

Microenterprises Shutdown Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic: A Focus on Determinants and Exit Strategies

**Jumalyn C. Dagpin¹, Aira R. Escaño²,
Xavier Lawrence D. Mendoza³, Jennifer C. Vertuso⁴**
Cavite State University - CCAT Campus, Rosario, Cavite

*jumalyn.dagpin@cvsu.edu.ph¹, aira.escañocvsu.edu.ph²,
xavierlawrence.mendoza@cvsu.edu.ph³,
jennifer.vertuso@cvsu.edu.ph⁴*

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Abstract: The world economy was severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Maintaining operations during a crisis was extremely difficult for the enterprises. Entrepreneurs who do not have crisis management strategies in place risk having their businesses shutdown unexpectedly. Hence, the researchers aimed to understand and analyze the determinants of microenterprises' shutdown and exit strategies during the pandemic. This study utilized a descriptive research design, and registered microenterprises were purposively selected in the areas of Cavite. The findings of the study revealed that the majority of the microenterprises were sole proprietors that had been in operation for 2 to 5 years and had a capitalization of less than Php 500,000.00. Consequently, the respondents' most common problems in managing the enterprise were limitations on direct marketing which also involved bill payments, adoption of an online platform, and work-from-home setup. Most of the determinants of problems that led to business failure during the pandemic were obstacles in the realignment of their respective goals owing to the pandemic, their ability to pay operational expenses, difficulties in product innovation, and their failure to react to the changes in the business environment. Exit strategies used by microenterprises included declaring bankruptcy, refinancing, and selling the business to family or friends. Finally, the researchers recommended crisis-sensitive interventions among the microentrepreneurs which involve government provisions of financial safety nets, retooling, and training of pandemic-sensitive enterprise strategies for microentrepreneurs.

Keywords – Cavite, COVID-19 pandemic, descriptive research, exit strategies, microenterprises

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INTRODUCTION

Unexpected operational interruption of small businesses is one of the results of having a lack of effective crisis management strategies [1]. The COVID-19 pandemic made enterprises vulnerable to crisis. This created an impact not only on Filipinos' lives but also on the business industry. The local government units in the Philippines responded immediately before the pandemic's emergence. Quarantine measures were implemented to ensure the safety of the community as well as economic results due to the crisis that led to business losses and shutdowns [2].

According to the study conducted by the Asian Development Bank [3] in the National Capital Region, it revealed that two-thirds of businesses closed temporarily, with most others (29%) reducing operations. While most (78%) remaining operated at half capacity or less, only 4% of the enterprises maintained full operation. Moreover, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [4] explained that the current global environment may result in a considerable drop in the amount of money accessible to developing countries. This raises the possibility of severe development setbacks, making it more vulnerable to future pandemics, climate change, and other global public health issues. As stated by Fairlie [5] due to the global pandemic, most enterprises closed because of policy mandates or decreased demand shifts, and many of these enterprises are closed permanently due to the sustainability of their expenses and are unable to avoid the shutdown.

A crisis is an unpredictable event that affects the revenue, human life, safety, the environment, property, and reputation of an organization that would require extraordinary management skills [6]. Moreover, a crisis is defined as a situation faced by an individual, group, or organization that they are unable to cope with through the use of normal routine procedures. The COVID-19 crisis is considered a sudden threat that affects not only an entire organization but also the whole sector of the economy. Recovery is crucial amidst the outbreak of the pandemic to survive in the new normal. There has been researched on business continuity strategies among large enterprises in industrial nations. However, there has been little research on microenterprises, particularly in developing nations. There is still a scarcity of research on the impact of emerging crises, such as a pandemic breakout, on microenterprises. It is believed that microenterprises are more vulnerable to constraints than bigger firms, particularly during a crisis [7].

Thus, this study focused on identifying and understanding the determinants of microenterprises shutdown and exit strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, this study served as a guide for

microenterprises' business survival strategies to keep their operations running despite the new normal. The relevant information for microentrepreneurs would assist them in managing their businesses in an outbreak of the crisis. Furthermore, this can serve as a baseline for government agencies to intervene in a more pandemic-sensitive manner.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study generally aimed to understand and analyze the determinants of microenterprises shutdown and exit strategies applied during the covid-19 pandemic.

