al., 2012). The night market selling concept has been recognised by the community and the local authorities as a form of small businesses which contribute significantly towards the informal economy (Ishak et al., 2012). The potential of the night market can also be seen in its ability to create work opportunities and help young people become entrepreneurs. (Aziz & Sapindal, 2012). It serves as a business incubator which aspires new entrepreneur to invest small amount of money and start their business operation (Catedral, 2018). This enables the business owner to test the existing business ability before expanding to medium or large-scale business (Chin & Harun, 2015).

Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic which now is a clear threat has become a great obstacle for the economic sector globally including the business field. The magnification of this pandemic threat is described as a public health crisis which prevent the progress of macro economy as a whole (Hasanat et al., 2020). This pandemic has forced many businesses to cease their operations and brought unprecedented business disruptions in various industry sectors (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). The impacts of this pandemic towards business are frowned upon by many business owners because it fundamentally affects the current and future business performance (Fabeil et al., 2020b). In other words, COVID-19 pandemic does not only affect impact the public health, but it also becomes an immense economic blow (Bartik et al., 2020).

In addition, there are several media reports with regards to the effect of COVID-19 pandemic towards the small local traders in this country including the night market traders. The MCO announced by the Malaysian government has caused the night market to cease operation as a directive endorsed by Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs (KPDNHEP). This falls under the general prohibition of mass gatherings and movements in the country including social, cultural, religious, and sports activities. When MCO was implemented on 18th March 2020, many businesses in the economic sectors have been closed down. This resulted in many night market traders complaining because they are agonized with their business continuity especially those with high commitments (Astro Awani, 2020a). As a result of MCO, the night market traders are forced to take a long leave obeying to the prohibitions announced by the government (Khalizan, 2020). The night market traders are forced to cease their business operations physically for a few months while the MCO is in force. In the meanwhile, many of these business owners anticipate the government's assistance to allow small economic business sectors such as night market traders and stalls to be back in business as usual to enable them to generate income and to avoid going out of business (Parzi, 2020). Nevertheless, the night markets have been allowed to operate on 15th June 2020 (Ramayah, 2020). However, due to the extremely rigid SOP, a large number night market traders have decided to defer their business operations (MyMetro, 2020). Compliance to the SOP is recommended by the government to ensure no new cluster is found as a result of this market business (Adnan, 2020).

However, it is found that the information related to small local business owners' experiences are very limited. Therefore, this research is regarded as significant and useful as

an effort to identify problems which are faced by the night market traders throughout this challenging period, at the same time to ascertain the impact of COVID-19 pandemic towards their businesses. The findings documented in this research can be used a reference for the government to plan a specific mechanism to assist the night market traders in this country.

Methodology

This research uses qualitative approach involving 15 informants of night market traders in Penang who have been recruited using purposive sampling to participate in in-depth interviews. The study is conducted at one of the night markets located in Balik Pulau area. The rationale for selecting this particular area is because it is one of the earliest night markets which resumed their operations in Penang when the government allowed the reopening of the night market since the pandemic. This was made possible with the directives from the authority after the country has recorded a decrease in number of cases. Through a visit to the night market, researchers can also obtain a real view of the night market traders' situation based on the observation around the area. Amongst the entry requirements for this research involving purposive sampling are (i) the trader must be a Malaysian citizen, (ii) the trader must be operating in Penang night market, and (iii) the trader must be 18 years of age and above.

In terms of instrument, this research uses a semi structured in-depth interview. It is divided into 6 sections consisting of (i) informant profile, (ii) business experience, (iii) the difference of income status before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and after the reopening has been allowed, (iv) sales strategy throughout the pandemic period (v) arising matters as well as (vi) assistance received from the government. Content analysis is then carried out descriptively. Prior to the interview session, consent to interview the informant was obtained to adhere to the research ethic. After the consent has been obtained, the interview is conducted based on SOP which is to wear mask and maintain social distance of 1 meter.

Result

Demography and Business Experience

The analysis findings in the demographical section show that the informants involved in the in-depth interview consist of 13 males and 2 females. All informants are Malays. From 15 informants who have been interviewed, 9 reported that the business is a form of partnership with family. Almost all informants revealed that the current business is their main source of income.

