



## Research Article

# Unpacking the Implication of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Small Businesses in Lebak Regency, Banten Province

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### ABSTRACT

In recent times, small businesses have been recognized as a significant component of national economies, as evidenced by their resilience during the monetary crisis faced by Indonesia in 1999. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a unique challenge due to the invisible nature of the virus, its social transmission, and the resultant threats to human safety. Small businesses have undergone several changes, including altered consumer behavior, production patterns, and product marketing, primarily due to their reliance on crowds and direct interactions between sellers and buyers. Consequently, many small businesses have either shut down or faced difficulties in maintaining their sustainability. To gain insights into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for small business actors, we conducted a qualitative phenomenological study in Lebak Regency, Banten Province. Our findings suggest that the informants viewed the pandemic as a crisis that tested their adaptive capacity. This capacity encompassed not only the ability to adjust to changing economic conditions but also a sense of gratitude for the outcomes of their business activities. The quality of these attributes together determined the sustainability of their business.

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## INTRODUCTION

Compared to other causes of economic crises, the COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique challenge due to the invisible nature of the virus and the potential threat it poses to human safety. Consequently, effective containment requires the implementation of stringent health protocols. In response, the government has instituted a range of policies to reduce the spread of the pandemic, including Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB) and changes to long-standing societal norms.

The government has implemented various policies in the economic sector to sustain Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) during the COVID-19 pandemic. These policies encompass direct assistance to MSMEs, credit restructuring, tax incentives, working capital loans, procurement of MSME products, implementation of health protocols in the business sphere, and digitization of MSMEs (Damayanti, 2021). The last two policies are aimed at reducing direct interactions among community members as these interactions pose a high risk of COVID-19 transmission and spread.

The circumstances and policies associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in the avoidance and restriction of activities requiring direct interaction and a reduction in community mobility. Among the sectors most severely impacted by these changes are Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), which are the engines of the economy. Many MSMEs have been forced to temporarily cease their operations due to reduced foot traffic in crowded locations such as traditional markets, schools, places of worship, modern markets, entertainment venues, restaurants, and public transportation terminals, which are the primary marketplaces for small businesses (Periyadi et al., 2022).

Small businesses, including roadside businesses, are widely acknowledged worldwide for their crucial role in reducing poverty levels (Aun and Salami, 2022). Thus, the Indonesian government must implement various policies (Susilawati et al., 2020) and provide different stimuli (Bahtiar and Saragih, 2020) to bolster the community's economy and ensure the survival of small businesses amidst the stringent health protocols. Failure to do so may lead to a decline in income, customers, or business partners for small businesses, thus complicating the distribution process and potentially triggering a national economic crisis. Consequently, the success of the government's policies is dependent on the support of the business community, and a joint effort between the government and community is necessary to safeguard the economy from the impact of COVID-19 (Hanoatubun, 2020).

The objective of this research is to analyze the implication of the COVID-19 pandemic for small business owners in Lebak Regency, Banten Province. The pandemic has led to a significant decrease in their income and necessitated various changes in small business operations, including alterations in production patterns, product marketing, and shifts in consumer behavior, all of which have adversely affected the sustainability of their businesses. Furthermore, the increasing number of COVID-19 cases in this district has resulted in the implementation of Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB) and its geographical location, which shares borders with COVID-19 red-zones such as the Tangerang, Bogor, and DKI Jakarta areas. Previous research conducted by Aryansah et al. (2020) indicates that MSME players have used various strategies to survive the COVID-19 pandemic, such as marketing through social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp), collaborating with online transportation service providers (Gofood and Grabfood), innovating culinary products, and building customer trust. However, the characteristics of small businesses may impede the implementation of these strategies by their owners.

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine the experiences of small business actors in Lebak Regency amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. While many studies have focused on analyzing the implication of the pandemic for small businesses using a quantitative approach, the current study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the situation through a qualitative lens. The results of this analysis offer insights into the practical application of small business empowerment strategies that can be utilized by local government and other related parties to support small businesses during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

## METHOD

Phenomenological analysis is a qualitative research approach that seeks to understand reality from the perspective of social actors who experience events in their lives. This approach aims to construct an understanding of subjective reality, which is a personal interpretation of experiences. Phenomenology is based on the assumption that humans actively interpret their experiences and ascribe meaning to them. Therefore, interpretation is an active process that creates meaning from human experiences. In essence, understanding is a creative act that gives meaning to human experiences (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008).

