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IMPACT OF COVID-19: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED AND STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY HOMESTAY INDUSTRY

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**Abstract:**

This study aims to uncover the challenges faced by homestay operators during COVID-19 and the strategies they've employed for resilience. It does so by examining multiple homestays in the hardest-hit states through the lens of entrepreneurial resilience. This research sheds light on the challenges confronted by Malaysian homestay operators during COVID-19 and the strategies they've adopted, offering a fresh perspective through the entrepreneurial resilience framework. It is noteworthy that Malaysia's homestay industry differs from those in other countries, due to unique lock-down policies and government support systems. These factors significantly influence how homestay operators recover, as viewed through the entrepreneurial resilience theory. This study employed a qualitative research approach using a case study methodology, gathering data through semi-structured interviews. The sample size was determined using the constant comparative method, which reached data saturation after the 12th interview. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis with a non-linear process, iterated multiple times. The findings indicate that homestay operators faced mental health challenges, including stress, uncertainty, and unconfidence, as well as financial challenges such as less consumer demand and high operation costs during COVID-19. Participants shared strategies such as self-development (positive attitude and learn new skills) and cost management (zero-cost marketing and aware of government support) to overcome these issues and regain resilience. In summary, this study highlights the remarkable entrepreneurial resilience exhibited by Malaysian homestay operators amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These operators have demonstrated entrepreneur emotional and financial

resilience by adapting to the unprecedented challenges. The limitation of this study exclusively focuses on registered homestays in Malaysia, particularly in states where homestay operators' income is most affected.

Keywords:

Entrepreneurship, Tourism Economics, Homestay Industry, Resilience Theory, Challenges And Strategies, COVID-19.

Introduction

The Malaysia Homestay Programme was initially launched in 1995 in Temerloh, Pahang. The primary objective of the homestay programme is to incentivize the rural society to be involved in the tourism sector, and ultimately raising the income and living standard in rural areas (Muslim et al., 2017). Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) (2015) defines homestay as a programme which allows the tourist to stay with a host family, so that they can interact and experience the host's daily life activities, and at the same time learn the cultures of the rural community in Malaysia. With all the natural attractions in Malaysia, homestay programme has the capacity to promote and foster both the rural economic growth and to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (Halder, 2018; Akbar et al., 2016; Cheuk et al., 2015). This is particularly true when the homestay programme are able to create employment and bringing income to the rural community, which redistributes the wealth from the urban to the rural area. Ultimately, it provides economic diversification, population retention, and income level increase (Castellano-Álvarez et al., 2019).

Most homestay operators fall under the B40 income group, where their income range is at the bottom of 40 percent in Malaysia (Sharma, 2020). Therefore, homestay programme could act as a stimulus to boost rural development such as enhancements in infrastructure, economic, social capital, cultural, and environment (Kulshreshtha & Kulshreshtha, 2019; Miraz et al., 2015). In addition, it could also alleviate poverty, sustain the rural community, and promote gender equality in the rural community (Pasanchay & Schott, 2021). As a result of the concerted effort of all industry stakeholders, Malaysia was recognised as one of the exemplary countries in promoting sustainable rural tourism development via its homestay programme during the 2017 Global Tourism Economy Forum (MOTAC, 2017).

The outbreak of COVID-19 resulted in a massive drop in Malaysia's total homestay tourist arrivals in 2020, with approximately a 30% decline compared to 2019. In 2021, this figure further plummeted by another 60%. This drastic decline in tourist arrivals can be attributed to the fact that the homestay program primarily caters to the international market (Ramele, 2022). Similarly, Lim (2020) reported a significant reduction in their homestay occupancy rate, experiencing around a 60% decrease throughout the MCO period. They were only able to maintain a 30% occupancy rate due to the accommodation of some frontline workers (Lim, 2020). The decline in tourist arrivals and occupancy rates has severely affected the income received by homestay operators. With fewer resources, some homestay operators find it challenging to maintain their business, leading to quitting the homestay program and venturing into other business fields (Amin, 2022).

There is a lack of studies on how the COVID-19 pandemic specifically affected the homestay program in Malaysia. While some existing literature, such as the works of Lim and Lee (2020),

Kunjuraman and Hussin (2017), Nor and Awang (2017), and Pusiran and Xiao (2013), has examined the challenges faced by Malaysia's homestay operators, their focus has been either on single homestays or on specific states within Malaysia. Unfortunately, these studies do not encompass the impact of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic on the homestay program as a whole. As the COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching consequences on the tourism sector worldwide, it is essential to investigate its unique and profound effects on the homestay program in Malaysia. A comprehensive study encompassing various homestay operators from different states would provide valuable insight into the tourism industry. Understanding these effects is crucial for devising strategies to revive and fortify the homestay program in Malaysia after the COVID-19 outbreak. Therefore, this study will use the lens of entrepreneur resilience to examine the challenges faced by homestay operators due to COVID-19. Subsequently, it is also equally important to explore the strategies to overcome these challenges. Analysing these challenges and strategies is crucial to better prepare homestay operators to face other health crises in the future. It allows them to review which challenges need priority or have yet to find a solution.

