



How to cite this article:

Suresh, N., Arsalan, M. G., & Kesavan, N. (2024). Social entrepreneurship: Cracking the unknown phenomenon of individuals with autism spectrum disorder. *Jurnal Pembangunan Sosial*, 27, 89-107. <https://doi.org/10.32890/jps2024.27.5>

## **SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: CRACKING THE UNKNOWN PHENOMENON OF INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER**

**<sup>1</sup>Suresh Nodeson, <sup>2</sup>Arsalan M Ghouri &  
<sup>3</sup>Kesavan Nallaluthan**

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Management and Economics,  
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia

Faculty of Business and Finance,  
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>School of Business, London South bank University

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Management and Economics,  
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia

*<sup>1</sup>Corresponding author: suresh@utar.edu.my*

Received: 26/3/2024   Revised: 3/7/2024   Accepted: 30/7/2024   Published: 1/10/2024

### **ABSTRACT**

Despite numerous initiatives made by various organisations to increase employment opportunities for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), they remain unemployed. The unemployment rate for individuals with ASD remains high. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the employment challenges for individuals with ASD and develop innovative solutions to address them. This study selected six founders of social enterprises in Klang Valley, Malaysia, that target individuals with ASD as participants. The study uses a face-

to-face interview as a means of data collection. By implementing the thematic analysis, the study will uncover key themes and patterns that can inform future initiatives and policies to promote inclusion and diversity in the Malaysian workforce. These findings will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by marginalised groups and the strategies that can be implemented to address them effectively.

**Keywords:** Autism Spectrum Disorder, Social Entrepreneurship, Employment, Malaysia.

## INTRODUCTION

According to Lord et al. (2018), autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a chronic neurodevelopmental disorder that manifests as difficulty in social interaction and communication, as well as a repetitive and restrictive pattern of behaviour across various contexts. Autism research has prevailed globally, with significant progress in international policy. In addition to the policy response, there is a significant increase in worldwide awareness and advocacy, with individuals with ASD receiving acknowledgement in several critical areas, such as human rights, maternity, and mental health (World Health Organization [WHO] 2013a, b, 2015, 2018; WHO & UNICEF, 2018). In 2021, the Ministry of Health Malaysia reported a diagnosis of autism in 589 children aged 18 and below, marking a five percent increase from 562 children in 2020. However, in 2022, the Health Minister noted that in 2010, the Ministry only identified 99 children under the age of 18 as having ASD, a figure lower than the current statistics. Despite extensive research on autism in various dimensions since 2012, social challenges like economic self-sufficiency, independent living, and self-determination continue to remain insufficient, adding significant concerns for parents or caretakers of individuals with ASD (Zeidan et al., 2022). In addition, Tucker et al. (2017) highlighted that job opportunities for individuals with disabilities are still significantly lower than those for non-disabled individuals. Businesses worldwide, however, are identifying the unique talent of individuals with ASD and their contributions to the workforce (Autism Speaks, 2019). A programme called “Workplace Inclusion Now” is a collaboration between various subject experts, business leaders, and professionals with autism to increase employment opportunities and create an

appropriate work environment for individuals with ASD. Autism Speaks, Inc., a non-profit autism organisation, is involved with autism research in the United States, assisting in autism research, promoting autism, and conducting activities focusing on families, governments, and the public. There are hundreds of thousands of individuals identified as having ASD who are ready to join the workforce but are unfortunately still unemployed and cannot work to their full potential due to a lack of knowledge and processes, which never provide those on the spectrum opportunities to survive in the workplace.

