

Regular article

The Resilience of MSMEs During COVID-19 Pandemic: An Analysis Using Philip Kotler's Approach

Ketahanan UMKM Selama Pandemi COVID-19: Analisis Menggunakan Pendekatan Philip Kotler

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the business continuity of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), specifically within the food sector. The research adopts a case study approach, analyzing how Bittersweet strategically used advertising during the crisis. The findings highlight the crucial role of advertising techniques in influencing consumer behavior, showing how effective promotional strategies can lead to sustained business growth during difficult times. By aligning promotional activities with changing consumer needs, Bittersweet strengthened its marketing efforts, enhancing customer loyalty and brand visibility. It suggests that MSMEs should focus on leveraging digital platforms to reach broader audiences and enhance customer engagement, especially during uncertain times. The success of Bittersweet demonstrates the potential for MSMEs to not only survive but thrive through strategic marketing adaptation, ensuring long-term resilience in the face of future challenges.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi dampak pandemi Covid-19 terhadap kelangsungan bisnis usaha mikro, kecil, dan menengah (UMKM), khususnya di sektor makanan. Penelitian ini mengadopsi pendekatan studi kasus, menganalisis bagaimana Bittersweet secara strategis menggunakan iklan selama krisis. Temuan ini menyoroti peran penting teknik periklanan dalam mempengaruhi perilaku konsumen, menunjukkan bagaimana strategi promosi yang efektif dapat menghasilkan pertumbuhan bisnis yang berkelanjutan selama masa-masa sulit. Dengan menyelaraskan kegiatan promosi dengan perubahan kebutuhan konsumen, Bittersweet memperkuat upaya pemasarannya, meningkatkan loyalitas pelanggan dan visibilitas merek. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa UMKM harus fokus dalam memanfaatkan platform digital untuk menjangkau audiens yang lebih luas dan meningkatkan keterlibatan pelanggan, terutama di masa-masa yang tidak menentu. Keberhasilan Bittersweet menunjukkan potensi UMKM untuk tidak hanya bertahan, tetapi juga berkembang melalui adaptasi pemasaran strategis, memastikan ketahanan jangka panjang dalam menghadapi tantangan di masa depan.

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Introduction

On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) stated that COVID-19 is a worldwide public health emergency of concern worldwide (Sonobe et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic was first reported in Indonesia on March 2, 2020, when two individuals infected by a Japanese national were confirmed (Rosita, 2020). A pandemic is a disease that simultaneously affects large numbers of individuals in different nations. The global distribution of the coronavirus has expanded dramatically and is sustainable (Mujianto et al., 2022). The pandemic has expanded to 34 provinces as of April 9, 2020, with East Java, DKI Jakarta, and South Sulawesi being the most vulnerable (Rosita, 2020). Covid-19 is a pandemic that has led to a global health crisis. This pandemic has not only affected the health sector but also the world economy. The Coronavirus disease-19 is extremely lethal because it rapidly spreads from individual to individual and

causes death. This has necessitated the implementation of control mechanisms, such as contact monitoring, isolation, quarantine, social distance, limiting community mobility, working from home, and extensive social restrictions in numerous nations. Social distance is one of the World Health Organization (WHO)-recommended methods to halt the transmission of this virus, and it has been implemented in various countries (Lutfi et al., 2020).

The adoption of the policy of social distancing (PSBB) has an impact on commercial activity, leading to economic disparity. This PSBB policy limited the mobility of the citizens of Jakarta to various locations, including restaurants, cafes, shopping centers, amusement parks, museums, libraries, movie theaters, workplaces, Grocery and Pharmacy, and transit stations. Even if the PSBB was loosened in June, people's mobility has not yet returned to what it was before the COVID-19 outbreak.

