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Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of degree graduates in Brunei who engaged in online food entrepreneurship – an emerging yet understudied area in relation to youth unemployment in the country. Through semi-structured interviews with 10 such entrepreneurs conducted in 2023-2024, this paper examines their motivations and challenges in choosing this career path. Contrary to the assumption of unemployment as the primary driver, the findings reveal two distinct cohorts – older (28-30 years old) and younger (25-27 years old) – that are differentially motivated. While the older cohort is primarily driven by external pressures such as unemployment, economic challenges and social pressures (i.e. necessity-driven), the younger cohort is driven by intrinsic motivations such as their passion for entrepreneurship, with some viewing this pursuit as a natural extension of their entrepreneurship education in university. Nevertheless, for both cohorts familial support is crucial in shaping their decision-making processes, sustaining their online food businesses, and assisting in the navigation of their career transitions. This study extends existing research on youth entrepreneurship as an alternative career choice for degree graduates. It highlights the significant role of familial support in empowering and assisting entrepreneurs throughout their entrepreneurship journeys.

Keywords: Online Food Entrepreneurship; Brunei Darussalam; Graduates; Family Support; Youth Entrepreneurship

University Graduates and Online Food Entrepreneurship in Brunei Darussalam

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Introduction

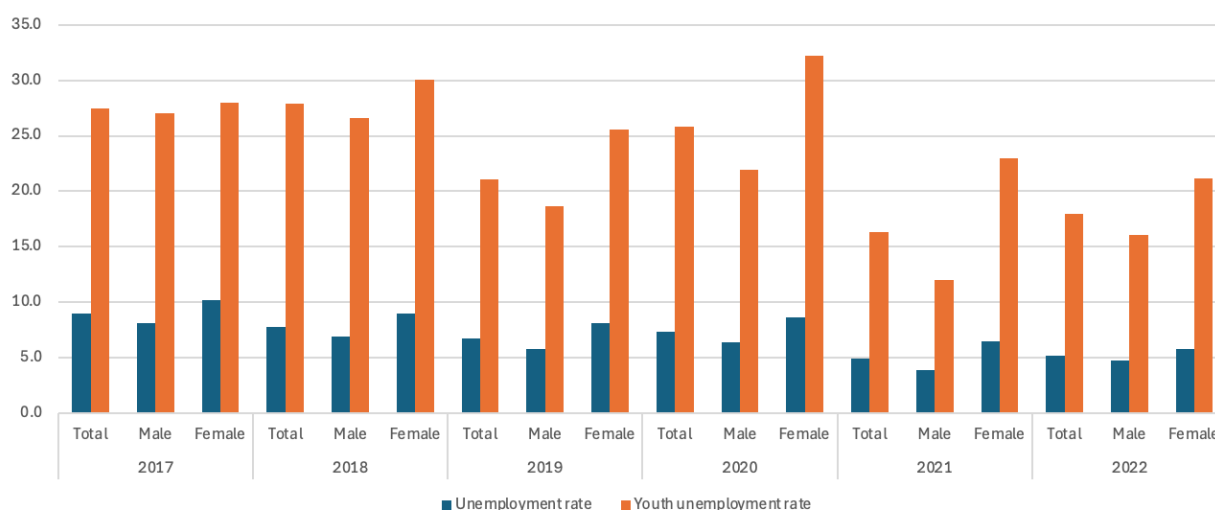
Growing up in Brunei Darussalam, I was raised with the dominant belief that obtaining a degree guarantees a secure job within the government sector. This belief, deeply ingrained within my family and community, has shaped my understanding of career paths. However, as I witnessed the evolving landscape of Brunei's push towards economic diversification, I became increasingly intrigued by alternative career paths, particularly in entrepreneurship. Moreover, the emerging term 'Youthpreneurship' in Brunei specifically interests me further. On top of that, my curiosity was further fuelled by the experiences of a family member who, despite holding a degree, chose online food entrepreneurship as her career. Her journey, alongside that of others on similar journeys, motivated me to explore the connections between higher education and graduate entrepreneurial ventures.

The excerpt above captures the first author's motivation for embarking on a study that examines why and how degree graduates in Brunei engaged in online food entrepreneurship. Over the past few years, Brunei's over-dependence on its oil and gas industry has been reflected in its low economic growth that has consequently affected the employment rate. Publicly available data from the Department of Economic Planning and Statistics shows that Brunei's unemployment rate declined from 9.0% in 2017 to 4.9% in 2021, before rising slightly to 5.2% in 2022 (DEPD, 2022). However, youth unemployment remains consistently high (averaging 23.9% during 2017-2022), especially amongst females (Figure 1). Existing research has highlighted that Brunei's high youth unemployment rate could be in part due to youths' preference for public sector jobs (Musa & Idris, 2020), and their willingness to remain unemployed while waiting for their desired jobs and preferred salary scales (Musa & Ananta, 2023). Indeed, in their national survey of Bruneian university graduates¹ in 2012, Rizzo et al. (2016: 102) found that:

¹ The survey included Bruneians who graduated from foreign universities (e.g. Australia, the UK).

