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**HARNESSING THE CAPABILITIES OF AUTISTIC
INDIVIDUALS THROUGH SOCIAL
ENTREPRENEURSHIP: INSIGHTS
FROM MALAYSIA'S CURRENT
ECOSYSTEM**



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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT AND ECONOMICS
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ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurship represents a novel methodology for tackling global social issues. Despite increasing global interest, less knowledge exists regarding how social enterprises efficiently utilize the abilities of autistic individuals, especially within the Malaysian context. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the realm of social entrepreneurship in Malaysia and examine how it creates social value for autistic individuals by recognizing the distinct problems they encounter. A qualitative methodology was employed, utilizing data gathered from semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation. A thematic analysis was performed on data collected from six social enterprises in the Klang Valley that predominantly assist autistic individuals. Findings reveal several key themes, such as high unemployment rates among autistic individuals, pathways to inclusion and empowerment, the existence of support systems, and structural challenges within the social entrepreneurship ecosystem. Notably, the study highlights the vital role of social enterprises in addressing these challenges by fostering skills development, social integration, and meaningful economic participation for autistic individuals. These findings also provide valuable insights for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers seeking to strengthen the role of social enterprises in supporting autistic individuals. While the findings are based on selected cases within the Klang Valley, they offer a foundation for broader exploration across diverse social enterprise contexts. Overall, these findings facilitate the development of more inclusive and responsive social entrepreneurship models that can help not only individuals with autism but also other marginalized communities





MEMANFAATKAN KEBOLEHAN INDIVIDU AUTISTIK MELALUI KEUSAHAWANAN SOSIAL: MENEROKA CABARAN, KEUPAYAAN, DAN IMPAK DALAM EKOSISTEM SEMASA MALAYSIA

ABSTRAK

Keusahawanan sosial merupakan pendekatan baharu dalam menangani isu-isu sosial di peringkat global. Walaupun minat terhadap bidang ini semakin meningkat di seluruh dunia, pengetahuan mengenai bagaimana perusahaan sosial secara efektif memanfaatkan kebolehan individu autistik masih terhad, khususnya dalam konteks Malaysia. Maka, kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidik landskap keusahawanan sosial di Malaysia dan meneliti bagaimana ia mencipta nilai sosial bagi individu autistik dengan mengiktiraf cabaran-cabaran unik yang mereka hadapi. Pendekatan kualitatif telah digunakan, dengan pengumpulan data melalui temu bual separa berstruktur, pemerhatian, dan dokumentasi. Analisis tema telah dijalankan terhadap data yang diperoleh daripada enam perusahaan sosial di Lembah Klang yang memberi tumpuan utama kepada sokongan terhadap individu autistik. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan beberapa tema utama, seperti kadar pengangguran yang tinggi dalam kalangan individu autistik, laluan ke arah keterangkuman dan pemerksaan, kewujudan sistem sokongan, serta cabaran struktur dalam ekosistem keusahawanan sosial. Kajian ini secara khusus menekankan peranan penting perusahaan sosial dalam menangani cabaran-cabaran ini melalui pembangunan kemahiran, integrasi sosial, dan penyertaan ekonomi yang bermakna bagi individu autistik. Dapatan ini juga memberikan pandangan yang berguna kepada pengamal, penggubal dasar, dan penyelidik yang ingin memperkukuh peranan perusahaan sosial dalam menyokong individu autistik. Walaupun dapatan ini berdasarkan kes terpilih di Lembah Klang, ia memberikan asas bagi penerokaan yang lebih meluas merentas pelbagai konteks perusahaan sosial. Secara keseluruhannya, dapatan ini dapat membantu pembangunan model keusahawanan sosial yang lebih inklusif dan responsif, bukan sahaja untuk individu autistik tetapi juga komuniti terpinggir yang lain.