In terms of business experience, half of the informants were traders who have been working in the night market for more than 10 years. Other than that, in terms of sales type, more than half of the informants were selling food (for instance Singaporean mee hoon, *kuetiau*, fried chicken, *pasembur*, sausage, nugget, French fries, fried squid, *takoyaki*, chicken rice, side dishes), followed by informants who sell beverages (for example drinks of various flavours), fruits (for instance mangoes), vegetables (for instance mustard leaf, sweet potato), fresh produce (for instance chicken) as well as dry goods (for instance salted fish and anchovies).

The Difference of Status Income Before the Pandemic, throughout the Pandemic, and After Reopening of Night Markets were Allowed

A large number of informants reported that before the COVID-19 pandemic, the night market sales return was good and profitable. More than that, the profit return can be used to pay for both round capital and life essentials.

“Arr. Before COVID, Alhamdulillah, it was profitable. If there is more rizq, then more rizq” (Informant 1)

“Before COVID, it was really okay, Alhamdulillah. At night market we can do business as usual, make money, and all” (Informant 3)

“The story here goes, before COVID, I don’t need any assistance at all, I can survive” (Informant 7)

“Before COVID, it was okay, it was pretty good, for instance the profit can be used as round capital and can be used to pay for expenses as well” (Informant 11)

Nevertheless, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, almost all informants reported that their income were affected. For instance, one of the informants revealed that his income reduced up to 80 percent. Apart from that, there were also informants who were forced to take personal financing loan for the sake of life sustainability.

“During COVID, less, so less, so very less, so less, the decrease is not small, so much more, so less, so terrible” (Informant 1)

“The income is considered as very bad, it was so terrible” (Informant 2)

“After the lockdown the other day, there was really no income. Zero. I had to take up a loan, five thousand from other person. Because there were no income, when I want to eat, have to take up a loan” (Informant 3)

“During COVID, lessen by 80 percent. The income is lessened by 80 percent” (Informant 7)

Although the government has allowed reopening of night market, the income status have been described by most informants as not doing well due to several problems during the pandemic which made it difficult for business owners. As what has been revealed by several informants, business performance is still moving slowly. For instance, there was an informant who claimed that his business performance gap is very obvious, before COVID-19 pandemic the sales of raw chicken meat can reach up to 50 in number (per night) whereas now the sales is up to only 3 in quantity (per night). Moreover, there were informants who said that the income made was just enough to live on.

“My income was really affected. Hmm yes. Not much. Alhamdulillah I am fine, just to make ends meet” (Informant 3)

“After COVID, the sales are lessened up to 60 percent” (Informant 11)

“The situation is just as bad, because when this COVID-19 happens, people are scared to go to night market. There was a huge difference in terms of income before COVID” (Informant 13)

“Now when we sell at the night market, it was slow. I used to sell 50 chickens in one night, whereas now I only manage to sell 3 (referring to selling of fresh chicken meat). People do not want to come here” (Informant 15)

The Difference of Business Sales Return Before Pandemic and After Night Market Reopening

Before the pandemic, the business sales return was said to be doing very well and encouraging specifically from the community people who came to the night market. There were informants who reported that sales can be made even during early hours of market which is around 4 to 5 in the evening.

“There were a lot of people” (Informant 2)

“Before this, Alhamdulillah [I was doing] really well, it was good” (Informant 3)

“It was not the same. Back then, I can say around this time I already made sales (referring to around 5 in the evening)” (Informant 7)

“The sales return were good” (Informant 14)

Nevertheless, after reopening of night markets were allowed by the government, the sales return were said to be very less. The initial sales were made very much later (than the usual time before pandemic) despite the fact that the night markets are already back in business. This was made worse by the lack of visitors forcing the trader to end their business day much earlier than usual.

“There were less people. Yes, less people. Less response. Very much less indeed” (Informant 1)

“During COVID, people cannot go out late... I used to open up until 9.30PM, 10PM. Now, at about 8.30PM there were no more people... When we see, there were no more people, we wait for what. I used to sell until 9.30PM (then), now, around Isya’ prayer time, there were no more people...” (Informant 2)

“Now the sales return was very less. All. In terms of the number of people [who came to the night market]” (Informant 3)

“During COVID, the initial sales can only be made at around 6PM” (Informant 7)

Sales Strategy during Pandemic or MCO

A large number of informants reported that online sales alternative was made the most of use by them during the pandemic or MCO. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram have been used by informants for marketing and promotion purposes. There were also informants who made use of Cash on Delivery (COD) method which

allow the business to sustain as well to make it easier for the customers to place their orders online.

