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COVID-19 Effects on Companies Owned by Disabled Entrepreneurs

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused considerable operational and financial challenges to companies, particularly those owned or managed by disabled entrepreneurs. While assessing the impact of the pandemic on the performance of the surveyed companies, this study attempts to explain how disabled entrepreneurs reacted to the effects of the pandemic and their success and shortfalls in overcoming the business and commercial challenges during the pandemic. Focus group discussions were used to collect primary data, with the aim of identifying and exploring different variables that influence the activities of disabled entrepreneurs and affect their business. The content analysis technique was also used to analyze the primary data to determine the status and conditions of companies owned by disabled entrepreneurs and to provide SWOT analysis of these companies. The results revealed that companies owned by disabled entrepreneurs demonstrated resilience and adaptability in surviving the pandemic, despite shortcomings such as falling trade operations, fewer customers, and higher operational expenses. The findings also identified some successful business models, where disabled entrepreneurs were able to adapt to the changing business environment by implementing digital technologies, accepting creative solutions, and changing business strategies. Our findings make original contribution to the field by identifying the serious challenges that encounter disabled entrepreneurs and stressing the urgency of developing specific policies to provide technical and financial support to this group at the time of crises.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial Policy, Disabled Entrepreneurs, COVID-19 Impact, Company Performance, Coronavirus.

1. Introduction:

The impact of COVID-19 forced many companies to close or downsize their production facilities and operations to survive the pandemic. Companies that survived the pandemic experienced reduced commercial activities, fewer customers, and financial losses, with companies owned by disabled entrepreneurs were the most affected.¹ The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that there were no adequate facilities nor appropriate strategies and policies to support disabled entrepreneurs in managing their business activities during the pandemic. It also underlined the absence of guiding principles, policy measures, guiding practices, database sets, and sufficient information on how to support disabled entrepreneurs at the time of economic and financial crises.

However, there are insufficient analyses and lack of examinations of the challenges and obstacles faced by disabled entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 pandemic. This lack of knowledge on this topic identifies the significance of this study that also highlights the abilities of people with disabilities to convert challenges into new opportunities. Thus, the main objective of this study is to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the performance of companies owned by disabled entrepreneurs, while identifying the opportunities and challenges encountered them and explaining their reactions to the market changes caused by the pandemic. In doing so, we adopted several focused group sessions during 2022. This is one of the most suitable research methods that can help us to collect qualitative primary data and evaluate the performance of enterprises by identifying the performance variables and measuring them.

The findings of the study are expected to make significant contribution to political making, particularly in countries such as Oman, where there is an absence of clear policy guidelines on the measures and procedures of assisting people with disabilities, especially those active in economic activities. This increases awareness of the importance of recognizing the various challenges faced disabled entrepreneurs in the market and coming up with reasonable solutions by the concerned authorities. The findings are also expected to theoretically emphasize the value of resiliency, adaptation, and creativity in entrepreneurship programs designed for people with disabilities, as well as the successful business models that could help them succeed in the long run. The findings may also reaffirm that people with disabilities can take proactive measures to address their shortcomings and threats and better position

themselves for a more sustainable and prosperous future. Our analysis concludes that stressing the importance of the role of government in designing and establishing supportive entrepreneurship programs for people with disabilities and the urgency of establishing comprehensive database sets to include detailed information on disabled entrepreneurs and their business activities.

2. Literature Review:

This section provides an overview of the literature covering the effects of COVID-19 on companies owned by people with disabilities. It focuses on key areas that have direct effects on the performance of companies and affect the ability and competence of disabled entrepreneurs in managing their activities. The overarching focus will be on the impact of COVID-19 on the financial position of the company, the marketing strategy, internal policies, and customers retention.

2.1 THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

Several studies conducted to analysis the impact of COVID-19 on the financial performance of companies in China. We can identify three indicators to measure the financial position of the company, namely investment, revenues, and profitability. To measure each indicator, there is a need to assess the nature of the market during the pandemic. Literature shows that there was direct correlation between the financial performance of enterprise and lockdown, border closure and strict social distance measures introduced by the governments, which resulted in sharp decrease in the demand of goods and service.² Companies were forced to cut down the production level, the sales and business operation to be able to survive in the market. These measures negatively affected the value of market shares and stock and forced investors to sell their shares to avoid serious losses.

