

## Migrant Employment: A Blessing in Disguise from the 'Unseen'?

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### ABSTRACT

Migrant workers are hired mainly to fill the demand in dirty, dangerous, and demeaning (3D) jobs in Malaysia. However, the transformation of temporary migrants into entrepreneurs while in migration, resulted in migrants' entrepreneurship registration conundrum because they were only allowed to register for companies with private limited by shares. Currently, business registration as sole proprietors, enterprises, and limited liability partnerships are restricted to Malaysian citizens only. During the pandemic, it was observed that migrants faced heightened difficulties with marginalization and discrimination. Social media comments were captured to observe public perception towards migrants' entrepreneurship in COVID-19 environment. A netnography analysis was conducted on eight official government agencies' Facebook pages, where 218 Facebook posts related to migrants' entrepreneurship were observed for data collection to conduct thematic analysis. Common themes captured in the comments related to COVID-19 shaped public opinions on the topic. It was revealed that Malaysian public felt that something good resulted from COVID-19 when more enforcement measures were done during the pandemic to mitigate migrants' enterprises. Based on thematic analysis of the comments, users criticized the lack of actions from the authorities in the past and that COVID-19 resulted in more enforcement measures due to the perceptions that migrants are responsible in spreading disease. The public has also supported such actions taken by the authority as it is seen as an opportunity to create more openings for locals to be involved in businesses especially for those who lost their jobs due to the pandemic.

**Keywords:** *Migrant entrepreneurship, COVID-19, migrant marginalization, netnography, Facebook.*

### INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns and travel restrictions brought social changes in the digital world. The changes are now much more noticeable especially in ways how people interact, express opinions, and search for information. People were drawn to interact online, and social media is a feasible way to connect with friends and families, during the pandemic. It is also a useful tool to share important information about the COVID-19 virus. Since the beginning of the outbreak, government agencies in Malaysia used social media to share important information, precautions, rules, and regulations to the public because the information usually broadcasted in mass media can now be publicly shared with less cost and time (Shahrul Nazmi, 2020).

However, within the social media environment itself, there were other challenges faced by government agencies as social media users. Pages require regular updating to maintain interactions with their audiences. Some even used those platforms to request or complain about services offered by the agencies (Wan Amizah, 2020). Member of the public as users and customers of these services have higher expectations on the quality of the products and services which includes their expectations of question, queries or complaints which were posted through social media to be attended properly. Government agencies however used social media mainly to share information of their roles and functions as well as

their activities and not merely to create a platform to interact with the public. During the pandemic, enforcement agencies and city councils used Facebook to share their enforcement activities to curb migrants' illegal businesses.

The focus of the present study is on low-skilled migrant workers in jobs that are considered dirty, dangerous, and difficult (3D) in Malaysia. In December 2020, there are 1,483,380 migrant workers in Malaysia with a valid *Pas Lawatan Kerja Sementara* (PLKS) or Visitor's Pass Temporary Employment (Mohamad Fauzi et al., 2021). The actual number of migrant workers in Malaysia is not known as undocumented migrant workers are not accounted for. Kanapathy (2006) estimated that there are almost a million undocumented workers in Malaysia in 2006. It is also estimated that the numbers of documented and undocumented migrant workers to be around 3.85 million.

During the pandemic, undocumented migrant workers faced heightened difficulties with marginalization and discrimination and it exacerbated during pandemic caused economic crisis. Abdullah et al. (2012) and Hassan (2009) for example, discussed migrants' transformation into entrepreneurship after job displacement resulting from economic crises and the present pandemic proves the fact. The increasing number of migrants' entrepreneurship despite their questionable legality of business registration in Malaysia require urgent attention and the need to address various social and economic issues resulting from migrant workers' transformation into entrepreneurs, deserves exploration. As it is impossible to control public opinions towards migrants' entrepreneurship or migrants in general on social media, these issues are widely reported and discussed in media even before the pandemic. As more people engaged to social media due to lockdowns and travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were also postings on social media with perceptions or opinions towards migrants and migrant entrepreneurs.

The tagline on Facebook for example, 'What's on your mind?' is for users to share their thoughts and opinions to friends, family, or anyone to read on social media platforms once the post button is clicked. As social media is an open platform to convey opinions, social media users can be more vocal and expressive on sensitive or controversial issues towards other social groups (Khadijah et al., 2022) including negative comments towards migrants. People are exposed to the opinions of others on the platform through posting, content sharing, or comments. This paper as such aims to evaluate social media users' reactions on the topic of migrants' entrepreneurship during the pandemic. The objectives of this paper are as follows: (1) to identify public opinion formation from social media comments on authorities' increased actions towards migrants' entrepreneurs during COVID-19 (or lacked thereof, pre-COVID) by thematically analysing those comments; and (2) to explore what are the implications of enforcement actions towards migrants' entrepreneurs.

