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TRANSFORMING MARGINALIZED SOCIETY: SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN TODAY'S MALAYSIAN BUSINESS LANDSCAPE

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Abstract:

Social entrepreneurship is becoming more widely acknowledged as crucial in tackling the most urgent social, environmental, and economic issues in the world. While existing reports on social entrepreneurship in Malaysia provide a broad overview, they often fail to capture the nuanced and dynamic growth of social enterprises serving the autism spectrum disorder community, where practical innovations and focused initiatives drive meaningful progress and provide crucial support for individuals and families. A qualitative study approach, using multiple case studies, has been used to explore and understand the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship in Malaysia by choosing six founders of social companies based in Klang Valley, Malaysia, to participate in this study. Data collection would be a face-to-face interview. Using thematic analysis, the researcher can identify these organizations' unique challenges and the targeted initiatives driving meaningful progress and providing crucial support for individuals and families. subsequently developing strategies to enhance the impact and sustainability of social enterprises in Malaysia.

Keywords:

Autism Spectrum Disorder, Social Entrepreneurship, Social Enterprises, Malaysia, Qualitative Research

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a chronic neurodevelopmental disorder marked by difficulties in social interaction, communication, and uniform behavioral patterns in diverse

contexts (Levy et al., 2010; Lord et al., 2018). Individuals with ASD who exhibit a deterioration in adaptive functioning may find it challenging to form relationships with classmates, family members, and others, despite demonstrating academic excellence, acquiring independent living skills, or engaging in community activities (Lindsay et al., 2016). The social and functional obstacles highlight the necessity of comprehending ASD from a medical standpoint; nonetheless, many deficiencies persist concerning its etiology, manifestations, and possible interventions. Ongoing investigation of these pathways is crucial for the development of effective interventions and therapies. Malaysia's Ministry of Health reported a 5% rise in autism diagnoses among children under 18, with 589 cases in 2021 compared to 562 in 2020. The Department of Social Welfare (JKM) has documented a consistent increase in the number of children diagnosed with autism, rising from 6,991 in 2013 to 53,323 in 2023. This trend indicates a wider pattern, as depicted in Figure 1, which demonstrates the steady increase in autism diagnoses in Malaysia over the past decade. These statistics highlight the increasing incidence of autism and the pressing necessity for improved resources and assistance for individuals with ASD and their families, both locally and globally. Inconsistencies among records from many organizations, including social welfare agencies, educational establishments, and healthcare providers, underscore the intricacy of diagnosing and reporting autism. Notwithstanding these disparities, the overarching trend indicates a substantial rise in autism prevalence, underscoring the necessity for a unified, multi-sectoral strategy to tackle this urgent concern.

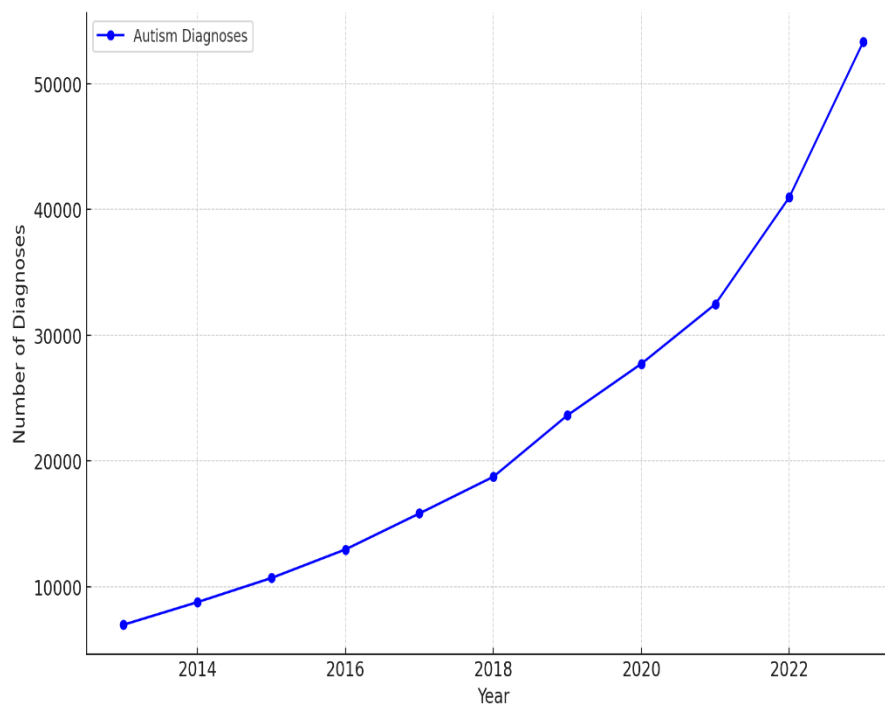


Figure 1: Diagnosed Autism Cases in Malaysia (2013-2023)