More specifically, this aimed to determine the profile of the business in terms of type of ownership; length of business operation; and average initial capital; identify the problems encountered in managing the enterprise during the pandemic in terms of marketing aspect; financial aspect; operational aspect; and staffing and leadership. Consequently, identify the determinants of the problems encountered by the respondents that lead to business failure during pandemic in terms of marketing aspect; financial aspect; operational aspect; and staffing and leadership. Considerably, identify the exit strategies employed by the respondents. Lastly, proposed possible intervention which can help business continuity during the crisis.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study used a descriptive research design to understand the determinants and exit strategies of microenterprises. The business profile and problems encountered in managing the microenterprises were also understood and analyzed through a descriptive research approach.

Sampling Design

The researchers utilized 30 microenterprises that were duly registered with the Department of Trade and Industry which the operations were seized during the pandemic. The samples were purposively selected in the municipalities of Kawit, Tanza, and Rosario, Cavite. The samples were selected purposively based on the available enterprises provided by the municipalities.

Research Instrument

A self-constructed survey questionnaire was administered through the use of the Google Form application due to the limitations and restrictions brought by the pandemic. The validity, reliability, and usability of the research instrument were examined and established by a pool of academicians and experts in the business. A Cronbach alpha is calculated at 0.62.

Data Gathering Procedure

The primary data was collected, analyzed, and interpreted through business owners' responses organized using questionnaires and software. The researchers compiled secondary evidence from online published scholarly articles, journals, and academic references relevant to the strategies of micro-enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Statistical Treatment

The researchers utilized statistical techniques and formulas to analyzed the reasons, causes, and exit strategies of micro-enterprises in order to come up with conclusions. Descriptive statistics were used in this study; frequency count, and percentage distribution.

Ethical Consideration

During the course of the study, the researchers adhered to ethical research practices. Before distributing the survey questionnaires, the proponents obtained permission from the respondents to participate in the study and kept all participant confidentiality private. Anonymity was also maintained to ensure that no physical, emotional, or social harm was done.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. *Type of business ownership*

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Sole Proprietorship	23	76.67
Partnership	7	23.33
Total	30	100.00

Table 1 shows the type of business ownership of the respondents. This reveals that 23 or 76.67% of microenterprises are sole proprietorship, while seven or 23.33% of the participants are partnerships. The majority of the micro-enterprises were sole proprietorship.

Table 2. *Length of business operation*

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Below 1 year	4	13.33
2 to 5 years	21	70.00
6 to 9 years	3	10.00
10 years and above	2	6.67
Total	30	100.00

Table 2 presents the length of the business operation of the respondents. It shows that there are 21 or 70.00% of the microenterprises have been operating for two to five years, while two or 6.67% are 10 years above. This reveals that the majority of the respondents have been operating for two to five years.

Table 3. *Average initial capital*

Category	f	%
Below Php 500,000	28	93.33
Php 500,001 to 1,000,000	1	3.33
Php 2,500,001 to 3,000,000	1	3.33
Total	30	100.00

Table 3 presents the average initial capital of the micro-enterprises. This table depicts that 28 of the respondents or 93.33% have initial capital of below Php 500,000, while one or 3.33% have Php 500,001 to 1,000,000 and Php 2,500,001 to 3,000,000 respectively. Most respondents have an average initial capital of below Php 500,000.

Table 4. *Problems encountered in terms of the marketing aspect*

Category	f	%
Improper management of customer relationship	2	3.64
Inefficient promotional activities or strategies	14	25.45
Limited direct marketing due to restrictions of government	24	43.64
Lack of marketing plan	8	14.55
Meeting customer satisfaction	1	1.82
Inadequate and irregular supply of raw materials	6	10.91
Total	55	100.00

Table 4 shows the problems encountered by the micro-enterprises in managing their enterprises during the pandemic in terms of the marketing aspects. This reveals that 24 or 43.64%, were limited direct marketing due to government restrictions, followed by inefficient promotional activities or strategies with 14 or 25.45%, while the third-highest responses are lack of marketing plan with 8 or 14.55%. Considerably, most of the problems encountered by the respondents with regards to the marketing aspect is the limitation on direct marketing brought by government restrictions. Due to Enhanced Community Quarantine measures, enterprises faced severe difficulties. It restricted the movement of workers and consumers as well as the business operational hours [3]. Although the microenterprises were limited to access to an assistance programs, still most MSMEs were found to be adaptable and innovative in their coping techniques, with the most popular being the use of online platforms and the customization or creation of new products [8].

