

Effects Of Covid-19 Pandemic: Ramifications and Prevailing Strategies of Independent Foodservice Establishments

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Abstract

An independent food establishment' is defined as an establishment owned by an individual or a private group where the restaurant's concept, menu, and experience are unique. In 2019, the world was devastated by COVID-19 pandemic. Foodservice industry was one of the most affected and was practically paralyzed after the first wave of the virus attack. After the pandemic was over, the food industry had adjusted their operations accordingly, although still badly affected. Consequently, this research was done to achieve 2 main objectives; (i) to explore the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic towards the operations of independent food establishment, and (ii) to discover independent food establishment operators' strategy to cope with COVID-19 pandemic aftermaths. Ten respondents were interviewed using qualitative, semi-structured approach. Interview transcripts were registered into and analyzed using ATLAS.ti as the main analysis tool. Two themes and two networks were conceived with a total of twelve combined codes. Findings and discussions were presented with the aid of selected quotations. Conclusively, the effects of the pandemic on the respondents and their coping strategies can be a very valuable lessons to other restaurateurs. By learning from their experiences, contingency plans can be made in case similar predicaments repeats itself henceforward.

Keywords:

Independent Food Establishments, Restaurant Owners/Operators, COVID-19, Pandemic, Aftermaths, Coping Strategies

1 Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (2020) declared the outbreak of the infectious disease as a pandemic. The pandemic was caused by SARS-COV-2 virus, which had spread to 196 countries globally. By 24th of July 2020, the pandemic had registered as many as 15,296,926 confirmed cases, as well as 628,903 deaths. Several crucial steps were taken to prevent further spread of the pandemic, such as nationwide lockdown, social distancing, temporary closure to all businesses, schools, and universities, obligations to wear mask in public, frantic use of sanitizers, and working remotely from home or online (Ben-Hassen et al, 2020). Ozilli and Arun (2020) supported this notion by explaining that during this pandemic, many restaurant businesses were affected due to the lockdown, where restaurants were forced to temporarily close their business by the government. Brizek et al (2020) found that approximately 65% of the respondents did not feel they could keep their restaurants open if the pandemic restrictions remained in place until 2021.

The closure of the restaurant had an impact on restaurant sales which led to financial issues thus unable to pay their staff. When business is down, restaurants were forced to downsize their operations and as a result, many workers were laid off. Until the end of 2021, the outbreak is still an ongoing pandemic that has its ups and downs on number of cases. The pandemic has negatively affected global economic growth beyond anything experienced in nearly a century. It is estimated so far that the virus had shrink global economic growth to an annualized rate of -4.5% to -6.0% in 2020, with a partial recovery of a rate of 2.5% to 5.2% in 2021. Negatively global economic growth has affected the restaurant industry nationwide where it is influencing changes in customer demand since the first stage of lockdown was introduced by the government (Jackson et.al, 2020).

2 Literature Review

An 'independent food establishment' is defined as a restaurant owned by an individual or a private group where the restaurant's concept, menu, and experience are unique, and not a part of a chain or franchise restaurant operation. The characteristics of the independent restaurant are owned by one or more owners where they usually directly involved in the daily restaurant operation. This type of restaurant often faced so many obstacles in surviving in the market due to stiff competition, limited resources, and consumer dynamic, as well as market saturation. Due to COVID-19, some industries of the economy suffer greatly, such as transport, hospitality, and food and beverages (Siddiquei & Khan, 2020). These industries, however, are sensitive when it comes to natural hazards such as the COVID-19 pandemic and any economic downturns arising from it. The study found that in many nations, sit-in guests dropped to zero as governments around the globe implemented social distancing practices, limits on movement, and lockdowns. As of September 2020, United States of America (USA) announced a loss of \$185 billion in sales revenue and had predicted loss of over \$240 billion by 2020. In addition, 10 percent of restaurants have either permanent or long-term shutdowns, some 3 million restaurant staff are unemployed, and 40 percent of restaurants in operation plan not to survive without relief packages, which are likely to lead to more closures of the restaurant (Shihigara, 2020). Shihigara also stated that large corporations (such as chain restaurants) are more capable than a small local, independent restaurant of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and COVID-19 mitigation acts. Independent restaurants, in particular, are poorly suited to afford or meet social-distance guidelines, to attract and maintain staff, and to continue to survive on long-term, unusual and inconsistent patronage.