(Source: Department of Social Welfare (JKM, Malaysia))

Therefore, social entrepreneurship (SE) can potentially solve complex social problems and create positive change in marginalized communities. Given this, SE is a global trend that combines entrepreneurial skills with innovation that addresses the unique needs of marginalized societies (Dees, 1998a; Alvord et al., 2002; Okpara & Halkias, 2011; Kadir & Sarif, 2016; Kraus et al., 2017). However, the state of SE in a nation is important to serve

the individual with ASD continually and effectively. Given this, social enterprises, the primary actors in the field of SE, are actively working to address social issues worldwide. Social enterprises with dual aims generally yield lower earnings than conventional corporations. In addition, social enterprises have expanded their functions to address the requirements that the state sector cannot provide (Palil et al., 2021). Social enterprises require support from various stakeholders, including governments, investors, and consumers, to thrive and make a lasting impact. Therefore, SE is frequently a top priority for Malaysia's Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives, as outlined in the Malaysia SE Blueprint for 2030. CEO Dzuleira Abu Bakar announced the transfer of MaGIC from the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives (MEDAC) to the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation (MOSTI) in July 2020. In 2021, the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation (MOSTI) introduced a novel initiative, the Malaysian Research Accelerator for Technology and Innovation (MRANTI). This initiative involved amalgamating two distinct government institutions: Technology Park Malaysia and MaGIC. According to the British Council's 2018 report, "The State of Social Enterprise in Malaysia," there are approximately 20,749 social enterprises in Malaysia. These social enterprises make up 0.8% of MSMEs, 79% of cooperatives, and 3.47% of NGOs, as stated in the Malaysia SE Blueprint for 2030. Yet, research found that rate of growth of SE is about 2%, which is comparatively low compared to neighbouring nations like Thailand and Indonesia, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines (Abdul Kadir et al., 2019). Countries such as the United Kingdom, South Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Myanmar, and Australia place enormous importance on social enterprises as key national priorities. Furthermore, Thailand has 120,000 social enterprises, while the United Kingdom has 70,000, contributing significantly to their national gross domestic product (GDP).

The evidence shows contradictory SE growth in Malaysia despite strong government and stakeholders' support. On the one hand, the number of social enterprises in Malaysia has steadily increased over the past few years, indicating a growing interest in the sector. Therefore, the study would like to explore the reasons behind this paradoxical trend and focus on social enterprises that serve individuals with ASD. It would be a significant study to understand the capacities of social enterprises that serve individuals with ASD and their impact on the community. In addition, it is noteworthy that, Abdul Kadir et al. (2019), highlighted that SE has received little attention in Malaysia over the years despite its immense potential to generate substantial positive effects on society and the environment. Despite there being extensive research on autism and SE, the studies of social enterprises addressing autism-related issues are not well documented. This gap in the literature is concerning, as it means that there is limited knowledge about the specific approaches and strategies that social enterprises are using to support individuals with ASD. With the rising prevalence of autism spectrum disorder, it is crucial that more research is conducted to explore the effectiveness of social enterprises in providing services and creating opportunities for individuals with ASD. By bridging this gap in the literature, we can gain valuable insights into how social enterprises can better serve this population and contribute to building more inclusive communities. Ultimately, understanding the impact of social enterprises on individuals with ASD can pave the way for more targeted interventions and initiatives that improve their quality of life and enhance their well-being.

Literature Review

Overview of Social Entrepreneurship

SE developed as a distinct topic in the 1950s and has garnered considerable attention in the literature over the last decade (Bowen, 1953). A key difference between commercial

entrepreneurship and SE is in their value propositions. Commercial entrepreneurs emphasize profit maximization through the production of goods and services, utilizing innovation, risk-taking, and creativity. Conversely, SE prioritizes the needs of underrepresented or disadvantaged populations, aiming for transformative advantages that enhance communities or society as a whole (Martin & Osberg, 2007).