Table 5. Problems encountered in terms of the financial aspect

Category	f	%
Large bills to pay	22	26.19
Owners' revenue decreases	14	16.67
Unforeseen business expenses	4	4.76
Problem in budgeting	13	15.48
Too much debt of the business	3	3.57
Finding funds to grow the business	13	15.48
Business expenses are greater than income	8	9.52
Mixing business and personal finances	7	8.33
Total	84	100.00

Table 5 presents the problems encountered by the business owners in managing the enterprise in terms of the financial aspects. The table depicts 22 or 26.19% of the responses were large bills to pay, followed by 14 or 16.67% which is owners' revenue decreases. The third highest is the problem in budgeting with 13 or 15.48% same with finding funds to grow the business. Most of the respondents' encountered problems were large bills to pay. According to the Asian Development Bank [3], during the outbreak, the number of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) fell by 0.4% in the Philippines. A prolonged pandemic made it difficult for MSMEs to raise funds from formal financial institutions and could contribute to more potential losses to the Philippine economy. Additionally, the majority of the MSMEs suffered financially because of reduced profitability and sales [9].

Table 6. Problems encountered in terms of the operational aspect

Category	f	%
Operating for a lesser time duration	12	18.75
Shortage in raw materials	3	4.69
Production disruption	5	7.81
Difficulties in accessing workplace, offices, factories, or warehouses.	15	23.44
Starting by operating the business from home and using the online platform.	16	25.00
Customer's cancellation of orders.	7	10.94
There were difficulties in communicating with the customer	5	7.81
Others	1	1.56
Total	64	100.00

Table 6 presented the problems encountered by the business owners in managing the enterprise in terms of operational aspects. This shows that 16 or 25.00% of respondents are starting in operating the business from home and using an online platform, secondly is difficulties in accessing workplace, offices, factories, or warehouses

with 15 or 23.44%, followed by operating for a lesser time duration with 12 or 18.75%. Most of the problems encountered by the respondents in terms of operational aspects are starting in operating the business from home and using an online platform. The study of Shinozaki and Rao [2] stated that some of the enterprises practice a contactless transaction and work from home to lessen the rapid increase of cases. Moreover, the outbreak of the pandemic resulted in the fear, panic and confusion of the community and the working time of the employees were also affected [10]. The global pandemic severely affected microenterprises. In order to survive, businesses need to remain open, but employees need to work from home, and others need to shut down to cut expenses. Although the government provides incentives and assistance funding, these funds may only be available for a short period [11].

Table 7. Problems encountered in terms of staffing and leadership

Category	f	%
Poor management skills and competencies	7	9.33
Move employees to work from home	18	24.00
Owner's lack of technology knowledge and used to face to face interaction.	15	20.00
Reduction of leisure/break time of employees.	4	5.33
Employees changes the number of caring duties.	1	1.33
Employees were faced with a dramatic increase in workload and job strain.	7	9.33
Employees experience mental health problems because of the crisis.	11	14.67
Employee's fear of losing a job	11	14.67
Others	1	1.33
Total	75	100.00

Table 7 shows the problems encountered by the business owners in managing the enterprise in terms of staffing and leadership. The table shows that 18 or 24.00% of the responses are the move of employees to work from home, followed by the owner's lack of technology knowledge and used to face to face interaction with 15 or 20.00%. The employees who experience mental health problems and fear of losing job has a frequency of 11 or 14.67% respectively. In addition, it can be observed that most of the employees have moved to work from home. Considerably, the business should have a new management strategy that can avoid business failure. Business owners may employ multiple synchronous strategies that can help businesses contentious to operate during the pandemic [7]. The study of Sardar, et al. [12], indicated that Information Communication Technology is a powerful tool in achieving

business survivability that affects the social capital building, bridging, and self-efficacy, both directly and indirectly. The entrepreneurial activity can be improved and entrepreneurs can minimize the implications of lockdowns with the help of ICT. Moreover, during a pandemic, microentrepreneurs must think outside the box to keep their businesses afloat. Superior human resources are required to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, namely individuals who are skilled in both hard and soft skills. Micro entrepreneurs must have certain qualities or skills, such as being able to recognize market possibilities, not becoming bored easily, working in a team, and being able to communicate verbally and write reports efficiently[13].