In this qualitative research, the phenomenological approach was utilized to explore the experiences of small business owners amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The data collection process involved various techniques such as in-depth interviews, observation, documentation studies, and audio-visual items (Creswell, 1998). The primary data was gathered through informal and interactive in-depth interviews, utilizing open-ended statements and questions (Moustakas, 1994), until saturation was reached. Secondary data was collected from various reliable sources. The study participants consisted of three small business owners who met specific criteria set according to the essential standards for phenomenological research informants by Moustakas (1994), which included being a small business owner for five years, having a capital of under 10 million, genuinely experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, being able to articulate their experiences/views related to the pandemic, and willing to be interviewed, recorded, and published. The validity of the data was ensured through source triangulation, which involved examining the evidence derived from various sources and using it to construct coherent themes (Creswell, 2013).

The present study employs a rigorous process of data analysis using a transcendental phenomenological approach following Husserl's systematic procedure (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004) and the interactive model of data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 2007). The analysis process involves several steps, including data processing and preparation, reading and reviewing the data, data coding, grouping the meaningful statements into meaning units and themes, synthesizing themes into a description of individual experiences (textural and structural descriptions), and constructing a composite narrative of the meanings and essence of the informants' experiences. To minimize the influence of the researchers' preconceptions, the first step of the analysis involves *epoche*, where the researchers strive to set aside their biases and preconceptions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and focus on the opinions reported by the informants. This process allows the researchers to approach the phenomenon with an open mind and a fresh perspective, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. Additionally, the analysis process adheres to the phenomenological principles of *horizontalization* and synthesis, which ensure that the analysis captures the richness and complexity of the participants' experiences while maintaining the integrity of the data.

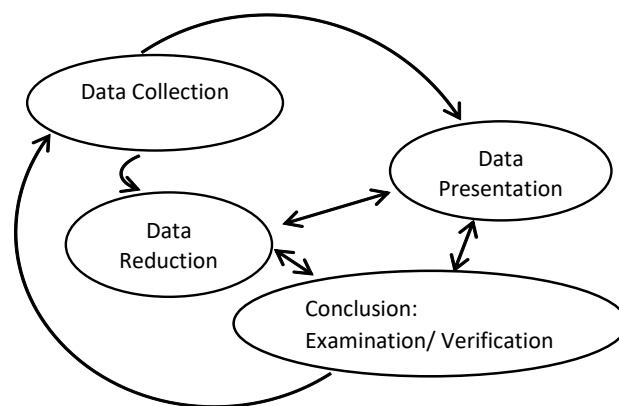


Figure 1. Components of data analysis with an interactive model

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Description of Research Site

#### Geographical Layout of Lebak Regency

Lebak Regency is geographically situated between 0007'18" and 07000'00" South latitude and 105000'25" and 106000'30" East longitude. It shares borders with Serang Regency and Tangerang Regency to the north, and the Indonesian Ocean to the south. The Regency is also bordered by Pandeglang Regency to the west and Bogor Regency and Sukabumi Regency to the east.

#### Demographic Characteristics of Lebak Regency

As of 2020, the total population of Lebak Regency was 1,386,993, with 714,052 male residents (51.48%) and 672,741 female residents (48.50%). The majority of the population resided in the sub-districts of Rangkasbitung, Cibadak, Kalanganyar, Warunggunung, and Maja, which are in close proximity to Rangkasbitung, the capital of Kabupaten, Lebak. Rangkasbitung serves as the center of government, trade, and services, as well as the settlement of numerous immigrant communities (BPS Kabupaten Lebak, 2021). The agricultural sector is the primary source of employment for the majority of the working population in Lebak Regency, with most being self-employed in agriculture, plantations, forestry, hunting, and fisheries.

#### Profile of the Informant

This study involved three small business owners who were selected as research informants based on specific criteria. The informants were chosen because they met the predetermined qualifications.

#### 1. Sutiah

The informant, Sutiah, is a 45-year-old business owner with two grown-up children who have graduated from college and are still studying at a boarding school. She hails from a family of entrepreneurs and began her entrepreneurship journey 19 years ago by selling cassava chips at a nearby coffee shop. With time, her

business has expanded, and she has diversified her products to include banana and onion chips, among others.