Moreover, the examination of companies' financial performance depends on the analysis of costs, assets, investment returns and debts. Devi et al investigated the profitability and liquidity of firms in Indonesia during the pandemic.³ They stated that the financial performance of the companies depends on the policies and strategies established by the company to achieve its goals. They found that COVID-19 had a negative impact on the liquidity of the company, and that decreasing the sales directly impacted on the cash flow and profit of the company. Devi et al also found that COVID-19 had a negative impact on the profitability of company through measuring the return on the assets.³ During the pandemic, purchasing power of customers were very weak because of decreasing

net income of people especially those who were working in sectors harshly effected by the pandemic or those who lost their jobs. A fall in purchasing power means a decline in the total sales of the company, lower profit margins, a decrease in the cash flow, and subsequently the company would be unable to meet its obligations. Devi et al found that there is a significant difference in term of profitability of companies before and after COVID-19.³ Their findings could help companies in making their investment decisions and assist policy makers to initiate tax incentives for effected companies and sectors. On the other hand, Daryanto & Rizki investigated on the financial performance of companies in Indonesia pre and during the pandemic. As the result, the researchers underscore that the financial status of the companies showed a decline during the pandemic where the performance was measured based on solvency ratio, liquidity ratio, activity ration and profitability ration.⁴

Cash flow is one of the fundamental parts of financial statements that was badly affected during the pandemic. According to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, COVID-19 affected the ability of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to balance between declining cash flow and bankruptcy and maintaining staff on the payroll.⁵ Brown et al investigated how COVID-19 affected companies financially during the pandemic and found that physical interaction is essential for investment and that early-stage investment was affected financially more than last stage investment, where the last stage was mire resilience.⁶ Hallegatte & Hammer recommended that dealing with future crises need a cooperation between financial geographers and economic to have a better understanding of macroeconomic policy with discovering new opportunities.⁷ In addition, Fintech adoption in the companies has a significant role on reducing the effect of COVID-19 on the financial performance.⁸

2.2 EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON MARKETING STRATEGIES

Literature reveals that some countries such as Indonesia and China initiated policies and programs aimed at providing support to disabled entrepreneurs during COVID-19. Donthu & Gustafsson explore how the firms reacted to the market changes during the pandemic. As the researchers figured out three types of marketing innovative strategy which are responsive strategy (used by the companies with physical connect), collective strategy (for companies that harshly effected by covid-19 where it needs to collaborate with other firms), proactive strategy (for less

affected firms by crises especially online business where it develops new business to meet the demand of customers).⁹ Prastowo et al argued business strategies developed by the government were more adoptable, creative, and effective in mitigating the consequences of COVID-19.¹⁰ Several events organized by business associations such as the Community of Entrepreneurs with Disability House, where successful disabled entrepreneurs were invited to present their experience in managing their business during the pandemic. While some entrepreneurs were successful and creative in using social media and other electronic platforms, others suffered from lack of knowledge on entrepreneurship and digital business. Lack of accounting and financial skills are evident in a statement by a disabled entrepreneur when saying that sometimes he forgot to record small routine expenses which affected the financial statement, underlining the need of financial skills in managing his business.¹⁰ These weaknesses could be addressed through vocational education to acquire entrepreneurship attitudes and develop interest in entrepreneurship aspect.^{10,11} Plotnikov et al underscored the importance of the support provided by community institutions, family, and professional associations in encouraging disabled entrepreneurs to continue their work at the time of difficulties.¹² Prastowo et al argued that the success of managing the business by disabled entrepreneurs is strongly related to four type of promotion, which are having high resolution of product or service photo, maintains the product and services after shipping, using the social media including Instagram and marketplace promos.¹⁰

In term of entrepreneurial education programs, Kent et al used a sample of 250 deaf college students to measure the factors that affected the entrepreneurial intention among deaf students in secondary institutions after COVID-19 in Nigeria.¹³ The factors measured were entrepreneurial education, personality traits and entrepreneurial self-efficiency, which were considered as independent variables which have the capacity to influence on the entrepreneurial intention of PWD especially deaf to establish their own business. The study stressed the importance of integrating entrepreneurial subjects into the education curricula and encouraging people with disabilities, especially deaf students, to have their own business ventures.