Almost one out of four unemployed graduates wants to work in the government sector only, and 15% would accept a lower-paid/qualified job in the government sector rather than working in the private sector. This attitude is more common among graduates with little work experience and Malays: among non-Malays, only 5% of the unemployed are willing to work for the government only.

Figure 1: Unemployment and youth unemployment rates in Brunei, 2017-2022



Source: DEPD (2022)

To address youth unemployment, the government introduced the i-Ready apprenticeship scheme in 2017. The scheme offers an 18-month paid apprenticeship at a host employing organisation to degree graduates with no or little work experience, with the aim of increasing their employability. However, it has been reported that only 37% of i-Ready participants managed to secure permanent jobs after the end of their apprenticeship, and some companies exploited the participants by terminating them once their apprenticeships were completed (Haris, 2020). Moreover, some participants experienced career and skills mismatch due to the programme’s lack of structure and coordination (Musa, 2023).

Consequently, the government turned to entrepreneurship as an alternative means of addressing youth unemployment. As Tam (2013: 111) noted, entrepreneurship “has been touted as the solution to the crisis of graduate unemployment”. Indeed, international organisations and national governments have been actively promoting this (World Economic Forum, 2021; see Chigunta, 2017 for a critical analysis). In Brunei, however, entrepreneurship was not traditionally considered a viable career path (Low et al., 2013). Nonetheless, a shift in

this perception can be observed following a series of state-led initiatives since the mid-2010s that focused on promoting and supporting entrepreneurship.

In 2018, the Sultan of Brunei Darussalam delivered a *titah* (decree) encouraging jobseekers to be open to private sector employment and entrepreneurship (Bakar, 2018). Subsequently, on the occasion of Brunei's 14th National Youth Celebrations in 2019, His Majesty announced the formation of a government-led youth entrepreneurship steering committee, aimed at supporting young Bruneians in initiating and developing their own businesses (Wong, 2019). New institutions and policies were established to encourage and support youth entrepreneurship. For example, Darussalam Enterprise (DARE), a statutory board, was established in 2016 to foster entrepreneurship amongst local micro, small, and medium Enterprises (MSMEs) (DARE, n.d.). DARE has launched several initiatives such as training and upskilling programmes on core business skills (Wong, 2018) and organising the Brunei MSME Festival in 2024 to promote Brunei businesses and Brunei-branded products and services (DARE, 2024). In terms of policies, the Economic Blueprint 2020 identified entrepreneurship as one of the emerging sectors that can contribute towards the diversification of Brunei's economy (MOFE, 2020). These state-led initiatives demonstrate a strong national commitment towards promoting and supporting youth entrepreneurship.

Another factor that contributed to the shift towards acceptance of entrepreneurship in Brunei was the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic has severely affected the country's economy (Linan, 2022), it has also led to growth in youths' participation in entrepreneurship activities, particularly in online food businesses. Physical restriction measures introduced during the pandemic led to most activities, including entrepreneurial activities, being conducted online through the use of digital technology and social media. Indeed, when the COVID-19 pandemic began in Brunei in 2020, over 20,000 youths were involved in entrepreneurship and started their businesses (Othman, 2020). Additionally, an increase of 3.7% in youths in the entrepreneurship sector is noted from 2021 to 2022 (MOFE, n.d.). Online food entrepreneurship offers a low entry point, especially for individuals with limited capital and business experiences. Using digital technology and social media, online food entrepreneurs can potentially reach a larger market audience and easily observe changing customer behaviours (Huws et al., 2018).

Given these broader trends, how have recent degree graduates in Brunei responded to youth unemployment and state-led encouragement of youth entrepreneurship? What challenges do they face in their entrepreneurship journeys, and how do they overcome these challenges? This paper explores these questions by examining the experiences of degree graduates who

engage in online food entrepreneurship. Following this introduction, the next section provides a review of relevant literature on the factors influencing degree graduates' career choices in general and in relation to online food entrepreneurship specifically. After a short methodological section, the paper presents the findings. The paper concludes with some suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

Motivations and Factors Influencing Career Choices amongst Degree Graduates

Unemployment

In recent years, there has been an increase in unemployment rates all around the world, which has been deemed a serious concern internationally (Hanapi & Nordin, 2014; Farooq, 2011). In India, for example, it has been noted that the phenomenon highlighted the country's economic conditions, employment demands, and law and order situations (Agarwala, 2008). The tight labour market has resulted in strong competition for jobs and the rise in graduate unemployment. High graduate unemployment rates suggest that good academic performance is no longer regarded as a guarantee that graduates will get a job (Razak et al., 2014). For example, Hossain et al. (2018) found that acquiring good results does not translate directly into employment opportunities for fresh degree graduates in Malaysia as other factors such as soft skills are rather important. When academic achievements fail to assist in graduate employment, they may seek jobs that are unrelated to their studies. Studies conducted in South Africa showed that high unemployment rates have compelled graduates to settle for any available job, including low-quality work (Mncayi & Dunga, 2016; Ndebele & Ndlovu, 2019).