#### *a) Facebook Interactions about Migrants' Entrepreneurship*

People connect through social media extensively during COVID-19 lockdowns. News and reports were posted by the authorities on their social media pages attracting more people to connect through social media. Technological advancement and good facilities helped in providing easier access to the internet for Malaysians in the urban as well as the rural areas. The majority of Malaysians has access to the internet where 93.5% of the urban population and 83.9% of rural populations have internet access in 2020 (Malaysian Communications And Multimedia Commission (MCMC), 2020). In the year 2020, Malaysians' most favourite online activity was participating in social networks (98%), where 91.7% of them used Facebook (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). Facebook users shared their opinions in comments,

postings and posts sharing. They may even react to others' by liking a post or comments. Therefore, Facebook can be used to collect public opinions by observing users' interactions in a digital setting.

Public opinion is defined as collective opinions of functional groups in a society that are assessable to individuals, where the opinions may require responses and decisions from key individuals (Blumer, 1948) while social media public opinion is not just about individual opinion but it is more focused on social interaction and conversation (Anstead & Loughlin, 2015). To study social media public opinion, online ethnography can be conducted to observe Facebook users behaviour in specific settings set for the research in their original, non-experimental setting, just as the definitions set for traditional ethnography by Creswell (2014). Social media has the ability to empower the formation of or even to prevent public opinion on any interesting issues (Normah & Wan Amizah, 2020). Despite the opportunities to post anonymously on social media, social media becomes the platform for the like-minded and individuals with similar ideologies to discuss and interact (Normah & Wan Amizah, 2020).

Robert V. Kozinets introduced netnography in 2010 as ethnographic research that combines archival and online communications work, participation, and observation, with new forms of digital and network data collection, analysis, and research representation. Netnography method was further improved and redefined in Kozinets (2015) guidelines to netnography which was used to guide this research. Netnography was also used by Khadijah et al. (2022) to study social media users' perception in Malaysia setting. The accessible environment in social media created an alternative to data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic as travel restrictions, lockdown and social distancing may pose limitations for surveys, interviews or focus group discussion for research activities. Netnography created opportunities for researchers to study human behaviour in a rather visible digital world that should be explored and accepted. Netnography is chosen to study the phenomena of locals' perceptions towards migrants' entrepreneurship because such sensitive issues related to migrants and the inefficiency of authorities to manage them were openly discussed in social media.

Migrant workers who were originally hired to do 3D jobs moved into entrepreneurship for various reasons. Their perseverance and motivations to work in harsh work conditions with lower wages helped them to survive in business when they readily offered the same goods and services at a lower price than other sellers (Jones et al., 2015; Kitching et al., 2009; Norehan et al., 2012). However, issues with the legality of their business registration created legislation issues when they abuse their work pass by overstaying or working in the sectors they are not allowed. Some of them were also undocumented migrants who resorted to businesses when they were paid below minimum wage or failed to secure a job because of their illegality (Muniandy, 2015b; Sultana, 2009).

Unresolved and aggravated migrants' issues in Malaysia seems to receive mixed reactions from the public. Increasing numbers of migrants' business owners are becoming more noticeable during COVID-19 as most of them are small traders where their grocery or clothing stores are operating in residential areas that were frequented by many during lockdowns. Despite the convenience created by these shops in neighbourhoods near to consumers, they were forced to close because of enforcement actions by the authorities during COVID-19 as these businesses were not properly registered.

*b) Business Registration in Malaysia*

Migrants are allowed to conduct their business legally with proper registration and ownership. However, registration of business with foreign owners are allowed for foreigners with Permanent Resident (PR) status or they can opt for registration of private limited by share company with paid-up capital of at least RM500,000 (advisory/ consultant) and RM1,000,000 (import-export, restaurant and trading businesses) (in Companies Commission of Malaysia Act 2001 [Act 614]) (Commissioner of Law Revision, 2018). Malaysia is a highly regulated market where Companies Act 2016 [Act 777] (2018) and Registration of Businesses Act 1956 [Act 197] (1978) are used for companies and business registration respectively.

The registrations of businesses are under the purview of local authority or city councils. For example, in Kuala Lumpur, small businesses such as grocery shops or small traders will need to register their businesses with *Jabatan Pelesenan dan Pembangunan Perniagaan, Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur* (DBKL) (Licensing and Business Development Department, Kuala Lumpur City Hall). The registration can be done online and complete information about the applications of licensing and registration can be accessed on DBKL's eLesen website. There is also a mobile application for online payment to DBKL, including for license renewal.

