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The COVID-19 Pandemic and Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs): A Humble Proposal

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Covid-19 is a disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus that emerged in December 2019 in Wuhan, China (WHO, 2020). In Malaysia, Covid-19 was first detected on 25th January 2020. It was traced back to the three Chinese nationals who had travelled to Malaysia via Singapore and previously had close contact with an infected person in Singapore (NST, 2020). Very soon after this case, on 4th February 2020, the first Malaysian with Covid-19 (Bernama, 2020) was confirmed. Since then, the virus has spread rapidly, not only in Malaysia but also in other countries. Due to the alarming levels of spread and severity of cases, in March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified Covid-19 as a pandemic (WHO, 2020).

Like many other countries, the Malaysian government, with the help of the Ministry of Health as a key player, took immediate actions to curb the outbreak of this pandemic. They enforced health screening at all points of entry into the country and several hospitals were upgraded and equipped accordingly to enable them to treat Covid-19 cases. In March 2020, a more drastic measure was implemented to break the chain of this pandemic; a movement control order. However, the massive lockdowns and distancing actions enacted have immediately scaled back both production and consumption and thus have hit hard on the country's economic status. Undoubtedly, the widespread Coronavirus disease continues to cause a direct global destructive impact on the economy (Goodell, 2020). The current economic turbulence and market uncertainty have badly affected financial performance and have caused various types of financial distress to all companies (KPMG, 2020), including SMEs (Raflis et al., 2020). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on SMEs has been immense and has distorted its function as the backbone of the economy.



Acknowledging the current economic downturn and in the effort to protect the survival of SMEs, the Malaysian government announced several incentives to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, under PRIHATIN Economic Stimulus Package 2020, a total of RM3.3 billion budget was allocated to help sustain the survival of SMEs (PMO, 2020) and the national Covid-19 immunisation programme was launched in February 2021 (JKJAV, 2021) as public health protection against this pandemic. However, to date, it is still unclear whether all the actions taken by the government are sufficient to bring a serious turnaround in business activities. As for SMEs, they will continue to be caught in a situation fraught with risks and challenges.

Against this backdrop, perhaps another alternative incentive that should be channelled to increase the resilience level of SMEs, especially the small enterprises, is by providing intensive social media marketing training. One should be aware, after nearly two years of struggling through the pandemic, large businesses will start to fully utilise their resources to improve their production level and profit margins. Such aggressive attempts by large companies will further sideline the SMEs from the market. Therefore, equipping SMEs with technology know-how, like social media marketing, could be the best way to reclaim their space and get a significant market share for their survival. Even though social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become part of Malaysians' daily lives, social media marketing remains alien to small businesses. Previous research confirmed that the application of social media in doing business could minimise operating costs, allow engagement with customers and create essential business networking (Karimi & Naghibi, 2014).



The SME Corporation, which coordinates development programmes for SMEs, could be the main player in materialising the proposal above. Training related to social media marketing should be embedded in existing programmes and strategically arranged to reach the target participants, i.e., small enterprises. Other than that, universities through university social responsibility (USR) programmes should be more proactive in conducting training related to social media marketing for small enterprises. As for the private sector and other key players in the industry, financial support could be of great assistance to ensure the success of the training. A combination of proper planning, good coordination, and strong financial support from all sectors may help small businesses get back on track in the long run. It is not too much to assume that the future business landscape will never be the same as before. Thus, it is high time for the government to fully prepare and train SMEs for the challenging future where being technology-savvy is an essential business skill for survival.

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