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**SOCIAL COMPETENCE AND WOMEN ENTREPRENEURIAL  
SUCCESS DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: A REVISED MODEL  
OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS**

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**Abstract:**

Women entrepreneurs in small businesses are beginning to be seen more than ever as a vehicle for entrepreneurship development, contributing not just to employment and social stability but also become a competitive power. However, the slow and inefficient business performance of women entrepreneur is drawing the attention of scholars towards the traits that should be possessed. Drawing upon the psychological characteristic model, the purpose of this study is to examine the influence of social competence (social perception, social adaptability, expressiveness and impression management) on the women entrepreneurial success and in turn its impact on the business sustainability. The data were collected from January until October 2020 on micro enterprise in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using quantitative research design, a structured questionnaire was used among the women entrepreneur listed in *Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat*. Proportionate stratified random sampling was used to select the respondents from each state in Malaysia. Descriptive statistic and linear regression analysis were used to analyse the data, which comprised 500 respondents. Overall, the findings showed that four dimensions of social competence had a significant positive relationship on the women entrepreneurial success. The novelty of this study rests in shedding light on a revised psychological characteristic model in micro enterprise sector and emphasised the crucial role women entrepreneur's social competence for business sustainability.

**Keywords:**

COVID-19, Micro Enterprise Sustainability, Psychological Characteristics, Social Competence, Women Entrepreneurial Success

**Introduction**

Globally, researchers in entrepreneurship stream agreed upon the fact that women play a vital role for the economic development of the country. Initiated in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the involvement of women entrepreneurs in small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) have received the utmost interest from policymakers, especially from academicians, due to their significant contribution to job creation and innovation (Agustina, 2021). SMEs contribute an average of 95 per cent to economic growth and between 60 to 70 per cent of jobs in most OECD countries (OECD, 2018). This leads to a reduction in the unemployment rate (Bello, et al., 2018). Interest in entrepreneurship is intense in many parts of the world. For developed economies, entrepreneurial is a means of revitalizing economy, a way of coping with unemployment problems, a potential catalyst and incubator for technological progress, product and market innovation. For economies of developing countries, entrepreneurship is seen as an engine of economic progress, job creation and social adjustment. Thus, small business growth/new business formation is widely encouraged by national economic policies to stimulate economic growth and wealth creation. As Malaysia entered the twenty first century, interest and concerns on the subject of entrepreneurship heightened among others by the government's enormous funding allocation towards the promotion of entrepreneurship (Yusoff, et al., 2018).

On perspective of the micro-enterprise level, entrepreneurship contributes to the dynamics and development of the business communities and entities. Micro-enterprises are concentrated primarily in low-income and low productivity activities, especially in petty trades and services in competitive markets. In many countries, women who could be categorised as poor and experience poverty operate many of these enterprises. Similarly, in Malaysia, micro-enterprise constitutes 78.4 per cent of the total SMEs compared to the small and medium enterprises, which constitute only 20 per cent and 1.6 per cent, respectively (Economic Census: Profile of SMEs, 2020). Therefore, micro-enterprise is essential in improving the well-being of society by providing significant income and generating employment opportunities, especially for the local community.

In response to this, many countries including Malaysia are inclined towards ensuring the improvement of women entrepreneur in micro enterprise especially among low income household. Producing women entrepreneurs is one of the current initiatives initiated by the Government of Malaysia to overcome the problem faced by Low Income Household (LIH) or known as the B40 group under the National Key Result Areas (NKRA) to eliminate poverty, tackling the imbalance of employment and wealth within society. In this context, the plight of women and female-headed households has been a concern for the Government, especially the increasing poverty feminisation among lower-income households. In 2021, the Malaysian Government outlined several initiatives to support women entrepreneurs. For instance, an allocation of RM50 million was made for PEMERKASA-NITA Micro Financing Scheme to encourage women entrepreneurs to venture into business (Muhyiddin, 2021).

However, there are still a number of barriers that hinders women entrepreneurial success. Indeed, recent reviews of the literature have acknowledged the gaps that exists among female entrepreneurs (Solesvik, et al., 2019; Yadav & Uni, 2016). Previous studies had indicated that women entrepreneurs are considered as less successful and are unable to compete for business opportunities if compared to men entrepreneurs although a few initiatives have been devised to empower women entrepreneur (Yusoff et al, 2021; Elam et al., 2019). Furthermore, the novel of COVID-19 has challenged women entrepreneurs beyond existing knowledge of crisis.