Sutiah and her husband jointly manage the chips business by dividing the tasks. Her husband sources fresh cassava materials from farmers in Maja, Sajira, and Cipanas districts around Rangkasbitung at a lower cost, and he delivers the products to their regular customers. On the other hand, Sutiah produces various chips with the help of two employees and markets the products to shops in Rangkasbitung and other locations like Cilegon, Tangerang, and Jakarta, through WhatsApp and referrals from friends and customers.

Sutiah expanded her business by renting a 4 x 6 m shop on the roadside near her house, initially intended to display her chips. Later on, she started selling household items and children's toys to cater to the increasing demand from customers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, her business was sustained through the sales of household items, children's toys, and a variety of chips, as the pandemic caused a sharp decline in food product sales. Sutiah's business strategy aligned with Ezizwita and Sukma's (2021) research that emphasizes product and service diversification for culinary businesses to remain operational during the pandemic.

Sutiah manages the shop daily, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, adhering to health protocols and implementing safety measures for herself and her customers. While Sutiah continues to provide essential services, she surrenders to God Almighty, and if customers appear unwell, she maintains her distance to safeguard her health and that of others.

## 2. Puput

Puput relocated from Jakarta to Rangkasbitung with the intention of starting her own business. Being born to a mother of native Pontang descent, Serang Regency, who has expertise in making milkfish skewers, Puput worked towards perfecting the recipe to make milkfish skewers more appealing to consumers. Although milkfish skewers are popular in Serang, Puput saw the opportunity to develop and sell the product in other areas such as Rangkasbitung, where the demand for milkfish skewers was low.

Since 2010, Puput has been producing milkfish skewers and began selling them in Rangkasbitung's market, specific events, and exhibitions. She then expanded her marketing strategy by partnering with resellers in Jakarta, Bekasi, and Pandeglang. As milkfish skewers are a perishable product, Puput innovated by producing frozen milkfish skewers that can be frozen for up to three months after being tested. The innovation extended the shelf life, expanded marketing, and made product delivery outside of Rangkasbitung more convenient. However, Puput prefers not to use delivery service companies and instead delivers her product directly to consumers to ensure that the milkfish skewers arrive in good condition.

Furthermore, Puput invented crackers made from milkfish bones, which received a positive response from consumers, as it was a creative way of utilizing the bone waste generated from making milkfish skewers. She also produces lunchboxes and markets them through exhibitions in collaboration with various government offices such as the Lebak Regency Cooperative, MSMEs Office, Fisheries Office, and Industry and Trade Office. She promotes her products online through social media platforms like Facebook and has registered the production location of milkfish skewers on Google Maps to make it easier for consumers to purchase directly from the production site. Such digital marketing strategies align with the views of Mangku et al. (2022), Arianto (2020), and Avriyanti (2021) who emphasize the importance of digital technology in empowering MSMEs to reach out to more consumers and improve the quality of their products and services. By implementing these strategies, Puput hopes to increase the sales of her MSME products.

## 3. Rumsinah

In 2006, Rumsinah and her eldest son, Asep, established a nata decoco business that was inherited from her husband. Despite having a career as a teacher at a public elementary school in Lebak Regency, Rumsinah decided to continue the business due to the number of workers who would be laid off. However, the business faced various limitations at the beginning, as Rumsinah reduced four out of 12 workers and decreased production due to a lack of business capital.

The products produced by Rumsinah are semi-finished goods sold to packaged nata de coco producers or factories. The availability of the primary raw material, coconut water, was severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as young coconut water was believed to boost immunity, leading to a shortage of raw materials. Consequently, Rumsinah had to dismiss her workers and reduce three more, even though demand for nata de coco remained unaffected by the pandemic. This is in line with Masrurroh et al.'s (2021) assertion that MSMEs were significantly impacted by the pandemic, affecting income, labor, credit repayment, and capital availability. Rohman and Andadari (2021) suggest strategies for home-based businesses producing processed food to sell online, expand their marketing areas, and improve product quality to cope with the COVID-19 crisis.

## Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Small Businesses

### 1. Significant Statements

This study aimed to gather information on the experiences of small business owners during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study identified specific statements made by informants related to the pandemic from transcripts of informant interviews. A total of 79 individual verbatim statements were identified, representing significant, non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements that reflect whole sentences and are subjective extrapolations from the interview transcripts. The statements provide a description of how informants perceive and experience the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 2. Themes (Units of Implications) of the COVID-19 Pandemic

To identify the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for small businesses, irrelevant, repetitive, and overlapping statements related to the pandemic were eliminated from the transcripts of small business informants. The remaining statements were analyzed to identify the textural meaning of the pandemic from the perspective of the small business informants. The selected statements were then categorized into specific themes by the researcher. The analysis resulted in the identification of four themes or units of implications related to the pandemic and its impact on small businesses: (i) business downturn, including decreased production and income; (ii) adaptation to the pandemic, including reducing labor and switching businesses; and (iii) occupational risks, including staying enthusiastic and being grateful.