With regard to unemployment as a motivation for entrepreneurship, the literature has described this as “necessity entrepreneurship” or “necessity-driven entrepreneurship” (Álvarez-Sousa, 2019; Fairlie & Fossen, 2020). Business creation, self-employment and entrepreneurship, in this scenario, are driven by limited alternative career or income generation options in the job market. As such, it is important to understand “context-related, structural factors... that push” (Álvarez-Sousa, 2019: 5) an individual into necessity entrepreneurship. For example, Dvouletý et al. (2018: 1164) highlight that unemployed individuals may be pushed into entrepreneurship as a result of “persistently lower wages, lower occupational prestige, ...the continued threat of unemployment, [and pessimistic] perceptions of the economic environment”.

Passion

In making career choices, individuals may be motivated by their passion for type of work, organisation, activity, or a greater cause. Pollack et al. (2020) similarly highlight that career passion involves positive feelings toward work and plays a significant role in defining one's identity. Additionally, the notion of being enthusiastic about a job is well established; for instance, in a study of Kenyan employees, Nyambegera (2001) found that they are more likely to be passionate about their work if they fit well with their organisation. In the context of pursuing a career in entrepreneurship, passion influences the link between learning, aspiration and attitudes toward self-employment and entrepreneurship. In the case of business university students in Pakistan, Batoool et al. (2005) found that many choose self-employment due to the desire to be their own employer and have the freedom to be creative and innovative. Correspondingly, Pinto et al. (2019) emphasised that graduate students' passion drives their motivation, including self-determination, realizing their own ideas, innovative thinking, risk-taking, competitiveness and the desire for autonomy. Moreover, a study conducted by Al-Abri and Kooli (2018) on future university graduates in Oman indicated that interest has significantly influenced their career paths. The interest regarding the job may include elements such as developing and challenging roles.

Family Influence and Support

Family influence plays an important role in influencing the career choices of graduates. Studies mentioned how familial influences motivates degree graduates in their choices of career paths. Millward (2005) stated that university graduates may choose their careers by observing occupational role models of their family members. Carr and Sequira (2007) also mentioned how graduates may be motivated and influenced to orientate their career paths toward entrepreneurship due to their exposure to their family business.

Family support can come in many forms, such as emotional or instrumental support. Based on their survey of undergraduate college students in a major state university in the northern part of USA, Shen et al. (2017) found that having emotional family support is important as it encourages and reinforces degree graduates' start-up efforts. Meoli et al. (2019) also found that university graduates in Italy with a strong intention to pursue entrepreneurship often succeed in realizing their aspirations when they receive support from their families, compared to those with insufficient support. Given this perspective, it becomes clear that individuals' interactions with external influences, such as family, play a critical role in their

career options and shape their impression of an “ideal job”. Additionally, when dealing with the need for capital, family and friends are found to finance most small-scale start-up entrepreneurs (Aldrich & Martinez, 2001).

On the other hand, family influence may also negatively influence graduates’ career choices. A study conducted by Musa and Basir (2019) shows how, in Brunei, they value working in the government sector more than any other sector, including entrepreneurship. Similarly, Shumba and Naong (2013) noted in their study conducted in South Africa that graduates frequently mirror their parents’ socio-economic status when selecting their career paths. This places significant pressure on them, as fear of unemployment may have detrimental effects on their mental and physical health.

Entrepreneurship Education

Entrepreneurship education can influence degree graduates’ motivations to pursue entrepreneurship as a career. This is because such education instills an entrepreneurial mindset, helping them become familiar with this field. Peterman and Kennedy (2003) mentioned that entrepreneurship education programmes have a substantial impact on university graduates’ choices of careers as they are exposed to entrepreneurial activities more than other educational programmes. Additionally, entrepreneurial education programmes also shape their attitudes and overall intentions to become entrepreneurs (Souitaris et al., 2007). Moreover, entrepreneurship education helps individuals improve their self-confidence which in turn affects their entrepreneurial intentions (Bae et al., 2014). Apart from that, the process of teaching entrepreneurial attitudes is important to individuals wanting to start or manage a business venture as it can make individuals aware of the issues facing business owners (Ferreira et al., 2017). Hence, they can be prepared before starting their own businesses. Conversely, degree graduates who lack entrepreneurial education may have a low level of entrepreneurial intention, causing them to exclude this option from their career choices (Franke & Luthje, 2004).