Notwithstanding its increasing significance, SE lacks a broadly recognized definition. Alegre et al. (2017) examined 307 papers and discerned 140 unique meanings of SE, underscoring its conceptual richness. Kamaludin et al. (2021) observed that researchers have not reached a consensus on a singular definition, but Choi and Majumdar (2014) characterized SE as an "essentially contested concept." This complexity arises from its ambiguous dimensionalization and the challenges in delineating its fundamental characteristics and unit of analysis (Foss & Saebi, 2017). As such, Table 1 delineates multiple definitions of SE, including its attributes and aims.

Table 1: Key Definitions and Evolving Perspectives on Social Entrepreneurship

Author	Definition
Leadbetter (1997)	SE implies entrepreneurial behavior for social impacts instead of profit; in other words, the generated profits will be reinvested to enhance the social wealth of disadvantaged people.
Dees (1998)	SE combines the passion of a social mission with an image of business-like discipline, innovation, and determination.
Alvord et al. (2004)	Creating innovative solutions to social problems by mobilizing the ideas, capabilities, resources and social arrangements needed for sustainable social change
Martin & Osberg (2007)	Addresses the characteristics of instability to enhance the lives of those in disadvantaged groups, identifies opportunities and develops new social values to challenge the imbalance in society, and supports as stable ecosystem in the context of reducing injustices to marginalized communities to create a better future
Saebi et al., (2018)	SE known as the behavioral characteristics of the social entrepreneur through an entrepreneurial process or activity that creates social value.
Haldar (2019)	To consider other interdependencies within social system instead of fixing social problems
Social Enterprise Accreditation Guideline (2019)	A business entity registered under any written law in the country that proactively creates positive social and environmental impact and is financially sustainable
Kamaludin et al. (2021)	SE involves various programs and processes to help society via social ventures that depend on themselves, profit-generating, and innovatively progress in managing their operations.

Chandna, V. (2022)

SE is associated with digital technologies in the new era, as a good platform for upcoming social ventures.

(Sources: Rahman et al., 2019)

Moreover, SE has developed into a multidisciplinary domain, tackling challenges such as poverty alleviation (Bloom, 2009; Ghauri et al., 2014), women's empowerment (Datta & Gailey, 2012), social transformation (Alvord et al., 2004), inclusive growth in subsistence marketplaces (Ansari et al., 2012; Azmat et al., 2015), and institutional change (Nicholls, 2008). It also intersects with concepts such as charity and philanthropy (Acs et al., 2013), sustainability and corporate social responsibility (Al-Marri et al., 2019), social innovation (Philips et al., 2019), and commercial entrepreneurship (Austin et al., 2006; Lurtz & Kreutzer, 2017; Mair & Marti, 2006; Schneider, 2017). SE's methodology for addressing social issues emphasizes extensive transformation, frequently highlighting innovation inside the private sector (Dacin et al., 2010; Short et al., 2009).

The Evolution and Impact of Social Entrepreneurship in Malaysia

SE was popular in the late 1990s, but the development of microfinance institutions (MFI) in Malaysia was one of the earliest SE activities. In 1987, Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM) established itself as the first microfinance institution (MFI) in Malaysia. Yayasan Usaha Maju (YUM) in Sabah and the Economic Fund for National Entrepreneurs Group (TEKUN) in 1998 followed in their footsteps. The Malaysian Social Enterprise Blueprint 2015-2018 (MSEB, 2015-2018) was unveiled in May 2015. The document is a three-year plan outlining the strategic steps to create the SE ecosystem in Malaysia. (Digital News Asia, 2015, May 14). The creation of the MaGIC in the SE section in 2015 played a pivotal role in advancing the growth of SE in Malaysia. The purpose of establishing the unit was to enhance knowledge, establish connections, and provide education for the SEs (MSEB, 2015–2018). Grants are MaGIC offers grants to facilitate young entrepreneurs' ventures into social enterprises, and education has been provided to assimilate knowledge of SE among young entrepreneurs across multiple disciplines.

Agensi Inovasi Malaysia and the Public-Private Partnership Unit (UKAS) from the Prime Minister's Office were tasked with developing the Social Public-Private Partnership (SPPP) as part of the National Blue Ocean Strategy (NBOS) in the same year. The SP needed to reassess conventional methods of providing social services to the public by leveraging the benefits of the three traditional business sectors: for-profit, non-profit, and government (Nafi et al., 2021). In 2016, the government acknowledged the significant role of social enterprises (SEs) in the Malaysian economy and emphasized their potential as effective means to reduce poverty in the Eleventh Malaysian Plan. In 2017, the government introduced the Social Outcome Fund, a budget of RM3 million, to provide financial support for a range of social intervention initiatives under the SPPP (Damodaran, 2017, March 13). The National Entrepreneurship Policy 2030 designated the SE as one of the eight (8) focal points, aiming to transform the nation into an exceptional entrepreneurial society by 2030. The government would offer tax exemptions, online platforms, support systems, and capacity building for social enterprises in the country (MEDAC, 2020).