The pandemic had an enormous impact on women entrepreneurs due to the combination of small businesses' vulnerability, heavy industry sector impacts, and the additional burden of family care in addition to work demands. Moreover, global economies have suffered an exogenous shock never seen before with a strong economic and psychosocial impact on organizations where women have affected the most (De Simone et al., 2021). The data indicated that 87 per cent women were more deeply impacted by the pandemic than their male counterparts (Nanthini & Nair, 2021; Monnaf, & Rahman, 2021). For instance, COVID-19 had an impact on women entrepreneurs in the United States in terms of financial losses owing to social distance constraints, resulting in a 16 percent fall in the number of women entrepreneurs from 5.4 million to 4.5 million (Fairlie, 2020). As the whole globe fights to combat the COVID-19, its impact on the global economy is growing as mentioned by Bagchi et al., (2020). The COVID-19 seems to have a severe impact on women's enterprises than the economic downturn of 2008–2009 or other worldwide recessions. The consequences of this pandemic are not just limited to health related problems, but also have a significant social and economic impact for instance liquidity, procurement of supplies, decline in employment, more constraints in access to credit, and technological problems resulted to sales decline and demand reduction (Cheong & Fernandez, 2022; Islam et al., 2020; Unioncamere, 2021; Martinez & Jayawarna, 2020; Kickbusch et al., 2020).

Without a doubt, entrepreneurship has been greatly affected by COVID-19. There is an argument stating that these changes in perception, will act as a double-edged sword (Shane 2011). In the future, these changes might have a negative impact and discourage new entrepreneurs, whereas, some suggest that these changes might have a positive impact, and can be a source of advancement by providing learning opportunities and new business tactics (Brown et al., 2020). To better understand the influences of the challenges due to the pandemic on women entrepreneurs' business success; the use of the psychological characteristics model to clarify the situation of women entrepreneurs in this specific moment of emergency and the effects on business success are vital in any study of women entrepreneurships. One of the study by Korunka et al., (2003) has adopts the psychological characteristics school of thought that views entrepreneurs as individuals who have unique values, attitudes and needs which drive them. This model is based on the assumption that people behave in accordance with their values and behavior results from attempts to satisfy needs. Therefore, this school of thought focuses on personality/psychological characteristics associated with entrepreneurship which have received a great deal of attention, with the individual as the unit of analysis.

In view of this, there is a need to study the psychological characteristics model focusing on social competence among women entrepreneur that were identified by vast literature to have influence on entrepreneurial success as well as business sustainability (Cai et al., 2018). The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, the brief review of the women entrepreneurial success definition. Second, the discussion on the school of thought

psychological characteristics model. Third, the overview of the social competence concept and how does it relate to entrepreneur that represent as a crucial driver in the stimulation of success. Fourth, the methodology employed such as the instrument used, respondents involved and pilot test result. Next, the analysis of results and finally, based on the result generated, the conclusion is drawn on how the study conducted may assist the future studies in entrepreneurship stream.

### **Literature Review**

There are three points will be discussed in literature review. First, the discussion focus on definition of women entrepreneurial success. Second, the fundamental of psychological characteristics model. Finally, the review on social competence concept and how it relates to women entrepreneurial success.

#### ***Definition of Women Entrepreneurial Success***

Women entrepreneurial success is a crucial phenomenon for the benefit of the society. Theoretically, the literatures indicated that there are lack of mutual agreement on how to determine the measurement and indicators of successful entrepreneur (Mamun et al., 2018). Based on entrepreneurship review suggests some indicators of entrepreneurial success which based on typical business, social and psychological (Agustina, 2021; Fisher et al., 2014). Generally, the word of “success” is defined as favourable or prosperous termination of attempts or the achievement of one’s goal (Bostock, 2014). However, favourable perception of one individual will be different as another. Similarly, the indicators of achievement may differ in some point of view or domain.