COVID-19 impacts where and how individuals shop and could well affect what individuals purchase and eat. For order-in or sit-down service, restaurants are almost uniformly closed, and those that remain open do so with shortened hours, a restricted menu option, and drive-thru/curb side pick-up options (Cranfield, 2020). In addition, the spread of coronavirus has significantly increase online consumption. Customers began to favour online ordering and food delivery services such as Food Panda and GrabFood, in effort to avoid social contact. Consumers prefer online food ordering via mobile apps, with delivery to their doors directly. This way, COVID-19 had actually created a major shift in the consumption behaviour of consumers (Ali et al, 2020). Madeira, Palrao & Mendes (2020) stated that restaurants were forced to either close or operate with many limitations, and in Portugal, only takeaway and delivery services were allowed. Most of the restaurants especially independent restaurants started to adapt and using takeaway and delivery services to sustain their business under this current situation. However, after the slowdown number of COVID-19 cases, all the restaurants were allowed to operate like usual, only to comply with many Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs). For example, (i) to apply social distancing when queuing, dining, and using public facilities, (ii) using hand sanitizer frequently, (iii) wearing face mask in public places, (iv) registering body temperature before entering any premises, and (v) to declare any health condition which are risky.

3 Methodology

Utilizing qualitative approach, this research was meant to emphasize understanding through examining people’s words and actions. Through semi-structured, in-depth interview in a non-contrived setting, the researchers were able to collect data in a cross-sectional manner. The unit of analysis is independent restaurant, represented by the restaurant owner and/or operator. Ten (10) respondents were interviewed within the area of Kota Kinabalu, Kota Tinggi, and Batu Pahat. These respondents were selected from the population using purposive sampling. Each interview sessions were done face-to-face, using a preset interview protocol. Interview questions were divided into 2 sections; (i) Section A (A1-A5) – demographic, and (ii) Section B (B1-B3) – effects of pandemic. The list of questions can be seen in Table 1: List of Interview Questions.

Recorded audio files were transformed into transcripts and labeled properly. Transcripts were checked several times for correct spelling and contents. Before it can be analyzed, all of the transcripts were sent back to the respondents for validation through signature and corrections. Once validated, these transcripts were entered into Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), specifically ATLAS.ti for further analysis. Using Thematic Analysis, a total of twelve (12) codes were derived, forming two (2) main themes and networks. These themes and networks were ensured to aligned with research objectives and questions, meaningful verdicts and connections were made, and the findings were presented with the support of selected quotations.

Table 1: List of Interview Questions

| RO | No. | Item |
|--|-----|---|
| SECTION A: Demographic | | |
| Demographic | A1 | Name |
| | A2 | Age |
| | A3 | Gender |
| | A4 | Marital Status |
| | A5 | Type of Business |
| SECTION B: Effects of Pandemic | | |
| RO1: To explore the effects of COVID-19 pandemic towards the operation of independent food establishments | B1 | Generally, how does the COVID-19 pandemic affect the operational aspects of your business? |
| | B2 | What are the changes that occurred before and after the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. manpower? ii. operational hours? iii. number of customers? iv. way of doing business? v. procurement? vi. marketing? |
| RO2: To discover independent food establishments’ operator’s strategy to cope with COVID-19 pandemic aftermath | B3 | What have you done to adapt and/or overcome the operational difficulties caused by COVID-19 pandemic towards your business? |