“Yes, I also do COD as well. I promote on Facebook (referring to his Facebook commercial promotion)” (Informant 2)

“During COVID, I did COD delivery. Yes. I promote in Facebook, WhatsApp groups, Instagram, my kids help me to do that. All of my children are working, when they are not working, when they are on leave, they will help to do the deliveries. I will only cook, and all of them will help to delivery. Many of the orders were from factories” (Informant 5)

“Yes, I did COD. I used Facebook and WhatsApp (online sales marketing)” (Informant 7)

“Yes, I did online sales, I did delivery. I promote in WhatsApp and Facebook as well” (Informant 10)

However, in terms of clients’ response and profit during online sales, many informants claimed that it can be categorised as very low and not doing so well. One of the informants reported that the orders received were about two to three orders only in a week. Moreover, there were also informants who said that the online sales did not achieve the expected target.

“The online sales, hmm, so so. Sometimes there were customers who place ordered, but there were not many” (Informant 4)

“The corn COD sales were very slow. The online sales were not doing well. Sometimes it was okay, sometimes it was not okay. Sometimes the sales do not reach a hundred. It was really less (referring to clients’ response)” (Informant 6)

“Just for the sake of doing it. It was not profitable, but as long as we do it, we can put food on the table on daily basis” (Informant 7)

“The response was not good, in a week we received about two to three orders” (Informant 10)

Due to the closure of night market sites previously, there were also informants who reported that they opened their stall in sidewalks nearby their houses.

“During COVID, we sell at the roadside. At the roadside, near our house. We were still in business” (Informant 2)

“All of us have to set up a tent at our house. We did online sales. And we deliver” (Informant 7)

“During COVID... we sell at the roadside at the Teluk Kumbar area” (Informant 12)

Arising Matters Highlighted by the Night Market Traders during the Pandemic Period Reopening Status and Diversion of Night Market Location

One of the issues highlighted by the interviewed informants were in term of the reopening status of the night market by the organisers. In this case, there were informants who reported that there are organisers who did not allow the night market to be opened for business despite the government's permission to do otherwise. In addition to that, there was uncertainty in terms of night market reopening in certain areas. Due to this situation, there were informants who took the initiatives to set up their businesses at the roadside instead. Unfortunately, their businesses were interrupted by local authorities.

"We lost space, on Sunday, there. They shut down the night market site totally. Even if they give suggestion, they plan to open the night market site quite far. A place which people do not want to go" (Informant 2)

"There were some traders who opened, some did not. When the night market is not opened for business, I have to sell at the roadside. When we sell the roadside, the local authorities will come... The organisers were problematic. For instance, this night market, the other night market sites have opened for a month, this one just recently opened for business. Yes, very late" (Informant 7)

"The problem now is the MPKK (organiser), there were places which they do not want to open" (Informant 8)

Apart from that, there were informant who reported about problems in terms of change of night market site location by the organisers. In this case, the change made by the organisers have made it even more difficult to obtain customers since the public was not aware of the night market new site has actually been opened at an area. The reopening of night market at a new site has also caused their sales to decrease.

"There was problem. Our night market site used to be in front of there. There, the response was very good. Now when they move the site here, the response has become slow..." (Informant 1)

"When we were in our original site, Alhamdulillah. When customers came back from work, they already saw us at the roadside. Now when they move [change of night market location] to here [it's more secluded]" (Informant 7)

"We were originally [previous night market site] at the front, now they move here it's a little remote, so here, customers did not really notice us in this route" (Informant 8)

"We used to open our stall at the roadside there, the crowd noticed us, when they were passing by. Here (referring to the new site), when we open, the people did not really notice us" (Informant 13)

The Increase of Night Market Site Rental Fee

Apart from that, the night market fee was described by most informants as burdensome. The increase of rental rate was reported by informants to double up in comparison with the rental rate prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The informants claimed that the excuse given by the organisers with regards to the rental rate increment was due to the need for them to provide for the proper equipment aligned with the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) even though it falls under the capacity and responsibility of the night market society to prepare for such equipment.