Table 8. *Determinants of the problems encountered by the respondents that lead to business failure in terms of the marketing aspect*

Category	f	%
Lack of business experience and knowledge	10	17.54
Not properly assessing the opportunity of the business.	11	19.30
Challenges in re-aligning the goals due to pandemic	26	45.61
Cannot maintain the competitiveness	10	17.54
Total	57	100.00

Table 8 shows the determinants of the problems encountered by business owners that led to business failure in terms of marketing aspects. 26 or 45.61% were the challenged in re-aligning the goals due to the pandemic, followed by 10 or 17.54% were lacked business experience or knowledge and could not maintain competitiveness. This further reveals that most of the cause of the problems encountered by microentrepreneurs in marketing is re-aligning the goals of the business during the pandemic. According to the adaptive approach, certain micro-enterprises may need to adapt in the case of a crisis, such as producing a product that is urgent to the market or shifting from traditional to online business. Furthermore, the assisted method argues that micro-entrepreneurs may rely on external help, such as from the government and other supply chain partners, in the event of a crisis. Focusing on customers, networking with other entrepreneurs, and digitizing the business are seen as appropriate and rational tactics for micro-entrepreneurs in this study to survive during the pandemic crisis, despite the fact that pandemic crisis has a severe impact on micro-enterprises [7].

Table 9. *Determinants of the problems encountered by the respondents that lead to business failure in terms of the financial aspect*

Category	f	%
Customer late payments	5	6.17
The inability of business owners to pay ongoing expenses	22	27.16
Customer delayed debt payment	6	7.41
Business owner’s higher personal spending	8	9.88
Business owner’s underpaying taxes	3	3.70
Not paying bills on time	11	13.58
Business owners failed to pay rent and utilities	19	23.46
Business owners failed to pay salaries	7	8.64
Total	81	100.00

Table 9 shows the determinants of the problems encountered by the micro-enterprises that led to business failure in terms of financial aspects. Most of the responses are the inability of business owners to pay ongoing expenses with 22 or 27.16%, followed by business owners failed to pay rent and utilities with 19 or 23.46%. The third highest response is not paying bills on time with 11 or 13.58%. It reveals that most of the causes of the problems encountered by the business owners were their inability to pay ongoing expenses that were considered as determinant encountered by the participants that led to their business failure. This affirms the study of Tajudin, et al. [14], restriction of cash flows and lack of customers and supplies were the challenges of microentrepreneurs during the implementation of quarantine measures. The majority of small and microenterprises were seriously affected because of insufficient cash reserves.

Table 10. *Determinants of the problems encountered by the respondents that lead to business failure in terms of the operational aspect*

Category	f	%
Delay in delivering the supply material	8	13.33
Declining customers demand	10	16.67
Difficulties in making a new and innovative product.	16	26.67
Obsolete (not updated) technology/- machines.	5	8.33
Distribution of products is hampered.	8	13.33
The company has temporarily closed its doors due to new protocols and guidelines.	13	21.67
Total	60	100.00

Table 10 showcases the determinants of the problems encountered by micro-enterprises that lead to business failure in terms of operational aspects. Most of the responses are the difficulties in making or developing

innovative products with 16 or 26.67%, followed by the company has temporarily closed its doors due to new protocols and guidelines with 13 or 21.67%. The third highest response are declining customer demand with 10 or 16.67%. It was discovered that the difficulties in creating innovative products cause the problem of the microenterprises' operations. In adjusting to new methods of doing business, it is critical to be proactive, innovative, and optimistic [14].

