

Challenges Faced by MSMEs and Their Strategies During The Pandemic: A Qualitative Perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to explore the challenges faced by micro, small, and medium (MSMES) in Djibouti during the pandemic and identify early strategies and post-pandemic alternatives. The research is situated within an interpretive approach. The interview technique was employed to explore the issue. Interviews were conducted with six firms including services like manufacturing, telecommunications, agriculture, travel agencies, bakeries, and restaurants. The firms were selected based on the firms that are actively engaging in Djibouti city. Five themes emerged as the challenges faced by micro, small, and medium in Djibouti during the pandemic and identify early strategies and post-pandemic alternatives: operational disruption; cash flow problem; bankruptcy risk; supply chain disruption, financial strategy, marketing strategy, adoption of new technology, and government support. From the results, this study helps researchers to contribute to a better understanding of the difficulties that micro, small, and medium enterprises confront during unexpected situations which are believed to benefit practitioners, policymakers, and academics.

Keywords: *MSMEs, COVID-19 Crisis, Challenges, Strategies, Sustainability*

1.0 Introduction

Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) support practically all countries' economic development. Micro, small, and medium enterprises account for 90% of global companies and 60% to 70% of global jobs (World Trade Organization, 2016). Micro, small, and medium-sized businesses are expected to produce 40% of GDP growth in growing countries (David et al., 2020) and 55% in developing nations (World Trade Organization, 2016). The pandemic has hurt micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises. The COVID-19 epidemic has caused a worldwide health disaster and economic crisis. A mobility restriction exercise has been launched to curb the transmission of the 2019 novel coronavirus (now called SARS-CoV-2), which causes COVID-19 illness (Kissler et al., 2020). Due to their size and capital needs, coronavirus has a tremendous influence on global MSMEs'

commercial activities, and they struggle to maintain operations and survive financially (Bartik et al., 2020).

Due to a lack of finance, MSMEs have struggled to grow in Djibouti in recent years (Innovative MSME Finance shows promise in Djibouti, 2016). Djibouti's banking system may lend to MSMEs. The Economic Development Fund finances MSMEs (Osman et al., 2021). The government has prioritised boosting MSMEs to bring them out of the informal economy. The Djibouti Chamber of Commerce offers a division (the approved management centre) to support micro, small, and medium enterprises with administration, accounting, business plan drafting, etc (World Bank Group, 2016).

2.0 Literature Review

Chapter two discusses previous research that is related to this study. This chapter contains 3 sections. It starts with the challenges of MSMEs during the Covid-19 pandemic, the survival strategies of Djiboutian MSMEs and the plan to sustain the sustainability of the organizations.

2.1 Challenges of MSMEs During The Covid-19 Pandemic

According to Ramakrishna (2022), COVID-19 has challenged MSMEs. These issues began with various governments' closures and movement restrictions, which halted their activities, harmed their finances and put them at financial risk. Due to supply chain interruptions, MSMEs have lacked labour and manufacturing inputs, affecting sales, financial obligations, and employee compensation (Subriadi & Kusuma Wardhani, 2021). The lockdown has caused uncertainty for enterprises, especially MSMEs. Mobility restrictions threaten the existence of businesses, particularly MSMEs. Djiboutian MSMEs confront cash flow concerns, closures, layoffs, retrenchment, and reduced growth potential (Mouelhi & Ghazali, 2021). Changing company strategy, operations, and business behaviour, as well as seeking new sources and redevelopment chances, are significant survival challenges for many MSMEs (Saarenketo, 2022). The consequences vary with economic activity, size, and resources.

2.2 MSMEs Survival Strategies During The COVID-19 Crisis

Past studies have demonstrated that several survival strategies for MSMEs have been developed, and most of them say that using technology, such as digital innovation and social media, is one of the most successful techniques for achieving success (Caballero-Morales, 2021). An emphasis on technology is recommended for building an internet infrastructure (Chowdhury & Shumon, 2020). Ajibade (2019) says the government should encourage financial institutions and banks to give micro, small-to-medium-sized firms suitable lending capabilities. Training, counselling, and finance supplied to MSMEs during the COVID-19 outbreak helped them continue and survive. Because of the COVID-19 crisis's impact on MSMEs' finances, governments must encourage lenders to provide more flexible policies, such as low-interest loans and factoring the business's finances when calculating loan payments (Mouelhi & Ghazali, 2021). Sudarmiati (2022) says Djiboutian micro, small, and medium firms can resist the COVID-19 epidemic. These include using digital marketing by creating social media promotional media, improving the quality of human resources by learning how to use technology, coming up with new creative ideas that can get people interested in the product, ensuring consumer safety and better services, and putting in place government policies that help MSMEs (Salamzadeh & Dheer, 2022).