Locally, the public sector employed 3782 persons with disabilities (PWDs), and from 1990 to 2018, the Ministry of Human Resources reported 14,252 PWDs. However, there is no official record of ASD individuals recruited in the public and private sectors (Ibrahim et al., 2021). The phenomenon in Malaysia presents a significant barrier for individuals with ASD to access employment opportunities. However, researchers have identified that social entrepreneurship (SE) can potentially address the lack of employment opportunities for individuals with autism. According to Saebi et al. (2018), social enterprises are called social ventures or hybrid organisations, as they address social objectives (such as educational growth, health, nutrition, and protection for marginalised societies) that create social value without ignoring profits and executing entrepreneurial ways or innovation methods (Chell et al., 2016; Corner & Ho, 2010; Dacin et al., 2010; McMullen & Warnick, 2016; Mair & Schoen, 2007). Furthermore, the prominent activities of social enterprises are trading, service delivery contracts, cross-sector partnerships, cultural arts, community development, education and employment skills training, childcare provision, community safety schemes, low-cost transport, recycling, infrastructure, and subsidised housing (Pearce, 2003). According to Arend (2020), social enterprises can create more job opportunities for individuals to become independent, and most of their social issues have been alleviated; this aligns with the present study. Sinthupundaja et al. (2020) added that social enterprises in Southeast Asia operate on a small scale and are keen to identify unemployment, provide necessary services, and protect the environment. This will be achieved through active stakeholders' participation in creating and managing the social enterprise and its governance structure and policies (Di Domenico et al., 2010). Therefore, social enterprises are embedded in and continuously committed to the communities they contribute to (Pearce, 2003). Although social enterprises have social

impacts, they also face challenges such as funding, scalability, and success measurement, similar to other Malaysian social sectors.

To assist this marginalised community, there is an urgent need to investigate appropriate alternatives to enhance the well-being of individuals with ASD in Malaysia. Recognising the contributions of social enterprises towards marginalised societies, this study's researchers believe that social entrepreneurs could produce insightful inputs for this research topic. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the challenges and barriers faced by individuals with ASD. Understanding the specific social barriers that individuals with ASD face will pave the way to garner more attention from the public and social media. The present study employs a qualitative approach to understand the ASD social challenges from the perspective of social entrepreneurs. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with social entrepreneurs to gather insights on their experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, the research gap requires academics to provide significant empirical evidence to upcoming practitioners, enabling them to better plan their social enterprises and create social impacts for other marginalised groups in communities.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Autism Spectrum Disorder**

Autism and pervasive developmental disorders (PDDs) exhibit a high level of complexity and variability in their clinical presentation and manifestation. Adolescents and young adults diagnosed with ASD may exhibit challenges in displaying fundamental social etiquette, comprehending social intentions, recognising nuanced emotional states in themselves and others, and predicting the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of others, even in relatively uncomplicated social contexts (Zager et al., 2012). The scholars added that individuals may pose atypical, excessively intimate, or rhetorical enquiries to obtain factual knowledge about a specialised area of interest. They may also seek frequent validation over trivial matters or make embarrassing attempts to showcase affability (Zager et al., 2012). Individuals with ASD may express statements that others perceive as provocative, abrupt, or without sensitivity, even though this was not their intended purpose. The tendency to engage in highly literal

and concrete issue solutions may manifest in socially inappropriate language and conduct. This approach often requires an understanding of the importance of taking into account extenuating circumstances, exceptions to established norms, and the individualised needs and preferences of others. Numerous research studies have provided evidence of deficits in social cognition, including empathy, emotion perception, and inference, among individuals diagnosed with autism (Zager et al., 2012). Although autism is frequently identified initially due to delayed or atypical speech development, there is considerable overlap between the early language impairments associated with autism and those observed in other disorders (Beitchman & Inglis, 1991; Bishop & Adams, 1989). Therefore, while language proficiency is crucial for individuals with autism to communicate effectively, it is worth noting that impairments in expressive language during the early preschool years are not exclusive to autism (Cantwell et al., 1989). An autism diagnosis can frequently be established based on a comprehensive assessment of a child's early social history and object utilisation without necessarily considering any delays in language development (Cohen et al., 1993; Siegel et al., 1989). The distinction between higher and lower-functioning individuals with autism in older age groups and adults was significantly influenced by their expressive language level at the age of 5, as observed by Rutter in 1970.