2.3 IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CUSTOMERS RETENTION

Customers retention is a key factor in the success of companies. Syfarudin investigated on how the quality of the product effect on the level of customer loyalty during the pandemic. The result indicates

that high level of customers satisfaction and loyalty lie in well quality standards of the product.¹⁴ Waheed et al measured the role of corporate social responsibility in maintaining a good relationship with external stakeholders specifically customers in crises time.¹⁵ The authors found that the customers are more commitment and loyalty towards the firms that are socially responsible as corporate social responsibility has a positive influence on customer satisfaction even in the pandemic.¹⁶ Kim & Han examined customers' satisfactions and behaviors of choosing suitable hotels before, during and after COVID-19.¹⁷ They found that hotels set a new standard and plans to deal with their customers under the stress of COVID-19. They also identified some factors that affected customers such as hotel categories, market segments, consumers' demographic profiles, use the electronic innovation and smart technologies for the products and services provided by hotel. Online marketing strategy was effective in supporting companies to continue their operations during the pandemic. Al-Ghraibah investigated how digital transformation helped in retaining customers during COVID-19.¹⁸ He found that maintaining a good relationship with customers is essential to increase customers satisfaction, loyalty, and good reputation of companies. In fact, most companies ignored digital transformation during the pandemic had failed to provide satisfactory services to customers, hence negatively affecting their profits.

2.4 COVID-19 EFFECT ON POLICYMAKING AND PRACTICES.

Establishing a comprehensive policy to deal with future crises is considered a fundamental step to avoid fluctuations in business performance in crises time. Rababah et al argued that financial institutions, and regulatory bodies must combine their efforts to address the impact of COVID-19 in terms of designing comprehensive policies including rescheduling the loans and tax rebates for companies effected by the pandemic.² Meanwhile, companies should also develop their own investment rules and guidelines to improve their financial performance and avoid speculative investments and bad financial securities in the market. To have a good reputation in the market during the crises time, the firms tend to establish policy with three essential elements embodies in protecting the interests of investors and shareholders, assisting the society in general and particularly vulnerable group and integration the previous actions with commercial interests.¹⁹

To empower entrepreneurs, United Kingdom, and other OECD economic supported financially SMEs in form of direct subsidized loans and loan guarantees

to survive in the market.⁵ For example, the UK government established the Future Funding Programme for SMEs and startups, with a budget worth £250m.²⁰ The Norwegian government introduced novel rules to maintain the link between employer and employees. In terms of temporary layoff, the rules reduced the compensation paid by employer to employees from 15 to 2 days and gave employees the right to receive full wages of the first 20 days of layoff, while assisting business owners to manage unavoidable costs such as rent, insurance cost, utilities, and net interest rate.²¹

Adopting new procedures during the pandemic.

Literature demonstrates that entrepreneurs sought creative techniques to keep their business position in the market. For instance, Indrawati et al argued that business strategy must focus on the strength of marketing, which includes product, price, place, and promotion.²¹ Fitriasari explored various strategies used by SMEs during COVID-19 and found the need to use digital transformation strategy to achieve business goals and develop new products to remain competitive.²² The role of the strategy in stimulating growth to reduce the economic suffering and to ensure more flexibility in the future to deal with any crisis. During COVID-19, governments sought to contain and combat the epidemic and strike a balance between preserving their economy and preventing dangerous levels of unemployment. Aburumman examined the extent to which Covid-19 impacted on the markets of international exhibitions and conferences, using indicators of economic efficiency, and proposing a strategy for business survival.²³ Companies need to maintain good performance by employing efficiency, creating a communications system, and promoting digital technology, as well as putting the attention on competitive marketing strategy.