“The organisers were quite strict. For instance, before this, we paid MYR5 for a space. But now, they increase [the rent] up to MYR10 per space. It has [the rate] has doubled. So, we have to pay as well. We were affected too, hmm” (Informant 3)

“For rental, before COVID, the rental was MYR5, now when the night market has been reopened, they doubled the rate to MYR10, as in for me, I open two lots, so the rental is MYR20. When we ask for the reason, they said it is because of SOP, but the SOP [equipment] was from the night market society, sanitizer, scanner and all that” (Informant 8)

“The most obvious one is the rental rate. The rate was MYR5 then. Now after they reopened, the rental becomes MYR10. Back then, for two lots I have to pay MYR10, now it becomes MYR20. The one making money is obviously the organisers” (Informant 11)

The Increase of Essential Items Price for Business

It has been reported by the informants that the unnecessary burden was made worse with the hiking of essential items price for business. This resulted in the increased of selling price which later caused the customers who may be reluctant to purchase these items from the traders.

“The items that we took during COVID were more expensive. Not cheaper. Now, all items are expensive. Not only these fruits, all kinds [of item] (Informant 2)

“Try to survey the income, trader situation, moreover with the current price hike. When we increase the selling price, the customers will withdraw, so it is difficult for us to sell” (Informant 8)

Lacking of Marketing Promotion by Organisers

It has been revealed by several informants that the reopening of night market was not noticed by the people within the community due to lack of promotion. There were informants who confirmed that the organisers did not produce any kind of promotion with regard to the new night market site in the form of ads, flyers, banners or signboards, resulting in fewer customers.

“The public did not know that this night market has been opened or not. Not so much. They [organisers] did mentioned that they wanted to create a banner, but they have not done so. They only promote on Facebook, that’s all’ (Informant 3)

“The organisers did not advertise whatsoever. So, when the night market reopened, the public did not know” (Informant 8)

“The organisers did not make any signboard or big banners. So, what is the point of becoming organisers if they do not know how to create banner to attract more people to the night market” (Informant 13)

“After that, there was no promotion from the organisers, until now, people do not know that there is a night market here. That day, during the first day [this night market] was opened, no one came [customer] here” (Informant 15)

Issues Related to Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)

In term of Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) outlined by the government with regards to business operations during MCO, the informants have responded that the SOP does not pose a problem to them. However, there were a number of informants who described the SOP as troublesome for the elderly to follow.

“SOP is not a problem. That [SOP] we follow” (Informant 1)

“Yes, the SOP is really strict. They allow us to do business, but the SOP has to be strict. Not troublesome” (Informant 3)

“The government issued SOP is affecting us as well, sometimes when we ask the customers, they too do not want to come, it’s difficult, to troublesome, the elderly, they do not want to scan. By right, we should check temperature only... The uncles and aunties (referring to the elder people) they don’t want to come to the night market, because the SOP is inconvenient.” (Informant 15)

Issues Related to Acceptance of Government Assistance Initiative

In terms of the initiative from the government which refers to the allocation of the *Geran Khas Prihatin* (GKP), almost all of the informants were aware of this initiative and moreover most of them have already applied for the assistance be it GKP 1.0 or GKP 2.0.

“Yes, I knew about it, I already received which I applied for earlier the other day (referring to GKP 1.0)” (Informant 2)

“Yes, I am aware, I already applied in the past (referring to GKP 1.0)” (Informant 11)

“Yes, I knew about it...for the second one (referring to GKP 2.0) I was just about to apply” (Informant 1)

"I just applied for GKP, I just applied recently (referring to GKP 2.0)" (Informant 7)

Nevertheless, there was a small group of informants who are not aware of this initiative. There were informants who claimed that they were uncertain with the assistance. Moreover, this problem escalates further when they were not exposed to way to obtain the form online.

"Hmm I don't know" (Informant 12)

"I don't know.. what did they want [referring to requirement] in order to get that [assistance]" (Informant 4)

"No, no I don't know, I did not apply...where do I get the form?" (Informant 5)

Discussion

One of the principal outcomes obtained in this research is that there exists a substantial difference or gap in terms of income attained by the night market traders before the COVID-19 pandemic in comparison with the current status income thru the pandemic as well as after the government has allowed for the night market to be reopened. This finding puts in perspective the pandemic situation which caused a major impact to the business owners' income. Media reportings that have been issued also shown that COVID-19 pandemic has caused a serious impact towards the night market traders (Astro Awani, 2020b). Khalizan (2020) states that the night market traders were badly affected due to the pandemic because they were forced to cease their business operations and take a long break as a result of the ban issued by the government. Indirectly, this has put a pressure towards the economic activities in general (Saw & Ming, 2020), apart from creating a bleak impact towards business entities as well as individual lives in the community (Muhamed, 2020).