Since the initial definition of autism as a disorder, restricted repetitive and stereotyped behaviours (RRBs) have consistently been recognised as a fundamental characteristic of autism, alongside the primary symptoms of social and communicative difficulties (Asperger, 1944; Kanner, 1943). After over six decades, the fundamental nature of this perspective has remained unaltered. Nevertheless, there has been a growing challenge to the pivotal role of RRBs in autism's diagnostic characterisation. It has significant consequences for the practical and policy aspects of diagnosis, prevalence estimation, and intervention (Lord & Bishop, 2010). RRBs refer to patterns of behaviour that are limited in range and often repeated (Zager et al., 2012). These behaviours are typically seen in individuals with certain neurodevelopmental disorders, such as ASD. RRBs can include repetitive movements, insistence on uniformity, and intense interest in specific topics or objects. The research descriptions have primarily followed the classifications provided by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed.; DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) and the International Classification of

Diseases (10th rev.; ICD-10; World Health Organization, 1993). The classification systems establish the diagnostic criteria for pervasive developmental disorders (PDDs), which encompass the following conditions: autistic disorder, Asperger's syndrome, atypical autism, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS). These diseases are typically classified as ASD.

## **Social Entrepreneurship**

Social entrepreneurship (SE) has been an established topic since the 1950s, but has become popular within the past decade and an influential figure in the literature stream (Bowen, 1953). It is essential to highlight a significant difference between commercial and social entrepreneurship in terms of value proposition. Commercial entrepreneurs produce goods and services to maximise profits (Martin & Osberg, 2007). A commercial entrepreneur or founder expects a financial return by trading off the innovation, risk-taking, and creativity they invested in a business venture (Martin & Osberg, 2007). Meanwhile, social entrepreneurship focuses on targeting large-scale transformative advantages for marginalised or disadvantaged groups, benefiting entire communities or a large number of communities (Martin & Osberg, 2007). SE is a popular subject to study because it has been connected to many other fields (Saebi et al., 2018), such as combatting poverty (Bloom, 2009; Ghauri et al., 2014), empowering women in society (Datta & Gailey, 2012), promoting social change (Alvord et al., 2004), allowing everyone to benefit from growth in subsistence markets (Ansari et al., 2012; Azmat et al., 2015), and discovering reasons for institutional change (Nicholls, 2008). It further stated that SE has a strong relationship with other phenomena, such as charity and philanthropy (Acs et al., 2013), sustainability and corporate social responsibility (Al-Marri et al., 2019), social innovation (Philips et al., 2019), and commercial entrepreneurship (Austin et al., 2006; Lurtz & Kreutzer, 2017; Mair & Marti, 2006; Schneider, 2017).

SE concluded that identifying, defining, and seizing opportunities to improve social well-being through new institutions or emerging organisations employing innovative strategies is crucial (Zahra et al., 2009). SE has extended its influences across the non-profit, public, and private sectors through innovation to reach social value (Austin et al., 2006). Private sectors involved in SE tend to operate businesses more

ethically and transparently to meet stakeholders' expectations (Adnan et al., 2018). The entities would act beyond traditional corporate responsibility programmes to deliver social value and innovation to help marginalised groups (Roper & Cheney, 2005). SE allows the government to be proactive and focused on integrating public demands and expectations in delivering public services and goods (Adnan et al., 2018). Strict procurement and processing procedures overwhelm government ministries, agencies, and their divisions, delaying the delivery of public goods or services (Adnan et al., 2018). As such, the government is gradually transferring its responsibilities to relevant social enterprises via the social partnership model (Roper & Cheney, 2005). Non-profit sectors usually operate in associations, clubs, voluntary organisations, or charities to help marginalised individuals without expecting economic benefits (Adnan et al., 2018). Social enterprises originated from NGOs, yet social enterprises have unique business models right from the establishment of the enterprises (Adnan et al., 2018). Moreover, NGOs differ from social enterprises because they need the capability to generate revenue and innovation to solve social issues (Adnan et al., 2018).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The researchers have employed a case study approach to extensively investigate a wide research domain without depending on pre-established topics or questions to guide the discussion. Creswell (2009) identified four primary data-gathering techniques in qualitative studies: observation, interviews, documentation, and audio-visual materials. Accordingly, semi-structured interviews were used as the main method to engage with the research issue from the participant's perspectives and insights, thus enriching their comprehension. This study used snowball sampling in data collection from seven social entrepreneurs in Klang Valley, Malaysia, as shown in Table 1 below. Other primary data were collected by reviewing each organisation's documents and observing the permitted access sites. Secondary data such as books, scholarly journals, magazine articles, and newspapers were also utilised to supplement the primary data collected.