2.3 MSME's Sustainability

Numerous studies have demonstrated micro, small, and medium-sized firms (MSMEs) may improve their financial performance by enhancing resource utilisation and productivity (Hu & Kee, 2022). Several organisations have proved that MSMEs have the resilience and flexibility to confront the global financial crisis (Rakshit et al., 2021). Micro, small, and medium-sized businesses (MSMEs) may reinforce and better employ existing resources during a crisis. According to the resource-based view (RBV), the market has unlimited possibilities; yet, for firms to capitalise on this growth potential, they must efficiently utilise and manage their resources (Lasuin & Omar, 2020).

"Resources" refers to corporate strengths and weaknesses (Eniola & Ineba Decster, 2022). According to Estensoro et al. (2021), RBV focuses on a company's financial resources, people resources, business activities, managerial capabilities, assets and liabilities, characteristics, business networks, organisational processes, information, and knowledge. MSMEs should establish survival strategies and policies with long-term sustainability in mind (Siuta-Tokarska, 2021). These are some of the survival and sustainability tactics utilised by Djiboutian micro, small, and medium enterprises. If they develop and make the best use of their resources, they will be able to keep their businesses functioning throughout and after the epidemic.

3.0 Methodology

This research will focus on Djibouti MSMEs owners since Djibouti city has the highest concentration of MSMEs in Djibouti (Infoclipper, 2000). Due to time constraints and difficulty in receiving replies, the authors selected only MSME firms in Djibouti based on data obtained from the Department of the Djibouti Chamber of Commerce (Osman & Meyssonier, 2019). In 2019, the Djibouti Chamber of Commerce (DCC) presented the list of companies. According to the (DCC) website, 300 Djiboutian MSMEs were registered. Creswell (2013) suggested a sample size of between five and twenty-five companies. All replies from companies were from business managers or owners. The researcher sent emails to the chosen list of MSMEs, but after intensive follow-up, only six agreed to be interviewed.

Saunders et al. (2016) suggested, when determining the sample size for qualitative studies, that the researcher conduct further interviews until the additional information gives minimal new data, if any, or identifies new themes; this is known as data saturation. Considering this, the minimum sample size for this research will be six, and respondents will be picked according to the selection procedures used in a similar study by Che Omar et al (2020). The minimum sample size for this study will be six, and respondents will be chosen based on the following selection criteria: the company must be privately held, the company must be classified as a Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprise of Djibouti (MSMESD) enterprise, and the company cannot be part of a corporate group or under government control. The interview schedule consisted of two parts: i) questions about the owner's history and the company, and ii) primary questions based on the research questions to collect further information. Refer to Table 1 for the interview schedule.

Table 1: Interview Schedule

Parts	Interview schedule
Part 1: Background of the owner or managers	Ask the respondents the following: Gender Business experiences Position Type of business and activities Business location Paid-up capital Average turnover (monthly & yearly) – estimates for the past 3 years Number of staffs
Part 2: Main questions based on the research questions Research	RQ1: What challenges have Djiboutian MSMEs faced during the COVID-19 pandemic? RQ2: What are the survival strategies of Djiboutian MSMEs to keep their operations running? RQ3: How do Djiboutian MSMEs plan to maintain the sustainability of their activities after the pandemic?

Six interviews were used to compile the data. Creswell's guidelines were followed during the data processing procedure (2013). To begin, the researcher examined the data to make sense of it. The text was then segmented and labelled to construct descriptions and broad themes in the data, which was then coded. Before compressing the codes into general themes, this method included looking for any overlaps or repetitions. Finally, to convey the phenomenon's intricacy, these motifs were integrated into numerous key themes. After that, the procedure was repeated for all the volunteers.