Social Justice Theory

The roots of social justice theory lie in ancient philosophical discussions by thinkers like Plato and Aristotle, later evolving during the Enlightenment with philosophers such as Locke,

Rousseau, and Hobbes. These scholars emphasized the social contract, individual rights, and the common good, laying a foundation for modern ideas of fairness and equity. Today, social justice principles—fairness, equity, and inclusivity—align closely with the ethos of SE, which seeks innovative solutions to social and environmental challenges. By addressing systemic inequalities and prioritizing marginalized communities, SE embodies the values of justice and equality central to social justice theory (Rawhouser et al., 2019). Social entrepreneurs apply social justice principles by ensuring equal access to opportunities, empowering underserved communities, and fostering systemic change (Mair & Marti, 2006; Dees, 1998). Their participatory approaches engage communities in co-creating solutions that are culturally sensitive and sustainable (Austin et al., 2006). Embracing diversity, they develop inclusive strategies that consider varied experiences and identities (Mair & Marti, 2009). Furthermore, social entrepreneurs advocate for policy reforms to address structural inequalities, leveraging their innovations to drive lasting societal transformation (Light, 2008; Alter, 2007). This intersection of SE and social justice highlights how entrepreneurial innovation can advance equity, foster empowerment, and contribute to building more inclusive societies.

Methodology

The researcher has employed a case study approach to extensively investigate a wide research domain without depending on pre-established topics or questions to guide the discussion. Semi-structured interviews as the main method were applied to engage with the research issue from the participant's perspectives and insights, thus enriching their comprehension. The researcher used purposive sampling to gather data from seven social entrepreneurs in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Other primary data were collected by reviewing the organization's documents and observing the sites permitted access. Secondary data such as books, scholarly journals, magazine articles, and newspapers were also utilized to supplement the primary data collected.

Data Collection Procedures

Respondents were chosen for their knowledge, experience, and direct involvement with social enterprises benefiting individuals with ASD. Interviews were in-person and online, accommodating participants' availability and geographical constraints. Each 60 to 90-minute session was conducted in English, as the respondents' fluency eliminated the need for translation and streamlined data collection. Participants were briefed in detail about the study, their role, and the consent process, including approval for audio recording. Interviews were held in conducive environments, such as participants' office spaces, which provided comfort and minimized interruptions. This setting also allowed the researcher to observe the natural surroundings, take detailed notes, and gain contextual insights during the conversations. By integrating systematic data collection methods with advanced analytical tools, the study comprehensively understood the participants' experiences and insights within Malaysian social entrepreneurship and its intersection with ASD-related challenges.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis in a systematic, organized, and transparent manner is essential despite the common perception that qualitative research is less reliable than quantitative research (Galleta & Cross, 2013). Therefore, an effective approach is crucial to accurately analyzing and interpreting the data. One way to achieve this is by using coding techniques to categorize and organize the information collected. Given this, Braun and Clarke (2006) highlighted using thematic analysis as a fundamental method in qualitative analysis. This method aims to reveal recurring themes or patterns in data collection, such as interviews, observations, papers, diaries,

or websites being analyzed (Saunders et al., 2019). Thematic analysis, also an effective method for examining extensive qualitative data sets, employs a methodology that yields comprehensive descriptions, explanations, and theories (Saunders et al., 2019). Typically, qualitative research generates well-written material through transcripts and field notes. The researcher's investment of time and effort is necessary for the systematic and thorough preparation of qualitative studies (Zamawe, 2015). Thus, to reduce the burden on the researcher, the researcher employs Nvivo software to speed up the theme analysis of this study project. In addition, the software helps researchers by eliminating the need for laborious transcription and improving the precision and efficiency of the analytic process. Nvivo 12, the most recent version, facilitates the management and organization of data analysis by assisting researchers in comprehending vast amounts of data contained in interview transcripts.