4 Findings

The unit of analysis is the restaurant itself, represented by the owner and/or operator. Although the interview questions were in English, the responses were a mixture of English and Malay. Nevertheless, the researcher chose to remain the responses in its original form (without translating to English) for three reasons; (i) to keep the responses original and genuine, which is difficult to get if the respondents were forced to speak in a language they do not thoroughly master, (ii) to keep the respondents comfortable in answering all the questions, and (iii) to avoid confusion and misinterpretation of the messages due to mistakes during translation. Five (5) questions were asked in the demographic section. Together with the list of restaurants, Table 2 below summarized the first part of the findings. The second part of the findings were comprised of twelve (12) codes, forming two (2) themes and two (2) networks. These codes were derived from thematic analysis on the transcripts, while keeping it parallel with the need to achieve aligned research objectives and answering research questions.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Respondents

| No. | Name | Age | Gender | Marital Status | Type of Business | Name of Business |
|-----|---|-----|--------|----------------|------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Siti Zaharah Musa | 32 | Female | Married | Restaurant | Restoran D'Pinggans |
| 2 | Nurul Jannah Jupakkal | 42 | Female | Married | Restaurant | Restoran Darul Naim |
| 3 | Rawati Mohd Yusuf | 46 | Female | Married | Restaurant | Restoran Mee Tauhu Sedap |
| 4 | Dulmani Abdul Nasir | 33 | Male | Single | Restaurant | Abang Mel Kopitiam |
| 5 | Hanisah Muhamad Fadzil | 35 | Female | Married | Cafe | Tokwan Cafe and Bakery |
| 6 | Suhana Mohd Isa | 46 | Female | Married | Bistro | Samballana Bistro |
| 7 | Ismail Misr | 30 | Male | Single | Restaurant | Bro M Western |
| 8 | Muhammad Kamarul Hafizuddin Muhammad Nur Hisyam | 26 | Male | Single | Bistro | Sanggar Bistro |
| 9 | Mohd Faizal Toha | 35 | Male | Married | Cafeteria | Mr. Plate Cafe |
| 10 | Zanariah Ahmad | 51 | Female | Married | Kiosk | Kedai Makan Pantai Sungai Lurus |

4.1 Theme 1: The Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic Towards the Operation of Independent Food Establishments

Based on Research Question 1, two interview questions were devised to acquire needed responses. The responses can be divided into five (5) codes, forming Theme 1 of the findings. Table 3 below summarized the codes and its grounding for Theme 1. The theme and codes also were used to construct Network 1, as can be seen in Figure 1.

Table 3: Theme 1 and Its Codes

| Theme | Name | Codes | Grounded |
|-------|---|-------------------------|----------|
| 1 | The Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic Towards the Operations of Independent Food Establishment | Amend Operational Hours | 13 |
| | | Less Customer | 17 |
| | | Less Profit | 19 |
| | | Reduced Manpower | 11 |
| | | Way of Doing Business | 16 |

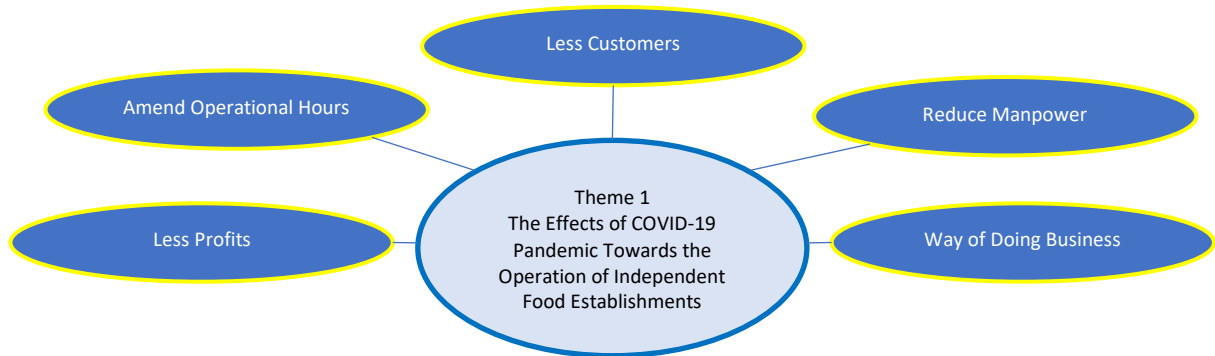


Figure 1: Network of The Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic Towards the Operation of Independent Food Establishments