Literature Review

Entrepreneur Resilience

The majority of past scholars view entrepreneur resilience as the ability to rebound after experiencing a disruptive event or failure (Branicki et al., 2018; Duchek, 2017; Fatoki, 2018; Martinelli et al., 2018; Manzano-García & Ayala, 2013). At the same time, "ability" views an entrepreneur's capability in different dimensions, such as emotional, cognitive (Branicki et al., 2018; d'Andria et al., 2018), social, and financial resilience (Hayward et al., 2010).

Emotional resilience involves adapting positively to adversity through traits such as optimism and self-confidence, crucial for maintaining a healthy emotional state during challenges (Bullough et al., 2014; Manzano-García et al., 2013; d'Andria et al., 2018). Cognitive resilience is characterized by an entrepreneur's belief in their ability to control outcomes and adaptability through cognitive changes (Branicki et al., 2018; Hayward et al., 2010). Social resilience involves maintaining relationships with stakeholders, accessing social support, and leveraging social networks for diverse perspectives and financial assistance (Fredrickson, 1998, as cited in Hayward et al., 2010). Financial resilience is not only about accessing financial resources but also encompasses an entrepreneur's capacity to handle financial challenges, requiring financial literacy and informed decision-making (Dewi et al., 2021). Overall, a resilient entrepreneur integrates these dimensions, navigating disruptions with a holistic approach that addresses emotional well-being, cognitive adaptability, social connections, and financial acumen.

Empirical Review

Sari et al. (2022) indicated that the majority of homestay operators during COVID-19 tended to avoid the situation without making necessary adjustments, often transitioning into the agricultural sector. Additionally, Supian et al. (2022) highlighted how the resilience of homestays in Malaysia has been negatively impacted by COVID-19, emphasising challenges such as a lack of commitment, marketing, financial resources, and proper management.

Conversely, Doan et al. (2023) suggested that to overcome the impact of COVID-19, homestay operators should adapt to current regulations, modify their products, and emphasise the authenticity of the homestay experience. Meanwhile, Hafizah et al. (2022) identified four

dimensions of resilience—government response, technology innovation, local belongingness, and consumer and employee confidence—that can aid homestays in Malaysia to build resilience against the challenges of COVID-19. Noorashid and Chin (2021) found that homestay businesses, to cope with COVID-19, must respond swiftly, diversify their products, have access to government support, and adopt technological advancements. Zamzuki et al. (2023) shared that flexibility in adapting, good relationships with authorities, and emphasising the natural environment are crucial during COVID-19 to enhance the resilience of the homestay programme.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) of this study aims to investigate the challenges faced by homestay operators and explore the strategies to overcome these challenges in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The health crisis, government regulations, and changes in market demand have significantly impacted homestay programs in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic, disrupting their regular operations. Therefore, the first proposition of this study is to look into the factors that could influence homestay programs during COVID-19.

Government regulations, particularly movement restrictions, have altered tourist behavior and market demand, posing challenges for homestay operators in terms of operational disruptions, sustainability, and overall well-being. The second proposition of the study is to examine the specific challenges faced by homestay operators.

Homestay operators exhibit entrepreneurial resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating their ability to bounce back, adapt, and recover from challenges. This resilience is characterized by the proactive utilisation of entrepreneurial skills, innovative thinking, and adaptive capacities in response to disruptions. The third proposition explores how homestay operators display entrepreneurial resilience.

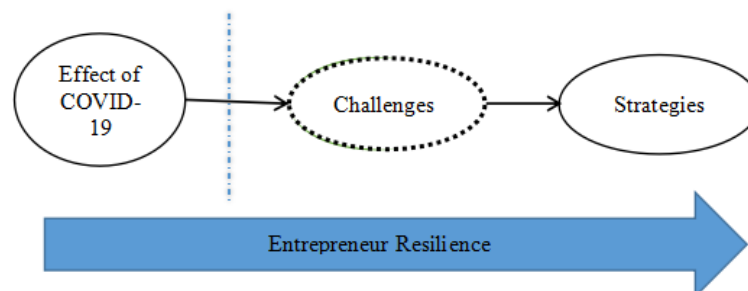


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

Research Design

This study will employ a qualitative approach, recognizing the influence of researchers' worldviews. It is believed that in this context, a singular truth may not exist, given the diverse experiences of each homestay operator in these circumstances. More specifically, the study will utilise a single case study design to investigate the challenges faced by homestay operators and explore the strategies employed to overcome these challenges.

Sampling Design

The population for this study specifically targets homestays registered under MOTAC, excluding other types of accommodations, and focuses on the roles of homestay operators. In qualitative studies, the sample size is not predetermined before actual data collection. Instead, it is guided by the principle of data saturation, using the constant comparative method. In short, data saturation was achieved by the 12th interview.