3. Methodology

3.1 RESEARCH TOOLS

This study adopts a focus group discussion as the main research tool to collect qualitative primary through gathering sample groups of at least 10 disabled entrepreneurs in one place to discuss pre-prepared themes and questions on the impact of COVID-19 on the companies owned and run by the participants.²⁴ Fouse group discussion is a research method used to understand the opinions and views of respondents on specific topic.²⁵ The purpose behind using focused group discussions is to understand the different opinions and perceptions on the topic through discussions and dialogues with the participants. We conducted three sessions of focus group discussions with disabled entrepreneurs to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the

performance of their businesses. Qualitative data gathered through the sessions forms the basis of our descriptive analysis and helps us to understand entrepreneurs' behaviors and attitudes toward new market conditions created by the pandemic. We also believe that the advantages of using focus group discussions are collecting more qualitative data, recognizing the problem, ensuring cost-effectiveness, interacting with participation, and avoiding researchers bias to research findings.

To effectively manage focus group discussions, we developed a set of questions on financial performance, policies, market, customer retention, and development, whereby all the variables have a role in meeting the objectives of the study. Appendix 1 contains all the questions and variables used to measure the impact of COVID-19 on the business run by disabled entrepreneurs. Some of the questions in discussion were designed based on performance measures written by Brooke²⁶ while others were designed based on performance measures discussed in previous studies.^{2,3,9,16,17}

2.3 DATA COLLECTION:

Focused group discussions provided us with deep understanding of the variables that affected the operations and performance of enterprises owned by disabled entrepreneurs during the pandemic. Due to the immobility of many disabled people and imposition of lockdown and social distance, we organized three online focused group discussions, which were the most suitable method of meeting to collect data at that time. In addition to the restrictions related to COVID-19, some participants requested online meetings due to the nature of their physical disability, while others lived in remote areas and found it extremely difficult to meet physically. So, all focused groups discussions were conducted on the 13th, the 14th, and the 21st of September 2022. The duration of the group discussion ranged between 60 minutes and 90 minutes.

The participants were from different companies and institutions, where they occupied different levels of seniority at their companies. For instance, among the participants were the CEO of Innovation Factory, the President of Oman Association for Disabled People, experienced business owners with more than 15 years of experience, new entrepreneurs with 2-3 years of experience, newly graduate with degree in entrepreneurship in Sultan Qaboos University, Nizwa University, and some disabled entrepreneurs selected randomly. The sample was collected using a cross sectional method to ensure having different types of disabilities,

including vision impairment, deaf or hard hearing, and physical disability. The sample also targeted participants from different geographical locations in Oman, where most of the participants were from Muscat, Dhofar and Al Batinah. The sample was also classified into three segments: the first segment was disabled entrepreneurs from students and new graduates; the second segment was disabled entrepreneurs who have experience and network with policy makers; and the third segment was disabled entrepreneurs with advanced knowledge and technical skills.

During the discussions, the questions were classified into measurable variables, which are financial performance, policies, customer retention, market, and development. In the financial performance, all the questions aimed to evaluate the performance of the business during the pandemic in terms of profitability, investments, and revenues. This same format was applied to other questions and variables to ensure consistency in discussions and gathering data. Meanwhile, our discussions focused on three key areas: the market conditions that posed serious challenges to disabled entrepreneurs and how they reacted to the new market changes; the policies that helped disabled entrepreneurs to overcome the challenges encountered their business; and the development strategies that enabled disabled entrepreneurs to take advantage of the pandemic and turn the challenges into new business opportunities.

4. Data Analysis & Finding

4.1 ANALYSIS OF COMPANY PERFORMANCE DURING THE PANDEMIC

4.1.1 Effects on Financial Performance

Our data shows that COVID-19 has had a significant effect on the financial situation of companies managed by disabled entrepreneurs. There was an agreement among participants that the pandemic negatively affected their companies' regular costs, commercial activities, clientele, and incurred additional costs associated with putting preventive measures into place. This effect was apparent in the companies' inability to undertake routine business operations due to movement restrictions and lockdown procedures in place, which drastically reduced revenues and increased financial burdens. According to the CEO of Innovation Factory Company, 'trade activities experienced a significant decline during the pandemic, adding to the financial challenges faced by companies owned by disabled entrepreneurs.' He argued that restrictions such as partial closure of factories and shops reduced working hours, and consumer fear of infection all contributed to a

decline in sales and resulted in lower profitability and liquidity issues.