**Tabel 1.** The evidence of significant statements regarding the themes (units of implications) of the COVID-19 pandemic, as reported by small business informants

Themes (units of implications)	Evidence in small business informants' statements
<b>"In a slump" businesses</b>	<p>"Muhun seantosnya pandemi alhamdulillah sih aya bae cuman aya oge ngorder 200 ribueun, 100 ribueun, paling besar cuman 250. Pokokna mah pas pandemi menurun." (Following the pandemic, income from sales has experienced a decline, albeit some customers continue to place orders ranging from Rp 100,000 to Rp 250,000, which represents a significant reduction compared to pre-pandemic levels.)</p> <p>"Atuh menurun penjualan neng, kaya keripik kan lamun biasanya si teteh biasanya sok ngambil kan aya langganan orang Cilegon, orang Sarjap jadi biasanya tiap hari sekali bawa 200 rebu 300 rebu, sekarang mah seminggu sekali ngambilnya." (Sales for certain products, such as chips, have been impacted negatively by the pandemic, with orders from customers in Cilegon or Sarjap being reduced to once a week from daily orders of up to Rp. 200,000 or more Rp. 300,000.)</p> <p>"Pokokna mah lamun istilahna mah ngajegrek. Tapi sih Alhamdulillah berjalan yaa ari ieu mah berjalan-berjalan lamun ieu asalna berapa persen mah kayaknyana setengah." (Although the income generated has decreased, it has not ceased entirely, with a slight reduction of a few percent compared to pre-pandemic levels, and roughly half of what it used to be.)</p> <p>"Sekarang mah paling juga 10 hari 4-5 ton, gak banyak sekarang mah." (The quantity of production has decreased, with an average of 4-5 tons in a period of at least ten days, representing a reduction from previous levels.)</p> <p>"he'eh sanggupnya segitu, karena sekarang air kelapa kurang. Terus produksi saya dikurangi karena saya modalnya mentok begitu ya mentok modalnya. Terus segala cuka segala Za, segala gulanya sekarang mahal, koran mahal." (The production of coconut sugar has faced several challenges due to the reduced availability of coconut water, a shortage of capital, and the increased cost of other ingredients, such as vinegar, ZA, sugar, and newspaper.)</p> <p>"omset, waktu pertama-pertama mah sampe 70% tuh sampe kita kadang gak dapet uang bu" (During the initial stages of the pandemic, the turnover from sales reduced to 70%, with some days producing no revenue at all.)</p> <p>"hehe. Bukan nutupin lagi bu, orang jarang dapet duit dari sate bandeng, dari satu gitu. Jadi kalo kita gak muterin otak, yaa udah" (Satay bandeng sales have seen a significant decline, resulting in minimal profits if not approached strategically.)</p> <p>"Ada halal, udah pada mati bu. Semenjak corona ga bisa perpanjang ini itu." (The expiration of halal licenses due to the pandemic has resulted in an inability to renew them, posing challenges to businesses that rely on them.)</p> <p>"Cuman kita pas kena corona boro-boro buat kemasan, buat makan aja susah" (Packaging has become difficult to manage during the pandemic, resulting in challenges with revenue generation.)</p> <p>"..... duitnya kitanya boro-boro bayar perizinan bu" (The cost of licensing has increased during the pandemic, resulting in financial strain on businesses.)</p>
<b>Adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic</b>	<p>"sampe kita istirahat kan yaa kerja juga kasian cuman ya gimana lagi kita produksi ga bisa. Kita bangkit lagi pas puasa karena emang pas puasa kan konsumsi ini kan" ("Due to the pandemic, production had to be temporarily suspended as it was not feasible. Production resumed during the month of fasting, as the product could be sold during this period.")</p>