Constant Comparative Method

By adopting the constant comparative method, the researcher will be able to identify data saturation and increase the verification of the analysis (Boeje, 2002). For instance, after conducting the first interview, the data will be subjected to coding, and codes will be assigned to specific categories. As subsequent interviews are conducted, the codes obtained from the second interview have been compared to those from the first interview, and any new codes are added. This iterative process continues until reaching data saturation, signifying that no further codes or themes are appearing.

Data Collection

The data collection took place in the second half of 2021. Prior to the actual data collection, two preliminary tests were conducted in Perak and Selangor as a trial run. This aimed to provide insights and early warnings regarding the interview guide (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). The data collection process involved organising interviews with two participants at a time. After each interview, transcription and translation were conducted, followed by thematic analysis through coding. Following the coding process, an iterative approach was adopted, going back to recruit another two participants, consistent with the constant comparative method.

Findings and Discussion

Participant Profile

Table 1: Participant Profile

Participant	Homestay Name	Years of experience	Language Spoken	Platform
P1	Homestay Kampung Pantai Sepat	14 years	Malay	Whatsapp
P2	Homestay Leban Chondong	12 years	Malay	Whatsapp
P3	Homestay Sungai Pasu	21 years	Malay	Whatsapp
P4	Homestay Kampung Alai	23 years	Malay	Face to Face
P5	Homestay Kampung Pulai	15 years	Malay	Face to Face
P6	Homestay Kampung Rhu	14 years	Malay	Whatsapp
P7	Homestay Penampang	7 years	English/Malay	Whatsapp
P8	Homestay Walai Tokou	21 years	Malay	Whatsapp
P9	Homestay Chenderoh	8 years	Malay	Whatsapp
P10	Homestay Gopeng	17 years	Malay	Mircosoft Teams
P11	Homestay Kampung Beng	18 years	Malay	Mircosoft Teams
P12	Homestay Banghuris	28 years	Malay	Whatsapp

This study collected data from 12 participants using the semi-structured interview. Most of the participants were interviewed via online video calls, such as WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams, while only two participants were interviewed in person.

Objective 1 - Challenges

Mental Health Issues

The interview found that out of 12 homestay operators, nine had expressed mental health issues during COVID-19. In addition, the participants express various negative emotions such as stress and uncertainty. These findings indicate that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the mental health of homestay operators, potentially through various mediating effects that influence their thoughts. Poor mental health will affect the business performance and the ability to sustain the business due to the inability to make sound decisions (Rajgopal, 2010), a decrease in productivity (Sachiko & Isamu, 2016), increasing the likelihood of losses (Johnson et al., 2015) and demotivate entrepreneur to stay in the industry (Stephan, 2018). Figure 2 illustrates three major negative mental states: stress, uncertainty, and unconfidence.

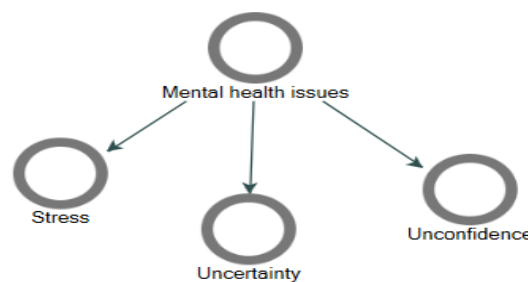


Figure 2: Theme 1 - Mental Health Issues

Stress

Participant P7: I have been feeling a bit stressed, and I have had to think about what kind of promotions I should do to encourage people to stay in my homestay.

Participant P7 expressed feeling stressed as she had to determine the necessary actions and promotions required to attract guests to stay at her homestay. On the other hand, other participants experienced stress due to concerns about the risk of contracting the virus and the prolonged waiting period for the government to lift the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and restrictions. For example, participant P10 articulated her anxiety concerning the potential repercussions of COVID-19, which subsequently translated into heightened stress levels. Consequently, her escalated stress levels contributed to a noticeable weight loss during that period. On the other side, participants (P6, P7, P10, P11, P12) experienced stress during COVID-19, particularly when the government enacted the MCO. One of the primary reasons for their stress is the heavy reliance on income generated from their homestay programme, which serves as their sole source of income. Therefore, during COVID-19, homestay operators faced stress from two perspectives: the performance of their homestay programme and personal health factors.

In conclusion, stress could affect homestay operator well-being in terms physical or mental. For example, the participant was over-stressed and experienced severe weight loss. This result is also in line with the research conducted by Corner et al. (2017), which found that stress

negatively impacted the well-being of entrepreneurs. Consequently, it affects their resilience and limits their cognitive decision-making flexibility. Hence, developing coping abilities and stress management is crucial to maintain well-being and entrepreneurial resilience (Kipkosgei, 2022). For example, Baron et al. (2016) mentioned that positive adaptation of entrepreneur resilience is crucial to overcome stress and avoid negative feelings.