Data analysis also reveals that developing new online marketing strategies to attract customers incurred additional financial resources, adding further pressure on the company's financial difficulties. In fact, incurring a higher marketing budget was one of the biggest obstacles for disabled entrepreneurs, but was necessary to connect with potential customers and keep their current customer base because of the restriction on face-to-face contacts due to health and safety concerns. In addition to the increased marketing costs, disabled entrepreneurs had to pay extra charges to maintain workplace safety and follow preventive measures to protect staff and consumers from the pandemic, including the purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE) like masks and sterilizers, hiring sterilization companies to keep the workplace sterile, and putting up plastic partitions between employees' offices.

The surveyed participants claimed that despite being one of the most vulnerable sections of the society that have been severely impacted by the pandemic's wide-ranging effects, they also suffered from lack of government support or any specific policies and plans to assist them financially and logistically during the pandemic. Some of the participants maintained that 'there are no specific relief programs or financial aid packages designed to meet their particular needs.' As a result, many of their companies battled to maintain their operations and suffered severe financial setbacks throughout the pandemic. They also argued that government inaction increased already-existing inequalities and restricted disabled entrepreneurs' capacity to expand and survive. While much of disabled entrepreneurs' participation in economic activities in the developed countries made possible by accessibility, Omani entrepreneurs suffered from a lack of adequate facilities and accommodations for people with disabilities in many companies and public areas. The absence of accessible facilities during the pandemic made it very harder to maintain safety precautions and follow health regulations, as well as restricting their mobility and capacity to manage efficiently their firms.

Our data analysis attributed much of the disappointment of disabled entrepreneurs to the absence of a comprehensive database of people with disabilities. The creation of a comprehensive database is necessary for policy makers to comprehend the requirements, difficulties, and design potential financial plans and regulations

tailored to the special needs of disabled entrepreneurs. They also complained about the ambiguous regulations when attempting to launch or expand their operations, the absence of a specific framework that considers the difficulties and hindrances that people with disabilities encounter in professional contexts by defining the steps, resources, regulations, and providing information on the financial incentives and other types of support accessible to them. Many of the participants, including the CEO of Innovation Factory and the President of the Oman Association for the Disabled, argued that they 'do not need special treatment, but asked for positive discrimination and focused support for disabled entrepreneurs,' and emphasized the significance of formal organizations offering facilities and funding to help disabled entrepreneurs succeed.

4.1.2 Effects on the Market

Undoubtedly, the economic impact of COVID-19 has changed market conditions, most notably changes in the tests and needs of the customers, affecting the demand and supply, and subsequently the marketing strategy. The participants confirmed that their companies realized the shift in the customers' needs during the pandemic, with a sharp decline in customers' demand for services in 2020 and 2021. They also stated that those operating in the services sector found it difficult to deliver their service to customers due to precautionary procedures of COVID-19. The shift in market conditions necessitated a change in the marketing strategies, particularly those whose services depended on face-to-face interaction in managing their business. Data shows that companies with face-to-face interaction did not work well during the lockdown; this forced many businesses to shift online. However, the discussion showed that delivering the product or service to the customers online did not fit with all nature of business or services.

4.1.3 Effects on Business Development

We must acknowledge that managing a business during COVID-19 was a major challenge not only for disabled entrepreneurs, but also for ordinary businesspeople. However, we discovered that disabled entrepreneurs have an advantage over their ordinary businesspeople because disabled entrepreneurs deal with tough situations daily as normal situations that have possible solutions. The study looks on how people with disability deal with difficulties as a new opportunity in their business. Data analysis revealed that disabled entrepreneurs were able to convert the obstacles into new opportunities because of their resilience and ability to adapt to any situation or changes happened in

the market and life at large. During the pandemic, several participants confirmed that disabled entrepreneurs were thinking out of box to continue their business activities such as changing the way of performing the product or services to the customers or shifting the business into another active geographical area. Disabled entrepreneurs also used technology, software, and other innovative techniques in their projects as a way to adapt their business to the precautionary procedures of COVID-19. The findings showed that adopting technology was an integral part of company strategy, but it does not fit with all businesses, especially those who need face-to-face interaction.