Ethical Consideration

All participants were informed about the confidentiality of their data, and their participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Two weeks before conducting the research at their respective centers, the researcher issued an approval letter to the participants. Before recording, all participants signed a consent form and were assured that the discussions would remain fully anonymous and that they would not be required to disclose any information they found uncomfortable. Rigorous procedures were followed to ensure data integrity while storing and managing audio recordings and transcripts.

Findings

Barrier for Growth

During the process of analyzing qualitative data thematically, the main topic that emerged is the presence of obstacles that hinder growth. This subject encompasses a range of issues that are preventing progress. This topic is further divided into sub-themes, often known as child nodes, including policy/red tape/bureaucracy, lack of public awareness, and lack of training. Each sub-theme highlights a distinct facet of the overarching problem, enabling a detailed comprehension of the obstacles encountered. Through a methodical process of encoding and classifying these underlying themes, the analysis presents a thorough representation of the elements that hinder progress, providing useful perspectives for effectively addressing and surmounting these obstacles. A summary of the findings is presented in Table 2.

Policy/ Red tape/ Bureaucracy

Essentially, every entrepreneur, even social entrepreneurs, anticipates that their government would provide them with convenient access to acquire resources, particularly financial assistance, to ensure their long-term viability in the market. The government sector possesses the capacity to support social entrepreneurs by providing public financing and guiding them to seek additional assistance from other institutions. Regrettably, one of the participants lacks the inclination to interact with the public sector due to limited accessibility. The participant believes the government sector needs to be more responsive and bureaucratic, posing challenges for social entrepreneurs in obtaining the necessary resources. Instead, they seek assistance from private institutions and groups that offer a more streamlined and effective procedure. Although this decision may restrict access to financial aid, they will renounce government help to evade the vexations and obstacles they link with the public sector. The following comments have been made:

I said it's not a waste of time, though it's not. It's good if everyone wants to join this accreditation process, but I think we went through that in our own personal capacity already. Because I mean, I think you have to be there last time, you have to be there by six weeks within six weeks, and you have to stay over at the hotel they provide. This is very good in the program, but I don't have the time for that. I don't have a doubt. I'm running a cafe here; I can't leave and be there by 6:00. So what happened to the boys, you know? I'm happy with that. I'm happy with that. I understand the importance of accreditation, but realistically, it's just not feasible for me with my current responsibilities. Running a cafe is a full-time job; I can't just drop everything and go stay at a hotel for six weeks. **(Case A)**

Furthermore, the below participants found the lengthy process tedious and time-consuming, leading to decreased motivation and commitment among the individuals involved. Ultimately, the dissatisfaction among the participants negatively impacted the overall social enterprises' effectiveness in serving the marginalized group. As a result, the marginalized group did not receive the necessary support and assistance they needed, further exacerbating their already vulnerable situation. Given this, similar comments are found below:

There will be no motivation factor for me to engage with government sectors any more. For example, till now I haven't gotten results for e-procurement. Too late! [sigh] It is demotivating us to collaborate with government agencies. Um, I don't want it, OK. So public. Not really, because the government does not really have a structure where we can actually use the e-procurement platform. We actually participated in the e-procurement platform. But I don't see any results yet. There have been 0 inquiries in the last two years; is that correct? **(Case B)**

The prime reason for e-procurement is to save on purchasing transaction costs through paperless transactions, low errors, and a more efficient purchasing process (Croom & Brandon-Jones, 2007). However, this research's respondents need help due to immaturity and inefficient platforms for social entrepreneurs. Participant recounted his encounter with the abundant paperwork required to obtain financial assistance from the government. As a result of the intricate application procedure, he was required to submit many forms and accompanying documentation. According to the participant, he primarily relies on his endeavours to significantly impact the lives of those with autism. The following comments have been made,

Not yet, due to a lack of time. Fuh! Most of the time, I will be at my café. Although I have employed autistic people in my center, I have to be with them due to their uniqueness. SO! You can see yourself here. Am I free? [Laugh] Yea. There is a lot of documentation involved in order to get financial aid from the government sector. I prefer the private sector, as they do have CSR practices but face challenges in fulfilling society's demands. Yet, they know our challenges and strengths. **(Case C)**

Lack of Training

Training involves imparting education and knowledge to individuals, enabling them to acquire new skills and adapt to unknown situations, thus facilitating personal growth. Considering this, it is imperative to offer training programs to social entrepreneurs to advance and maintain their presence in the market. Through training, social entrepreneurs will acquire the essential tools and knowledge required to tackle the issues that emerge in the always-evolving market effectively. Consequently, this will empower students to make well-informed decisions and

confidently navigate ambiguous situations. The findings indicate that more instructions on creating impact measuring tools could have helped most respondents seek the next level of accreditation status in Malaysia. Therefore, Case E expressed her perspective on the measurement toolbox.