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

IMet	1 Malaysia Entrepreneur
AIM	Agensi Inovasi Malaysia
AIM	Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
AS	Asperger Syndrom
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEM	General Entrepreneurship Monitor
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
ID	Intellectual Disability
IT	Information Technology
IIUM	International Islamic University Malaysia
JKM	Jabatan Kebajikan Malaysia
MaGIC	Malaysia Global Innovation and Creativity Centre
MED	Ministry of Economic Development
MEDAC	Ministry of Entrepreneurs Development and Cooperatives
MFI	Microfinance Institutions
MHE	Ministry of Higher Education





MOSTI	Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation
MRANTI	Malaysian Research Accelerator for Technology and Innovation
MSEB	Malaysian Social Enterprise Blueprint
MSMEs	Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises
NEP (2030)	National Entrepreneurship Policy
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization/Organisation
PPKI	Special Education Integrated Program
PWDs	Persons with Disabilities
RBV	Resource-Based View
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SE	Social Entrepreneurship
SE.A	Social Enterprise Accreditation
SEMy	Malaysia Social Entrepreneurship Blueprint
SMBs	Small and Medium-Sized Businesses
SPPP	Social Public-Private Partnership
SVC	Social Value Creation
TD	Typically Developed
TEKUN	Economic Fund For National Entrepreneur Group
TOMS	Tomorrow's Shoes
UN	United Nations
UiTM	MARA University of Technology





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UM	University of Malaya
UKM	National University of Malaysia
UPSI	Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris
USM	University of Science Malaysia
UTAR	Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman
WISE	Women in Social Enterprise
YUM	Yayasan Usaha Maju



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the contextual information necessary for readers to comprehend the concept of Social Entrepreneurship (SE) and its capacity to benefit underprivileged populations, particularly those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The chapter commences by presenting the problem statement, research questions, and their aims, the significance of the study, and the contextual definition of the term.

1.2 Background of the Study

ASD is a persistent neurodevelopmental illness characterised by chronic impairments in social interaction and communication, as well as repetitive and restrictive patterns of behaviour across diverse contexts (Lord et al., 2018). The World Health Organisation (2023) estimates a global prevalence of 1 to 5% and projects that by 2030, it will become a significant health concern, partially due to rising detection and diagnostic rates. In Malaysia, the Ministry of Health has reported that in 2021, a total of 589





children below the age of 18 received a diagnosis of autism. This figure represents a 5% rise compared to the previous year, when 562 children were diagnosed in 2020. Given this, Ip et al. (2018) have highlighted that raising autistic children involves navigating educational, medical, and psychological dimensions, particularly in environments where specialised resources are limited. Meanwhile, Vogan et al. (2017) highlighted that individuals with autism face several recognised obstacles. These challenges include uncertainty regarding the availability of support, feelings of being overwhelmed by the steps required to obtain assistance, difficulties in articulating their needs, unmet service requirements, and adverse experiences with healthcare systems and providers. Typically Developed (TD) children's parents and those with other disabilities commonly experience less stress in their lives and worry more about their children's future (Amireh, 2019; Porter & Loveland, 2019; Siu et al., 2019; Tucker et



Social justice is a key framework that emphasises the importance of fair treatment for autistic individuals. The approach contains numerous definitions of social justice (Blackmore, 2022). Blackmore defines social justice as the disruption and subversion of systems that foster marginalisation and exclusionary practices. Social justice advocates for a framework founded on respect, compassion, acknowledgement, and empathy. Social justice is characterised as the process of modifying institutional and organisational structures through the active reclamation, appropriation, sustenance, and promotion of fundamental human rights to equity, equality, and fairness across social, economic, educational, and personal spheres. Moreover, social justice is a social construct, asserting that "there are no fixed or predictable meanings of social justice





before actually engaging in educational leadership practices". Institutions and societal structures are considered socially just when they enable all individuals to participate fully and equally in society (Fraser, 2008). By considering Social Justice Theory, this research aims to examine the challenges faced by autistic individuals during adolescence, as identified in existing literature (Carter et al., 2014; Fleury et al., 2014; Lai et al., 2019; Simonoff et al., 2008; Visser et al., 2017), through the perspective of social enterprises.