Likewise, it was suggested that gender differences do affect perceptions of success. Men use external standards to determine successful, such as obtaining something prestige or acknowledgement in their performance; whereas women use internal factor to define successful, such as whether they have accomplished what they have planned (Solesvik, et al, 2019; Fisher et al., 2014). Other scholars reported the criterion based on the life span or survivability of the business in the industry whereby the business able to exist three years continuously after the entrepreneur develop the company to differentiate it between successful and unsuccessful entrepreneurs (Batool & Ullah, 2017; Freeman et al., 2004; Brockhaus, 1980, Brockhaus & Horwitz, 1986). As a result, due to broad and distinctive theoretical perspective on entrepreneurial success might give consequence on accuracy of estimating the factors related to entrepreneurial success. Accuracy is essential to entrepreneurial success especially for women, as it is important to understand how the entrepreneurs will struggle in the great challenge of economy.

Therefore, the relevant point of reference for success in this study was based on business survivability within the first three years after its formation due to its liability of newness as suggested by Batool and Ullah, (2017), Freeman et al, (2004); and Brockhaus, (1980) and Brockhaus and Horwitz, (1986). Since, our subjects are women entrepreneurs of micro enterprise and belong to low income household category, thus, the definition of success used in this study is appropriate for this context.

#### ***Psychological Characteristics Model***

Fundamentally, the research on entrepreneurship has been dominated by psychological characteristic theory. One of the research streams in the entrepreneurship field is based on the premise that an entrepreneur reveals some characteristics or competencies that influence his or

her new venture, leading to success (Vu & Nwachukwu, 2021; Agustina, 2021). Zhao and Wibowo (2021) stated that in order to judge whether the business plan will be carried successfully by entrepreneurs, a deeper understanding of the entrepreneurs' personalities needs to be studied. Similarly, Bernandus et al (2020), who claimed that in order to develop more chances of entrepreneurial success, psychological characteristics among entrepreneurs are important to be recognised and sharpened.

Hence, understanding the psychological characteristics that are unique to entrepreneurs (vis-à-vis non-entrepreneurs) is a logical first step in studying entrepreneurship (Farradonna et al., 2021). In view of this, the main psychological characteristics associated with entrepreneurship shall be considered in this study and are adopted as independent variables because they are the most frequently counted as the entrepreneurial characteristics. For instance, Bygrave (1989) presented a model of psychological characteristics that includes the need for achievement, internal locus of control, tolerance for ambiguity and risk-taking propensity as vital components in analysing the entrepreneurial process. Similarly, Dinis, et al. (2013) have listed achievement, innovativeness, locus of control and self-confidence as entrepreneurial attitudes.

Hence, understanding the psychological characteristics that are unique to entrepreneurs (vis-à-vis non-entrepreneurs) is a logical first step in studying entrepreneurship. Since small scale business owner among women represent highly diversified group, it is reasonable to focus on psychological characteristics model. Psychological characteristics of business owners were not only studied with respect to the emergence of entrepreneurship but also the preferences that allowed them to sustain in their chosen field and to be successful. Hence, there is a solid reason to be concerned in psychological model since previous research have overlooked the significant advances that have been made in entrepreneurship research during the last 20 years (Mamun et al., 2018). The capabilities of the entrepreneurs to perform their role successfully provide the meaningful creation of the firm and this revealed the connection of specific entrepreneurial traits to the entrepreneur's ability to achieve certain organizational success (Beattie, 2016). Hence, many of the previous research were conducted to investigate the entrepreneur characteristics that led them to be successful (Kerr et al, 2017; Sajilan et al. 2015).

### ***Social Competence***

It has been empirically verified that social competence is a personality trait that positively affects entrepreneurial outcome variables such as firms' performance (Sallah & Caesar, 2021). Social competence is increasingly regarded as an important psychological characteristic for entrepreneurs (Dai et al. 2019) because it refers to the ability of the entrepreneur to interact with others effectively (Luna et al. 2020; Spence, et al. 1999). Furthermore, social competence is needed for individual entrepreneurs because they must have the ability to convince various stakeholders to fulfil the need for high-performing new ventures. Furthermore, a person who possesses social competence will be able to behave positively and effectively to achieve the desired objectives without harming others (Bessa, et al. 2019), especially for his/her business success (Nsereko, 2020).