Registration of businesses are only allowed for citizens and permanent residence in Malaysia while non-citizens are allowed to register for private limited by share companies. There is a different agency in charge of Company's Registration, which is *Suruhanjaya Syarikat Malaysia* (SSM) (Companies Commission of Malaysia). Private limited company by shares of total foreign owner(s) will need at least RM500,000 paid-up capital. Higher capital requirement for company's registration made migrant businesses look for other opportunities to legalize their businesses. Some opted to use their spouse's name for company registration or using other's business licenses (Azizah, 2015; Hassan, 2009). It is hard to prove of any such malpractices as some business owners claim that they are only an employee at the said business establishment when asked by enforcements officers and some may just turn a blind eye. Their strategies of policy manipulation are supported by corruptions that will ease entry and facilitate growth in a highly regulated market as discussed by Dheer (2017).

In the new global economy, migration has become one of the central issues which received various public opinions in host countries. Therefore, issues related to migrants' entrepreneurship received growing attention from the public. During the pandemic, economic crises decrease the demand and supply of migrant workers due to slower economic growth (Kanapathy, 2006). Transformation to entrepreneurship is also an option for migrants' survival during economic crises when some refused to be sent home and they stayed as illegal migrants. These workers ventured into businesses to survive as migrants in host country as evidenced by a surge in migrants businesses start-ups between 2002 and 2008 economic crises (Hassan, 2009; Norehan et al., 2012). Despite the increase in migrants' business start-ups during economic crises, Hung et al. (2011) found that economic crises may slow business operations in Malaysia and globally too (Jones et al., 2015; Kitching et al., 2009, Waldinger et al., 1990). However, Jones et al. (2015) claimed that ethnic businesses were unaffected during economic downturn and this possibly happened during COVID-19 period as well.

## METHODOLOGY

For this study, migrants' businesses are defined as businesses conducted for profit that are owned by temporary migrants in Malaysia. COVID-19 pandemic increased stigmatization and discrimination towards migrants' entrepreneurs when enforcement was done by the authorities.

An observation was conducted on official Facebook pages of randomly selected government authorities where two (2) law enforcement agencies and six (6) city councils in Klang Valley were selected. These authorities were selected because they are directly involved in the management of migrants or business activities such as licensing procedures of small traders. City councils in Klang Valley (Selangor or Kuala Lumpur) were selected due to the higher concentration of migrants in these areas as the centre of economic activities. The unit of analysis for this study is the Facebook page where comments related to migrants' entrepreneurship are posted.

Public comments posted on publicly available Facebook profiles were extracted by limiting the scope to postings on a specific topic: migrants' entrepreneurship. The postings were carefully filtered and selected after COVID-19 first outbreak in Malaysia, from 25 January 2020 until 31 December 2020. However, from the data collected on postings specific to migrants' entrepreneurship, the earliest date of a posting recorded was 13 February 2020 and the final posting of 2020 was made on 23 December 2020. Netnography was used as a qualitative research method to collect and analyse the data. Thematic analysis was done to search for interesting and common themes in the data.

### *Netnography*

Kozinets (2015) listed 12-steps involved in netnography. Those are Introspection, Investigation, Information, Interview, Inspection, Interaction, Immersion, Indexing, Interpretation, Iteration, Instantiation, and Integration. Netnography begins by using the researcher as the research instrument and her research interest in migrants' entrepreneurship during COVID-19 involving 12 steps. Step 1: Introspection. Step 2: investigation on what types of information is important by developing research questions and conducting literature review related to the topic. Step 3: Information step is important to prepare the researcher to be well informed on the issues and topic of research which involve ethical considerations before conducting the research.

As this research involved studies on migrants as vulnerable groups, ethical considerations were carefully crafted by obtaining proper approval from Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) (UMREC). Social media research always comes with unclear ethical concerns but discussion with UMREC helped to minimize risks and impacts from the research. As this research is an observational study and no contact was made with any Facebook users, no consent was obtained from Facebook users. To maintain the anonymity of Facebook pages and protect Facebook users who posted comments on the postings, law enforcement agencies were labelled as ENF1 and ENF2 while city councils were labelled as PBT1, PBT2, PBT3, PBT4, PBT5 and PBT6, Facebook users were also coded and labelled anonymously. Another initiative taken was by translating the comments from Bahasa Melayu to English while maintaining its original meaning and context to avoid backtracking to the users' profile by searching the words or phrases from the comments.