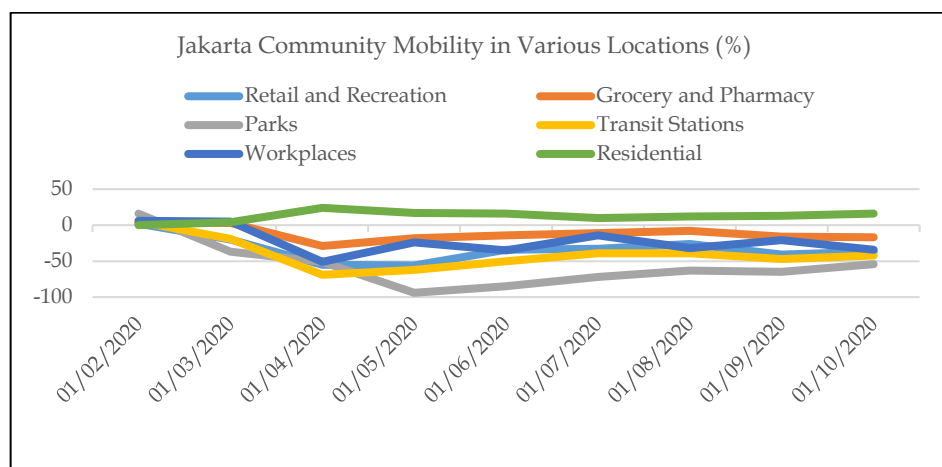


Figure 1. Jakarta Community Mobility

Source: Google Mobility Report

Previous research found that social distancing regulations hurt the economic sector, particularly micro, small, and medium-sized enterprise (MSMEs) businesses, which were marked by the emergence of operational problems, including service disruptions, supply chain disruptions, difficulties in forecasting future business directions, and other issues. Financial difficulties, including cash flow challenges, recourse to stimulus packages, and the risk of bankruptcy. Numerous MSMEs have laid off workers and even temporally shut down (Che Omar et al., 2020; Wijaya, 2020). Lutfi et al (2020) analyzing the impact of social distancing policies and regional restrictions revealed that many businesses in the MSME sector were negatively impacted such as a decrease in supply chains (47.83%), and demand (44.02%), resulting in a 38.04 percent decline in sales and a 41.85 percent decline in profits.

The most affected MSME sector is food and beverage entrepreneurs, there was a 1.77 percent reduction in small food and beverage businesses and a 0.07 percent decline in medium food and beverage businesses. According to the Ministry of Cooperatives and Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises, cooperatives engaged in services and production were also the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. MSME entrepreneurs experience a reduction in revenues, a shortage of financing, and distribution difficulties. At least 39.9 percent of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) agreed to reduce their stock of commodities under large-scale social restrictions (PSBB) caused by COVID-19. As a result of the closure of physical businesses, 16.1% of MSMEs are forced to downsize their workforce. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the restaurant industry. According to Kadin data from May 19, 2020, the industry recorded 430,000 unemployed individuals due to the challenges

faced by restaurant businesses. Despite increased mobility over time, dining in restaurants or shopping in malls has not become a primary focus for consumers. These behavioral shifts contributed to the failure of many restaurant businesses (Citradi, 2020).

This is because the COVID-19 pandemic has not only affected the welfare of MSMEs as producers but also significantly changed consumer behavior. This change is evident in purchasing patterns, where consumers prioritize utilitarian shopping for essential products such as food, cleaning tools, and health supplies, triggered by anxiety and fear of COVID-19. In contrast, purchases of non-essential products (hedonic shopping) are more influenced by depression, with consumers tending to seek emotional escape through the purchase of items that provide entertainment or pleasure (Di Crosta et al., 2021). Consumers, particularly those in the lower middle class, tend to resist spending and save more, focusing on spending their money on basic products despite the disbursement of government social aid, whilst upper-class consumers choose to stay inside (Rosita, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant changes in consumer behavior, which ultimately led to the failure of many restaurant businesses (Citradi, 2020). However, amidst the widespread financial struggles and negative impacts faced by companies in the food and beverage industry, some businesses in the same sector experienced a contrasting outcome. Remarkably, during the pandemic, certain MSMEs not only avoided employee layoffs but also managed to achieve substantial profits. This study seeks to explore the factors driving the growth in income and sales of one such business during the COVID-19 pandemic, shedding light on the strategies and circumstances that contributed to its success in an otherwise challenging period.