Entrepreneurs with social competence have the ability to detect and understand buyer behaviour, work to create a pleasant situation when doing transactions and show amicable facial expressions. Entrepreneur with good social competence provides a positive aura to a person because the keen sense of personal attributes of this characteristic makes a person have the ability to invite, respond, adapt and have social communication (Markman et al., 2003).

Chasbiansari (2007) explained that social competence is a person's ability to negotiate and set up a network based on trust as communication provides comfort that makes close cooperation easier so the company's existence can be sustained. Those entrepreneurs who have good social competence are able to adjust themselves according to the demand of the environment. Social competence success is easier to achieve because it is the ability of a person to socialize and establish a relationship among community or groups that include colleagues, customers, suppliers, and other alliance agencies. Markman and Baron (2003) suggested four dimensions of social competence namely:

- 1) Social perception: accuracy in perceiving others (e.g., their traits, intentions, and motives);
- 2) Social adaptability: the ability to adapt to, or feel comfortable in a wide range of social situations;
- 3) Expressiveness: the ability to clearly express one's emotions and feelings to generate enthusiasm in others.
- 4) Impression management: a wide range of techniques for inducing positive reactions in others.

Therefore, based on the above discussion lead to the following hypothesis:

H0: There is no relationship between social competence and women entrepreneurial success

H1: There is relationship between social competence and women entrepreneurial success

## Methodology

### *Sample and Data Collection*

Self-administered survey was conducted with women entrepreneurs listed in *Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat*. The sample size of the study involved 500 respondents as indicates in Table 1. The participation was voluntary, and the data were processed anonymously and confidentially. The time horizon for data collection covers one year due to COVID-19 terms in Malaysia. Furthermore, the owners of this business have an active role for more than three years in managing micro enterprise and therefore considered as an eligible criteria used in this study. The sample selection for each state in Malaysia was derived from proportionate stratified random sampling approach based on the following formula:

Proportionate Stratified Random Sampling Formula:

$$nh = (N_h / N) * n$$

Whereby:

nh = Sample size for hth stratum

Nh = Population size for hth stratum

N = Size of the entire population

n = Size of the entire sample

**Table 1: Sample Size of the Study**

Numb	State	Population	Sample
1	Perlis	33	17
2	Kedah	31	16
3	Penang	33	17
4	Perak	45	23
5	Selangor	62	32
6	Wilayah Persekutuan, Kuala Lumpur	2	2
7	Melaka	17	17
8	Negeri Sembilan	491	252
9	Johor	50	26
10	Pahang	41	21
11	Kelantan	67	35
12	Terengganu	67	35
13	Sabah	7	7
	Total	946	500

Source: (*Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat, 2020*)

### **Research Instrument**

The instruments used have been adapted from Riggio (1986) as applied by Markman and Baron, (2003); Spence et al., (1999) and many more, with some modification by considers the culture and context of the study. Face validity was applied for ensure the validity of the modified instruments. The construct for social competence is divided into four dimensions, namely: social perception, social adaptability, expressiveness and impression management. While, for women entrepreneurial success there is one dimension involved which is business sustainability.

The scale of measurement is 5-point Likert-scale for all items to ensure the standardize response and avoid confusion among respondents. The Likert-scale is used to construed between how strongly disagree to strongly agree a respondent was, with the statement on the scale. The questions have been stated as sentences that have to be answered by respondents in terms of their agreement rate. There are 13 items used to measure social competence and six items for women entrepreneurial success. The set of questionnaire was setting in dual languages which are Malay and English. In order to ensure the consistency of the language, inter-translator checked was implemented by the expert.

### **Pilot Test Results**

The pilot test was conducted by using 100 respondents and acceptability of the instrument was assessed by the reliability of the items based on Cronbach's Alpha as indicates in Table 2. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2010) and Pallant (2007) indicated that the value of Cronbach's Alpha more than 0.6 considered as acceptable.

**Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha**

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
Social Competence	0.941	13
Women Entrepreneur Success	0.894	6

### Analysis of Results

In general, data were analysed using SPSS Version 23. The descriptive statistics were used to analyse the background of the respondents. Linear regression analysis was conducted as the main statistical procedure for examining the relationship between social competence and women entrepreneurial success.

Based on the descriptive statistic conducted as indicates in Table 3, the result found that the majority of respondents' age are between 36 until 40 years (45.6%), received education at Certificate/Diploma/STPM level (43.9%), running their business around 9-11 years (35.6%) and conducting two types of business (55.4%).