4.1.1 Code 1: Amend Operational Hours

Most of the respondents stated that amended operational hours is one of the factors which badly affect their operational performance. Shorter opening hours had ultimately affected their operations, as well as profitability. Below are some of the respondent’s reactions regarding the amended operational hours:

“Dari segi waktu perniagaan telah sedia maklum dikurangkan masa berniaga nya iaitu daripada 7.00 pagi hingga 7.00 malam sahaja yang mana sebelum ini kami punya fokus untuk customer datang ramai adalah pada waktu petang dan juga malam serta kami rasa sangat-sangat terganggu...” (R1)

“Waktu perniagaan saya sebelum pandemik adalah start pada pukul 9.00 pagi hingga 2.00 pagi kerana ada dua shift. Setelah pandemik, kita tertakluk dengan peraturan semasa iaitu 7.00 pagi hingga 7.00 malam sahaja dan saya kan sentiasa ikut apa SOP atau peraturan yang telah ditetapkan.” (R4)

The statement above clearly showed that the respondents were seriously affected by this pandemic as the operational hours had been amended to abide by the government rules. As a solution, many businesses would have to resort to: (i) reduce workforce, (ii) salary cuts, and (iii) close down unprofitable outlets. On the contrary, as

each phase of the pandemic gone by, governments all over the world began to loosen the restriction for restaurant. Operational hours were extended gradually, and people can dine-in, although the capacity is controlled due to social distancing. The respondents felt blessed when these happens, because additional operational hours mean more sales can be produced to lift the business back to normal.

“...waktu perniagaan kalau ikutkan PKP hari itu dia cuma boleh buka hingga pukul 8 maknanya kita ‘start’ pukul tengah hari tapi sampai pukul 8 sahaja. Itupun memberi ‘effect’ yang agak orang kata teruk juga lah sebab pukul 8 ramai orang baru nak balik kerja betul tak? Ramai yang kadang-kadang ... sudah pukul 8 pun nak call lagi. Kita nak tutup 7:30 kita terpaksa ‘closing’ kan? Macam nak tutup kedai ‘closing’ setengah jam 8 dah ‘off’ kedai.” (R6)

“...kita beroperasi pada jam 10 pagi sehingga 12:30 malam dan seterusnya pandemik COVID-19 ini telah menyerang negara kita, kita mengikut SOP yang telah ditetapkan mungkin sehingga pukul 8, pukul 10 dan baru-baru ini ... dalam pukul 8 hingga pukul 10 pula.” (R9)

4.1.2 Code 2: Reduced Manpower

While operational hour had been shortened, many restaurants were forced to reduce its manpower. Lack of operational hour results in less sales, thus less money can be spent on manpower. To keep the business going, radical step would have to be taken, as mentioned by these respondents below:

“...kami terpaksa mengurangkan pekerja kami supaya perniagaan kami dapat bertahan sepanjang pandemik ini.” (R1)

“Dari segi tenaga kerja, saya terpaksa mengurangkan pekerja iaitu meminimumkan perkerja sebab untuk dine-in sudah tidak boleh dan semua pekerja yang ada di dalam restoran saya terpaksa bekerja lebih giat disebabkan tenaga kerja yang kurang...” (R2)

The statements showed that the respondents were having difficulties maintaining the manpower, due to the daily increase of active COVID-19 cases. Apart from having to impose salary cuts, some unfortunate workers were terminated as one of the measures to ensure business survival. Despite the challenging situation during COVID-19, some respondents managed their business smoothly and prevent loss of manpower. This is also possible, especially to some established food establishments, where their contingency funds absorbed all the loss due to the pandemic. This is also an actual

advantage of a small business. When their pool of staff is small, everybody can stay, work together, and perhaps took multiple roles (multitasking). Some of their quotes from these respondents can be viewed below:

"...pekerja kami adalah kekal tidak ada pembuangan pekerja ataupun penambahan pekerja." (R3)

4.1.3 Code 3: Less Customers

Reduced operational hours, as well as many restrictions against dining in restaurants, have resulted in less and less customers patronage. Even though the rise of food delivery services has helped in some way, but generally still not enough to keep many businesses afloat. Many have succumbed to the aftermath of the pandemic. Some respondents have commented on the matter:

"Dari segi bilangan pelanggan, sepanjang waktu PKP ini, dine-in tidak dibenarkan jadi semua pelanggan tidak dapat makan di restoran saya jadi boleh dikatakan sedikit bilangan pelanggan yang datang..." (R1)

"Untuk bilangan pelanggan, sepanjang waktu PKP ini, dine-in tidak dibenarkan jadi pelanggan saya tidak dapat datang dan bilangan pelanggan yang membeli secara take-away, Grab Food, Food Panda pun sangat sedikit jadi ini menyebabkan kesulitan kami untuk menjalankan perniagaan kami." (R2)

"Bilangan pelanggan tu memanglah amat-amat berkuranglah tak boleh nak cakap, kadang-kadang sampai tiada pelanggan." (R10)

4.1.4 Code 4: Less Profit

Directly related to the decrease in sales, less profit had made it difficult for many of the establishment to maintain relevance in the market. Many were forced to close down, and the remaining survivors still having difficulties to get back on their feet. Many respondents explained that they experienced continuous loss, even though opening every day. Some of their statements are:

"Semasa PKP juga kerajaan telah mengarahkan semua restoran hanya bungkus atau take away sahaja dan ini sangat memberi kesan dari segi mengurangkan pendapatan..." (R3)

“...pendapatan restoran sangat sangat merosot, kurang permintaan daripada pelanggan.” (R8)

“...impak yang besar kepada kami apabila boleh dikatakan 70-80% pendapatan kami hilang...” (R9)

4.1.5 Code 5: Way of Doing Business

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many restaurants or business were forced to change their way of doing business. For example, (i) from dining-in, food establishments would have to resort to ‘take-away’ and delivery only, (ii) running with minimal numbers of employee, (iii) instead of cash, many are changing their payment system to cash apps, e-wallet, QR code, as well as online transfers.

“...dine-in sudah tidak boleh oleh itu kami fokus kepada tapau ataupun take-away sahaja dan juga memfokuskan kepada perkhidmatan penghantaran ataupun delivery iaitu Food Panda dan juga Grab Food...” (R1)

“Semasa COVID, tidak dibenarkan makan di dalam restoran dan kami terpaksa membuat perkhidmatan penghantaran. Cara berniaga masih sama dengan cara berniaga sebelum COVID tetapi yang bezanya semasa COVID kami menyediakan perkhidmatan penghantaran, bungkus, dan juga take away sahaja.” (R3)

“...kalau sekarang ni...sebelum ini kita ‘dine-in’, ‘take away’, delivery tapi sekarang ini hanya ‘take away’ dengan ‘delivery’ sahaja lah. Maknanya ‘delivery’ pun haa walaupun kita ‘delivery’ direct kepada Samballana ada juga kita buka ‘delivery’ sekarang ini yang terbaru ialah Food Panda ada, Grab Food ada... yang terbaru Halo Delivery haa dengan Bungkusit...” (R6)

4.2 Theme 2: Strategies to Cope With COVID-19 Pandemic Aftermath

Based on Research Question 2, one interview questions were utilized. The responses can be further arranged into seven (7) codes, forming Theme 2 of the findings. Table 4 below summarized the codes and its grounding for Theme 2. The theme and codes also were used to construct Network 2, as can be seen in Figure 2.