This study is both relevant and valuable as it explores the unique factors that contributed to the remarkable success of a business in the food and beverage sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. What makes this research particularly interesting is its focus on Bittersweet by Najla. This study complements existing literature that primarily focuses on how businesses survived during the COVID-19 pandemic. By contrast, this research goes further by examining how Bittersweet by Najla not only adapted and thrived during the pandemic but also continued to grow and sustain its success in the post-pandemic period. This perspective fills a significant gap by highlighting the strategies and factors that enabled the business to achieve sustained growth beyond the crisis, offering valuable insights into long-term resilience and adaptability in the food and beverage industry.

Theoretical Framework

Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs) are firms with a business capital of less than 10 billion Rupiah and an annual operating revenue of less than 50 billion Rupiah. The MSME sector encompasses a wide variety of businesses, including shops, home-based enterprises, street sellers, and supermarkets. Also included in the MSME category are restaurants, cafes, pharmacies, beauty clinics, hotels, inns, car washes, and other enterprises with capital and income values not exceeding the mentioned figures (Anastasya, 2022).

To maintain the continuity of business operations during increasingly fierce competition, as well as the crisis that hit, marketing has become one of the main pillars, especially in modern business strategy, helping companies understand consumer needs, create value, and build sustainable relationships with the market. In the development of marketing theory, many figures and experts have made significant contributions, but Philip Kotler is recognized as one of the most influential figures in the discipline. As the “Father of Modern Marketing,” Kotler has developed frameworks and concepts that are not only academically relevant but also widely applied in business practice (Tarnanidis & Gkiouzepas, 2024). In his monumental book *Marketing Management*, Kotler offers a systematic view of marketing that spans analysis, strategy, and implementation. Concepts such as marketing mix, market segmentation, and customer orientation are the cornerstones of modern marketing thinking.

The Kotler Model focuses on how companies can create, deliver, and maintain value to customers by utilizing the marketing mix which includes the 4Ps: Product, Price, Place, and Promotion. In addition, Kotler also emphasizes the importance of understanding consumer behavior, market segmentation, and innovation in the face of changing market dynamics. In a strategic context, the Kotler Model highlights the need for companies to be adaptive, especially in the face of challenges such as economic crises or pandemics. Kotler-based marketing strategies prioritize customer orientation, product innovation, and digital approaches in communication and distribution. This has been the key to success for many companies in maintaining their competitiveness (Bourassa et al., 2007).

Kotler argues that advertisements are one of the primary instruments used by businesses to communicate persuasively with target purchasers and the general public. Advertising is done to raise a company's sales and/or profits above and beyond what it would otherwise receive. When making advertising decisions,

marketing managers should consider the following: How much should be allocated for advertising? Which messages should be utilized? What media should be utilized? How should advertising be scheduled in a given year? What is the best way to measure the effectiveness of advertising? A common approach for estimating the advertising budget is based on the percentage of current or anticipated sales or the sales price method (Leonid Julivan, 2004).

Advertising is said to be a variable resulting from the convergence of interests in the fields of communication and marketing (Nichifor, 2014). With references to academic and practical origins, advertising is studied as a medium of communication that needs to be carried out by those involved in contemporary economic activities so that it can be said to be a solution to communication difficulties that occur in various organizations, such as the media. Advertising and communication are important elements of the economic and social structure. In this all-digital era, advertising is a crucial activity for a business or company and has developed sophisticatedly because it is integrated with technological advances. Its purpose is to convey messages to specific audiences that have given advertising a significant position in the marketing activities of most businesses, as well as to promote and sell their products and services to target markets of businesses of all sizes, from multinational corporations to small businesses. In a functioning market economy, consumers use advertising as a consideration before making a purchase. Analysis to achieve effective advertising can be achieved by taking two visions: descriptive, which defines the problem and then relates it to the level of need; then the normative level, which adjusts the conditions, an advertisement must meet market needs to achieve marketing goals.