4.2. EVALUATING COMPANY PERFORMANCE USING SWOT

Focused group discussions also provided us with valuable qualitative data to assess the performance of the companies owned or managed by disabled entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using SWOT analysis, the data collected identified a number of critical factors that affected those companies' operations and financial performance during the pandemic. Table 1 explains the four elements of SWOT analysis: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

Strengths: data confirmed that companies managed by disabled entrepreneurs stand out for their tenacity in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. These companies showed amazing adaptability to the shifting market conditions despite encountering unusual difficulties. They were able to carry on with their operations, albeit with modifications, because of their capacity to adapt to any circumstance or change. Additionally, disabled entrepreneurs demonstrated a distinct viewpoint in how they dealt with challenges, seeing them as chances for improvement. They were able to see and take advantage of fresh opportunities even in the middle of the pandemic by adopting change.

Weaknesses: COVID-19 created a number of problems for businesses managed by disabled entrepreneurs, most notably the decline in

commercial activities that hurt the company's overall profitability. These companies experienced a reduction in client numbers because of the reduced economic activity and travel restrictions, and subsequently a considerable drop in revenue. Meanwhile, these companies have to bear the additional costs associated with setting up the workplace in accordance with preventive measures, putting a further strain on their financial resources. The financial position of the companies worsened by the fall in cash flow and increased marketing expenses, delaying opportunities for development and expansion for some companies.

Opportunities: despite the difficulties, the pandemic also created new possibilities for businesses run by disabled entrepreneurs. Many of the companies easily managed their transition to online platforms with the use of technology. Businesses were able to access a wider client base and adjust to shifting consumer tastes by embracing digital transformation. In addition, some businesses found it beneficial to implement creative and innovative solutions during the pandemic since it allowed them to differentiate their goods and services and maintain market competition. By successfully adapting to the new business environment, companies were able easily deliver their goods and services, adopting new business concepts, enhance their financial performance, and cultivate their resilience.

Threats: SWOT analysis highlighted several threats to businesses, notably those that primarily depended on in-person contacts when they move their operations online. Meanwhile, the switch to digital platforms may have resulted in fewer clients for some companies. Given the uncertainties and disruptions brought on by COVID-19, it was also difficult to keep and satisfy clients during the pandemic. Overall, the stability and expansion of these companies were threatened by the changes in market dynamics, including variations in demand and supply, shifting client preferences, and developing marketing and promotional methods.

Table 1: SWOT Analysis of companies owned by disabled entrepreneurs during COVID-19

Strengths	Weakness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resilience (The ability to adapt to any situation or changes) Dealing with the obstacles as new opportunities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decreasing commercial activities. Decreasing the number of customers. Paying additional costs for preparing the workplace according to preventive procedures. Declining cash flow Extra costs for marketing

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital transition by shifting operations online. • Changing geographical location to increase clients' base. • Changing the way of producing and delivering goods or services. • Adopting new ideas to overcome challenges and improve financial performance. • Adopting creative and innovative solutions in business during the pandemic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using online tools puts companies with face-to-face client interaction at risk. • Difficulty in maintaining and satisfying customers during the pandemic. • Decreasing demand and supply due to changing customers' needs and tests. • Changing marketing or promotion tools and methods of presenting goods or services to customers.

Source: authors' own calculations.

5. Discussion

Our results reveal how it was difficult for disabled entrepreneurs to manage their business during the pandemic. The results show that many of these entrepreneurs experienced financial challenges that drastically reduced cash flow and placed pressure on finances. Our findings support the results of existing literature. For example, our findings support the findings of Devi et al who concluded that businesses owned by people with disabilities were harshly affected financially during COVID-19.³ These correlates well with the statement made by the CEO of Innovation Factory Company, which confirmed that during the pandemic, the decline in trade activities resulted in huge financial challenges to his business. Our results are also compatible with the finding of Rababah et al who concluded that social distance measures adopted by countries to control the spread of coronavirus contributed to huge decrease in economic activities.² The deterioration of the financial performance of some companies was also caused by their compliance with the preventive measures enforced upon companies, which caused an increase in their expenses. This finding is compatible with the hypothesis of Devi et al which assumed that COVID-19 had a detrimental effect on the company's liquidity.³ Brown et al added a worthy finding to our study as their result showed that the early-stage investment is affected financially more than last stage investment, where the last stage is mire resilience.⁶