Step 5: Inspection is when the eight (8) pre-determined Facebook pages were viewed on the social media platform. Keywords related to migrants' entrepreneurship were searched for on the main profile pages of the samples at the 'Search Post' button. The searched keywords are '*peniaga asing*' (migrant traders), '*penjaja asing*' (migrant vendors), '*peniaga warganegara asing*' (migrant traders), '*penjaja warganegara asing*' (migrant vendors), '*penjaja bukan warganegara*' (foreign vendors), '*peniaga haram*' (unlicensed traders), '*penjaja haram*' (unlicensed vendors) and '*pendatang haram*' (undocumented migrants). A total of 218 posts related to migrants' entrepreneurship were further analyzed to find common themes from the comments posted on each post. Step 7: Immersion of the data. For this research, observation was done on the information and interaction posted as comments on the postings made on the eight (8) Facebook pages by immersing in the experience as a social media user. The comments were downloaded and saved into Microsoft Excel files by using third-party software named No Limit Software. The comments were scrolled thoroughly for data immersion by observing and carefully reading publicly available comments on the pages to build a general idea on the subjects. Comments collected were thematically analysed by following Braun and Clarke (2006) 6-phase thematic analysis where repeated patterns of meaning were identified. The next step is where netnography and thematic analysis is merged where initial codes were created in thematic analysis. Step 8: Indexing. Comments which were downloaded into PDF format are the data used in this research. The data were coded and thematically analysed using Atlas.ti.

For this paper, specific terms related to COVID-19 were auto searched in the comments using the 'Search and Code' function in the software. The terms used for COVID-19 keywords are, 'COVID-19', 'COVID', 'kovid', 'convid', 'covic', 'corona', 'korona', 'virus', 'pandemic', 'pandemik', and 'c19'. The keywords include some commonly misspelt words whether in English or *Bahasa Melayu* which were used in comments. The most interesting, meaningful, and relevant repeated data will be further coded, grouped, and analysed in common themes. Step 9: Interpretation, where the 6-phases of thematic analysis were useful to give meaning to the raw data, (comments collected) as research findings.

Step 10: Iteration required the researcher to revisit the sites, data and people while going back to the research questions to understand the data holistically. Step 11: Instantiation is when netnography was done in a humanistic way, the data are analysed by using human intelligence, keeping the analysis process to own thinking. Step 12: Integration is when the netnography data are integrated into a publication. Two steps namely Step 4: Interview and Step 6: Interaction, were skipped for this research due to time and financial constraints. The procedure in conducting thematic analysis using Atlas.ti will be discussed in the next section.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After initial coding of the data containing any words related to COVID-19, only 47 out of 218 Facebook postings have comments with the abovementioned terms. These comments constitute data that are collected for this research. The top 10 codes that were observed in this analysis are listed in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Top ten codes based on number of comments

|   | <b>Code</b>                   | <b>Number of Comments</b> |
|---|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Hikmah (Blessing in Disguise) | 110                       |
| 2 | M: Complaint/ Critique        | 95                        |
| 3 | M: Opinion                    | 89                        |
| 4 | M: Request Actions            | 65                        |

|    |                              |    |
|----|------------------------------|----|
| 5  | Job                          | 59 |
| 6  | M: Praise/ Support           | 53 |
| 7  | M: Responses to another user | 25 |
| 8  | Diseases                     | 21 |
| 9  | M: Bribery                   | 14 |
| 10 | M: Gambling/ Prostitution    | 12 |

The highest number of comments are coded with ‘*Hikmah*’ (blessing in disguise), followed by complaints and criticisms towards the authorities which were defined as general opinions towards the subject matter and comments which were requesting actions from the authorities. Based on the findings, Facebook users who posted comments on the six Facebook pages were mostly interested to comment on the quality of services offered by the authorities, because four (4) out of 10 codes are related to the authorities involving complaint/critique, request actions, praise/support, and bribery.

Common themes were searched in the comments by using Atlas.ti, which mentioned ‘COVID’ to specifically analyse the most interesting and repeating opinions made by Facebook users about migrants’ entrepreneurship. Besides that, comments that mentioned the authorities related in managing migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic were also analysed. Figure 1 is a summary of the common themes in the comments extracted into a Word Cloud. The Word Cloud analysis in Atlas.ti can be used to display the most frequently used words in the comments that were analysed, where the fonts size represents the frequency of word repetition.



Figure 1: Word cloud of common themes in comments which mentioned Covid-19

Stop words were added into the software to ignore words such as prepositions, numbers, and commonly used words such as ‘is’, ‘a’, ‘the’, ‘dan’ (and), ‘many’ (*banyak*), ‘boleh’ (can) and ‘dari’ (from). It can be automatically excluded for the calculation and analysis by Atlas.ti. In Atlas.ti, Word Cloud and Word Count were used to search for common themes in the data.

Word Cloud was generated for thematic analysis in the comments collected from Facebook. It requires familiarization in the language including short forms and informal languages used in Bahasa Melayu, Bahasa Indonesia and English because standardized stop words for the languages will not be sufficient.

Additionally, Word Count is used as content analysis of the words used in the analysed comments. It displayed the word frequency counts, the word length and the percentage of occurrence out of all other words within the selected 47 documents (FB postings). The first 15 Word Count from the comments are listed in Table 2 and common themes are highlighted that excluded general words referring to migrants such as '*asing*' (foreign), '*warga*' (citizen) and '*peniaga*' (entrepreneur).