Methodology

This paper draws from semi-structured interviews conducted with 10 participants from December 2023 to February 2024. A purposive snowballing sampling method was used to select participants who met the following criteria: An online food entrepreneur who is a degree graduate, aged between 25 to 30 years old. The term “online food entrepreneur” refers to

individuals who operate as solo entrepreneurs, managing every aspect of their business (including business creation, food preparation for online sales, obtaining necessary supplies, and product delivery to customers), with or without paid or unpaid help from family and friends.

Table 1. Participants' Details

Cohort	Pseudonym	Age	Degree major	Duration of involvement in online food entrepreneurship
Older Cohort (28-30 years old)	Wafi Fakhri	28	Islamic Finance	5 years
	Lily Nad	30	Sociology and Criminology	6 years
	Maira	30	Geography and Development	6 years
	Talita	28	Chemical Engineering	5 years
	Rosie	30	Mathematics	4 years
Younger Cohort (25-27 years old)	Jeremy	27	Business Administration	4 years
	Aaliya	25	Marketing	7 months
	Hanaa	25	Culinary Arts	1 year
	Sharifah	26	International Tourism	3 years
	Kamila	27	Business Management	3 years

The first author contacted the respondents personally, initially via social media such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and Mail; and thereafter through snowball sampling. Interviews were conducted using a mix of English and colloquial Malay to suit each participant's preference. Each interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded with consent from the participants. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Pseudonyms are used to protect the participants' anonymity. Table 1 documents the basic information of the respondents.

Findings

Motivation for Engaging in Online Food Entrepreneurship

Contrary to the assumption of unemployment as the primary driver for engagement in online food entrepreneurship, the findings reveal two distinct cohorts – older (28-30 years old) and younger (25-27 years old) – that are differentially motivated. While the older cohort is primarily driven by external pressures such as unemployment and economic challenges (i.e. necessity-driven), the younger cohort is driven by intrinsic motivations such as their passion for entrepreneurship, with some viewing this pursuit as a natural extension of their entrepreneurship education in university.

Older Cohort (28-30 Years Old)

The older cohort expressed feelings of frustration with the limited employment opportunities available to them post-graduation, which left them little to no choice but to pursue online food entrepreneurship. They believed that, as graduates, they *should* pursue careers in government or in prestigious private sector instead of starting businesses. However, with limited opportunities for landing those coveted jobs at the time of their graduation, many of them felt pressured into choosing this career despite lacking the essential knowledge or relevant training. For example, Wafi Fakhri was considering pursuing a career in the banking and finance industry, but “due to [the] difficulty in securing [a] job”, he resorted to “choosing entrepreneurship as [a] way forward, a source of sustenance and as a full-time career”. Others, such as Maria and Talita, were driven by financial considerations:

“I have to motivate myself *macam* at least find something *yang* stable *pasalnya macam* I’ve got bills *jua...* which is *masatu bukan pulang ada kereta sendiri apa tapi bayar telefon apa kan mesti jua difikirkan*. (I have to motivate myself to at least find something stable because I have bills to pay. At the time I didn’t have my own car, but I still needed to consider things like my phone bills.)” (Maria)

“I started *atu pasal masatu macam* I think I need side income *catu*. (I started [my business] because at the time I think I needed some side income.)” (Talita)

Notably, during the inception of the older cohort’s entrepreneurial ventures in 2019, the country grappled with a 6.8% unemployment rate and a 21.1% youth unemployment rate (DEPD, 2022). Additionally, as highlighted by Hamdani and Hoon (2019), Brunei encountered a setback in economic growth, contracting by 2.8% in the second quarter of 2018, despite earlier hopes for improvement. These economic challenges catalysed Brunei’s ambitious goals in 2018/2019 aimed at augmenting the skills and marketability of job seekers, with a specific emphasis on fostering a conducive business environment to spur job creation, particularly

within the private sector (Hamdani & Hoon, 2019). This shows how changes in Brunei's economy have had a ripple effect on job opportunities for young people. Similar patterns can be seen in Agarwala's study in India (2008), where the economic situation and job market of a country greatly influenced the career choices of university graduates. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, in 2018/19, His Majesty encouraged the pursuit of youth entrepreneurship. Thus, the older cohort may have viewed His Majesty's call for youth involvement in entrepreneurship as an encouragement to choose this as a viable career path.

Additionally, individuals within this cohort faced substantial social pressures from their families, who frequently queried their employment status. For example, Lily Nad shared how she was at the receiving end of questions at extended family social gatherings:

Like for example if you go to [a] gathering or an occasion they would be asking like "*Keraja sudah?*" "*Apply SPA sudah?*" ("Do you already have a job?" "Have you applied for SPA?") "*Apply bah pegawai di jabatan ani, di jabatan atu*" ("Just apply for the officer position in this department, that department") when in fact it's actually difficult to secure the jobs. I've been there. Like I've tried countless applications.