4.0 Results and Findings

First, this part explains the findings of the background of the owner/managers. According to Table 2, the research comprised five male and one female participant who are MSMEs owners and managers of different types of MSMEs, which include services, like manufacturing, telecommunications, agriculture, travel agencies, bakeries, and restaurants, in Djibouti city, Djibouti. Out of the 6 participants, 3 owners manage companies categorised as small businesses, while only 1 participant is an owner of a business categorised as a medium business. In addition, two respondents are the owners of companies classified as micro businesses. Secondly, the next part explains the result of the three research questions discussed to learn more about the problems that micro, small, and medium-sized businesses face and the ways that the owners of Djiboutian MSMEs have dealt with those problems and sustained their businesses going.

Table 2: Respondents' Profile

Respondent	Gender	Business experience	Type of business	Business location	Paid-up capital (' 000)	Annual turnover (' 000)	No. of staffs
Respondent 1	Male	16 years	Telecommunications systems	Boulaos, Djibouti-city	DJF 500,000	DJF 2000,000	10
Respondent 2	Male	12 years	Restaurants and bakery	Haramous, Djibouti-city	DJF 150,000	DJF 4000,000	15
Respondent 3	Female	11 years	Manufacturer healthcare and beauty product	Ambouli, Djibouti-city	DJF 100,000	DJF 7000,000	40
Respondent 4	Male	7 years	Printing	Heron, Djibouti-city	DJF 560,000	DJF 690,000	8
Respondent 5	Male	10 years	Agriculture farm (Vegetables, and chicken poultry)	Arhiba, Djibouti-city	DJF 320,000	DJF 350,000	4
Respondent 6	Male	8 years	Travel agency	Balbala, Djibouti-city	DJF 120,000	DJF 540,000	5

4.1 Challenges Faced By Djiboutian MSMEs During The COVID-19 Pandemic

The first result involved the challenges faced by micro, small, and medium-sized businesses in Djibouti during the pandemic. Based on the interview data, the themes of challenges can be identified as operational disruption (Respondents 1,3, and 4), cash flow problems (Respondents 2,4, and 6), the risk of bankruptcy (Respondents 1 and 6) and supply chain disruption (Respondent 3,4, and 5).

4.1.1 Operational Disruption

During the lockdown period, the Covid-19 containment policy, the complete shutdown of company activities, and emphasises on social distancing between employees and minimising physical contact with customers are among the issues that have influenced businesses, especially MSMEs. As a result of the confinement effect, most respondents indicated that the interruption of operations was one of the challenges during the confinement period and that they were forced to reduce their workforce during the outbreak crisis.

4.1.2 Cash Flow Problem

Other firms in the essentials sector that cater to people's domestic requirements and necessities are continuing to operate on a scaled-down basis, which has unavoidably led to cash flow issues. After the entire business shutdown caused by the outbreak, several firms reported zero revenue.

4.1.3 Risk of Bankruptcy

Due to the longer confinement period, which will undoubtedly place the business in a position of bankruptcy if financial difficulties continue, certain micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) may be exposed to risks of bankruptcy.

4.1.4 Supply Chain Disruption

The respondents said that micro, little, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) typically or always depend on the supply chain network to function since a reduction in the total supply that occurred may force several firms to shut down.

4.2 The Survival Strategies Of Djiboutian MSMEs To Keep Their Operations Running During The Pandemic

MSMEs' survival strategies were adopted during the COVID-19 crisis to overcome the challenges they faced. Based on the information shared by respondents, the dominant subject that emerged was MSME's survival strategies, which were subdivided into two themes comprised of financial strategy (Respondents 1,3,4 and 5) and marketing strategy (Respondents 1,3 and 5).

4.2.1 Financial Strategy

The MSMEs should enhance their overall strength. The COVID-19 pandemic poses a significant threat to the survival of companies. Due to their strong assets, sufficient cash flow, and sophisticated risk management measures, large businesses can successfully deal with the crisis. But those micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) with relatively weak assets, limited cash flow, and deficient risk management systems confront a test of life and death. Faced with the epidemic. Consequently, it was necessary for the MSMEs to reinforce themselves.