In terms of policymaking and government support to companies owned by disabled entrepreneurs, our analysis revealed that the Omani government has not provided sufficient financial or logistical support tailored to disabled entrepreneurs. Our results also confirmed that there were no specific relief programs or financial aid packages designed specifically to meet their needs. This result contradicts with the findings of Howell et al who presented the UK government experience in assisting the business owned by disabled people, especially those in startup stage, through the

government-sponsored Future Funding Programme with £250 million.¹² We also found that the absence of specific policies and accessible facilities for disabled people during the pandemic made it very harder to maintain safety precautions and follow health regulations. In fact, Rababah et al warned against the lack of policies framework for disabled people and recommended at the end of their study that designing comprehensive policies by government bodies, financial institutions, and regulatory bodies during the pandemic is an essential action, if we are to successfully deal with any future crises.² While there was no attention from authorized institutions in Oman on designing a program or policy on the procedures and steps of launching a new business by people with disability, Prastowo et al show Indonesia experience in empowering disabled entrepreneurs during the pandemic.¹⁰ For instance, the Community of Entrepreneurs with Disability House hosted several events to exchange ideas and experiences of successful disabled entrepreneurs. Of course, Omani government introduced a number of initiatives, including rescheduling loans and tax deductions for various industries affected by the pandemic, but none of these initiatives was specifically targeting disabled entrepreneurs. Rababah et al who argued that the government could have adopted a strategy of rescheduling loans and tax breaks to assist entrepreneurs in running their business during the pandemic support our findings.² In addition, Brown et al found that the UK government designed a tailored plan to support companies owned by disabled persons through providing debit finance in term of loans.⁶

Moreover, our analysis found that precautionary procedures of COVID-19 caused difficulties in delivering goods and services to customers, which made it difficult to retain the customers during the pandemic. Our study also discussed possible dangers, such as the danger of declining client engagement because of online operations and challenges in sustaining customer satisfaction. This result is supported by the finding of Rababah et al

attributed the decrease in demand of goods and services to the effect of the pandemic on business activities.² In terms of online operations, our findings revealed some advantages and disadvantages of using online operations. We recommend that companies must try to find a balance between online and offline operations, utilizing technology to improve customer experiences while preserving the individualized touch that distinguishes face-to-face interactions to solve this issue. Although Prastowo et al recommended using online marketing strategy to adopt to market conditions during the pandemic.¹⁰ Our study found that using an online marketing strategy does not always fit every company because of its nature, especially for those companies that heavily depend on face-to-face interaction or direct marketing. This corresponds with the statement made by Al Bahlani who argued that "shifting toward conducting online workshops led to a decrease in the number of workshops, which forced us to close the studio two years and a half ago".²⁶

Despite all these challenges, our study confirmed that people with disabilities are resilience and enjoy a higher degree of adaptability in surviving the recession. Despite shortcomings like falling trade operations, fewer customers, and higher operational expenses, the CEO of Innovation Factory Company stressed that some "disabled entrepreneurs have the ability to adapt to any situation in quick way through innovation and creativity". The findings of Prastowo et al support the statement of the Omani CEO.¹⁰ They showed that the strategies adopted by disabled entrepreneurs in Indonesia during the pandemic tended to be more creative by using the social media. Our findings also confirmed that Omani disabled entrepreneurs saw the obstacles as a new opportunity for their business, hence focused on implementing digital technologies, changing the geographical area, changing the way they produce, display, and deliver products or services, and adopting new ideas to overcome persisting challenge. Prastowo et al and Mada recommended that disabled entrepreneurs could use vocational education to improve their knowledge in using digital business and acquire the necessary skills in the digital world.^{10,11}

This study has some important theoretical, policy and practical implications. Theoretically, this study improved our understanding of the effects of the pandemic on the companies owned by disabled entrepreneurs and increased our awareness of the important role played by disabled entrepreneurs in community development during the pandemic. It also draws the attention of the importance of

creating a comprehensive database on people with disabilities, which could be useful for the government to initiate potential policy measures and anticipate the consequences of future crisis on the performance of companies owned and managed by disabled entrepreneurs. Politically, this study could help policy makers to design appropriate policies and programs to help companies to overcome the economic and market challenges and minimize the effects of the pandemic. The study also has practical implications for disabled entrepreneurs and company executives to design and establish an alternative operational strategy to be put in place at the time of crises, while benefiting from supportive entrepreneurship programs and vocational education to improve their digital skills and implement digital transition.