Table 2: Word count generated from comments tagged with COVID-19 code

| No | Word                                   | Length | Count |
|----|--|--------|-------|
| 1  | COVID                                  | 5      | 229   |
| 2  | <i>Asing</i> (foreign)                 | 5      | 60    |
| 3  | Virus                                  | 5      | 50    |
| 4  | <i>Warga</i> (citizen)                 | 5      | 50    |
| 5  | <i>Rakyat</i> (public)                 | 6      | 47    |
| 6  | <i>Peniaga</i> (entrepreneur)          | 7      | 42    |
| 7  | Malaysia                               | 8      | 41    |
| 8  | <i>Berniaga</i> (trading)              | 8      | 38    |
| 9  | <i>Kedai</i> (shop)                    | 5      | 38    |
| 10 | <i>Ramai</i> (many people)             | 5      | 35    |
| 11 | <i>Hikmah</i> (a blessing in disguise) | 6      | 28    |
| 12 | <i>Niaga</i> (sell)                    | 5      | 28    |
| 13 | <i>Kerja</i> (job)                     | 5      | 27    |
| 14 | <i>Lesen</i> (license)                 | 5      | 27    |
| 15 | <i>Pati</i> (undocumented migrants)    | 4      | 26    |

It is important to note that in the Word Count analysis for this research, the words counted were typed in their correct spelling and syntax. While on social media, some of the words may be typed with syntax or spelling error. For example, Facebook users may use other words for COVID-19, such as '*corona*' (12 comments), '*COVID19*' (7 comments), '*covic*' (4 comments), '*covik*' (1 comment), '*kobit*' (1 comment), '*kobid*' (1 comment), and '*korona*' (6 comments). Another obvious word is '*peniaga*'. In some comments, it was written as '*perniaga*' (entrepreneur) (5 comments) and '*peniaga2*' (8 comments) (to represent collective nouns of '*peniaga*'), '*penjaja*' (small trader) (3 comments), '*penjual*' (seller) (3 comments), '*perniagaan*' (business) (4 comments), '*perniagaan2*' (1 comment) (to represent collective nouns of '*perniagaan*'), '*niaga*' (business) (28 comments), '*meniaga*' (doing business) (14 comments) and '*berniaga*' (doing business) (38 comments).

### *Thematic Analysis*

Common themes were further analysed using 6-phases of thematic analysis by data familiarization, initial code generation and themes searching before reviewing, defining, and naming the themes to produce a report. The inductive method was applied to the collected data by reading the data and understanding their meaning and context to come up with three (3) common themes which are:

- i) A blessing in disguise;
- ii) Opportunities; and
- iii) Exemplary



These themes were repeatedly observed by familiarization of data and reviewed before starting the procedures to thematically analyse the comments. To review and group the comments into themes, ‘Search and Code’ were done in Atlas.ti. Moving forward to the next steps of thematic analysis are themes definition, keywords used for coding and comments examples as listed in Table 3. A comment may contain more than one code and, in this analysis, the comment must contain ‘COVID-19’ code to explore Facebook users’ opinions about migrants’ entrepreneurship during the pandemic. Co-occurrences with another three themes within COVID-19 comments were evaluated to systematically describe the three (3) common themes in the discussions.

A total of 229 comments mentioned COVID-19 in the observed data. The highest co-occurrences with the COVID-19 theme is in **Theme 1: ‘A Blessing in Disguise’** with 110 comments (50.46%). Another co-occurrence is **Theme 2: ‘Opportunities’** (59 comments, 27.06%) followed by **Theme 3: ‘Exemplary’** (53 comments, 18.43%). From the observation, the most noticeable comments about COVID-19 are about the positive impact of COVID-19 which will be discussed further according to those three (3) themes.

a) *Theme 1: A Blessing in Disguise*

It can be observed from the data when the word ‘hikmah’ was repeated 28 times and other comments that were in the same context. Due to COVID-19 and the perception or accusation of migrants are at higher risks to spread the virus, many authorities increased their enforcement activities to control and prevent unlicensed migrants’ businesses. Therefore, the word ‘lesen’ (license) appeared frequently (27 times) and it was observed during the pandemic that migrant entrepreneurs were arrested due to various enforcement actions related to licensing.