Themes (units of implications)	Evidence in small business informants' statements
	<p>"Lemon biasa, buah lemon. Es nya juga sama kita kan jualan tuh di depan tuh ada warungnya tuh di depan. Kita kan untuk sate bandeng pas PPKM pertama ngedrop beralih kita ke lebih ke jualan imun-imun buat imun kaya jeruk lemon. Lemonnya juga kiloannya, lumayan dijualnya banyak yang nyari" ("The sale of milk fish skewers decreased during the PPKM, prompting a shift towards selling lemons and citrus fruits. Immunity-boosting drinks made from lemons were sold in whole kilos in front of the house.")</p> <p>"Engga sih kita ga pernah sampe putus, tiap hari tuh ada produksi, fase bangkitnya itu pas mulai rame lagi." ("Production continued despite the pandemic, albeit at a reduced capacity. A surge in production occurred when customers began returning.")</p> <p>"he'eh, intinya gimana caranya dapet duit. Kita mah cari ruang yang ini aja bu, ada ruang yang ini ya hayuk" ("The primary concern is generating revenue, and opportunities are pursued with diligence.")</p> <p>"Atuh semua ini bu bukan kita doang yang ngalamin. Yang terdampak yang kerja, yang engga? Tapi kan sebenarnya gini, namanya pengusaha ga da pandemi juga naik turun, yaa kadang ada naik ada turunnya. Kan gak selalu naik terus, kadang ada masa-masanya." ("Entrepreneurs are not immune to the pandemic's impact, and fluctuating income is a common experience. Sales figures are not always positive.")</p> <p>"Atuh neng ieu mah euh mah perjuanganna perih." ("The struggle to survive during the pandemic has been challenging.")</p> <p>"iya semenjak corona aja, paling pas corona mah cuma 2 orang doang" ("Since the pandemic outbreak, the number of customers/buyers has dwindled to a mere two.")</p>
Occupational Risks	<p>"Lumayan nya penghasilan segitu Alhamdulillah." (It can be deemed satisfactory to have achieved such an income, for which we express our gratitude.)</p> <p>"yaa Allah neng pas pandemi mobil lunas si teteh ntos ya Allah, lamun kitu" (The prospect of paying off the car loan post-pandemic is a matter of great relief and gratitude.)</p> <p>"Atuh karena serba mahal harus lapang dada, cuka naik segala naik dan dari sananya harus murah." (The necessity for affordable prices results from the rising cost of goods such as vinegar and other raw materials.)</p> <p>"Kalo hikmahnya itu jadi lebih banyak bersyukur, bersyukurnya gimana? Oh banyak waktu lebaran itu kan kita sama mang sani ke Jakarta ya Allah itu tuh KFC tuh rumah makan terbesar termewah gitu kan kok sampe tumbang, kita yang bukan siapa-siapa kita masih bertahan masih bisa bayar hutang masih bisa makan masih bisa beraktifitas berarti kita manusia yang bersyukur udah jadi kita intinya banyak bersyukur bu." (Gratitude could be regarded as a valuable virtue in these circumstances. Despite the observation that even major corporations such as KFC can suffer bankruptcy, our small business venture continues to survive, enabling us to manage our debts, maintain sustenance and continue operations.)</p>

In this research article, we aim to elucidate the units of implications of the COVID-19 pandemic as described by small business informants. To achieve this, we present the terminology employed by the informants in each theme or unit of implication, substantiated by quotations from the pertinent literature review.

### COVID-19 pandemic: "In a slump" businesses

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on small businesses has been detrimental, resulting in decreased sales due to restrictions on community interactions. For instance, Puput reported that the Rangkas Bitung market was affected by the odd-even number of traders, and sales dropped during the PPKM when the market was closed. Meanwhile, some small businesses are trying to keep producing during the pandemic to maintain business continuity. However, these businesses have encountered obstacles such as scarcity and rising prices of raw materials. Rum explained that the instability in her production process is caused by the scarcity of raw materials. She cited situations where she has coconut water and vinegar, but no ZA, or plenty of coconut water but no vinegar. Even if these materials are available, they can be expensive to acquire, which creates a barrier to production. Tiah, on the other hand, has been affected by the rising prices of raw materials. She explained that the cost of oil has increased from 25-26 to 30, causing her to lose money on her sales.

These challenges are consistent with Soetjipto's (2020) findings that MSMEs have been negatively affected by the pandemic due to the scarcity of raw materials and social restriction regulations, resulting in a decline in sales turnover and various marketing and sales constraints. In response, MSMEs have sought alternatives such as securing capital, diversifying temporarily, and adopting effective technology for promotion and sales. According to Rakhma and Setiawan (2020), 37,000 MSMEs have reported difficulties in obtaining raw materials as one of the impacts of COVID-19.