**Table 1**

*List of Social Enterprises in Klang Valley*

No	Case Code	Social Enterprise	Descriptions
1	A	Autism Café project	The Autism Café project engages in the catering business, employing individuals with ASD as its beneficiaries.
2	B	Stand Pie Me	Stand Pie Me is a social enterprise that provides employment to young adults with special needs in the food production sector.
3	C	Seven Tea One Sdn. Bhd.	Seven Tea One is an accredited social enterprise that provides a safe, inclusive, and non-discriminatory platform for differently abled individuals from marginalised communities to learn employment skills and earn dignified income for sustainable living.
4	D	TenderTouch	TenderTouch is a social enterprise that provides specialised physiotherapy and rehabilitation services for children.
5	E	Kindness Cookies	Kindness Cookies is a bakery-café that functions as a simulated setup to uplift and empower learning-disabled students with basic and commercial cooking skills.
6	F	Infinite Minds	Infinite Minds is an academy that conducts digital tech programmes for individuals with special needs, empowering them to obtain the necessary skills to be able to sustain themselves economically without having to be dependent on government aids or handouts from anyone.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis in a systematic, organised, and transparent manner is essential despite the common perception that qualitative research is less reliable than quantitative research (Galleta, 2013). Therefore, an effective approach is crucial to accurately analysing and interpreting the data. One way to achieve this is to use coding techniques to categorise and organise the information collected. Given this, Braun and Clarke (2006) highlighted the use of thematic analysis as a fundamental method in qualitative analysis. This method aims to reveal recurring themes or patterns in data collection, such as interviews, observations, papers, diaries, or websites being analysed

(Saunders et al., 2019). Thematic analysis, also an effective method for examining extensive qualitative data sets, employs a methodology that yields comprehensive descriptions, explanations, and theories (Saunders et al., 2019). Typically, qualitative research generates well-written material through transcripts and field notes. The researcher's investment of time and effort is necessary for the systematic and thorough preparation of qualitative studies (Zamawe, 2015). Thus, to alleviate the researchers' burden, this study employs the Nvivo software to expedite the analysis of themes. In addition, the software helps the researchers by eliminating the need for laborious transcription and improving the precision and efficiency of the analytic process. Nvivo 12, the most recent version, facilitates the management and organisation of data analysis by assisting researchers in comprehending vast amounts of data contained in interview transcripts.

## RESULT

During the qualitative data's thematic analysis process, the main emerging topic was barriers to employment for autistic individuals in Malaysia. This topic is further divided into sub-themes, often known as child nodes, including skills and education gaps, as well as the lack of workplace accommodations. Skills and education gaps were identified as a significant barrier for autistic individuals seeking employment, as many struggle to access appropriate training and education opportunities. Additionally, the lack of workplace accommodations was highlighted as a key issue, with many autistic individuals facing discrimination and a lack of understanding from employers.

### **Barriers to Employment**

During the qualitative data's thematic analysis process, the topic of employment familiarity emerged. This subject encompasses a range of issues that prevent further progress. This topic is further divided into sub-themes, often known as child nodes, including policy/red tape/bureaucracy, lack of public awareness, and lack of training. Through a methodical process of encoding and categorising these underlying themes, the analysis provides a wider picture of the issues that impede progress and offers accommodating solutions to deal with and overcome these problems.