With reference to the findings attained in this research, the night market traders did not face so much of critical business complications prior to the pandemic, in which their sales were at an excellent level and they were making profit as well. However, their income started to decline appallingly during within the pandemic period. This has worsened their economic condition when they were not allowed to do business because all night market locations have been closed. When the business operations have been shut, they did not have any sales which resulted in their income being badly affected (Parzi, 2020). This situation also has made the business owners anxious mainly because they lost their source of income during the MCO which was initiated as an attempt to curb the pandemic (Daud, 2020). On a positive note, when the government allowed reopening of night markets, it helps these business owners to generate more business income (Aman, 2020). Nevertheless, many traders did not manage to attain favorable profit rate from the sales (Saw, 2020). As a result, numerous business owners were forced to take up personal financial loan to ensure their life sustainability. This clearly indicates the desperation and difficulties faced by the business owners which affected their action to the extent of taking up financial loans. Sulaiman (2011) states that individuals who take up loans were the ones who really needed it in order to free themselves from difficult life.

Other than that, there is a substantial gap in terms of customers' responses before COVID-19 and after the government has allowed for the night market to reopen. Before the

pandemic, the night market business can be regarded as profitable and filled merrily with crowd. However, after the reopening of night market was allowed within the MCO period, the customer's response was very much less and not encouraging. This is in aligned with a report by Zain (2020) in which there was a situation where the night market was reopened after the ban was removed by the government, but the market was empty and there were traders who were not getting any customers at all. This gives a clearer picture on the business owners' income in when there is lesser response, the lesser income they will receive.

Although there were a number of company owners who took the initiative during the pandemic to use online sales alternatives through the use of Facebook , Instagram and WhatsApp as their sales medium, the sales return was not that strong, however, and made it difficult for traders to generate revenue to meet ends. Other alternatives initiated by the traders, apart from using social media, were to set up their business on the roadside near their residential area. This alternative is perceived as being one of the ways for them to generate income during pandemic which clearly indicates their life desperations which have forced them to do anything they could to make money.

Even though the government has allowed the reopening of night markets, there were several arising matters following this. For instance, problems given by the organisers in terms of night market reopening status in which the organisers only allowed the night market to be back in business but only in certain places or locations. This posed a difficult situation to the night market traders in order to continue their business. As a result, many business owners decided to do their business at the roadside. However, this strategy is cumbersome when being interrupted by the local authorities. This has made it difficult for them to expand their sales during pandemic. Change of night market location has become an issue during the pandemic when the organisers ignorantly changed the night market location without prior discussion with the night market business owners. As a result, people in the community did not realise that the night market location has been shifted from previous place to a new location.

Other than that, the rental rate has also become an issue which has been highlighted by the business owners. The rental rate which has doubled compared to the original rate prior to the pandemic which according to the traders was irrational. This has burdened these business owners particularly when they did not manage to attain their targeted sales income. Razali (2020) also reported it is unreasonable for to the rental rate to be increased because these traders are already hampered with income problem.

Following that, the hike in goods' price during pandemic also create a burden to the night market traders. This is due to the fact that the business owner needs to have larger capital in order to kickstart their business again. For that reason, after the products price rise by the retailer, the business owner has to increase its selling price, which has resulted in the customer's unwillingness to buy. This causes the business owner to lose, which poses an issue for the trader to gain both their money and profit. Relevantly, the government needs to go and see the situation on the ground and check the goods price during this pandemic to ensure that irresponsible parties will not take advantage of this predicament (Zulkiffli, 2020).

Apart from that, promotion issues also existed within the night market traders' community. This resulted from the fact that the organisers failed to promote thoroughly thru social media, printed media, or not even signboards along the roads. Due to lack or no promotion done by the organisers, the public did not realise that the night market has been reopened. This caused significant loss to the night market traders due to the shrunk number

of crowds. Hashim and Abu (2020) indicate that promotion plays an important role in effort in increasing the sales income in a business.