### COVID-19 pandemic: Adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a test for the adaptive capability of small businesses after they have contributed to the recovery of the national economy from the international monetary crisis in the late 90s. The

decline in sales of small business products caused by the pandemic has been the most significant impact, leading to a decrease in the business level's income. The informants have experienced a decline in sales for at least one to two years, with the implementation of social restrictions from mid-2020 to 2021 being the peak. Puput demonstrated the struggle for the continuity of her business during the implementation of Community Activities Restrictions Enforcement (PPKM), stating that they had to switch to selling lemons as the market closed early in the morning and afternoon. She further explained that all markets, including the Rangkas Bitung market, were affected by the odd-even number of traders, and the sales dropped significantly, especially during the PPKM, when the Rangkas market was closed.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the informants' small businesses experienced a significant decline in income, which is referred to as 'ngajegrek,' compared to 'reseup,' which represents the pre-pandemic income level. Maleha et al. (2021) reported that the majority of small traders, particularly mobile cake traders, food stalls, coffee shops, and other types of stalls, experienced decreased sales during the pandemic. This situation was caused by the declining purchasing power of the community, leading to losses in some traders' businesses, and even the closure of some businesses. To cope with the pandemic, Nur et al. (2020) suggested that MSMEs should adapt by integrating online marketing systems while following health protocols, even in the new normal era.

During the pandemic, small business owners had to adapt to the changing economic conditions. Tiah and Rum, two informants, shared their experiences of downsizing their employees to maintain the sustainability of their businesses. Rum temporarily laid off some of his employees and planned to call them back once production stabilizes. On the other hand, Tiah downsized the number of her employees. These statements demonstrate the adaptive capacity of small business actors during the pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 on the MSMEs sector has been discussed by Bahtiar (2021), who noted that businesses had to reduce production, employee working hours, and sales/marketing channels to adapt to the pandemic's effects.

#### **COVID-19 pandemic: Occupational Risks**

Rum and Tiah have expressed that they have been able to keep their production going despite the COVID-19 pandemic. According to them, " ... I keep my production going, ma'am, from the first time there was a covid; Alhamdulillah, it is still going on, just the time is reduced ..." and "this is a painful struggle." This indicates their awareness of the risks involved in trading and the need for an entrepreneurial spirit. Puput has also emphasized that the entrepreneurial spirit is vital, and "Actually, even though there are no pandemics, there are also ups and downs. Sometimes there are downs in business, it doesn't always go up." The informants' ability to remain resilient and continue their businesses is a testament to their entrepreneurial spirit and gratitude for their business's results. This has helped them to face the crisis caused by the pandemic, with their small businesses still being sustainable and their families spared from COVID-19 exposure. As one of the informants said, "... Alhamdulillah, at least, I got a thousand rupiah a day. That's what I got that day, but sometimes someone orders chips for a IDR 100.000 or IDR 200.000. So, the profit from those transactions. But sometimes, if it's not there, it's not there at all. That's how it is if you have a business." The traders' willingness to continue their struggle to meet their daily needs is what has kept them going during the pandemic, as noted by Sinaga and Purba (2020).

The statement regarding the link between the entrepreneurial spirit and gratitude for business outcomes reveals the overall resilience of small business actors amid the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Torrido's (2021) research, the pandemic has had a negative impact on Indonesia's economy, resulting in an increase in poverty rates. However, some positive effects have also emerged, including an increase in social solidarity within communities and the provision of considerable profits to some businesses. As Tiah stated, "I am grateful for my income; it has its ups and downs...". Other informants also expressed gratitude for their business results during the pandemic, noting that compared to larger and more luxurious establishments like KFC, their MSMEs were still able to survive and sustain their basic needs. This sentiment highlights the gratitude of small business actors during difficult times, aligning with Hadiwardoyo's (2020) observation that the pandemic's restrictions on community activities have resulted in significant economic losses at a national level.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges to small businesses, and policymakers must take steps to support and maintain their entrepreneurial spirit to ensure their sustainability. This is in line with the recommendations of Dwiastanti and Mustapha (2020), who highlight the need to strengthen the interest and belief of entrepreneurs in facing challenges and opportunities with perseverance and hard work. Sugiri (2020) emphasizes that short-term and long-term strategies are necessary to support policies aimed at saving MSMEs from the pandemic's impact and maintaining their sustainability as key actors in the Indonesian economy.