Table 4: Theme 2 and Its Codes

| Theme | Name | Codes | Grounded |
|-------|---|----------------------------------|----------|
| 1 | Strategies to Cope With COVID-19 Pandemic Aftermath | Changing Ways of Acquiring Stock | 1 |
| | | Continuous Promotion | 7 |

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| Enhance Marketing Effort | 18 |
| Government Incentives | 2 |
| Maintaining Product Quality | 2 |
| Reduce Cost and Wastage | 2 |
| Way to Sustain the Business | 9 |

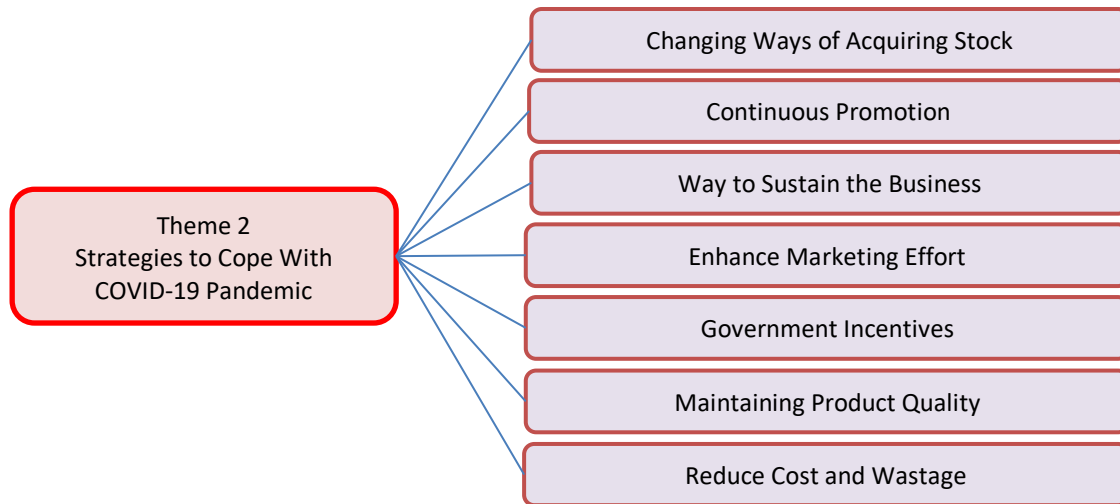


Figure 2: Network of Strategies to Cope With COVID-19 Pandemic Aftermath

4.2.1 Code 1 - Ways to Sustain the Business

Many of the respondents said that in effort to survive, they have to be creative and proactive. Desperate times warrant desperate measures; therefore, restaurant operators must change their old way of doing business. Different payment system, online ordering, SOPs, food delivery services, and so many new ways must be embraced to keep their relevance, as explained by some of the respondents:

“...sebelum ini 90% target saya hanya student sahaja kerana area saya adalah area student dan makanan saya hanya jual makanan bajet yang sesuai untuk pelajar dan setelah COVID-19 saya telah open order kepada semua orang awam menyebabkan peningkatan jualan saya serta bilangan pelanggan saya pun meningkat. Alhamdulillah sehingga sekarang pelanggan saya masi di atas average dan anggaran dalam sebulan pelanggan yang datang adalah dalam angka 3 digit...” (R4)

“Saya menyesuaikan dan mengatasi masalah operasi restaurant saya dengan berharap pada jualan pagi kerana setiap pagi kami ada menjual pelbagai makanan seperti kuih-muih, nasi lemak, nasi berlauk dan sebagainya. Selain itu, kami juga menyesuaikan diri dengan order makanan melalui Grab Food dan Food Panda untuk dapat bertahan serta dapat meneruskan perniagaan kami...” (R2)

4.2.2 Code 2 - Reduce Cost and Wastage

Reducing cost is also crucial in surviving the business, especially in food business. On top of taking salary cuts, many food establishments were retrenched. Unnecessary expenditure was eliminated, and many aspects of the restaurant operations be revamped to minimize costs. For instance, remaining employees were trained to multitask as to optimize the workforce. In addition, according to one of the respondents, one effective way to sustain their business is to reduce the wastage. For example, instead of offering buffet meals, restaurants can offer a ' la' carte meals, which minimizes the use of raw materials, cooking gas, and labor costs. One of the respondents stated that:

"...kami terpaksa kurangkan kami punya kos untuk gaji pekerja dan melatih pekerja untuk menjadi serba boleh maksudnya semua kerja dia boleh buat..." (R1)

"...dengan cara pengurangan kos dan bertahan maksudnya untuk pengurangan kos saya tidak menyediakan makanan-makanan buffet supaya tidak ada pembaziran dari kos bahan mentah, saya cuma membuat menu ala carte iaitu orang order baru kami masak jadi dengan tidak ada kos bahan mentah yang terbuang" (R1)

4.2.3 Code 3 - Government Incentives

Next, another strategy or way to sustain their business is from government incentives. One of the respondents stated that he received a grant of RM10,000 and also received kitchen equipment from the government agency (KEJORA). This has helped them to stay in their restaurant business during this pandemic and can help increase their sales.

"...saya mendapat bantuan daripada pihak KEJORA.....KEJORA memberikan geran sebanyak RM10000, berbentuk barangan lah peralatan yang kita gunakan untuk buat pes lah." (R6)

In addition, one of the respondents also said that they also received assistance from the government because they had registered their business with the Companies Commission of Malaysia (SSM). The Government will assist any business that has been registered with the Companies Commission of Malaysia. To quote the said respondent:

"...kerajaan ada bagi bantuan kan untuk yang ada SSM ni untuk bantuan ... perniagaan, modal-modal untuk berniaga balik..." (R10)

4.2.4 Code 4 - Enhance Marketing Efforts

After the pandemic, many of the respondents reinvent their marketing effort to keep the business going. For example, promoting their menu in apps such as Shopee, Food Panda and GrabFood, and also in social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Many restaurants also quickly embrace food delivery services as their business partner. Menu items were also undergone changes so they can better fit current consumers' preferences. In addition, they also promote their products by making live feed on social media (such as Facebook Live), as frequent as 8 times per day. Menu were recreated to include more affordable packages, sets, discounts, and special rates. Some of the quotes from the respondents are listed below:

“Apa yang saya buat lagi ialah membuat marketing di Facebook dengan posting gambar kedai saya yang cantik serta menu serta membuat menu baru iaitu Nasi lemak, Nasi Lalap dan Nasi penyet, Alhamdulillah saya dapat bertahan setakat ini. Selain itu, untuk sekarang saya mempromosikan menu saya di social media seperti Facebook dan menyediakan perkhidmatan Grab Food, Food Panda, dan juga take away pada masa ini...” (R4)

“Marketing ... kita still 'on' kita setiap hari..contohnya macam kita akan buat 'live' satu hari 3 kali kemudian kita buat 'content copywriting' kita 'share' dekat 'page' Samballana tu FB..satu hari 8 kali still ada lah kita buat macam tu..sebab kita nak supaya orang..terkubur macam tu sahaja kan sebab kita akan..marketing tu penting sebab nanti bila pkp dah mungkin dah dilonggarkan kan 'customer' sudah boleh 'dine-in', kita sudah bersedia untuk menerima kehadiran 'customer' tu..tapi macam mana pun 'marketing' kita still..masih meneruskan haah..” (R6)

“Tindakan untuk menyesuaikan kesulitan beroperasi pula membuat teknik pemasaran yang boleh dibeli oleh B40 ke bawah, membuat set combo untuk makan 2 ke 3 orang RM35, membuat set keluarga (8 ke 10 orang) dengan harga RM120 yang mana semuanya boleh terdapat dalam pakej itulah.Lepas itu, memberi freegift dengan setiap pembelian makanan kami.Kitaorang mencari seorang dropship. Lepas itu, dropship perlu promosikan kedai semua itu, ambil order, membuat lebih banyak penghantaran ke rumah, Penghantaran ke kampung-kampung yang jauh dari kedai seperti runner akan diberikan komisyen lah” R8 “membuat gerai makanan berkhemah berhampiran dengan kedai, mengubah cara pembungkusan makanan agar lebih menarik...” (R8)

4.2.5 Code 5 - Changing Ways of Acquiring Stock

One of the respondents were having problems with receiving supplies from Johor Bharu due to roadblocks during the pandemic. Alternatively, the respondent changed the way they pick up their supplies by using runners equipped with MITI approval letter.