Traditionally, autism research has relied heavily on proxy accounts from teachers, parents, clinicians, and siblings (Pellicano et al., 2014). However, these perspectives do not always align with or may differ from those of social enterprises, which offer unique insights into the real-world experiences and challenges faced by individuals on the autism spectrum. Scholars have emphasised the potential of SE to address deep-rooted social issues by empowering individuals who are often excluded from mainstream development (Peredo & McLean, 2006; Seelos & Mair, 2004; Thompson, 2002). In this context, social enterprises have emerged as key actors in supporting vulnerable groups, including autistic individuals, through innovative and inclusive practices (Palil et al., 2021). Thus, scholarly investigations delve into the realm of social enterprise, acknowledging its potential to effectively address the substantial challenges faced by autistic individuals by providing sustainable economic opportunities that are not easily accessible through conventional institutions. Most recently, Zivkovic (2024) emphasised that autistic-owned social enterprises can play a significant role in reshaping public perceptions of autism. By placing autistic individuals in leadership and decision-making roles, these enterprises challenge





traditional deficit-based narratives and instead highlight the unique skills, perspectives, and contributions of the autistic community. Through entrepreneurship, autistic individuals are empowered economically and positioned as capable agents of change, reframing autism from a condition of limitation to one of potential. This perspective supports the current study's focus on recognising social enterprises as platforms for empowerment, visibility, and inclusion for autistic individuals. Unfortunately, the topic of SE has attracted little attention in Malaysia over the years, despite its vast potential to create significant positive impacts on society and the environment (Abdul Kadir et al., 2019). The growth rate of SE is approximately 2%, which is relatively low compared to neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines (Wahid et al., 2018; Abdul Kadir et al., 2019). Countries such as the United Kingdom, South Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Myanmar, and Australia place significant importance on social enterprises as key national priorities.

In 2014, the Malaysian Global Innovation & Creativity Centre (MaGIC), which operates under the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives (MEDAC), provided a degree of support for SE in Malaysia (Mohd Nafi et al., 2021). In 2020, MaGIC was transferred to the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation (MOSTI), shifting its focus from Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) to prioritise technology- and technical-based start-ups. Based on the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021-2025), it aims to consistently develop the capacities of entrepreneurs, cooperatives, agriculture-based associations, social enterprises, and MSMEs. The newly proposed plan aims to foster the development of innovative and sustainable entrepreneurs by promoting inclusive participation through the involvement





of MSMEs, cooperatives, and agriculture-based associations. Additionally, the plan seeks to enhance the overall entrepreneurial ecosystem. Hence, the primary focus of social innovation is to prioritise the well-being of individuals and society, aiming to promptly identify suitable solutions and address them effectively (Mohd Nafi et al., 2021).

This research aims to comprehend the complex obstacles encountered by autistic individuals in Malaysia and critically analyses the responses of social enterprises to these challenges in order to enhance their overall well-being and quality of life. The objective is to examine the impact of social enterprises on the welfare of autistic individuals, specifically regarding their inclusion and societal engagement. This study examines the programs, strategies, and operational practices of specific social enterprises to understand how they empower autistic individuals through meaningful employment, vocational training, social engagement, and the cultivation of independent living skills. The research underscores the transformative capacity of social enterprises as a catalyst for social change. The study is situated within the evolving national policy frameworks, particularly the Malaysian Social Entrepreneurship Blueprint 2030, to offer pertinent insights for policymakers, practitioners, and advocates seeking a more inclusive and equitable society.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Numerous studies, both globally and locally, have examined the knowledge and attitudes toward autistic individuals among various stakeholders involved in their care.





Findings consistently indicate that parental knowledge about ASD is often insufficient and needs improvement (Effatpanah et al., 2019; Luleci et al., 2016). Guardians of children with ASD frequently encounter significant challenges and demands that exceed those experienced by guardians of neurotypical children or even children with other disabilities, such as Down syndrome (Abdullah et al., 2022b). Kamaralzaman et al. (2018) estimated that annual expenses for care, education, therapy, and daily living needs range from RM25,000 to RM35,000, approximately one-third of the national average household income (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020).