Table 3: Themes Definitions, Keywords and Comments Examples

| Themes & Definition   | Keywords   | Examples  |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Theme 1: A blessing in disguise</b>  |  | Finally cleared because of COVID while you just collected hush money in the past.   |
| Definition:<br>Comments stated that besides the harmful impacts of COVID-19, there were some hidden benefits and good behind the situation. | (Hikmah/ sebab (reason)/ pasal (because)/ kerana (due to)/ selepas (after)/ sejak (since) ~ COVID, Alhamdulillah | AA, thanks to that corona virus... despite its harm, they’re blessings to our country... for example undocumented migrants (PATI)... ministries... authorities are doing their jobs... hopefully it continues until Malaysia is clear off PATI... and don’t offer too many jobs to migrants... limit their numbers... for Rohingyas, Malaysians finally realized who they really are... for every one of Allah’s tests... hope it will be replaced with something better.<br><br>Clear all migrants’ shops in our country, this is city council’s responsibility, how could migrants’ illegal shops go unnoticed. Mayor and staff accepted bribery, actions were only taken after this virus spread, if it is the locals, straightaway all their tables and chairs will be confiscated. Hope that SPRM will investigate the areas with many illegal migrant traders and the city councils where the businesses were monopolized by migrants.<br><br>Alhamdulillah, maybe they were gone because the shop owner reclaimed the business... we can only see them, before... Allah showed that... there are blessings in disguise from COVID-19... this is one of them! |

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Theme 2: Opportunities</b>   |   | MR, Malaysians should be prioritized, it's a pity many lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic love our country care for our citizens...   |
| Definition:   | Hilang kerja (job lost), buang kerja (terminated), utamakan (prioritize), warga tempatan (locals), perniagaan (business), berniaga (trading), niaga (trade) | Give us the chances for Malaysians to redeem our rights... moreover since COVID... we lost our jobs and income... we felt grateful for such actions from the authorities.   |
| Comments which shared their opinion for employers to prioritize jobs and business opportunities to locals over migrants. This is due to the increasing unemployment rate from COVID-19. |   | Alhamdulillah, PKP's and COVID's blessings in disguise. Or else we wouldn't know until when our markets were full of migrants... continue the effort and make sure to give priorities to locals for job opportunities. Excellent!!!<br><br>Many lost their jobs during COVID, they must do business to put food on the table... if their goods were confiscated, what will happen to them... what will be the source of their capital to start again... feel that authorities should give more chances to locals... can barely profit from business in this period... sometimes, there is no return of capital... as a business person, we know what they must have felt. |
| <b>Theme 3: Exemplary</b>   |   | Excellent, clear the area that may be infected with COVID-19. People will come flocking when it is clean. Current government is the best!   |
| Definition:   | tahniah (congratulations), terbaik ('Excellent!'), congratulations and 'teruskan usaha' ('keep it up')  | You are crazy, this has been so many years. Huhuhu, whatever it is, if Pasar Borong stays the same and now there is COVID-19... you are the worst... Congrats! Can see that they have learned their lessons, or they are actually afraid of the army.<br>Try to follow the approaches taken by Minister of Federal Territory. Helping small traders during COVID. Don't be too cruel.   |
| Comments with perceptions of praise, supporting actions, or complimenting the authorities or government because they finally walk the talk.   |   | Only now we can see that everyone is doing their jobs... thank you COVID spirits.   |

There are some social media users who turned to social media to complain on the authorities, directly or by making their complaints as viral posts to reach more audience and gaining attention by many (Wan Amizah, 2020). Most importantly, social media is readily available and easily accessible by the public to voice out their opinions to the government (Normah & Muhammad Adnan, 2020).

The questions arise from this common theme are why the sudden improvement in the enforcement actions and how it affected migrants' enterprises and the public? It is pointless to highlight in this research that most of the comments are about enforcement activities because the data were collected from Facebook postings which revolve around news reporting by the authorities' enforcement activities on their pages. Nevertheless, this research attempts to answer the questions on why more enforcement activities took place during COVID-19. Based on the observation, comments also mentioned the lack of actions from the authorities in the past with allegations of corruption that obstructed the implementation of law related to migrants' entrepreneurship. Corruption and bribery in Malaysia were said to be the reasons why irregular migration issues have never been solved (Azizah, 2014; Azizah Kassim et al., 2014; Low & Mokhtar, 2017)). Muniandy (2015a, 2015b) even discussed bribery in his publications about migrants' entrepreneurs paying for 'duit kopi'

or coffee money while Sultana (2009) in her thesis claimed that Bangladeshi businessmen have to not only bribe the authorities but also the locals.

Dheer (2017) finds that corruption may affect entrepreneurial activities in a country differently based on its cultural context. The author also agreed to a previous study, that corruption may help business growth in collectivistic countries, but it will do the opposite in individualistic countries. Taking Malaysia into context as a collectivistic country, giving bribes may be one of the solutions for unlicensed migrants' entrepreneurs to run their businesses. However, for data that were coded with 'COVID' word, only 14 comments mentioned bribery. Even if there are opinions about bribery as the reason for the lack of enforcement actions, more comments mentioned about how COVID-19 resulted to more enforcement actions where 110 out of 218 comments perceived the pandemic as beneficial. When the analysis simultaneously tried to relate three (3) codes, (COVID + hikmah + bribery), there were only eight (8) out of the 110 comments. Instead of putting the blame on bribery for the flaw, users tend to complain or criticize on other factors too, where from 95 comments from Malaysians, another 62 comments were requesting actions from the authorities.