Current competitiveness among MSMEs is also affected by technical advancements. The existence of information technology (IT) modifies business practices by presenting new opportunities and obstacles for the growth of MSMEs. The function of the information technology in question is the Internet, which is exploited as a promotional medium by MSME actors via free social media platforms. The advances in electronic media influence the digital advertising content received by consumers, hence increasing customers' expectations for digital advertising. A consumer's preference is their inclination to notice an advertisement. Many aspects of advertising are examined by consumers, including the provision of helpful information. Consumers will see numerous benefits from digital advertising, like information about specification products and services that is more engaging and easier to obtain. However, consumers

evaluate the various sorts of online advertising differently. In general, advertising is the presentation of an idea or message to consumers in a particular medium (Ekaputri et al., 2021; Rambe & Jafeta, 2017).

Internet consumers have a well-known need for social media. The purpose of social media is to facilitate varied contacts, cooperation, and content. An appropriate social media will generate revenue, and brand recognition, create ties with other partners, increase traffic, acquire customers, and obtain new perspectives on the market (Stelzner, 2020). The persuasiveness of the message has a beneficial effect on the value of the goods delivered. Examining the philosophy of advertising, it appears that a study of customer preferences is necessary as the foundation for receiving messages that consumers will accept (Alamsyah et al., 2021).

Several studies asserted how businesses can survive during the COVID-19 pandemic by using various strategies. Research by (Odhuno et al., 2022) highlights how businesses in Papua New Guinea have survived the COVID-19 pandemic by adopting innovative marketing and promotional strategies. The study shows that the most vulnerable small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) are turning to digital tools such as social media and online platforms to market their products, change payment methods, and adjust delivery processes. Research by (Belitski et al., 2022) shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has not only created challenges for small and medium-sized businesses but also changed people's behavior and the way businesses operate.

The pandemic is driving the accelerated adoption of digital technologies and the transformation of business models to survive in the market. Consumers started to rely more on online platforms for their needs, which changed the pattern of interaction between customers and businesses. Small businesses that can integrate digital capabilities such as digital marketing, e-commerce, and cashless payments have shown greater resilience to disruptions caused by the pandemic. These changes are in line with the shift in consumer preferences towards more flexible, fast, and digitally-driven services. Bittersweet by Najla, a well-known dessert box brand in Indonesia, is a clear example of a marketing strategy implementation that has adopted the Kotler Model well. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when many businesses had to shut down operations, Bittersweet by Najla managed to not only survive but also reap huge profits. The key to their success is the implementation of innovative and adaptive strategies, following market dynamics.

Methodology

Investing in all types of assets is becoming an increasingly popular trend, attracting people from all walks of life, regardless of career, economic status, education, or family history. When a person has more money than he needs for current consumption, he acts like a potential capitalist. Businesses that have made substantial financial gains may desire to spend their profits on expanding their existing business or starting a new one. An investment can be defined as a sacrifice of present cash or other resources in exchange for future benefits, or it can be defined as the net addition to a country's physical stock of capital. In the current monetary market condition, several routes of finance are available. The two most important factors of any investment are time and risk. However, during the time of investment, their emotional inclinations, deep-seated thought patterns, psychological biases, and other factors may influence their investment behavior. The current study focuses on the investment behavior of all teaching professionals who live in the Guntur and Krishna districts. The study focused on understanding individuals' preferences for investment avenues, the variables influencing their investment decisions, and their level of investment awareness.

Results

Bittersweet's Business Adaptation Strategies Amid the Crisis

In 2017, Najla Farid Bisyr founded a business that focuses on a cake product called a dessert box named Bittersweet. The idea was inspired by the enjoyment of purchasing café cuisine from various malls. As baking is also one of her hobbies, she concluded that it would be preferable to make the cake herself. secondly, the concern is that cafe cake items are frequently perishable. She considered this as both a challenge and an opportunity to establish a culinary business by preparing sample cakes and enlisting her family as taste testers; she received a great reaction and support to her desires. The first thing she did was sell a snapshot of a dessert she had cooked called Cinnamon Roll on the social networking platform 'Path' to promote her business ideas and products. She received numerous favorable and passionate comments, which prompted her to develop a Pre-Order (PO) mechanism for individuals interested in purchasing the dessert. Her dessert business is gaining popularity among a growing number of individuals daily.