Pakpahan (2020) suggests that short-term policies should focus on providing financial assistance through soft loans or direct cash assistance involving both government and private sectors. Long-term strategies should introduce and use digital technology for MSMEs, preparing them for the Industry 4.0 era. Training and guidance provided by Raharja & Natari (2021) have positively impacted business actors by increasing their knowledge of digital media and advanced skills in managing digital media for branding.

The importance of government assistance schemes for the continuity of MSMEs during the pandemic is confirmed by Harjowiryo & Siallagan's research (2021), which emphasizes the need for integrated financial literacy and MSME innovation programs in assistance programs. Suardika & Kurniawan's (2022) research shows that government assistance has a positive impact on sales turnover, production of goods, and profits of small business actors. Training for small business actors, such as the Pandemic Incubation Program, has a positive and significant relationship with the continuation of micro, small, and medium enterprises, as revealed by Rusadi et al. (2022), emphasizing the need for counseling, training, and mentoring to improve small business actors' ability to create social media and market products online through Facebook social media, as highlighted by Astiti et al. (2021).

However, Mujianto et al. (2021) reveal that many traditional retail stalls have not received government or private sector assistance during the pandemic. These stalls survive and grow by adopting cost-efficient strategies and complementary marketing tactics, such as selling products in small packages/sachets and placing orders online. Hadi & Zakiah's (2021) research suggests that some MSMEs still require an understanding of digital marketing, while those that have used digital marketing can survive and even increase sales without relying on conventional stores.

### 3. Textural and Structural Description

The current study employed a thematic analysis approach to gather descriptions of the experiences of small business informants regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. The textural description, which includes the literal expression of the informants' statements, was compiled to provide a comprehensive overview of their experiences. The collected descriptions were further analyzed to identify the contextual and structural factors that influenced the informants' experiences of the pandemic. These structural descriptions provide valuable insights into the settings and environments in which small businesses operate and how these contexts shape their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### Textural Description

The small business informants used various terms to describe their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, including '*ngedrop*', '*ngajegrek*', '*lieur*', '*perih*', '*lapang dada*', '*muterin otak*', '*ga pernah sampe putus*', '*mencari ruang*', '*syukur*', '*ribut-ribut teu boga duit*', '*semangat*', and '*tumbang*'. According to one informant, they continued to keep their shop open regardless of whether people were buying or not. Another informant mentioned that sometimes people would order chips for IDR 100,000 or 200,000 at their kiosk. Another informant revealed that the pandemic meant they spent a lot of time at home, taking care of the business, saying "But thank God since COVID I just work at home," and "so don't worry about the problem of not having money. I enjoyed it, and I'm grateful. *Insya Allah*, it's a blessing, ma'am, because when we see our friends whose businesses in the mall are failing, we can still survive, so we're even more grateful." These accounts demonstrate the ability of small businesses to adapt and coexist with the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### Structural Description

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the experiences of small business informants are primarily shaped by economic factors. The decline in business income and scarcity and increased prices of raw materials were commonly mentioned by each informant. Puput reported a 70% decrease in turnover during the early stages of the pandemic, resulting in financial difficulties. Another informant recently had to pay over a million rupiahs for raw materials, which adversely impacted both production quality and the financial well-being of the informant's family. As one informant stated, "Just when we were hit by corona, it was difficult to make packaging, just to eat." Nevertheless, when describing the impact of the pandemic on their income, the informant expressed a religious perspective that one must always be grateful for the results of their efforts. Therefore, there is no need to fret over financial difficulties. The informant stated, "I enjoy it, am grateful, and am blessed, *Insha'Allah*." The effects of the pandemic have impacted everyone, including both those who work and those who do not. As Tiah put it, "*Alhamdulillah*, it's okay. I am the kind of person who doesn't complain easily, so I am grateful."



Government policies, including the implementation of Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB), Community Activity Restrictions (PPKM), and others, significantly shape the experiences of small business informants amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite their challenges, informants continue to adapt and remain hopeful that the pandemic will end soon and that economic conditions will recover. Informants highlight the impact of the pandemic on their businesses, particularly the closure of crowded centers and exhibition activities, which has reduced the space for promoting and marketing their products. As Tiah explained, "All markets, the Rangkas Bitung market, was affected by the odd-even number of traders. When the sales plummeted again, the sales were terrible during PPKM yesterday because the Rangkas market was closed." This has limited their ability to develop new products based on business development training, as their capital has decreased due to reduced income. Before the pandemic, informants had participated in training or comparative studies organized by the local government, such as to Lampung for the development of chocolate bananas or to factories to learn about the production process. However, these opportunities have become scarce due to the pandemic-induced economic challenges.