Feedback with regards of government initiative through SOP that need to be adhered clearly became a positive indicator on its acceptance by the business owner. Provision of SOP by the government aims to minimise health risk within the community as well as in business premises (National Security Council Malaysia, 2020). However, the SOP determined by the government may provide the ground for problems or complications to the night market trader. This is in accordance with the statement by Wei (2020) which indicate that there were night market traders who delayed their business operations because they thought the government SOP was too rigid. With reference to this research, SOP intricacy which occurred was quite related to the elderly in which most of them found it hard to visit the night market due to the SOP regulations. This is owing to the fact that in order to fulfill the SOP criterion, everyone who come to the night market need to do temperature screening and scan QR code. This has been stated by Jalil (2020), which indicate that the organisers and society which manage the night market must ensure that there is a staff who is in charge of temperature screening as well to prepare the QR code application and *MySejahtera* for attendance record. To scan QR code, every individual needs to have a smart phone which will enable them to use the QR code application. However, not all elderly own a smartphone. This makes it difficult for them to come to the night market due to the QR code scanning factor. Even though they may choose to write their information manually in the attendance book prepared at the entrance of the night market. Nonetheless, that still makes it difficult for them to write because not all of them are literate or have the ability to write well.

On the other hand, based on the traders' awareness level on government's initiative through Geran Khas Prihatin (GKP) assistance, it can be seen that information conveyed through public relations method, media and communication by the government clearly shown preferable results. The first phase of GKP 1.0 was a micro grant consisting of financial assistance at MYR2.1 billion distributed by government to assist all eligible small medium sizes enterprises (SMEs) (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2020). The application for GKP 1.0 initially began on 1st May 2020 until 15th May 2020 (Inland Revenue Board of Malaysia, 2020a). The grant was a one-off financial assistance amounting to MYR3000 as the government's effort to increase service and production productivity as well as to reduce business financial burden (Inland Revenue Board of Malaysia, 2020b). Recently, the government has opened for GKP 2.0 application through a new initiative amounting to MYR600 million for micro SME business owners who have not received the grant previously (Zainuddin, 2020). The application period of GKP was from 1st October until 31st October 2020 only (Zulkafli, 2020). Nevertheless, there were a small number of informants who were not aware of the existence of this grant in which they were not exposed to how to obtain the form whether online or manual. This has caused them uncertainties with regards to the grant provided by the government. According to Mahbob et al. (2019), communication with unclear message will surely hinder the operation and fail the organizational mission. In other words, information with regards to assistance and the like should be conveyed to everyone with clarity so it will achieve the required goal.

Conclusion and Suggestion

In general, the COVID-19 clearly has brought about a substantial impact towards the night market traders, many of which have been in the business for more than a decade. The findings obtained clearly illustrate how great the challenges faced by traders during this period of

pandemic from various aspects. One of the aspects covered is the income status which clearly shows substantial decline in comparison with the income and profit generated prior and after the pandemic has occurred. Although the government has given the permission for the reopening of night market business activities, this initiative has not been able to amend or fix the situation back to what it usually was before the pandemic. Back then, the responses received from local visitors were massive and encouraging, unfortunately now the night market has been ignored and turned into a rather secluded and quiet place. Numerous alternatives were initiated by traders during this pandemic period such as, online sales as well as roadside and home trading strategies in order to ensure that income can be earned despite the fact that the revenues received may still be inadequate. In fact, traders also have to face other challenges when the night market business is allowed to reopen, for instance, (1) the uncertainty of status and location of the night market, (2) high site rental rates, (3) increase in the price of essential goods for business, (4) lacking of promotion from the organisers about the reopening of the night market site, as well as (5) a few other issues regarding the standard operating procedure (SOP) and (6) acceptance of government assistance initiative.

From the carried-out interview sessions, the researcher would like to suggest several efforts that can be implemented by the government and the organisers in order to reduce the problems faced by the night market traders. One of the suggestions that the researcher would like to highlight is for the government to be lenient to the night market traders and temporarily allow them to set up their business at the roadside as long as they do not interrupt the traffic. This suggestion came to light based on many informants who claimed that there are a lot of night marketplaces that have not been opened for business. The closure of these night market locations by the organisers without any valid reason definitely affected the traders' income.