4.2.2 Marketing Strategy

The second theme found is marketing strategy during the Covid-19 era. Even if half of the respondents' firms were completely shut down, the remaining enterprises were still operating. Two businesses were slowly transitioning to digital and social media marketing in terms of marketing.

4.3 MSMEs Plan to Sustain the Sustainability of Their Companies After the Pandemic

The third research question explores how MSMEs will keep operating after the pandemic. The main theme that came out of the information that respondents gave was the sustainability of MSMEs' operations after the pandemic. This was broken down into two themes which are the adoption of new technologies (Respondents 1,2,3 and 5) and government policy (Respondents 2 and 6).

4.3.1 Adoption of New Technologies

All the respondents expressed in a different manner that to avoid the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic, micro, small and medium-sized enterprises must actively pursue alternative opportunities for implementing technology-based business operations. Because the use of technology will enable MSMEs to communicate with their consumers more quickly, leading to a possible boost in their revenue during the economic downturn.

4.3.2 Government Policy

Many of the respondents pointed out that the primary objective of policy interventions should be to assist Djibouti's micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in regaining their strength and resiliency, and that the government has a significant role to play in this regard by assisting MSMEs

in their efforts to innovate, improve connectivity and digitisation processes, and expand into new markets.

5.0 Discussion

Major responses emphasise operational disruptions that endanger MSMEs' economic survival (Lutfi et al., 2020). During the epidemic, MSMEs must lay off workers and reduce pay. The employee must work from home, hindering MSMEs' operations. Inaccessible working environments, physical inaccessibility, border restrictions, and postponed essential meetings all hampered marketing. Wahyudi, (2014) and Craven et al. (2020) noted that these concerns contribute to cash flow problems. Another concern was cash flow. COVID-19 brought inadequate cash flow to sustain employees and operations, supplier interruptions, and raw material availability. Because it was a new experience for the responders, it caused a sensation of a cash flow shortfall (Sharma et al., 2020).

COVID-19's financial flow was inadequate to support employees and operations. Respondent 2 respectively further about a lack of cash flow because of the COVID pandemic by highlighting that, for many MSMEs, cash flow is being decimated by the decline in sales revenue, which will lead to the findings of Eggers (2020), who found that companies anticipated a cash flow imbalance would arise due to the owners' need to pay mandatory expenditures such as employee salaries, company loans, leasing fees, electricity, and other costs.

According to Respondent 1, MSMEs face high degrees of fragility, flimsiness, and turbulence (financial downturn), creating unfavourable economic, social, and financial circumstances. MSMEs may be going bankrupt at record rates. MSMEs may go insolvent due to COVID-19's increased confinement duration. The gearing ratio and loan payments are connected. The higher a company's gearing ratio and payments, the larger its bankruptcy risk, according to Cassia and Minola (2020) and Svatoová (2021).

Respondent 3 identified supply chain interruption as a difficulty for MSMEs during the COVID-19 situation. The closure of vendor premises and operations and awaiting international commerce in raw materials and supplies owing to the lockdown in most major exporting nations while China hit MSMEs immediately. Lockdown and social distance affect supply. Respondents also indicated they can't modify their corporate orientation quickly. Agriculture, restaurants, and healthcare may produce a new product quickly. Alshahrani & Salam (2022) found that businesses with fixed resources, such as travel agencies, telecoms, and printers, are more resistant to change.

Under the second study question, which covers SMEs' survival plans for COVID-19, all respondents emphasised financial management measures. Before Covid-19 MCO, most MSMEs reduced credit exposure via capital restriction (Thorgren & Williams, 2020). MSMEs must also defer investments, allow government-funded work remittances, form hourly contracts with representatives and experts, minimise expenditures, negotiate contracts and conditions, decrease labour costs, restrict advances, and enhance revenue-focused operations.

The marketing strategy is the second topic under the second research question, which covers MSMEs' tactics during the COVID-19 crisis. Respondents 1 and 5 are migrating to electronic and social media marketing. The COVID-19 epidemic has forced MSMEs to seek innovative replacements or devise techniques for securely delivering their goods and advantages without physical contact (Fitriasari, 2020). Thus, micro, small, and medium businesses may embrace digital development by using virtual forms of enrollment, planning, and socialising, enhanced and virtual advertising, and social media. The third question of the study deals with the sustainability strategy that might help MSMEs survive the pandemic.