## Skills and Education gaps

Findings show that individuals with ASD are continually facing more challenges as they enter adulthood compared to normal individuals without disabilities. The critical issue is that employers are not ready to hire autistic individuals because of their limited ability to complete job-related tasks. Despite the potential that individuals with ASD may bring to the workplace, employers often overlook their skills and strengths. As per the comment below:

*No, they've not been marginalized. It's just that their opportunities, particularly in terms of work, are significantly limited due to health conditions. The second point is that the government is making every effort. Well, I guess they have this 1% of OKU staff in the workplace. (Case A)*

Proficient communication with colleagues, superiors, or clients is a prerequisite for many occupations. Individuals with autism may experience difficulties in seeing and comprehending social cues, non-verbal communication (such as body language or facial expressions), or participating in casual conversation. One participant expressed the following opinion:

*They look like normal people. They don't have physical impairments. They are just like normal people, except that they have a condition known as mental impairment. As a result, they are unable to pursue any employment opportunities. Many of them have lived at home for more than 10 years without a job. We are encouraging all parents to at least allow their children to face the real world. Lack of social skills and lack of academic background make it impractical to join the workforce. (Case B)*

## Lack of Workplace Accommodation

Another obstacle encountered in the realm of employment is the establishment of a range of responsibilities for individuals with mental disabilities. One participant expressed dissatisfaction with

the current work environment or job responsibilities for those with ASD. According to the findings, the job assignment is frequently not customised to the individual's requirements or capabilities, resulting in feelings of incompetence and annoyance. The absence of suitable provisions can lead to heightened stress and diminished job contentment among individuals with ASD, eventually impeding their capacity to thrive in the professional environment.

*They could only temporarily sustain themselves in the organisation due to poor job matching. My students graduated from the IT field, which is primarily animation and graphics. These talented people were assigned to the marketing department, which did not match their education. Until now, they have not been able to showcase their talents in organisations. (Case F)*

In line with this, another participant also expressed his frustration:

*While their computer job presents no issues, they are unable to work anywhere. Several months will pass before they are fired from the company. They have to do job tasks on their own. No one should control them. However, which company will allow them to do that? Each company will say that one must follow instructions. They can do it, but we must give them space. (Case C)*

Participants have expressed discontent with the lack of support available for individuals with ASD since job scopes developed for them have not been customised accordingly. Furthermore, institutions fail to understand the characteristics of autism, so they treat autistic individuals like normal people. Instead, individuals with ASD should be treated differently or assigned suitable job tasks based on their organisational skills and talent. The following comment was provided by one participant:

*As you can see in GOLD, we have many children with autism, as well as those with Down syndrome and other types of disabilities. Yes, they are a marginalised group in our community. Our community is not aware of autism. As I said earlier, there is no awareness of social entrepreneurship and autism issues in Malaysia.*

*The job matching process for individuals with autism is inadequate. I have sent a few of them to a company. I was working on an attachment programme. They assign someone to take care of these children, but they lack the skills to properly care for them. It is just cheap branding. They are hiring students solely for the purpose of inexpensive branding. They do not even match the job according to their capabilities. In the end, the autistic individuals suffered and were terminated from their jobs.*  
(Case D)

Furthermore, some organisations recruit or hire individuals with ASD for specific reasons to gain financial benefits from the government. This initiative has prompted some organisations to seek out individuals with ASD to take advantage of such financial incentives. However, a suitable working environment is not prepared for individuals with ASD. Without proper support and accommodations, these individuals struggle to perform at their best and could face discrimination or mistreatment in the workplace. One participant commented the following:

*However, the issue lies in employers' clear desire to hire these marginalised individuals. They want to hire them because if companies hire differently-abled individuals, they will be eligible for tax exemptions. There is a hidden agenda behind the management's decision to hire OKU individuals within their organisations.* (Case E)

In summary, the participant contends that individuals with ASD have been disregarded as a result of prejudices or preferential treatment within these organisations. Parents are determined in their pursuit of finding a means for their children to be acknowledged and provided the opportunities they deserve. The participant intends to champion the cause of marginalised communities and advocate for more inclusive and fair opportunities within these organisations.