For now, I don't have any other collaborations with the government yet. If there is a possibility, I will grab it. If I have the sense of that, why not? Hopefully, I can work with them soon. Public procurement does not help us. If they give us training, then I would like to go for public procurement. We have a lot of ideas. But we have insufficient money and expertise. If we have both capabilities, we can go further and apply for public procurements such as toys, furniture, and more. We don't have a measurement toolkit to measure the social impact of our children. I do not know about it. We don't know yet. Still learning. Hopefully, the government can guide us soon, and we are waiting for it. **(CASE E)**

The participant confirmed that her social enterprise needs a measuring toolkit to assess the quantifiable social impact of its actions. In addition, she needs to gain knowledge of the measuring tools, which hinders advancing in accreditation status. Evidence indicates that the participants did not partake in any educational sessions or workshops organized by the governmental institution. The researcher discovered that another participant had likewise never encountered the task of compiling a report regarding the social consequences of her operational activity. The participant stated that a substantial amount of information and paperwork is required to finalize the report for submission. However, the guidelines need more consistency and clear direction from the relevant government. The comments are located below,

The only problem that I have is filling up quite a lot of information that is needed, and I think, uh, when they need all the papers, somebody has to actually sit down and do it. Even so, I have no idea about it. No training has been provided. Indeed, time is running out for me to do it, given that my young adult is expanding annually. **(CASE D)**

In addition to the complaints above, esteemed public organizations like MaGIC failed to offer essential training sessions for participants, particularly in preparing social impact reports. The participants' inadequate training has led to a notable deficiency in their expertise, impeding their capacity to assess and convey their projects' social impact effectively. These individuals lack suitable supervision and education and may need help comprehending the intricate approaches and measurements necessary for proficient reporting. Public entities such as MaGIC must acknowledge the necessity of offering thorough training sessions that enable participants to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to evaluate and document their social impact effectively. The comments are below:

I don't know anything about impact measurement tool. I don't have one. For me, the impact measurement tools are the key success factor for this is getting them to be able to move from point A to point B, for example, getting them to be able to know how to wash the dishes they came here, they don't know how to wash. They came out, they know how to wash the dishes. As simple as that. **(CASE A)**

Lack of Public Awareness

Evidence indicates that Malaysia's public awareness of SE could be faster than that of other nations regarding its ability to recognize and address social problems. One possible reason for

this slow development could be the need for more education and exposure to SE in Malaysia. There may also be a general need for more understanding of the concept and impact of SE within the community. Findings indicated that there is a lack of knowledge about SE in society, as below

Malaysia is still new. How many people here know about SE? [sad] To be honest, nobody in Malaysia knows anything about SE. I'm sorry to say that. People in Malaysia don't know what social businesses are for. This area is only known to a small group of people who are directly or indirectly connected to marginalized groups. In Malaysia, parents and guardians of beneficiaries, as well as people who work for the government or in the business sector and deal with social enterprises, had chances to learn about SE. It's disappointing to see such a lack of awareness and understanding about social enterprises in Malaysia. **(Case F)**

Similarly, another participant commented above that local people still need to catch up to other countries regarding SE. This participant points out that while Malaysia has seen some growth and progress in the field of SE, it still has a long way to go before it can catch up to other nations, as below,

There are a lot of gaps currently, especially in awareness, which is the biggest limitation in Malaysia. Many people are still unaware of the importance of sustainable living and the impact of their actions on the environment. Without widespread awareness and education, it will be difficult to make significant progress in promoting sustainable practices in Malaysia. There are several social enterprises that have achieved success in Malaysia. But people have concepts about social enterprises. I do not know the meaning of objective social enterprises. They are assuming that social enterprises are similar to NGOs. **(Case C)**

Apart from the slow SE progress in Malaysia, the findings consistently show comparable remarks on misunderstandings about the intentions of social companies and other social initiatives like NGOs. Moreover, the absence of knowledge and assistance impedes the development and influence of SE in Malaysia. Furthermore, the scarcity of resources and conflicting agendas pose challenges for governments in effectively allocating adequate funding and support to SE efforts. Despite these obstacles, governments in various nations have endeavoured to foster SE and establish a conducive atmosphere for the flourishing of social enterprises, as evidenced in previous scholarly works. Evidence indicates that insufficient societal knowledge can be attributed to the school system's failure to prioritize SE. In addition to social media, educational institutions, particularly higher education, serve as the subsequent platform for educating society. These institutions possess the authority to include SE in their educational programs and cultivate a climate of social accountability among students. By integrating SE into their curricula, educational institutions may provide future leaders with the essential information and skills to tackle social and environmental issues effectively. One of the participants shared his views below,