The informants' experience of the COVID-19 pandemic is also shaped by the time context. One informant reported that the pandemic had been ongoing for the past two years. Another informant discussed the number of weeks and even months during which their business had suffered, as well as the unpredictable duration of the pandemic. This temporal context shapes the informants' experience of the pandemic in terms of their ability to adapt and endure as small business owners, as the longer the pandemic persists, the more resources the informants must expend. Puput referenced the time context of the pandemic by recalling how conditions had differed in the past, when everything felt good: "Back then, making cassava took two or three days. It's not like that now, so it's not as profitable as it used to be. It used to take three days for a car to produce it. Oh God, I remember how good things used to be."

Texturally and structurally, the arrangement of units of implications in this study elucidates the process of intentionality in small business actors and its relationship with the conditions presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. The consciousness of small business informants reflects the influence of the hope of ending the pandemic and stabilizing economic conditions for small business management on their intentionality. The onset of the pandemic triggered a process of intuition, wherein small business actors perceived, remembered, assessed, felt, and thought about the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, small business owners realized the changes in their income and interpreted them rationally. These units of implications underscore the textural and structural aspects of the study's findings, revealing how small business actors respond to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

From a theoretical perspective, phenomenology posits that the meaning of something is contingent upon its potential in a person's life, with the implications of an object determined by an individual's relationship to it. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the informants perceive it as a significant threat to their work. The pandemic has resulted in changing economic conditions, as restrictions on human interaction have been imposed to prevent the spread of the virus and limit the number of exposures. These measures have been implemented to safeguard both life safety and economic stability. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a reminder to be grateful for the resources and opportunities one has, particularly with regards to life safety and income. This phenomenological perspective highlights the significance of personal experience in shaping an individual's understanding of and response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **The Essence of the COVID-19 Pandemic Experience**

The combined textural and structural descriptions of the COVID-19 pandemic experiences of small business informants are synthesized to develop a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. This approach allows for the exploration of the meaning and essence of the COVID-19 pandemic experience for each informant in a single unit. By analyzing the themes and patterns that emerge from the individual experiences, a holistic understanding of the pandemic's impact on small businesses can be obtained. The synthesis of textural and structural descriptions provides a powerful tool for gaining insights into the complexities of small business experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a widespread transmission of the COVID-19 virus, leading to a significant impact on small businesses. The primary challenge faced by small businesses is the limitation of human interaction, which is crucial for overcoming the spread of the virus. The pandemic is caused by the direct and indirect interaction of infected individuals with healthy individuals, without the implementation of proper health protocols. The resilience of small businesses during the economic crisis of the late 1990s suggests that they can adapt and coexist with the COVID-19 pandemic, which is essentially a protracted economic crisis. The pandemic has become an occupational risk that small businesses must face. Hence, the

experiences of small business actors during the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the cyclical nature of business, and they must be grateful for every acquisition as every business has its own time.

The COVID-19 pandemic experience of informants highlights their interpretation of the crisis within a socio-economic context. The pandemic has emerged as an economic crisis that has revealed the adaptive capacity of small business actors. This capacity goes beyond their ability to adjust their business to changing economic conditions, but also encompasses their ability to be grateful for every outcome of their business, which is informed by their religious beliefs. The combination of these qualities is crucial for ensuring the sustainability of their business amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis and discussion of the results suggest that small business informants in Lebak Regency, Banten Province interpret the COVID-19 pandemic as a cyclical phenomenon in small businesses. They emphasize the importance of being grateful for every acquisition as every business has its own time of profitability and loss. This interpretation underscores the resilience and adaptability of small business actors amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, as they continue to navigate and sustain their businesses amidst challenging economic conditions.

To ensure the sustainability of small businesses in Lebak Regency, Banten Province during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the local government can enhance the adaptive capacity of small business actors by implementing the following measures:

1. Conducting training and mentoring programs for small businesses during and after the pandemic to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate the challenging economic conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Establishing a small business development information center during and after the pandemic that provides information services, consultations, and disseminates small business development information media to enhance the access of small business actors to sources of business development information. This measure will provide small business actors with relevant information and support to sustain and grow their businesses during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

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