Most respondents emphasised using new technologies. COVID-19 has forced MSMEs to seek innovative replacements or invent strategies for passing on their goods and advantages with less physical contact and security (Akpan et al., 2022). Micro, small, and medium-sized businesses can embrace digital development by using virtual forms of enrolment, planning, and socialisation, the exponential increase in computerised communications, focusing on advanced records (for example, advanced contracts, computerised toll declaring), virtual advertising, and social media use (Abedisi et al., 2020). Flexible progress may boost internet buying. Millions of employees must be taught via portable learning and web-based communications due to travel constraints.

The final question of the research discusses how MSMEs may retain operations after the pandemic. Without government assistance, MSMEs cannot survive. Governments should offer coordinated financial assistance to businesses to boost national economies (P. Ozili, 2020). Employee security and data accuracy, strengthening the economy, remuneration and business assistance for MSMEs, planning, establishing strong capabilities, and promoting healthy social connections. The government should expand company insurance to include these professions.

6.0 Research Implications

In addition, the research adds to the present literature on COVID-19 micro, small, and medium-sized firm issues and fills a vacuum in the area on a theoretical level. The researcher delivers current material that adds to the participants' knowledge and focuses on responding to substantiated questions to gather relevant and adequate information to solve the research issue and generate the appropriate conclusion to the results. Thus, the research might help to a greater understanding of the business issues faced by MSMEs during an unanticipated economic downturn. In general, the conclusions are consistent with those of other researchers' efforts on this issue, and it is crucial to demonstrate/provide intriguing and maybe promising topics to focus on during the current crisis. Therefore, governmental interventions should focus primarily on addressing short-term issues, bolstering short-term liquidity and finance availability, and creating the proper circumstances and incentives for creative enterprises and aspiring entrepreneurs. These will expedite the recovery and maintain total employment throughout time. To assist Djiboutian MSMEs in rebuilding stronger and more resiliently, the government must encourage its efforts to innovate, improve connection and digitalization processes, and expand into new markets.

7.0 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As a qualitative research paper, this study provided a sufficient number of participants to conduct interviews and ensure a steady flow of accurate material. Nonetheless, this research has numerous limitations that the reader must comprehend and be aware of. The sample size of just six interviewees cannot reflect the experiences of all Djiboutian MSMEs, and the research was restricted to MSMEs based in Djibouti City. Similarly, adding data involvement when the researcher uses data from prior studies. In addition, since the interviewer and respondents did not reside in the same country, the interview had to be conducted online, which may have reduced the need for collaboration and made it more difficult to see the participant's body language than a physical interview. To circumvent this constraint, it is proposed that future studies emphasise relevant research based on in-person interviews. Therefore, modifications to the data collecting procedure and data analysis must include both qualitative and quantitative data so that the study's findings are more balanced and diverse. Future studies may perform extensive surveys in accordance with the article's conclusions to get a full grasp of the many problems/challenges faced by MSMEs owners in patriarchal developing countries because of the worldwide spread of coronavirus and other pandemics. Lastly, additional

studies on the influence of COVID-19 on company performance, comparative studies before and after the crisis, and how to handle these types of pandemics and their challenges during times of crisis are necessary.

8.0 Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the obstacles experienced by micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in Djibouti and to discover survival strategies adopted to address these challenges during the pandemic crisis. As a result, the research has revealed insights into the diverse experiences of micro, small, and medium-sized company owners in the face of COVID-19's obstacles, which included operation interruption, supply chain disruption, cash flow concerns, and the possibility of bankruptcy. The majority of the topics identified as problems for MSMEs were supported by previous studies of a similar kind. In terms of the tactics employed by MSMEs owners to tackle the present issues of their firms posed by COVID-19, financial strategy and marketing strategy were the most often mentioned by respondents in this study and prior studies. Participants engaged in fewer conversations about the final study topics pertaining to techniques for sustainability, particularly since they are uncertain about the future of COVID-19 in the corporate environment. The topics that arose were new technology adoption and government backing. In this context, future research might study unanswered concerns about various development strategies of corporations in response to the recession. In general, the qualitative study met all research topics and added new insights to similar prior research.

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