In Malaysia, SE is still okay. It is one of the fastest-growing knowledge areas nowadays. Yet, there are a lot of gaps in Malaysia, such as in education, policies, etc. Yet, there are a lot of gaps in Malaysia, such as in education, policies, etc. As far as I know, only several educational institutions are offering this subject. Not many. Of course, we do

not have time to educate society. Moreover, they would not listen to us. So, the education system must concentrate on teenagers in colleges to promote SE. (**CASE A**)

Furthermore, research indicates that the government's inadequate efforts in promoting SE have resulted in a need for more awareness among the general public regarding SE practices in the country. Malaysia lags significantly behind its surrounding countries in terms of the advancement and expansion of SE. Indonesia and Singapore have experienced a significant surge in thriving social companies. However, Malaysia must still catch up regarding available resources, government backing, and broad public awareness. The comments are below,

SE is very new in Malaysia. Oh, it's only maybe about 6–8 years. You know, many years ago, people didn't even know what a SE was. Even today, you know that not many people know what a SE is. People are still confused between NGOs and social entrepreneurship. There is no weakness in our social enterprise. But awareness among the public is poor. So, not many people know about us. Therefore, it becomes crucial for social enterprises in Malaysia to actively promote and create awareness about their work. Without widespread knowledge and understanding, these organizations may struggle to gain the support and recognition they need to thrive. (**Case B**)

Table 2: Key Barriers to Growth for Social Enterprises in Malaysia

Theme	Sub-theme	Key Issues	Participant Examples
Barrier for Growth	Policy/Red Tape/Bureaucracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited accessibility and responsiveness of government sectors - Lengthy and complex processes for accessing financial aid and resources - Demotivating and inefficient systems (e.g., e-procurement) - Excessive documentation required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Case A: "I can't leave and stay at a hotel for six weeks... running a café is a full-time job." - Case B: "Not really, because the government does not really have a structure where we can actually use the e-procurement platform." - Case C: "The documentation process is too time-consuming, so I prefer the private sector."
	Lack of Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Absence of training programs, especially on impact measurement tools - Limited knowledge impedes progress in achieving accreditation - Inconsistent guidelines for 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Case E: "We don't have a measurement toolkit to measure social impact... we are still learning." - Case D: "There is no training for completing reports; it takes a lot of time." - Case A: "I don't know anything about impact measurement tools."

		creating social impact reports	
	Lack of Public Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General lack of understanding of SE among the public - SE is often mistaken for NGOs - Limited educational programs promoting SE - Poor government promotion and public awareness of SE practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Case F: "Nobody in Malaysia knows about SE; it's disappointing." - Case C: "People think SE is like NGOs... awareness is poor." - Case A: "The education system should focus on teenagers to promote SE." - Case B: "Even today, not many people know what a SE is."

Discussion

The "Workplace Inclusion Now" program brings together subject experts, business leaders, and professionals with autism to enhance career prospects and establish a suitable work atmosphere for those with ASD. While, Arend (2020) highlighted the capacity of social enterprises to create additional employment prospects for individuals, empowering them to achieve self-sufficiency and mitigate a significant portion of their social challenges. The involvement of engaged stakeholders in the establishment and administration of the social enterprise, as well as in the development of its governance structure and policies, will lead to the desired outcome (Di Domenico et al., 2010). These social companies offer crucial assistance and prospects for individuals with ASD to enhance their abilities and assimilate into society. Social enterprises in this study are dedicated to improving the welfare of individuals with ASD. These businesses encounter obstacles such as insufficient money and resources, as well as a lack of awareness and comprehension of the requirements of individuals with ASD in the broader community. Notwithstanding these challenges, they persist in making a beneficial influence and offering vital assistance to individuals with ASD.