As mentioned earlier, entrepreneurship has not traditionally been considered a viable career path in Brunei (Low et al., 2013), especially amongst the older generation. In fact, entrepreneurship is not viewed as a legitimate career, compared to the coveted public sector. Consequently, the older cohort encountered stigmatisation, doubt and disapproval from extended family members and relatives who questioned their choice of entrepreneurship as a career path. The participants attributed the negative perception to the association of entrepreneurship with unstable income, long working hours, and limited time flexibility. In Brunei's context where the maintenance of extended family and social relations is of utmost importance, the participants' decisions to engage in entrepreneurship also necessitated approval from parental figures. For example, Rosie had to seek permission from her father-in-law, a minister at the time, before starting her business to avoid potential embarrassment to her husband's family:

"My mom *cakap nya minta izin* from your father-in-law *takut odrang malu*, cause some people *catu kan malu eh jadi saudagar ya sudah* you know that kind of *lah* mindset. (My mom asked me to seek my father-in-law's permission, because [she felt that] some people may feel embarrassed when others say "Eh, your so-and-so is now a business person?" You know, that kind of mindset.)"

Despite their encounters with the initial prejudice in their career choice, the older cohort noted that there has been a growing acceptance and positive change in societal attitudes towards

² An acronym for *Suruhanjaya Perkhidmatan Awam*, referring to the Public Service Commission, the government agency that coordinates public sector employment.

entrepreneurship as a viable career choice in Brunei. Most of them eventually gained family support for their online food business.

As Ndebele and Ndlovu (2019) noted in their study conducted in South Africa, high unemployment rates and the pressures of gaining employment led degree graduates to compromise on the relevance of the job to their field of study. For the older cohort, online food entrepreneurship emerged not only as a means of income generation and a strategy to navigate through economic uncertainty, but also as a response to social pressures and expectations regarding being employed.

Younger Cohort (25-27 Years Old)

In contrast to the older cohorts' narratives of external pressures, the younger cohort primarily articulated intrinsic motivations for engaging in online food entrepreneurship such as passion for baking or setting up businesses. On top of that, the COVID-19 pandemic also enabled them to kickstart their online food businesses as a means of managing their mental health and occupying their free time. Below are some relevant excerpts:

“Started when I was actually doing my DY,³ which is in my incubation⁴ *lah*.” (Jeremy)

“I set my mind *udah*. (I've already set my mind.) ... Even during my degree, I set my mind to doing business *lah*.” (Hanaa)

“..one of my life goals is to start a business as a baker. So, why not I do something that I want to do..” (Aaliya)

“I started my online business when COVID-19 just hit Brunei.. I wanted to do something to occupy my time (or like a hobby).” (Sharifah)

“It all started when I was trying to cope with my mental health. So during COVID-19, I started my business.. It all started with passion also.” (Kamila)

Importantly, all the participants from the younger cohort highlighted that their degree majors had significantly contributed to their journey in the online food sector. They attributed their university education for providing “the foundation” and “useful knowledge” that prepared them for online entrepreneurship. For example, Jeremy's degree major (business administration) has helped him gain exposure to entrepreneurship, especially during the Incubation Programme offered as part of the Discovery Year at his university, Universiti

³ Discovery Year, which is an internship or overseas exchange programme that allows students to gain first-hand experience outside of the university. Students participate in the programme during their third year and engage in two semesters of activities.

⁴ The Discovery Year Incubation programme is a module that supports students in exploring their business skills and capabilities, while also encouraging creativity in business and commercialisation realms.

Brunei Darussalam (UBD). Kamila credits her Business Administration programme for equipping her with the knowledge and skills to manage her business:

Undeniably, my business educational background has given me the foundation of my business as the theories I had learned [are] now put into practice. I specialise in Project Management so it has also allowed me to plan all my operations appropriately - from inventory budgeting, costing, baking schedule, marketing and finally the distribution of my products.

Indeed, the younger cohort's drive to engage in online food entrepreneurship stemmed primarily from their passion and a natural extension of their entrepreneurship education in university. Many of them already have a clear sense of direction about their careers before completing their degrees, which was heavily influenced by their educational experiences. For instance, participation in the Discovery Programme like the Incubation Programme at UBD, and internships in Malaysia for business and culinary programmes fueled their enthusiasm for this career path. Essentially, their decision was self-driven, reflecting a strong internal motivation rather than external influence. Exposure to entrepreneurship education in university is thus an important factor which serves as a motivating force that equipped the younger cohort with the knowledge and skills to turn their passion into businesses. This observation resonates with existing studies which found that entrepreneurship education shaped graduates' aspirations and intentions to pursue entrepreneurship in the future (Peterman and Kennedy, 2003; Souitaris et al., 2007). In the younger cohort's case, the combination of education and passion synergised and facilitated their ease in choosing this career compared to the older cohort, who took more time to decide due to the relative lack of exposure to entrepreneurship in their educational training.