Beyond financial burdens, early identification and intervention remain difficult due to a shortage of trained professionals, inadequate infrastructure, and limited government support (Hui et al., 2021). Furthermore, studies have shown that low levels of public awareness and understanding of ASD contribute to delays in diagnosis and access to appropriate services (Ilias et al., 2017; Kaur et al., 2020). Although extensive research on autism has been conducted across various dimensions since 2012 (Zeidan et al., 2022), there remains a lack of comprehensive understanding of the capabilities of autistic individuals as a contributing factor to their socioeconomic status in Malaysia. This study aims to address this gap by exploring how the strengths and potential of autistic individuals can be better recognised and supported, particularly through the role of social enterprises. Without a thorough understanding of their unique needs and challenges, it is difficult to design policies that empower autistic individuals to reach their full potential. Moreover, research has increasingly sought to explore less stigmatising and non-deficit-oriented perspectives on autism, such as those promoted





by the neurodiversity movement, which redefines autism as a natural variation in cognition, processing, communication, and behaviour (Grinker, 2010; Kreck, 2013).

Existing research tends to focus on the medical or educational needs of autistic individuals, with limited attention given to how social enterprises navigate operational, financial, and policy-related challenges. Perhaps the research has yet to effectively capture the experiences of social enterprises working with autistic individuals. There may be unique challenges and successes that have not been adequately documented or understood. Further research and collaboration with social entrepreneurs in this field could provide valuable insights and strategies for better supporting autistic individuals. By amplifying the voices and perspectives of these entrepreneurs, research can work toward creating more inclusive and effective programs and initiatives for this community. Social enterprise has emerged as a prominent actor within the field of SE. The utilisation of social enterprise in this context serves to confront the economic downturn, identify instances of market failure, and generate novel solutions (Gigauri & Djakeli, 2021). In view of this, Mohd Nafi et al. (2021) revealed that the number of social enterprises in Malaysia exceeds 100, with a significant concentration in the Klang Valley, the nation's key economic region. Social enterprises have expanded their functions to address social concerns that the government sector has failed to resolve adequately (Palil et al., 2021). Palil et al. further underscored that the notion of social enterprise and its social impact are inadequately defined and experimentally substantiated. Additionally, Eiselein and Dentchev (2021) have emphasised that many social enterprises face challenges when scaling their ventures.





The majority of social enterprises are in the early stage, having been established by individual social entrepreneurs who face challenges in sustaining the organisation due to limited resources, support, and connections (Zahra et al., 2009). Kamaludin et al. (2021) explained that sustainability in social enterprises typically involves two key dimensions: the need for these organisations to endure and achieve financial robustness over time and the importance of attaining operational stability as a critical factor in ensuring long-term sustainability. The legitimacy of social enterprises is another factor that affects their sustainability, as it impacts their ability to attract funding and support from both investors and consumers. By upholding high standards of legitimacy, social enterprises can build a strong reputation and ensure their long-term success in creating positive social and environmental impact. Estrin et al. (2019) argued that measuring social impact helps social enterprises gain legitimacy and engage with stakeholders as well as establishes a baseline for managing their scaling efforts efficiently. Furthermore, Eiselein and Dentchev (2020), Roundy (2017), and Diaz-Gonzalez et al. (2020) suggested that researchers should further explore how social enterprises interact with different entities within the ecosystem, such as network organisations and universities, which are impacted by the scaling phenomenon. The primary responsibility of facilitating and enabling is with the public sector, while others provide financial investments through specific initiatives of interest (Bogacz-Wojtanowska et al., 2019).

In essence, sustainability, legitimacy, and collaboration are interrelated concepts, and assessing the effectiveness of social enterprises in addressing these areas remains a topic of ongoing debate. Despite the growing number of social enterprises in





the country, the SE ecosystem must be continuously evaluated and refined to ensure that these organisations are genuinely creating a positive impact on society. Gigauri et al. (2022) supported that conducting research across various national contexts and perspectives can lead to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and impacts of social enterprises in different parts of the world. Although numerous studies have explored social enterprises from various perspectives, research specifically examining their social impact remains limited (Palil et al., 2021). Moreover, the current literature often focuses on how social enterprises influence the well-being of individuals with autism and support their integration into society. Such research efforts can benefit individual nations like Malaysia as well as help identify best practices and lessons learned. These can be applied across borders to promote social and environmental sustainability through the advancement of social enterprises.