During the thematic analysis of qualitative data, the predominant subject that surfaced was barriers to growth. The research revealed that red tape and bureaucratic hurdles often associated with government hinder the ability of social enterprises to implement their innovative solutions effectively. The researcher does not deny the significant role of the government's sector in streamlining the SE in Malaysia. The growth and success rates typically rely on public agencies, the primary clients and established funders (Subaciene et al., 2019; Bogacz-Wojtanowska et al., 2019). The public sector also primarily serves as facilitators and enablers, while others provide financial investment in specific initiatives of interest (Mohd Nafi et al., 2021). However, findings found that government efforts to facilitate SE are not satisfying the participants, as they often face obstacles in accessing funding, navigating complex regulations, and competing with traditional businesses. Findings also align with the dissatisfaction with government rigidity, as most social enterprises prefer to work with private companies, as they tend to be more agile and responsive to change, allowing for quicker and more impactful results. The participants believe that the private sector offers more opportunities for growth and scalability, allowing them to have a greater impact on social and environmental issues. Additionally, the private sector often provides access to resources,

networks, and funding that can help social entrepreneurs achieve their goals more efficiently. They believe that collaborating with the private sector allows for more flexibility and creativity in their roles compared to the rigid structure of the public sector. Additionally, consumers need more awareness and understanding of social enterprises to scale their impact. As a result, many SEs need help to reach their target market and gain traction in a competitive marketplace. Despite these challenges, the importance of social enterprises in addressing social and environmental issues cannot be overstated, highlighting the need for more support and recognition in both the public and private sectors. Apart from that, lack of training is the second child node generated in the thematic analysis, in which social entrepreneurs need help developing their skills and knowledge in specific areas. Financial benefits such as public procurement and grant access are often restricted for social entrepreneurs who need more training and qualifications. With proper training, these individuals may struggle easily to compete in the market and grow their businesses successfully. Addressing this need for training and skill development is crucial for social enterprises' long-term success and sustainability. Findings also show that lack of awareness is another crucial challenge for social enterprises to sustain themselves in the market. Social enterprises shall attract customers and generate revenue through proper marketing and outreach efforts. However, this is not happening due to a lack of understanding among the target audience about these organisations' social mission and impact. Enterprises must differentiate themselves from traditional enterprises with effective communication and promotion strategies. This lack of awareness ultimately hinders their ability to grow and make a meaningful impact in the community.

The participants are focused on outcome-oriented learning and practicing the theory of change (TOC). The theory of change (TOC) can be developed independently through the involvement of stakeholders at the initial stage. As such, involving decision-makers in the development phase may create a mutual understanding of the processes demanded for expected social change (Simon et al., 2016). By involving decision-makers in the theory of change development, there is a greater likelihood of support and buy-in for the initiatives proposed by enterprises supporting individuals with ASD in Malaysia. This collaboration between stakeholders and participants will lead to a more sustainable and effective approach to improving the lives of those with ASD. Ultimately, with a united effort and a clear theory of change, these enterprises can create lasting positive change and integration for individuals with ASD in Malaysian society. In addition, the media shall work with the government to expand and disseminate knowledge of SE throughout society. By highlighting successful social entrepreneurs and their impact on communities, the media can inspire others to pursue similar ventures. Through partnerships with government agencies, the media can also help create educational programs and resources to support aspiring social entrepreneurs. By utilizing these tactics, the media can greatly improve social enterprises' prominence, backing, and influence, aiding them in overcoming obstacles and attaining long-lasting expansion.

Conclusion

The intersection of social justice theory and SE highlights the transformative potential of entrepreneurial innovation to address systemic inequalities and create meaningful societal impact. By emphasizing participatory approaches, diversity, and systemic change through policy reforms, SE is a critical tool for fostering equality and tackling the root causes of social and environmental challenges. However, policy-related bureaucracy, insufficient public awareness, and inadequate training hinder progress in this sector. Social enterprises must build partnerships, leverage community resources, and adopt innovative service models incorporating diverse perspectives to overcome these challenges. In addressing ASD, social

enterprises need tailored strategies to empower individuals and create opportunities for meaningful societal integration. Despite Malaysia's governmental support for social innovation, an ineffective institutional framework restricts the sector's growth. Targeted policies and stakeholder alignment are essential to scaling impact, building inclusive communities, and ensuring sustainable solutions that enhance the quality of life for individuals with ASD. The study's limitations, including data availability, reporting inconsistencies, and difficulties obtaining comprehensive information on social enterprises working with ASD, highlight the need for improved data collection systems. Future research should focus on longitudinal evaluations of social enterprises' long-term impacts on individuals with ASD while exploring diverse models and collaborations to further advance social equity and well-being.

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