While some individuals mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic as a potential motivator for entering the industry, the majority had already initiated their businesses before the pandemic hit Brunei in 2020. This suggests that early exposure to entrepreneurship, in this case through entrepreneurship education and training in university, plays an important role in preparing degree graduates for entrepreneurship. Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst that enhanced the viability of their online food businesses. This is because movement restrictions and social distancing measures during the pandemic normalised online consumerism, leading to increased demand for such services (Mukhtar et al., 2020). Consequently, many youths seized the opportunity, contributing to a surge in entrepreneurship, driven not solely by external circumstances but also by their pre-existing passion and educational training.

In contrast to the older cohort, the younger cohort did not report any prejudice regarding societal and family perceptions of their career choices. They noted a more supportive and

accepting environment, citing examples of some individuals leaving traditional employment to pursue entrepreneurship. The shift in societal perception of entrepreneurship in Brunei may be attributed to the pandemic-induced acceptance of online food businesses, as well as the outcome of state-led promotion of youth entrepreneurship and related initiatives since the mid-2010s. Thus, while the older cohort encountered entrenched stigmatisation when they started their businesses during the 2017-2019 period prior to the pandemic, the younger cohort encountered a more accepting and supportive environment when their businesses were created in 2020 and beyond (during and after the pandemic).

Family Support

Starting the Business

While the two cohorts differed in their motivations for engaging in online food entrepreneurship, the presence of and reliance on family support is a common feature. All the participants mentioned how their family members were the first ones who tasted their food products and provided honest and useful feedback. For example, Jeremy shared that “they are the one *yang macam awal awal dulu merasa your makanan* (they are the ones who tasted your food from the very beginning)”, while Maria credited her family members for providing tasting feedback:

Dorang rasa, okay. Tapi barangkali cuba kau tambah itu ini. So ubah lagi recipe catu ah. (They tasted [my food products and suggested] maybe you can try adding this and that. So, I tweaked the recipe [after receiving their feedback].)

Family members were also the ones who encouraged the participants to pursue their passion in online food business, which gave them the confidence they needed to take the plunge. As Lily Nad explained, “I never knew how to bake Tapak Kuda Rolls so I googled the recipe and it turned out well, and my aunts love them. So, I baked more and served during Raya and *Alhamdulillah*, I received positive feedback, and my family encouraged me to open up a business one day”. Others, like Hanna, grew up being immersed in a family culture of baking, leading to her natural progression to starting her online food business:

I grew up in a household where my aunties, my cousins, they love baking - my mom, everyone. Like I wanted to take it a step further *pasal dorang buat this kuih kuih* and like Raya (I wanted to take it a step further from all these baking, like for Hari Raya). And then my cousin introduced me to all of these cakes like ...a bandung flavoured cake and milk tea cakes. So, I was inspired by that. And then I started [to] make a business out of it.

Several participants also shared that their exposure to food entrepreneurship came from their family members’ (parents and older siblings) long-term involvement in the industry. Growing up, they were exposed to this entrepreneurial atmosphere and frequently assisted their

family members in their food businesses from a young age (as young as 10 years old). These early exposures to the food business have shaped their decision to pursue a similar career.

In addition to moral and emotional support, some participants also received financial support. For example, Aaliya shared: “I don’t have [a] financial issue that much... my parents support *kan... diorang yang* provide the finance... *Diorang yang* give the money.” (My parents are the ones who provide the finance. They give [my business] the money.); while Rosie’s husband was her “main financier”.

The participants’ decisions to embark on online food entrepreneurship can thus be viewed as being heavily influenced by family support. This observation matches with Meoli et al.’s (2019) that university graduates with strong entrepreneurial inclinations often realise their aspirations when they receive support from their families.

However, this observation contrasts with Franke and Luthje’s (2004) argument that a lack of entrepreneurial education results in lower levels of entrepreneurial interest among students. In the participants’ case, the absence of entrepreneurial education did not diminish their interest. Instead, the presence of familial support enabled individuals, even those without a business background, to pursue this career. For instance, the older cohort gained essential skills and knowledge for their online food business through encouragement and financial sponsorship from their family. This support enabled them to address gaps in education and expertise necessary for success.

Running the Business

Family support is not just crucial to the participants starting their businesses; it is equally important in helping them run and sustain their businesses.

As solopreneurs, home-based and small-scale business operators, the respondents relied heavily on their family members, who often stand in as informal paid or unpaid staff. For example, Rosie shared: “...*kadang mendengani tu menggulung cookies duduk ya didapur mama ani* (sometimes my mother would help me with preparing the cookies in the kitchen).” In addition to assistance with food preparation, their family members also helped in attending to customers picking up orders in their absence, facilitating product delivery, managing social media postings, and helping in product sales during pop-up events. Importantly, they highlighted that, while they may not have requested for assistance, their family and friends would often step in to help when they noticed a need to.