Table 11. *Determinants of the problems encountered by the respondents that lead to business failure in terms of staffing and leadership*

Category	f	%
Large reduction in employees	5	8.33
Business owners fail to pass information to their employees about policies and procedures.	5	8.33
Business owners lack vision and productivity	12	20.00
Used to bully and intimidate employees	2	3.33
Owners' inability to make decision	14	23.33
Unable to adapt and adjust in reaction to a wide range of changes occurring around	15	25.00
Poor listening skills and lack of understanding	2	3.33
Quick to blame instead of taking responsibility	4	6.67
Others	1	1.67
Total	60	100.00

Table 11 presents the determinants of the problems encountered by business owners that led to business failure in terms of staffing and leadership, 15 or 25% are unable to adapt and adjust in reaction to a wide range of changes occurring around them, followed by 14 or 23.33% are owners' inability to make a decision. The third highest response is business owners lack of vision and productivity with 12 or 20.00. It revealed that the cause of the problems encountered by the owners was their inability to adapt and adjust in reaction to a wide range of changes occurring around them. The pandemic reduces the possibility of the microenterprises' survivability, however by responding to market changes, micro-enterprises can still make a tremendous comeback. Micro-enterprises must consequently possess entrepreneurial leadership traits to be successful [15]. Tajudin, et. al [14], identified the coping strategies of microentrepreneurs despite the effect of the COVID-19. Among the mentioned strategies was the ability to control stress, develop a strong spiritual relationship with God, apply problem-solving thinking skills, utilize social capital (offline and online), and

optimize digital marketing.

Table 12. *Exit strategies employed by the respondents*

Category	f	%
Bankruptcy	20	51.28
Initial Public Offering (IPO)	3	7.69
Hiring management	2	5.13
Refinancing	6	15.38
Liquidation	1	2.56
Sell the business to family or friend	5	12.82
Ownership is passed to the successor	2	5.13
Total	39	100.00

Table 12 shows the exit strategies employed by the micro-enterprises. Majority of the exit strategies used by the respondents are the bankruptcy with 20 or 51.28%, followed by refinancing with 6 or 15.38%. The third highest response are sell the business to family or friend with 5 or 12.82%. This revealed that most of the respondents filed bankruptcy as a means of an exit strategy. This is common strategy to exit on particular industry or market considering the situation posed in the market as pandemic is prevailing.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The majority of respondents were sole proprietorships that had been in business for 2 to 5 years and had an initial capital of less than Php 500,000.00.

Most of the problems encountered by the respondents in managing the enterprises during the pandemic in terms of the marketing aspect of the enterprise were limited to direct marketing, inefficient promotional activities, and lack of a marketing plan. Considerably, in terms of financial aspects, owners' revenue decreased, problems in budgeting and sourcing funds to grow the business and large bills to pay were identified. While in terms of operational aspects, starting with operating the business from home and using an online platform, difficulties in accessing workplaces, offices, factories, or warehouses, as well as operating for a shorter period of time. problems encountered in terms of leadership and staffing were relocating employees to work from home, experiencing mental health problems because of the crisis, and fear of losing their job.

Most of the determinants of the problems encountered by the microenterprises were challenges in re-aligning the goals due to the pandemic, the inability of business owners to pay ongoing expenses, difficulties in making a new and innovative product, and being unable to adapt and adjust in reaction to a wide range of changes occurring around them.

The majority of the respondents employed bankruptcy, refinancing, and selling the business to family or friends as a means of an exit strategy.

Based on the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations were proposed: the microenterprises should have a detailed process of converting parts of their operations into a working setup that is flexible in nature. Considerably, microentrepreneurs must consider the reinvention and innovation of their respective businesses, which could adapt to the changes in the business environment brought by the prevailing crisis; training in financial literacy for microentrepreneurs will further help them to budget and properly utilize financial assets which could anticipate difficulties in sustaining the operational expenses of the business; microentrepreneurs should also consider adopting updated technologies, especially in dissemination and utilization of information necessary for business operation; government agencies should have a provision for financial safety nets that will safeguard enterprises from the crises-led repercussions towards these enterprises. Thereby reflecting a crisis-sensitive interventions.

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