Corruption and ineffective enforcement actions were impeding their initiatives to control unlicensed migrants' enterprises. In some of the comments, there were opinions of more enforcement activities conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic as a preventive measure due to the fear of migrants potentially spreading the virus. These comments showed concerning perceptions and stigmatizations towards migrants as spreading diseases especially during the pandemic as public health is the biggest concern. It has been discussed by Ullah (2010), Kanapathy (2006, 2008), Mirbabaie, Fromm, Löppenber, Meinig, and Reuße (2020), with Ragayah and Azizah (2011) how locals' stigmatization towards migrants potentially bringing infectious diseases.

As migrant workers are usually moving or relocating, there is no record of their whereabouts in Malaysia unless the information is provided by them or their employers. Therefore, it is harder to manage the outbreak among migrant workers during this pandemic as their recorded addresses may not be updated. Enhanced Movement Control Order (EMCO) was implemented in some areas with high migrants' populations to stop the spread of the virus such as at Plaza City One, Selangor Mansion (residential building) and Pasar Borong Kuala Lumpur (wholesale market). Implementation of EMCO at Pasar Borong Kuala Lumpur is also viewed as an effective measure to control irregular migrants' businesses at the wet market. There were suggestions to better manage migrant workers in Malaysia by specifying areas to live or providing them with hostels. However, this suggestion has been implemented in Singapore but during the peak of the outbreak in migrants' community, there were also outbreak at migrants' dormitories in Singapore. There were comments which mentioned about COVID-19 outbreak at migrant workers' dormitories in Singapore when it happened in April 2020 that showed FB users' comments were also influenced by events happening outside the country.

In netnography, taking field notes is important to understand phenomenon or events in their context, space, and time. To support the hypothesis of the stigmatization towards migrants as spreading diseases that resulted in more enforcement actions towards unlicensed migrants' entrepreneurs, it is important to link the timeline of total lockdowns and COVID-19 clusters in areas with a high population of migrants as well as the outbreak at migrants' dormitories in Singapore. The timeline for total lockdowns at the locations in the earlier months of the COVID-19 outbreak is visualised in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Timeline for COVID-19 total lockdown at locations with high migrants' population

From this timeline, the first lockdown in Malaysia begins on 18 March 2020 and the total lockdown was made on 31 March 2020 at Menara City One Kuala Lumpur, which housed many migrant workers as new clusters of infection were detected in the area, followed by nearby locations such as Masjid India, Selangor Mansion, and Malayan Mansion not long after. As observed from the timeline too, Pasar Borong Kuala Lumpur, Pasar Borong Selayang and Selayang Baru were put under total lockdown at about the same time Singapore Dormitories COVID-19 outbreak by the end of April 2020.

The lockdowns were heavily reported in mass and social media. For Singaporeans, the infection rates increased when migrant workers living in communal quarters were infected at a higher rate due to sharing of facilities and living in close proximity (Ngiam et al., 2021). This kind of reporting may have created a generalization and stigmatization towards migrants in Malaysia as disease-spreader. It was observed that there were more postings made on enforcement actions towards migrants' entrepreneurs by early April and the number of postings increased steadily until August 2020. Comments posted on these postings about COVID-19 were first observed on postings made by PBT4 on 8 April 2020 but were not observed in the previous month. PBT4 is one of the city councils of the locations under total lockdown in April 2020. Despite the tendency to generalise, more news sharing was made since April 2020 on enforcement actions that led to more public realizing the authorities were seriously performing the tasks assigned to them, leading to more comments to be posted by users whether positively or negatively made towards the authorities. There is a possibility that more users are engaging through social media due to lockdowns and were attracted to read on news sharing related to COVID-19 updates.

### *b) Theme 2: Opportunity*

Lockdowns have forced many businesses and offices to stop their operations whether permanently or temporarily due to strict travel restrictions. Many employees who have lost their jobs may start their business ventures. During the first year of COVID-19, around 389,889 new businesses, 43,976 new local companies and 20 foreign companies were registered with Suruhanjaya Syarikat Malaysia (SSM) (Companies Commission of Malaysia, 2020). There is a slight increase in 2020 for business registrations, possibly due to the increasing number of online business sellers.

This theme delves with comments mentioning prioritizing locals over migrants for jobs and business opportunities. It is expected that the pandemic which resulted to economic and health crises may change people values and political attitudes (Steinert, 2020). The

emotions with COVID-19 were most intense and negative due to death, job loss, infection and facing financial difficulties. The author further added that fear and anxiety were shared in social media during crises and these negative emotions facilitated perceptions of threat to the values they cared about such as health, job security, and personal freedom which explains why comments were mostly related to preventing COVID-19 infections and business opportunities.