Moreover, the Bruneian cultural phenomenon of “*mulut ke mulut*” or word of mouth serves as a form of free yet effective marketing tool for the participants. This is because positive

feedback from family and friends contributed to business demand and credibility. This supports Souitaris's (2007) idea that personal communication plays a key role in promoting brands and products, particularly in the food sector. Additionally, Brown et al (2007) mentioned the significance of word of mouth in digital technology, as internet platforms expand their impact. Activ8BN (n.d.) highlights the importance of word of mouth in Brunei's food industry; consumer recommendations increase widespread sharing and consumption.

Additionally, family support constitutes a crucial role especially during challenging periods in their business ventures. Regardless of their expertise in entrepreneurship, culinary skills, or mastery of social media platforms, they would not be able to sustain their online food businesses without family support. Previous research also emphasises the importance of instrumental and emotional support for young entrepreneurs, as it significantly influences their engagement in startup activities (Powell & Eddleston, 2017). This reflects the positive impact of family support on the graduates' ventures in online food entrepreneurship, particularly for the older cohorts who encountered resistance.

While the role of family support for self-employed entrepreneurs' business success is similarly observed elsewhere (e.g. Dyer et al., 2014; Edelman et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2020), in Brunei's context this has an additional dimension. Selvarajah (1996) discusses how *gotong-royong* (community effort), social harmony and mutual cooperation are highly valued in Brunei. Ullah and Kumpoh (2018) also highlight the close-knit nature of Bruneian families, including extended relatives such as grandparents, aunts and cousins. In other words, familial support and connections are deeply embedded in everyday life. Agripreneurs in Brunei for example, often cite family support and exposure to agriculture as their motivation to pursue farming (Musa et al., 2020). Furthermore, many resort to borrowing funds from family and friends when they face difficulties in obtaining bank loans (Musa et al., 2020). In her study on everyday finance and consumption in Brunei, Hassan (2017) found that, when facing financial challenges, individuals often turn to their families for support and advice.

Challenges Faced

Existing studies have highlighted that online food entrepreneurs face some challenges and barriers when starting and running their businesses. For example, Selvarajah (1996) pointed out that entrepreneurs face challenges in the availability of capital and labor at the onset of their business ventures, and intense competition in sustaining their businesses. Shah et al. (2023) also argued that there are substantial barriers to starting food businesses, for example, the high cost to maintain, build, and operate a licensed commercial facility. Additionally, online food

entrepreneurs, especially the newcomers in these markets, experience smaller profits compared to those in other sectors due to the higher production costs and smaller customer base.

Running the Business

While both groups encountered various obstacles the nature of their challenges differed. The older cohort primarily faced technical challenges, particularly concerning their lack of educational training related to entrepreneurship and culinary arts. When they first started their businesses, this deficiency in foundational knowledge hindered their ability to initiate and manage their online food businesses effectively. They encountered difficulties with financial record-keeping and lacked professional expertise to enhance product quality, highlighting the importance of fundamental skills in these areas.

By contrast, the younger cohort did not generally encounter challenges due to a lack of educational exposure and training in entrepreneurship skills. Instead, they cited internal challenges such as procrastination and self-doubt. For example, Aaliya shared that she sometimes experienced procrastination and lack of self-motivation to work on her business when the other members of her family are engaged in unrelated activities while Kamila started doubting her business's unique offering in the market.

“Like procrastination. Because you live *serumah* (in the same house) with your family and you see them doing other things, so you don't have the energy to do your own thing *lah*.” (Aaliya)

“It was my own self-doubt, as I felt that the baking industry was saturated, especially with something as common as cookies.” (Kamila)

Nevertheless, both cohorts share the same challenges of being solopreneurs. For example, Hanaa jokingly said: “I mean, I am a one-woman team basically”. While they can and do rely on family support as paid or unpaid staff when necessary, this is not a sustainable arrangement that can facilitate the growth and expansion of their businesses. Their businesses are labour intensive and require manpower. Some may require additional space and cannot be entirely home-based (i.e. rent free). As Maria shared:

Me sewa sebuah tempat just untuk baking. Rumah lah, khas untuk baking. Dari pukul 8 pagi me kerja sampai kadang baru 10 malam baru me balik. I'm staying there buat cookies you imagine buat order orang. Because sometimes 20 pieces untuk cookies saja requires 4 hour bah, (I had to rent a place just for baking. A separate house, specifically for baking. I work from 8am until 10pm before I can go home. I stay in the rented house just making cookies to meet customer orders. Because sometimes even making 20 pieces of cookies can take 4 hours.)

While the participants rely heavily on digital marketing and social media to promote their products and engage with customers, the informal nature of their online food businesses means that they may not have access to regular sales. Moreover, their businesses are highly

reliant on seasonality as mass purchases of baked goods are typically tied to major holidays and celebrations such as Hari Raya. With limited business financing and the inconsistency in sales, the participants are unable or reluctant to invest in manpower and equipment. Consequently, it maintains the informal nature of their businesses. This situation has led to some participants to start reconsidering their career choice in online food entrepreneurship, as we next discuss.