1.4 Objective of the Study

The research aims to comprehend the difficulties encountered by individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum conditions in Malaysia. Considering this insight, the researcher would like to examine how social enterprises contribute to the general well-being and fulfilment of individuals with autism by specifically addressing the distinct issues they experience. Hence, it is imperative to establish a specialised regulatory or legislative structure to foster a favourable environment that can fully harness the potential of SE. A favourable environment refers to the involvement of various social organisations and commercial sectors, alongside the public sector (government agencies), in enhancing social enterprises.



The researcher has succinctly outlined all the research aims as follows:

- i. To explore the current challenges faced by autistic individuals in Malaysia.
- ii. To explore the role of social enterprises in empowering autistic individuals by harnessing their capabilities.
- iii. To explore the capacity of social enterprises in Malaysia to generate social impact for autistic individuals within the current ecosystem.

1.5 Research Questions

General Questions:

- i. How do autistic individuals in Malaysia experience the challenges in their daily lives?
- ii. How are the capabilities of autistic individuals nurtured and expressed through their involvement in social enterprises?
- iii. How do social enterprises in Malaysia perceive their capacity to generate social impact for autistic individuals within the current ecosystem?

1.6 Significance of Study

Under the Twelfth Malaysia Plan, the government aims to address existing challenges while revitalising or restructuring Malaysia's socioeconomic development for long-



term viability and success. It embraces the principle of "Keluarga Malaysia" to progress by addressing the economy as the fundamental factor in enhancing the welfare of the people. Malaysia's National Entrepreneurship Policy 2030 (NEP 2030) promotes an inclusive society through social enterprises, now overseen by MEDAC. Hence, this study holds significant value in contributing to both the academic literature and practical applications related to social enterprises and autistic individuals in Malaysia. Despite the growing awareness of autism, there remains a gap in understanding the intersection between SE and ASD. By focusing on the role of social enterprises, this study seeks to shed light on how these organisations can enhance the lives of autistic individuals, promoting their inclusion, development, and well-being within Malaysian society.



Remarkably, the country's level of SE activities is deemed to be low, at 0.3%.



This suggests that knowledge of SE is insufficient, as indicated by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor. Research suggests that in Malaysia, the understanding of SE concepts or knowledge is confined to specific groups, including the public sector, the private sector, social entrepreneurs, practitioners, and beneficiaries. Hence, this research holds significance in expanding the reach of SE to broader demographics, beyond the typical limited groups in Malaysia. The understanding of SE should be regarded as an important component that holds the same value as other aspects of human existence. As such, this research provides a platform for underrecognized social firms to share their challenges, contributions, and potential. It brings attention to the operational realities of these enterprises, enabling greater visibility and appreciation of their role in supporting marginalised communities, particularly autistic individuals.





Ultimately, this research would be advantageous for the parents or caretakers of autistic individuals. Research would provide parents with knowledge on how to effectively interact with autistic individuals, as the majority of parents experience emotional frustration, physical or mental exhaustion, and economic vulnerability when caring for their children. This study is important as it corresponds with an expanding corpus of research aimed at investigating less stigmatising and non-deficit-oriented viewpoints on autism. Other than that, this research explores the concepts of the neurodiversity movement, which views autism as a natural difference in cognition, processing, communication, and behaviour. It challenges traditional deficit-based models and promotes a more inclusive understanding of autistic experiences. Therefore, this research aims to raise awareness among parents about the contributions of social enterprises to the marginalised community in Malaysia. Social enterprises play multiple roles beyond the typical enterprises in the lives of autistics, such as educator, employer, and supporter. By highlighting the positive impact of social enterprises on marginalised communities, parents may feel more supported and less stressed, knowing that resources are available to help their loved ones thrive. This research aims to empower parents with the knowledge and resources they need to better navigate the challenges they face.