Therefore, if the government will allow leniency on this issue, there is a strong likelihood that the business owner could produce more profits, a bit of leniency goes a long way. In this regard, the investigator refers to a conditional execution that can be carried out by the government, such as permission to set up companies on the roadside as long as they do not impede traffic, in addition to allowing the company owners to pay the monthly provisional rental rate. Through this initiative, night market traders can still operate and generate income in order to survive.

Apart from that, based on the criticisms received from several informants with regards to the price of essential goods for sales which have increased more, the researcher would like to suggest for the government through the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs (KPDNHEP) to monitor and reevaluate the essential goods price. This can be regarded as very imperative to ensure that irresponsible parties will not take advantage by hiking the price inconsiderately during the pandemic and those who do so should be taken into appropriate action. In addition, operations monitoring executed by KPDNHEP also secures the rights of traders to obtain essential goods at controlled prices, and they will not be oppressed by any irresponsible parties. As such, the financial burden problems faced by night market traders can now be relieved and become more tolerable.

In addition, the government has also been suggested to provide small enterprises with extra capital injection, like the night market traders, as a way to decrease the informant's financial burden due to the affected profits and less consumer. This is suggested due to the many complaints received from the informants regarding their income which were deeply affected by the current situation as well as the lack of responses by customers. The provision of this additional financial assistance can be provided (suggestion: dispensed) by the

government gradually (monthly) or on a one-off basis to enable it to be used by night market traders as a their business capital, as well as to cover for inadequacies in the living expenses for their families. With such assistance, it will certainly be a turning point for traders in planning and reevaluating their business in order to fit in the current pandemic situation, as well as to some extent to reduce the burden of losses incurred.

Subsequently, following the night market lot rental rate issue which have been argued by informants as burdening, the researcher would like to propose for the government to maintain the original rental fee or the least to increase considerably and not to the extent of doubling or tripling the rate. This is mainly because the COVID-19 pandemic situation has undoubtedly affected the income of these night market traders. In view of this, the organisers should be more attentive and considerate towards the predicament that is faced by the business owners and not to add more burden by increasing the rental fee which has been regarded as unreasonable. The organisers' understanding of the predicament faced by the night market traders is very much needed in order to ensure that these traders are still able to operate. In this way, the organisers will not be labeled as tyrannical by the traders at the same time creating a good rapport between traders and organisers whereby both parties can co-exist in harmony and perform their duties as usual.

Other than that, the researcher would like to suggest for the government to be more assertive in terms of broadcasting as well promoting to the community members with regards to the night market reopening at any specific location. The researcher considers this as the key duty and role of the organisers in an attempt to ensure that the public is aware of the reopening of the night market. The use of various communication medium including promotion in social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, printed media such as flyers and pamphlet, peripheral media such as banner, and face to face interaction which is to promote house to house in the adjacent neighborhood can be considered as beneficial in order to allow information dissemination to reach the public. The use of media and communication by the organisers in the context of promotion is clearly able to help night market traders in order to gain customers again. The least that this promotion could do is to help in terms of increasing the number of customer attendance from time to time under the new normal conditions by following all the SOPs issued by the government.

Limitation of Study

The limitation of this study is that it focuses only locally within Penang. This may be influenced by many restrictions and factors such as the extended MCO, the undetermined numbers of new cases recorded on daily basis, the uncertainties in terms of night market business operations, as well as the safety of the researchers. Therefore, the result of this study could not be generalised to conclude all night market traders across the country. However, this study indirectly provides a perspective towards the problems faced by the night markets at large. In other words, what has happened in one state, could be recurring at another state. Hopefully this study could strengthen the literature with regards to the impact of COVID-19 amongst the traders and small local businesses, in which the study of its kind is still scarce in the Malaysian context. Apart from that, this study holds the potential as a reference and guideline for other academic researchers to explore the subject matter in a broader context, perhaps in regional or national level.

Acknowledgement

We would like to extend our highest appreciation to Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MoHE) for MyPhD (MyBrain15) scholarship for Mohamad Hafifi Jamri as its recipient. We would like to also take this opportunity to thank all the informants who were involved in this study, the reviewers who took the time to assess and gave constructive feedback, as well as the proofreading team; Ms. Syazana Ayuni Shaharudin and Ms. Rabiatul Husna Ibrahim. Their contributions are highly appreciated by the researchers.

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