Uncertainty

Based on Anderson et al. (2019), uncertainty is considered a form of negative mental state that can have a detrimental impact on mental health. This study found that the majority of homestay operators experienced a high degree of uncertainty due to COVID-19, which is considered one of the most unprecedented health crises ever faced in Malaysia. The crisis was new to them, as they had never experienced such a high infection and fatality rate, which claimed numerous Malaysian lives (Hashim et al., 2021).

Participant P6: When I get to know about COVID. When announce the MCO we did not expect how long will be... how long this homestay will be closed, so we rely on the income, it's stress too. Wait and wait for the government to open when the COVID is end. We can't estimate ... one year two year or three year... We can't expect that what it will happen in 2 to 3 months.

Moreover, Han et al. (2011) explained three different sources of uncertainty: (1) randomness of the upcoming event, (2) reliability and credibility of the information, and (3) having multiple possible outcomes for the event. For example, participant P6 claimed that he never knew what would happen in the upcoming months as there might be another new dreadful wave of COVID-19. Therefore, the randomness of the upcoming events (COVID-19) and the multiple possible outcomes (implementation of MCOs) made the homestay operator feel uncertain during COVID-19. Similarly, Participant P3 shared that she was unsure about the SOP plan implemented by the government because she saw that some places in Pahang had loosened the SOP while some did not. Thus, with the uncertainty of the SOP plan, she was confused and indecisive about whether she should accept the bookings, which caused the loss of potential customers during COVID-19. Moreover, participant P8 mentioned it is difficult for him to react and respond to COVID-19 as he lacked sufficient knowledge and was uncertain. Hence, unprepared homestay operators may face increased pressure when adapting to the pandemic, feeling overwhelmed by decision-making and existing responsibilities.

In conclusion, these results align with the study of Anderson et al. (2019), in which the feeling of uncertainty is a negative mental state that eventually turns into poor mental health. Likewise, Moors et al. (2013) explain that the actual mental state of uncertainty could be the determinant of leading to certain negative emotions or mental health issues. In short, the participants in this study initially felt uncertainty brought about by COVID-19 and the lockdown SOP. This mental state can lead to negative mental health outcomes such as fear, indecision, sadness, lack of confidence, or frustration.

Unconfidence

Participant P8: We felt a lack of confidence during that period. While we had plans to add or repair toilets and make other improvements, when we considered the financial situation at the time, we hesitated to invest because our income was uncertain. We lacked confidence in increasing both the quantity of rooms and other amenities.

Participants (P6, P8) expressed a desire to improve and renovate their homestays to enhance their services. However, they mentioned that financial constraints exacerbated by COVID-19 had prevented them from proceeding with their plans, leading to a lack of confidence. They feared that negative outcomes could worsen their financial situation, creating a negative feedback loop. For example, they lacked confidence in further investing due to limited income. If they were to invest more and the outcome fell short of expectations, they would face even greater financial constraints, further eroding their confidence. In summary, participants expressed hesitancy in making decisions regarding their homestay programmes due to the outbreak of COVID-19, which disrupted their plans for expansion and renovation. Financial limitations and potential risks contributed to their lack of confidence in pursuing such endeavors.

In conclusion, homestay operators with low emotional resilience as entrepreneurs tend to experience feelings of uncertain, stress and unconfidence when they are unable to effectively adapt to the challenges posed by COVID-19. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Zayadin et al. (2022), which highlights that entrepreneurs often express a lack of confidence in uncertain environments, leading to de-motivation and hindered reactions to the situation.

Financial Challenges

During the interviews, participants shared their experiences regarding the financial challenges they encountered. Figure 3 illustrates the four main financial challenges faced by homestay operators: less consumer demand and high operation cost.



Figure 3: Theme 2 - Financial Challenges

Less Consumer Demand

Some homestay operators (P1, P5, P8) mentioned that the absence of foreign tourists would significantly reduce their revenue because their activities are aimed at the foreign tourist market. For example, participant P8 was located in Sabah, and most homestay activities are related to outdoor activities that mainly target the international customer segment. However, activities targeting international tourists are not feasible. Thus, they cannot sell tourism packages when the border is closed. This result is aligned with the study by Gössling et al. (2020) because the fall in international tourist arrival would impact the demand for the product.

Participant P8: We have a jungle track available, but unfortunately, we are unable to offer jungle tracking experiences. There is no demand for these activities, and they are typically included in international tourism packages, making it challenging for us to sell them. Unable to sell.

In short, homestay operators that target international tourists will not be feasible due to border closure. Thus, most of their tourism packages that targeting international tourists will not be able to sell as well due to no international tourists, and domestic tourists will be less interested.

Besides that, COVID-19 exacerbated more severe issues than the tourism packages that were unable to sell, which were the packages that were sold out before the outbreak of COVID-19. Furthermore, when the sudden implementation of MCO requires the homestay operator to cancel all the sold tourism packages, the homestay operator must fully refund the customer who booked the homestay before the MCO. Therefore, this will further worsen the situation where the homestay operators have limited incomes but must refund all customer's deposits.