**Table 3: Result of Descriptive Statistic**

Age:		Valid
		percentage:
Valid	less than 30 years	
	30-35 years	7.6
	36-40 years	16.1
	41-45 years	45.6
	Above 45 years	24.4
		6.3
Educational level:		Valid
		percentage:
Valid	Doctoral	
	Master's	1.0
	Bachelor	12.0
	Certificate/Diploma/STPM	31.0
	SPM	43.9
	PMR/SRP	11.2
	Others	0.2
		0.7
Length of business:		Valid
		percentage:
Valid	Less than 2 years	
	3-5 years	0
	6-8 years	11.7
	9-11 years	20.7
	12-14 years	35.6
	15 years and above	22.7
		9.3

Number of business project conducted: Valid	Valid percentage:
1 business	21.5
2 business	55.4
3 business	19.3
4 business	3.9

Table 4 indicates the result of linear regression analysis. The analysis found that there is significant positive relationship between social competence and women entrepreneurial success at the significance level of 0.05 ( $p = 0.025$ , sig.  $p < 0.05$ ) which indicates that the higher the social competence trait leads to the higher women entrepreneurial success. The R square value between the variables is 0.34, which means that 34% ( $r = 0.583$ ) variation in dependent variable (women entrepreneurial success) is explained by the changes of the independent variable (social competence). Thus, this study rejected the null hypothesis and accepted the alternative hypothesis. Therefore, the equation can be presented as following:

$$Y = 2.26 + 0.13 (SC)$$

**Table 4: Result of Linear Regression between Social Competence and Women Entrepreneurial Success**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	Sig.	R	R Square
		B	Std. Error	Beta					
1	(Constant)	2.256	.143			15.797	.000		
	Social Competence (SC)	.100	.044	.132		2.253	.025	.583	.34

a. Dependent Variable: Women entrepreneurial success

### Discussion and Suggestion

COVID-19 pandemic triggered unexpected crises, which were beyond the imaginations of a public. It changed the order of routine life and has affected the businesses upside down. In this challenging condition, the survival of the small business was at high risk specifically women entrepreneurs. Therefore, psychological characteristics model is seen as one of the approaches to remain sustain during business crisis since it has been identified as the grass root of the business performance. Considering the model has not been renewed for quite some time, hence, this study was focus on the social competence as new variable in the model for the micro enterprise sustainability among women entrepreneurs.

The finding showed that social competence significantly influences women entrepreneurial success. Thus, this finding demonstrated that these women entrepreneurs have the ability to interact with others effectively which allow them to better leverage network ties and thus operate their business successfully. This finding in accordance with previous studies such as Sallah and Caesar (2021), Nsereko (2020) and Vázquez-Parra et al., (2021). The finding

reported by Garcia-Gonzalez and Aragon (2020) also pointed out that women entrepreneur with social competence characteristic had the ability to influence others within the business environment is positively associated with business performance. Similarly, Vázquez-Parra et al., (2021) also demonstrated that women entrepreneur who choose to embark in entrepreneurship has the ability to create good relationship with stakeholder, build high levels of trust and friendship. This finding offers evidence that women in low income household engaged in entrepreneurship has the capability to induce positive reactions with others, able to adapt in wide range of social situations and establish a relationship among community that include colleagues, customers, suppliers, and other agencies. These outcomes provide important insight for the entrepreneurship stream since research in this context has become increasingly necessary due to the limited studies conducted especially among women entrepreneur in micro enterprise. In addition, the finding may assist *Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat* specifically in designing and implementing an entrepreneurship development programme, especially for women to reduce the consequences of business crises among women entrepreneurs operating micro-businesses in Malaysia.

This study has several limitations. First, this study was performed among women entrepreneur listed in *Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat* in Malaysia only. Therefore, to enrich analyses of social competence and women entrepreneurship, it is recommended for the future research to explore social competence and entrepreneurship relationship among women in diverse sector of economies in different countries other than Malaysia because different population may yield different result from those reported in this study. Second, this study was conducted in limited time frame. Future research may examine the longitudinal effect especially COVID-19 pandemic on the business sustainability. Finally, future research may explore different dimension of social competence instead of four dimensions used in the study.

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