Irrespective of the methodology employed, it is improbable for a study to overlook the government's involvement in fostering entrepreneurial drive through various initiatives carried out by Malaysian ministries. For the government, this study offers valuable insights into the structural and legislative challenges faced by social enterprises. By highlighting gaps in existing policies and identifying areas for





improvement, the findings can support more responsive and inclusive policymaking. In doing so, the study facilitates a stronger dialogue between policymakers and social enterprises, fostering collaboration and guiding the development of more effective SE policies. By examining the experiences and perceptions of social enterprise, the research identifies key gaps between policy intentions and the practical understanding of these initiatives on the ground. In doing so, it addresses prevailing misconceptions regarding the roles and objectives of relevant government agencies and ministries, particularly in relation to the promotion of SE under the framework of the NEP 2030. The findings of this study thus provide an evidence-based foundation for refining policy communication, coordination, and strategic alignment with the dual social and economic missions of social enterprises. Moreover, the study proposes an innovative, people-centric marketing strategy that may serve as a valuable tool for government bodies in raising public awareness and fostering greater engagement with SE. Collectively, these contributions support the formulation of a more coherent, inclusive, and impactful policy framework to advance the SE ecosystem in Malaysia.

This study is crucial for future research as it tackles the existing dearth of empirical investigations concerning social enterprises in Malaysia, specifically those that assist autistic individuals. This study distinguishes itself from prior research, which has primarily focused on the viewpoints of parents, educators, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and schools, by concentrating on the experiences and ideas of social enterprises—a frequently neglected yet essential stakeholder in supporting autistic individuals. This change in emphasis offers a distinctive perspective for comprehending the function of social businesses in meeting the requirements of





neurodiverse populations, enhancing overall comprehension of their influence and possibilities. Although policy documents, such as the Malaysian Social Enterprise Blueprint and other governmental resources, provide valuable strategic frameworks, they are inadequate in addressing the actual realities and issues encountered by social entrepreneurs operating in this domain. Moreover, this study utilises a qualitative case study methodology, facilitating a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the practices, motives, and issues faced by social entrepreneurs. The study employs data collection techniques, including interviews, observations, and document analysis, to gain subtle insights that are unattainable through quantitative approaches or policy evaluations alone. This method amplifies the perspectives of practitioners and illustrates the significance of qualitative research in comprehending intricate societal concerns. The findings provide a significant basis for future researchers, promoting extensive empirical investigation across many contexts, groups, and methodological approaches. This study addresses a significant gap in the literature. It establishes a foundation for more nuanced, inclusive, and evidence-based research that can enhance academic discourse, inform policy development, and guide practical interventions at the intersection of SE and neurodiversity.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

This research comprises several constraints that limit the overall generalisability of the findings and may not fully capture the complexity of SE practices in Malaysia. There are, as below:





This study focuses solely on autistic individuals in order to thoroughly examine the distinct difficulties, requirements, and prospects within this underserved population. By exclusively concentrating on autistic individuals, a comprehensive analysis of their particular experiences and views can be conducted, facilitating the development of tailored interventions and recommendations that effectively cater to their specific needs. The research aims to maintain clarity in addressing the complexity associated with ASD by focusing its attention on this specific group, thereby avoiding the dilution of findings.

The study utilised a limited number of participants who assisted autistic individuals in alignment with the research goals. The research sought to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences, methods, and effects of a specific category of contributors, namely social enterprises. By doing so, it attempted to offer nuanced insights into their roles within the ASD community. The researcher deliberately selected authors whose interests were closely aligned with the objectives of the study. This ensured that the study remained concentrated on crucial facets that are significant for comprehending the support networks accessible to autistic individuals.

Furthermore, the study failed to incorporate additional social sectors, such as NGOs, charitable organisations, and government sectors, which hold considerable influence in fostering social entrepreneurial initiatives inside Malaysia. The inclusion of social sectors beyond social enterprises in the study may introduce ambiguity and compromise the clarity of the research objective, thus detracting from the concentrated examination of the distinct mechanisms and impacts of social enterprises.