While many businesses based on cafes or restaurants closed during the pandemic due to financial losses, as a result of a decrease in product selling power caused by the global lockdown,

bittersweet has experienced an increase in sales and a rise in profits, allowing them to open seven new offline outlets in various regions. During the pandemic, online sales reportedly increased, which contributed to the rise in online sales. Bittersweet did not lay off any employees but instead hired additional personnel for outlet operations (Catriona, 2021).

Bittersweet is believed to have implemented the 4Ps strategy in operating its business: Product, Place, Price, and Promotion, with a focus on promotion or marketing.

1. Product

The main product marketed by Bittersweet is desserts or sweets such as cakes. the uniqueness and innovation presented by this trademark is easily recognized because it attracts the attention of consumers. Apart from its uniqueness, the taste quality of Bittersweet products with many dessert variants is relatively popular with many consumers. The various choices of flavors that bittersweet create can meet the expectations of their consumers' tastes. Bittersweet also presents a food menu other than dessert to meet the desires of consumers who are not in favor of desserts, such as coffee, pasta, and processed chicken.

2. Place

This business, which began as a home-based enterprise, has subsequently expanded to more than 40 cities, with many locations in the cities. Moreover, consumers are also greatly facilitated by digital platforms such as e-commerce, ShopeeFood, TikTokShop, and delivery services like Go-Food and GrabFood, which allow them to make purchases more conveniently and efficiently

3. Price

In terms of price, Bittersweet charges a box of desserts ranging from IDR 50,000 to IDR 75,000, compare with the good taste and uniqueness of the product, this price is relatively friendly to enjoy a dessert box with quite large portions and favorable taste.

4. Promotion

In terms of promotion, bittersweet utilizes social media to advertise its products, bittersweet often presents interesting content by interacting with followers on social media, even sharing behind-the-scenes moments of employees when dessert boxes are produced to create closeness with customers. When interviewed, Najla the owner of Bittersweet said that the strategy she had adopted and considered effective and had succeeded in increasing sales during the Covid-19 pandemic was by advertising. During the pandemic, bittersweet marketing and sales strategies included advertising on social media by collaborating with celebrities and artists, as well as integrating

other e-commerce sites to promote food delivery services. the impact of advertising through the program which then has a very significant effect on the sustainability of Bittersweet's business. This shows that in the COVID-19 atmosphere, MSMEs that are already connected to the digital ecosystem and take advantage of existing marketplaces in Indonesia can survive business failures. On the other hand, Bittersweet is considered capable of recognizing the market and adapting its business with various innovations, such as creating attractive new products, both in terms of design and with new flavors packaged in advertisements and packaging that can attract customers, especially teenagers, to buy the product.

Comparison with Similar Businesses in the Industry

To assess the success of Bittersweet in maintaining and generating significant profits, it is important to examine its performance before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Since its launch in 2017, several similar food and cake businesses have emerged, particularly those owned by celebrities or social media influencers. For instance, Ayu Ting Ting's cake business, "Kuenya Ayu Ting Ting," offers affordable prices with attractive designs aimed at appealing to young consumers. Other examples include Nia Ramadhani's food business and Shireen Sungkar's cake business. However, several of these businesses struggled even before the pandemic, with some failing to survive. After the pandemic, many experienced financial difficulties and a decline in sales, despite efforts to adapt to the changing environment.

In an interview, Bittersweet representatives emphasized the important role that digital platform played in promoting their products, especially during the pandemic. They highlighted several benefits of business digitization, starting with the reduction of costs. Online shopping eliminates expenses such as transportation, parking, and lodging. It also saves time, as customers can shop while doing other tasks at home, work, or elsewhere, making the process more efficient and less exhausting. Furthermore, customers no longer need to visit multiple stores, reducing both time and energy spent on shopping.