The respondents said that:

“Akak banyak ambil di JB tapi diorang terjejas juga macam nak rentas tu kan...tapi sekarang ni lagi ketat diorang nak surat MITI ... so macam ... kita ada juga pakai ‘runner’ pergi ke JB.” (R5)

4.2.6 Code 6 – Continuous Promotion

Promotions, as one of marketing efforts, would have to be continuous. Despite that, the way of promotion has changed since the pandemic. Restaurateurs no longer can afford expensive marketing ploys. As a replacement, they would have to learn and use online marketing techniques, primarily with the help of social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok. Promotions were also done through food delivery apps, such as in Food Panda and GrabFood websites and Apps. Of course, using these apps are significantly cheaper, faster, and can reach more audience than traditional methods. One of the downsides is the postings (promotional video and posts) must be updated regularly, sometimes at a burdening rate. A lot of restaurateurs also beginning to create their own apps for several reasons, including to keep track record of their customers. Nevertheless, this is the new norms which every restaurateur would have to face and embrace.

“Dari segi pemasaran, saya membuat pemasaran dari segi online iaitu Facebook dengan membuat promosi dalam Facebook dan masuk dalam group-group yang terdekat sekitar restoran saya dan dari itu saya mempromosikan Facebook page kami. Dengan cara itu, orang boleh mengorder makanan daripada restoran saya dan saya membuat COD secara percuma sepanjang pandemic ini. Dengan itu orang boleh mengenali kami punya kedai dan dapat memudahkan urusan orang lain” (R1)

“...so setiap kali ‘customer’ macam ‘customer’ akak ke..akak akan ‘save number’ diorang kan diorang tengok status kita h... tu pun merangkumi apa ni pemasaran juga.” (R5)

“Sebelum COVID-19, kami juga memasarkan menu atau kedai kami di social media iaitu di laman page Facebook kami” R3 “Pemasaran untuk COVID, antara kaedahnya Facebook, kitaorang buat booth post, Telegram, viral media social...” (R8)

4.2.7 Code 7 - Maintaining Product Quality

One of the most obvious steps to maintain existing customers, as well as attracting new ones, are to maintain and improve product quality. One of the main reason people kept coming to the same premise is not usually because the restaurant serves the best

food, but often because they serve consistent food. This is supported by one of the respondents:

“...kami sangat-sangat struggle, sangat -sangat ... menitikberatkan tentang kualiti dan keunikan supaya orang boleh beli dan tertarik dengan apa yang kami lakukan...” (R9)

5 Conclusions

In a nutshell, every food establishment all around the world were badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, one way or another. When the pandemic strikes, many of the establishments were unprepared, leaving their operation paralyzed. Many workers were laid off, firms closed down, and the whole supply chain were seriously afflicted. Despite of that, human civilizations are known to be resilient and adaptable. We push through the crisis, and we made it. After the vaccines for COVID-19 were distributed and the pandemic had diminished gradually and significantly, food industry worldwide began to heal. However, things are not the same anymore, so many things needed to change as to adapt to the new norms. Thus, this research was done to explore the effects of COVID-19 pandemic to the operations of independent food establishments who had survived the plight. This research had also managed to reveal the restaurant operators' strategies to survive the aftermaths of the pandemic. Hopefully, the findings will serve as a lesson, and as a reminder to the stakeholders, so that we can learn from it and prepare ourselves for any future predicaments.

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