Career Change Dilemma

7 out of 10 participants from both the older and younger cohorts reported that they are reassessing their career decisions. Participants from the older cohort mentioned that when they initially entered the sector, they were unmarried, and their priority was primarily focused on fulfilling customer orders. However, as they married and started families, their commitments pivoted to ensuring the financial and income stability of their households. They acknowledged the pros and cons of entrepreneurship, with the drawbacks becoming more apparent, especially during holidays when sales were low or non-existent. This realisation prompted some participants such as Maria, to contemplate applying for government jobs for the income stability they offer:

...myself started to *fikir* maybe I should apply *keraja* government. Because *ia* very stable. You *cuti kah*, your *gaji masih jalan*. You imagine if you[r] business, you *inda buat apa apa...* you *sakit* you stop you *nada duit*. (I started to think maybe I should apply for a government job because it's very stable. You still get paid even during holidays. Just imagine if you have your own business, and you don't do anything... If you get sick, you stop [working], and you have no income).

Jeremy from the younger cohort also shared similar views. When asked about whether his business is a temporary venture, he replied:

I'm not sure... like right now I'm trying to focus more on other careers as well. Furthermore, I [am] actually planning to be a lecturer so. For my master, I actually took [it with the intention of] pursuing my PhD. Right now I see [my business] as my full time backup income. Because I am still searching for other career *jua* (too).

While initially considering his venture as his primary career, he eventually transitioned to viewing it as a secondary source of income while he pursued further education, with the hope of securing salaried employment. As lecturers are employed as public sector employees in Brunei, Jeremy's aim, ultimately, is to transition from online food entrepreneurship to a government job.

As noted earlier, public sector jobs are preferred in Brunei (Low et al., 2013; Musa & Idris, 2020). Government jobs offer benefits like coverage of maternity expenses, financial support for illnesses, and even holiday bonuses, which are deemed more secure and

comprehensive compared to the uncertainties of self-employment (Hugree et al., 2015). The burden of family responsibilities compounded these challenges as the participants are often expected to prioritise family duties over individual career aspirations. Like Musa and Basir's (2019: 8) respondents (Bruneian youths who are involved in online food businesses), they lack the confidence to commit to online food entrepreneurship full-time and as their main career "due to their risk-averse attitude and the need to have a secure monthly income".

Apart from the socio-cultural barriers, the nature of self-employment itself contributes to the career dilemma. Specifically, the lack of job security and income instability associated with entrepreneurship prompted some individuals to pursue further education in hopes of securing socially-preferred employment in the public sector. Despite the shift towards wider societal acceptance of online food entrepreneurship as a viable career choice in Brunei, the challenges and difficulties of sustaining their businesses financially compel them to think about changing careers. A similar pattern can also be seen in Tammelin's (2019) study which found that solo self-employed entrepreneurs in Finland often face more uncertainty about future work opportunities than regular employees, particularly in regard to financial insecurity. Taken altogether, the informal and unstable nature of their online food businesses (i.e. lack of financial stability and security), coupled with the entrenched social preference for government jobs, compel the participants to consider making a career change.

Conclusion

This study of online food entrepreneurship among degree graduates in Brunei reveals two distinct cohorts – older and younger – that are driven by different sets of motivations. Economic pressures led the older cohort to entrepreneurship amidst high unemployment rates and social expectations (i.e. necessity-driven), while the younger cohort is primarily motivated by passion and supported by their entrepreneurial education in university, with COVID-19 acting as a catalyst. Both cohorts faced different sets of challenges, yet what unifies them is the significant role of family support throughout their entrepreneurial journeys.

This paper has highlighted the persistent nature of prejudice and resistance against entrepreneurship in Brunei, even though a shift is discernible. Indeed, the older cohort acknowledges lingering resistance, while the younger cohort perceives growing acceptance.

The older cohort of graduates can be regarded as pioneers in online food entrepreneurship, as they overcame public prejudice. In contrast, the younger cohort experienced less resistance and received more support. The difference in the two cohorts' experiences reflects Brunei's transformation towards greater acceptance of online food

entrepreneurship as a viable career path for university graduates. This means that there is less negative judgment about graduates choosing this career. As pointed out by Reynolds (1991), the rise in entrepreneurial activity typically mirrors improvements in both economic and non-economic conditions at a national level. Hence, it indicates a shift towards economic diversification, as outlined in the Economic Blueprint of 2020.

Given that the online food entrepreneurship sector is relatively new in Brunei, a deeper understanding of its dynamics would be valuable. Future studies could explore other dimensions of this phenomenon, such as gender stereotypes, the role of government initiatives (e.g. DARE programmes), parents' and family members' perspectives, and the views of customers. Further research into these areas could enrich our understanding of entrepreneurship and its socio-cultural implications in Brunei Darussalam.

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