Another advantage of digital platforms is competitive pricing. Unlike traditional shopping, where consumers have to physically visit different stores to compare prices, online shopping allows them to easily switch between stores with a click. This makes it easier to find the best deals, and online shopping's convenience and price comparison capabilities make it an appealing option for many customers. Additionally, online shopping helps prevent overspending, a common issue in physical stores where impulse purchases are tempting. Online shopping focuses the customer's

attention on specific products, reducing the likelihood of purchasing unnecessary items. Moreover, digital platforms often offer attractive discounts, vouchers, and rewards for customers, which are available at any time, unlike traditional stores that limit discounts to members or specific hours.

Strategies for Maintaining Business Sustainability Post-COVID-19

Bittersweet successfully adapted to changes in consumer behavior during the pandemic, as outlined by Kotler, such as the shift toward online shopping and the growing demand for food products that could be easily enjoyed at home. The company quickly embraced technology, enhanced its digital presence, and developed a brand narrative that resonated with the situation. After the pandemic, Bittersweet continued to thrive by staying innovative and strengthening its connections with customers. This reflects the importance of having a marketing strategy based on a deep understanding of the market and the ability to adapt, as emphasized in the Kotler Model. Such strategies are crucial for business success, even during global crises.

The company's success during and after the pandemic was driven not only by its adaptability but also by its ability to seize new opportunities. Bittersweet expanded its reach by building a broad reseller network and opening new branches in strategic locations. Additionally, it kept pace with emerging trends, particularly on social media, responding quickly with new product innovations tailored to young people's preferences. Moreover, Bittersweet's ability to maintain a strong visual identity—reflected in its pink-themed cafes designed to resemble a palace—created an engaging experience for visitors. This appealed especially to younger audiences, motivating them to visit, take photos, and share their experiences on social media. Despite the premium pricing, Bittersweet succeeded in maintaining loyalty and attracting new customers, turning each visit into a memorable social experience. Beyond these efforts, Bittersweet's ongoing success can also be attributed to its commitment to quality. The company maintains rigorous quality control procedures and regularly runs giveaway programs to engage customers and boost brand awareness. These strategies not only foster customer loyalty but also attract a new generation of consumers looking for unique experiences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Bittersweet's strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the importance of adopting the 4P framework, with a particular emphasis on promotion. By integrating their promotional activities with digital platforms,

Bittersweet successfully adapted to changing consumer behaviors and market dynamics. Their ability to leverage digital marketing tools allowed them to maintain strong customer engagement, broaden their reach, and stay relevant in a competitive market. This approach not only enabled them to survive during the pandemic but also positioned them for long-term growth as consumer preferences shifted toward digital and online experiences. The company's focus on promoting through social media, e-commerce, and influencer partnerships helped reinforce its brand presence and attract a younger, tech-savvy audience. For MSMEs, a tiered approach based on business size and resources can enhance their resilience post-pandemic. Micro enterprises should start by establishing a basic digital presence and collaborating with local businesses to build customer loyalty. Small enterprises can invest further in e-commerce platforms, strengthen brand identity, and improve efficiency through digital tools. Medium enterprises, with more resources, should embrace comprehensive digital transformation and leverage data analytics for targeted marketing. Additionally, expanding into new markets and diversifying products can help mitigate risks and create new growth opportunities. These strategies should be customized to fit each business's capabilities and ensure sustainable growth. While the study offers valuable insights into the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies for MSMEs, several limitations must be considered. First, the analysis is limited to a single case study of Bittersweet, which may not fully represent the broader landscape of MSMEs across different sectors. The reliance on self-reported data from interviews may also introduce bias, as responses could reflect only the company's perspective. Future research could explore a larger sample of MSMEs across various industries and incorporate external variables to gain a more holistic understanding of effective strategies for business resilience.

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