Participant P6: Actually we provided two options because we wanted to ensure that people could choose what suited their situation best. One option was to refund the deposit, but we also suggested rescheduling for another date. However, to be honest, we really didn't want to forfeit their deposit, as we felt sorry for the customers, and we were willing to refund regardless of the circumstances

The participant shared that he provides two options to his customers: either to postpone their travel date or receive a full refund. Based on his statement, he seems more inclined towards customers choosing an alternative date, which suggests that he may face financial constraints in providing full refunds. Nevertheless, if the customer chooses a full refund, he will still honor it, as he mentioned his understanding of the situation and expressed empathy towards his customers. Similarly, another participant (P4) mentioned that some people suggested him to only refund half of the deposit amount to reduce liquidity risk. However, despite facing criticism and being called "stupid" by some individuals, he insisted on refunding the entire deposit. This result agrees with Menegaki's (2020) research that the tourism sector would face the problem of refunding all the deposits acquired from the reservation before the pandemic outbreak.

On the other hand, Alexandrescu and Milandru (2018) suggest that promotion is a crucial marketing communication strategy to raise awareness by reminding, persuading, providing information, and targeting potential customers. Unfortunately, homestay operators faced cancellation in promotion campaign due to COVID-19.

Participant P2: Before the lockdown, MOTAC or Pahang Tourism invited all homestay entrepreneurs, hotel entrepreneurs, tourism business entrepreneurs to join the programme TM188. The programme organises in Kuantan for 3 days 2 nights in order to promote all the tourism businesses (hotels, resorts, homestays) in Pahang. The executive committee and every entrepreneur work together to sell all the tourism products and packages which include the hotel and homestay packages. Unfortunately, at last, we closed due to the outbreak of pandemic.

In summary, during COVID-19, homestay operators have faced significant financial challenges due to the inability to sell certain products, such as international tourist packages, and the cancellation of promotion campaigns. This disruption has not only depressed demand from the market but also hindered the traditional word-of-mouth strategy, making it difficult to conduct on-the-spot promotions or advertisements. Consequently, the immobility of homestay operators has created a barrier to communicating with potential customers, ultimately resulting in a loss of potential customers for the homestays.

High Operation Cost

Participants shared some of the expenses they needed to cover during COVID-19, such as the maintenance, operating, personal protective instrument expenses, sanitisation, and cost of buying the thermometer.

Participant P6: If we operate the homestay, each homestay operators will take turns, reducing costs and usage. Customers will also be more likely to go out, take walks, and not stay in the house all the time. However, with rental houses, they may have to accommodate their family members, which increases costs and the risk of air conditioning maintenance.

The participant pointed out several facilities that needed maintenance, including the air conditioning, refrigerator, damaged television, electric motion sensor light, and toilet repair facilities. He also emphasised that before COVID-19, they could swap tourists between their homestays. However, most customers would rather stay in one homestay without outdoor activities during COVID-19. Therefore, it requires frequent maintenance of facilities such as the air conditioning and incurs higher utility costs.

Furthermore, most participants agreed that they needed to bear the cost of conducting the sanitisation process and preparing personal protective equipment. This is because they must ensure the house is clean whenever they have a customer. For example, participants (P3, P10) suggested purchasing disinfectants and cleaning products like Dettol and Clorox to clean the house. Likewise, participant P11 mentioned that they had bought some instruments to perform the cleaning. Meanwhile, Participant P2 stated they would request the government to clean or disinfect whenever they have a large group of tourists. However, she added that the cost of sanitising would be RM50 per house.

Participant P11: We will inform the tourist to bring along that, but still, we will prepare for it. Because tourists might forget about it, we are responsible for preparing for that.

Participant P11 agreed that they are responsible for preparing the personal protection items and will remind the customer to bring them along. Similarly, another participant (P7), shared that she will place a box of masks and hand sanitizer in the common area to provide to their customers. The participant emphasised that the price of masks was surging seriously at the beginning of COVID-19. Thus, at a certain point, it increased the cost of the homestay program as they needed to purchase inflated mask prices. On the other hand, one participant (P8) shared that to ensure the workers' safety, they had bought some special uniforms for performing the cleaning.

In short, most of the participants shared that they provide PPEs because they understand that safety is the top priority during COVID-19. For example, Participant P6 mentioned, "*we cannot prioritise profit over safety.*" Also, Participant P1 understands they should prepare the compulsory items to avoid being fined by the Malaysian National Security Council. While Participant P8 shared that they strictly comply with the rules and regulations and prepare all the required items such as thermometers and hand sanitizers. In summary, this indicates that homestay operators would incur additional costs during COVID-19 due to performing sanitisation and providing PPEs to ensure the safety of the homestay.