More engagements were observed from the public on social media posts by government agencies when there are emotions or narratives that they may relate to their experiences (Musdalifah, Nasyaya, & Santoso, 2023). Comments which are more inclined towards criticizing and requesting aids or supports from the government emerged because people will be inclined towards policies that protected the values, they cared most. Commenters shared their preferences for jobs and prioritise businesses for locals over migrants as they see migrants as threats, a form of negative responses towards outgroups to preserve economic security. These emotions were oftentimes exploited by political leaders by portraying that the outsiders are threatening economic and social stability (Steinert, 2020) as what was observed in our social media environment.

Migrants were also blamed for the pandemic while they were heavily impacted by it too (Ullah et al., 2021). Even insiders' competitions for economic well-being with fewer job or business opportunities during COVID-19 may also increase stereotypes and negative attitudes towards the outsiders (Riek et al., 2006). Public opinions on any issues may turn aggressive when they feel that their economic well-being are threatened (Normah & Muhammad Adnan, 2020). From the comments, there were opinions when the number of migrants' enterprises are growing, there will be more competition between enterprises which may result in price increase of goods and services.

### c) *Theme 3: Exemplary*

Another interesting observation from the comments are when Facebook users posted their praise and support towards the authorities on social media. Facebook users also posted comments of appreciation for the actions taken. It was observed that 53 comments were complimenting the authorities, ministers, or the government in general. More enforcement actions done and reported on social media which increased their perceptions that the authorities are now being more effective during COVID-19. Most comments were expecting enforcement actions will continue even after the pandemic. Some comments also mentioned Allah's hidden blessings from COVID-19 by solving the unresolved problems, existing, and growing issues of unlicensed migrants' entrepreneurship. Most commenters as such believed that migrants' entrepreneurship is a continuous issue that needs proper addressing.

There are occurrences in the comments that showed the influence of religion or religious belief elements. For example, there were nine (9) comments which used *Alhamdulillah* to show gratitude by praising God for enforcement actions taken by the authorities. Other words which were used to show support and praise to the authorities or government are '*terbaik*' (the best) (10 comments), '*bagus*' (great) (8 comments), '*teruskan*' (keep on) (7 comments), '*syabas*' (congratulations) (5 comments), '*tahniah*' (congratulations) (4 comments), good job (2 comments) and '*terima kasih*' (thank you) (1 comment).

While the comments under this theme sound positive, some of the comments may contain negativity and criticism towards the authorities or the government. Out of the 54 comments, 10 comments were requesting actions from the authorities, seven (7) comments

were criticising or complaining towards the authorities and one of the comments also mentioned about bribery. The complaints emerged due to the experiences by some Facebook users as the problems have existed for many years.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper extracted opinions of Facebook users on authorities' actions to increase their enforcement measures towards migrants' enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of such actions before. Generally, users posted their opinions that the authorities' ignorance to take serious actions towards migrants' entrepreneurs is due to corruptive practices. Improved actions by the authorities since the COVID-19 outbreak is because of the stigmatization towards migrants for spreading diseases. Such actions towards migrants can also be seen from the perspective of insider-outsider juxtaposition. The reactions towards outsider by the insiders emerge when the insiders feel threatened as health and economic stability were jeopardised. Facebook users gave positive comments for enforcement measures undertaken by the authorities and as such they label COVID-19 as a blessing in disguise. This is because more jobs and businesses opportunities available for locals when unlicensed migrants' businesses were forced to shut down. The authorities were also criticised for their lack of actions in stopping migrants' businesses in the past causing the problem to escalate and most Facebook users feel that corruption is the underlying reasons behind this conundrum. Social media opinions can also shape and influence an agenda setting process, where the public complaints, aspirations and experiences from their daily life led to online news report (Herlambang, Bajari, & Abdullah, 2023). These opinions may be able to give better perspectives to government authorities in improving their service delivery.

Conclusively, Facebook users' perceptions towards migrant entrepreneurs in terms of economic framework are mostly negative as discussed in the opportunity theme. They are seen as a threat to local entrepreneurs and competing in the job market and businesses that are specifically reserved for locals as in small businesses or trade. As a result, migrants' entrepreneurship competition caused possible economic loss by not paying for licenses, visas, and taxes when the businesses are conducted with no proper documentation. Most Facebook commenters also agreed that COVID-19 caused the authorities to be better at their jobs by improving enforcement. Users who posted the comments were mostly locals based on the languages used and by brief checking of their profiles. Locals are expecting more and continuous actions by the authorities to protect their health and economic wellbeing because they perceived migrants' entrepreneurs as a threat to their economic well-being. This research may help in understanding the perceptions towards migrants' entrepreneurs in Malaysia during COVID-19 where a more in-depth study can be conducted to extend the research to measure level of acceptance towards migrants' entrepreneurs. Netnography can be conducted to perform various perceptions and opinions study of a specific group and this paper can be a guideline for research replication in the future.

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