6. Conclusion & Recommendations

This study presented some of the key challenges that affected companies owned by disabled entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 pandemic. It explained how disabled entrepreneurs adapted to the new market conditions posed by the pandemic and responded to some of the major obstacles faced their companies. Despite the negative effects of the pandemic on the companies' financial situations, marketing strategies, human resources, and capacity to develop and expand, our study emphasized the importance of key concepts and values that characterized companies owned by disabled entrepreneurs such as resiliency, adaptation, and creativity. While highlighting possible risks and dangers such as declining revenues and client engagement, the pandemic has provided new hopes for companies to turn the crisis into an opportunity through digital transition and online operations to overcome the consequences of the pandemic. The study also suggests that companies owned by disabled entrepreneurs should find a balance between online and offline operations, utilizing technology to improve customer experiences while preserving the individualized touch that distinguishes face-to-face interactions at the time of crises.

Moreover, our study makes some important recommendations. The first suggestion is the creation of an up-to-date and comprehensive database of the people with disabilities, including details on their entrepreneurial and economic activities. This will help the government to initiate and develop efficient policies and programs, including financial aid, mentorship programs, and capacity-building initiatives catered to address the needs of disabled entrepreneurs. Major stakeholders such as the government, public authorities, and business

associations must cooperate to foster a more welcoming business environment for people with disabilities and assist them to create and operate home-based enterprises. Home-based enterprises provide several benefits, including lower operating expenses and greater accessibility for business owners with impairments. This type of enterprises will not only encourage entrepreneurship, but it will also improve the disabled community's overall economic resilience in times of crisis. The suggested entrepreneurship training programs should cover a variety of topics, including as business ideation, planning, marketing, financial management, and using digital technology, and they should be specifically designed to solve the special needs and issues faced by people with disabilities. We also suggest promoting public-private partnerships to build a sustainable ecosystem for companies owned by people with disabilities. Collaborations between the government, businesses, and interest groups that

help disabled people to share resources, knowledge, and best practices.

Finally, our study acknowledges its own limitations. Our investigation was limited to a small sample in Oman, where no accessible database on people with disabilities existed to use for analysis. This forced us to collect primary data using personal networks to communicate with potential participants. We also faced communication problems with disabled respondents in term of speaking and using sign languages, while some participants refused to answer some questions due to their sensitivity and conservative attitudes. We end our analysis by suggesting ideas for future research including the examination of the attitude of people with disability towards entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial programs, and the quality of assistive technology and services offered for people with disabilities.

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Appendix 1: Variables and questions used in focused group discussions.

Variable	Questions
Financial Performance	<p>Q1. Are there any changes in (Profitability, Market share, the investment, revenues, debit) during COVID-19?</p> <p>Q2. What are the financial challenges that occurred in business during COVID-19?</p> <p>Q3. What were the actions taken toward overcome challenges?</p> <p>Q4. If you are to face these challenges again in the future, what will you do differently?</p> <p>Q5. What are the institutions and the type of financial support received during the pandemic?</p>
Policies	<p>Q1. What are the governmental roles to help disabled entrepreneurs to manage their business in the pandemic time?</p> <p>Q2. What policy measures have the government introduced to support disabled entrepreneurs in the crisis?</p>
Customer Retention	<p>Q1. How have you retained your customers during the pandemic?</p> <p>Q2. How have you responded to the changes in the market in terms of demand, supply, competition during the pandemic?</p> <p>Q3. How have you satisfied the customer needs during pandemic?</p>
Market	<p>Q1. Please explain how your company survived during COVID-19?</p> <p>Q2. How have you adjusted to the changes in Demand and Supply during COVID-19?</p> <p>Q3. How efficient are your products or services during the pandemic?</p>
Development	<p>Q1. What are the factors that helped you to improve your business during COVID-19?</p> <p>Q2. What are the resources needed to adopt new ideas in your business?</p> <p>Q3. What were the difficulties faced in developing the business during the pandemic?</p>