In conclusion, whether homestay operators can operate, they still need to bear the fixed cost. Even though they are allowed to operate, they still need to bear extra costs, such as personal

protection equipment and sanitisation costs. Thus, homestay operators suffer from personal financial sacrifices as they need to use their resources to continue to fund the homestay programme. Homestay operators need to tap into their financial resources to cover the costs of their homestay programme. This will affect the resilience of the entrepreneurs as they will have fewer financial resources compared to before. This result is supported by the study conducted by Schutte and Mberi (2020), which found that the financial resources of entrepreneurs directly impact their resilience. Additionally, according to Munawaroh and Qamari (2020), entrepreneurs running out of capital will exit the market with many debts. Thus, homestay operators who persist in funding the homestay operation cost alone will impact their financial resilience when their reserves are depleted. Again, whenever homestay operators run out of capital, they might close the homestay programme.

Objective 2 - Strategies

Self-development

Due to COVID-19, prioritising and nurturing the self-development of homestay operators is crucial, as the crisis has brought about unprecedented challenges and led to mental health issues. Based on the shared experiences of participants in Figure 4.3, self-development encompasses cultivating a positive attitude and learning new skills that homestay operators can adopt to navigate these difficulties and enhance emotional resilience.

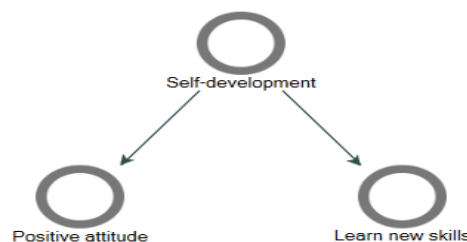


Figure 4: Theme 1 - Self-development

Positive Attitude

Based on the shared experiences of participants (P1, P2, P4, P5, P11, P12), it is evident that maintaining a positive attitude, particularly in adapting to the new normal brought about by COVID-19, is of utmost importance. Participant P1 shared the perspective that it is crucial to adapt to the changes and emphasised that they did not remain inactive at home during the pandemic. Homestay operators have acknowledged the likelihood of the pandemic lasting for an extended period and have highlighted the need for alternative plans and ideas to adapt to the evolving circumstances.

Participant P2: We don't need to give up or feel hopeless, even though we been hits by the COVID-19. All lifestyles need to change to adapt to the new current situation, and the same goes for tourism. In my own opinion, for this new normal period and new normal in tourism we need to change the way to adapt the new normal.

participant (P2) recognised that giving up or feeling hopeless is not a productive response. Instead, she emphasised the importance of cultivating a resilient mindset and actively adapting to the new normal. This includes embracing a lifestyle that can accommodate the changes and seeking innovative ways to attract new tourists.

Acknowledging and understanding the current situation is indeed the initial step in preparing oneself mentally for the changes and adapting to the new normal. By recognising the reality and acknowledging the changes and impacts, homestay operators can begin to assess the impact on their lives and businesses. This awareness allows homestay operators to develop a mindset that is open to change and resilience. Once homestay operators acknowledge the need for adaptation, they can then focus on developing strategies to cope with the new circumstances.

Learn New Skills

Participant P11 organised three programme and training to attract the customer while for the training to increase their capability to prepare for the pandemic. He said, "*So what we had done is to stabilise our team with three programme.*" Similarly, participant P8 mentioned that the first thing was to train their people. This is because, in the early conversation with the participant, he shared that they did not have any preparation for COVID-19, so initially, they were in a panic. This indicates that participants realise that personal development is vital to prepare for or deal with COVID-19 regardless of skill or to have a positive mental state. Meanwhile, participant P1 shared that their young generation has learned video recording and photography. These specific skills could help in advertising and promotion via the short clips. Also, the participant encourages the other homestay operator to be involved in COVID-19 related training. Likewise, participant P6 shared that they learned to create pop-up advertisements as a strategy to enhance their advertising and promotion efforts. This indicates their willingness to explore new methods and adapt to the changing circumstances brought about by the pandemic.

In summary, this result indicates that participants are fully aware that the way to deal with COVID-19 or mental health issues is to make changes such as training or learning a particular skill to adapt to COVID-19 because seeking self-development via learning new skills improves their skills to handle the challenges better. Again, this result is aligned with the study by Tugade and Fredrickson (2004), where learning new skills could promote better mental health and build resilience. Similarly, Robitschek and Keyes (2009) found that people taking the initiative to seek self-improvement will have more sense of purpose in their lives and promote better mental wellness. In short, homestay operators seeking self-development during COVID-19 will develop better entrepreneurial emotional resilience to adapt positively to the situation.

Cost Management

Based on the participants' shared experiences, it is evident that effective cost management is crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic. Homestay operators have found ways to reduce burdens by utilizing zero-cost marketing to offset unavoidable costs. Figure 5 illustrates the theme of cost management and demonstrates how implementing strategies such as zero-cost marketing and being aware of government support can help homestay operators address the financial hurdles brought about by the pandemic and ensure the sustainability of their businesses.