The study aims to utilise a qualitative research approach, namely, by conducting in-depth interviews with social entrepreneurs in Malaysia. The objective is to gain insights into their motivations, challenges, and strategies for achieving success. The research aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the distinct setting in which social entrepreneurs operate, focusing solely on them. Further investigation will be conducted to examine the influence of governmental policies, support networks, and cultural elements on the advancement of SE in Malaysia.

This study focuses solely on social enterprises rather than social entrepreneurs in order to preserve a distinct emphasis on comprehending the organisational structures, operations, and impact of social enterprises. Through the process of narrowing the scope, the objective is to thoroughly explore the distinct attributes and impacts of social enterprises, circumventing potential intricacies that may arise from a more comprehensive analysis of individual participants within the SE framework.

One of the limitations of this study is the challenge of generalising the findings beyond the specific social enterprises involved in this research. As qualitative research seeks to explore the unique experiences and challenges of individuals within a specific context, the insights gained may not be directly applicable to all social enterprises, particularly those operating in different cultural or geographical settings. Additionally, the relatively small sample size, which includes interviews with a limited number of social entrepreneurs, means that the conclusions drawn are based on a select group of perspectives, rather than a broad, statistically representative sample. While these limitations are inherent in qualitative research, the study's objective is not to provide

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generalizable data but to offer a deeper understanding of the specific challenges faced by social enterprises addressing autism-related issues.

1.8 Operational Definitions of Terms

- a. ASD is characterised by persistent challenges in social interaction, communication, and behaviour (Abdullah et al., 2022). Individuals diagnosed with autism often exhibit difficulties in understanding social cues, forming relationships, and engaging in reciprocal communication (Baron-Cohen et al., 1997).
- ii. Based on Mair and Marti (2006) and Dees (1998), SE is operationally defined in this study as the use of entrepreneurial strategies to solve societal and environmental problems sustainably. For this research, SE will be identified in organisations that apply commercial methods, such as selling products or services, with the explicit goal of creating long-term social or environmental benefits.
- iii. The social enterprise is a fundamental notion in this field that utilises commercial techniques to accomplish its social or environmental objectives (Nicholls, 2010). In addition, social enterprises prioritise the needs and well-being of specific target populations or communities, with the main objective of directly helping or benefiting them (Dacin et al., 2011). Social enterprises are characterised by their mission-driven strategy, which sets them apart from standard for-profit organisations. This approach emphasises their dedication to both financial sustainability and social



impact (Defourny & Nyssens, 2008). The notion revolves around a commitment to attaining concrete social influence, where success is evaluated based on financial indicators and the favourable results achieved for communities or the environment (Austin et al., 2006).

- iv. Social impact is typically defined as the value delivered to beneficiaries, society, and the globe that cannot be assessed in terms of economic profit for owners or consumer advantages for customers (Khare & Joshi, 2018). The effect can be characterised as the relationship between inputs (activities conducted by social businesses), outputs, and results for individuals or communities benefiting from the products or services provided by the social organisation (Ragan & Gregg, 2019). Perrini et al. (2021) defined social impact as the outcome of actions conducted by social entrepreneurs. The social impact refers to any significant or advantageous alteration that aids in mitigating or at least confronting societal inequities and challenges (Ricee, 2021).

- v. The SE ecosystem denotes a collection of interrelated elements—including networks, mentors, capital, policy and governance structures, and organisational culture—that together foster a supportive environment for the growth and sustainability of social enterprises (Acs et al., 2017; Spigel, 2017; Spigel & Harrison, 2018). These traits are influenced by several entities, including organisations and individuals, and are crucial for the success and sustainability of social enterprises (McMullen, 2018; Thompson et al., 2018; Zahra & Nambisan, 2012).



1.9 Summary

This chapter provides a comprehensive background of autistic individuals and their challenges in Malaysia. This study examines how social enterprises play a crucial role in promoting inclusion and providing support for the marginalised community. By highlighting the importance of social enterprises in addressing the needs of this community, this chapter aims to shed light on the potential solutions and opportunities for improving the quality of life for autistic individuals in the country. Through a detailed analysis of the current landscape and initiatives in place, this study seeks to offer valuable insights for policymakers, organisations, and communities to better understand and support autistic individuals in Malaysia.