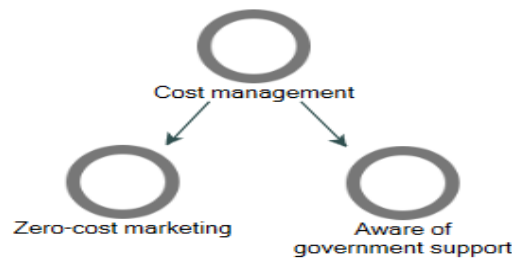


Figure 5: Theme 2 - Cost Management

Zero-cost Marketing

Most participants also shared their opinion on online marketing and how it could help them during COVID-19. For example, participant P11 mentioned that they understand the importance of online marketing and do not follow the traditional ways as he claims that "*traditional business model won't able to go far.*" This indicate that he believes that traditional approaches may have limitations in reaching a wider audience and sustaining the business in the long run.

Besides that, the majority of participants expressed their unanimous agreement on the effectiveness of utilising social media as a promotional tool for their homestay programme during the COVID-19 period. They recognised several key benefits when using social media platforms for advertising and promotion such as zero cost for advertisement, access broader customer and positive result of using social media.

Participant P6: Promote on Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok because it's free, and we don't need to pay, right?

Participants P6 and P7 mentioned that they have been using social media to promote and advertise their homestay because it doesn't incur any cost. This result is aligned with Hoekstra and Leeftang's (2020) study, as during the COVID-19 company tended to go for a cost reduction policy, so they made full use of social media to promote and communicate with customers. Besides that, participant P6 mentioned a critical point: during the lockdown, people cannot go out; thus, most people will be actively shuffling on social media. This result is proven by Dixon (2022); the average social media usage has surged during lockdown because social media is an accessible channel for social interaction and entertainment.

The participants (P3, P5, P11) highlighted several advantages of utilising social media to promote their homestays during the pandemic. These benefits included increased visibility and tourist visits, enhanced accessibility for customers through social media platforms, expansion of market share, and the cost-free nature of advertising.

In conclusion, online marketing such as Youtube, and social media was being used to advertise the discounted items and provide accurate information regarding the business situation after the crisis (Orchiston & Higham, 2014) and able to reach out to different segments of customers to increase the sales volume (Carr, 2020; Rahayu et al., 2021). Meanwhile, Saha and Kar (2020) provided the view from a consumer perspective during COVID-19 as it is effective to let the consumer realise some new products or services while they cannot move around. This study further emphasises the importance of using social media to promote during COVID-19 because it does not involve any financial charges for usage, which helps minimise the financial burden

for homestay operators. In short, when homestay operators provide new travel packages, they can reach out the new domestic customer and, with the usage of digital marketing, can overcome the problems caused by the cancellation promotion campaign which can replace by using the electronic word of mouth strategy via the social media or creation of homestay website. Hence, this strategy will increase the entrepreneur's financial resilience as it uses minimal resources to gain the most output from digital marketing; also, it will restore the communication channel with their stakeholders. Mason et al.'s study (2021) corroborates that during COVID-19, consumers are spending time on social media to evaluate or collect information regarding the product or service, and it will influence their purchase decision-making

Aware Of Government Support

In the interview, participants were questioned about their awareness of the support provided by the government or respective parties. Most participants shared various support or benefits received during the pandemic, such as financial support, promotion support, IT-related issues support, necessary items, and training regarding how to perform the sanitisation process and have also given the sanitisation service.

Participant P5: Gratefully, we received the government's help. So that we able to hang on the business.

Participant P5 stated they received the RM600 from the MOTAC, which was the one-off cash assistance toward the registered homestay in Malaysia. One-off cash assistance could help the homestay business by covering monthly utility bills. But, most importantly, it gives the participant hope in sustaining the business and helps support their life. Additionally, participants mentioned that the government provided RM2000 to each homestay association to cover bills and support funds for conducting activities. Furthermore, the Malaysian government provided necessary items such as hand sanitizers and thermometers. Some participants shared that the government or state government also helped sanitise houses or tourism hotspots.

In conclusion, the government provides support not only for cash assistance but also some necessary items. Besides that, one of the participants, a consultant who will frequently deal with the account, said that the government had allocated a 250k budget for each tourism location. Therefore, homestay programme will benefit from the budget allocation. The government and MOTAC provide various financial assistance programme that help homestay operators sustain their businesses. However, government support can only be considered an external strategy as it is beyond the control of homestay operators. Although it is not a strategy that can be implemented by the homestay operators themselves, government support is one way to assist them during these challenging times. Therefore, homestay operators should fully take advantage of this government support to alleviate their financial burden during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, they should ensure they submit reports with correct bank account details, submit monthly reports as required, and stay updated on the latest news regarding government support. This result aligns with the previous study by Ntounis et al.

(2021); financial assistance is the most useful way to help tour operators relieve or recover from COVID-19. Meanwhile, Estiri et al. (2022) further explained that financial assistance improves the business's liquidity and facilitates their daily operation; it also includes the debt repayment moratorium programme, which indirectly provides financial support.

Conclusion

In general, this study aims to understand the challenges faced by the homestay operators due to COVID-19 pandemic and identify strategies to overcome these challenges via the lens of entrepreneurial resilience. Figure 6 in the study illustrates the resilience of entrepreneurs, highlighting their ability to rebound from the challenges faced due to COVID-19. At the initial outbreak of COVID-19, it brought significant disruption to the homestay programme due to movement restrictions and shifts in market demand. Consequently, this impact of COVID-19 led to two primary challenges for homestay operators: mental health issues and financial difficulties.

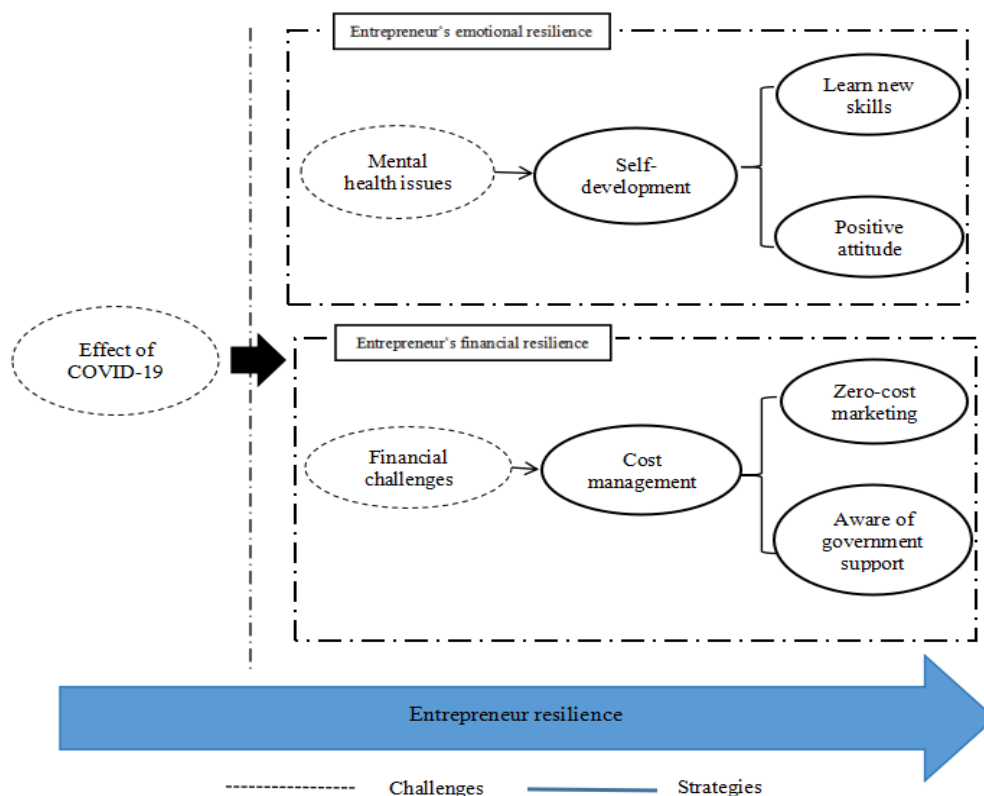


Figure 6: Homestay Operator Pathways To Regaining Resilience

Homestay operators achieved emotional recovery by implementing innovative strategies, including self-development initiatives. By embracing self-improvement, homestay operators not only bolstered their emotional well-being but also fortified their adaptability and resilience in the face of disruption. In addition, homestay operators focused on managing costs to cope with financial challenges.

In conclusion, the study highlights the remarkable entrepreneurial resilience displayed by Malaysian homestay operators in the face of challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. These operators have demonstrated emotional resilience by adapting to the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19, maintaining a positive mindset, and acquiring new skills to navigate changing circumstances. Financial resilience has been showcased through strategic adjustments, such as implementing cost management measures. By pro-actively adapting their strategies, homestay operators have not only sustained their businesses but also built stronger resilience, positioning themselves for success in a post-pandemic era.

Limitation and Recommendation

This study was undertaken exclusively within the Malaysia context, making its applicability limited to scholars and researchers with an interest in this specific country. Furthermore, this study focusing on registered homestays within states hardest hit by COVID-19's income impact. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the unique structural, cultural, and economic variations across different countries could influence the applicability of the study's conclusions beyond the Malaysian context.

A notable limitation of this study arises from the necessity to conduct certain interviews online, a consequence of travel restrictions imposed during the research period. To address this, future studies could consider conducting in-person interviews on-site at the homestays to overcome these limitations and facilitate a more holistic understanding.

Another noteworthy consideration is that this study only focuses on the viewpoint of homestay operators, neglecting the valuable perspectives of other stakeholders, particularly customers. To give a better overall view of the homestay ecosystem, future research endeavours could encompass both seller and buyer viewpoints.

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