## DISCUSSION

Autism spectrum disorder is not a pathological condition but rather a cognitive style that diverges from the norm. Individuals may

experience difficulties engaging in social relationships and accurately understanding and utilising nonverbal and spoken communication forms. Nevertheless, according to this study, individuals with ASD possess unique capabilities that are not commonly known by the general population. In addition, individuals with ASD are dependent on their parents or guardians in their lives, leading to limited independence and financial stability. Moreover, parents frequently choose to keep intellectually disabled adolescents, including those with autism, at home because they lack the necessary support and direction to prepare them for life outside. As a result, the unemployment rate among Malaysians with mental disabilities is alarmingly high, with only a small percentage of them employed. Furthermore, findings reveal there is a huge gap between the demand and supply of job opportunities for mentally disabled individuals in Malaysia. However, individuals with ASD who are already employed in organisations also face countless challenges. The limitations impede their ability to fully integrate and succeed in the workplace.

Evidence shows that several individuals with ASD had short-term rather than long-term working experience in the private sector. This trend could be attributed to a variety of factors, such as challenges with social interactions and sensory sensitivities in the workplace that may make it difficult for individuals with ASD to sustain long-term employment. Furthermore, they often face discrimination and lack of understanding from their colleagues and supervisors. In fact, the major barrier to employment for individuals with ASD is the lack of experience and awareness among employers about how to support and accommodate their unique needs. This lack of knowledge often leads to misconceptions about the abilities and potential contributions of individuals with ASD in the workplace. Without proper education and awareness, employers may overlook the unique skills and abilities that individuals with ASD can bring to the workforce. This lack of understanding often results in workplace discrimination and exclusion, making it difficult for individuals with ASD to secure stable employment. Therefore, social enterprises were included in the present study because of their increased awareness and expertise in handling these matters with caution. Social enterprises, with their limited resources, require assistance in fully addressing unemployment problems among disabled citizens. Furthermore, the participants have divulged their encounters and challenges regarding the work prospects for adolescents with autism, specifically in obtaining

suitable opportunities that cater to their distinct requirements and capabilities. Many autistic individuals have voiced dissatisfaction with conventional employment prospects that do not align with their areas of expertise.

The participants also criticised and commended the government for persuading the private sector to hire individuals with ASD by offering financial benefits such as tax exemptions. However, the findings show no significant increase in employment rates for individuals with ASD. In addition, organisations misuse the financial benefits and do not provide a proper working environment to individuals with ASD. This has led to frustration among those with ASD who are seeking meaningful employment opportunities. Many feel that the government must do more to regulate how organisations utilise these incentives and ensure that individuals with ASD are provided fair and equal opportunities in the workforce. Without proper oversight and enforcement, the efforts to increase employment rates for individuals with ASD may continue to fall short of expectations. Moreover, the limited employment duration of autistic individuals in the private sector may also be attributed to employers' lack of appropriate accommodations and understanding. As efforts continue to increase awareness and create inclusive workplaces, it is hoped that more individuals with ASD will have the opportunity to have long and successful careers in the private sector. Furthermore, job discrimination occurs when the management treats employees with distinctive or abnormal characteristics differently. There are no opportunities for individuals on the spectrum to reveal their hidden talents and skills to the public. Indeed, the findings contradict the old paradigm that individuals with ASD are functional and can work well at their jobs. Institutions must recognise the unique strengths and challenges of individuals with ASD and provide them with the necessary support to thrive in the workplace. By fostering a more inclusive and accommodating environment, organisations can tap into the potential of individuals with ASD and create a more diverse and talented workforce.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate the challenges that individuals with ASD face in Malaysian communities. Fundamentally, employment

opportunities for disabled individuals are a common social issue, and individuals with ASD are not exempt from these challenges. Without workplace understanding and accommodations, they may struggle to secure and maintain employment. This highlights the need for greater awareness, education, and support systems to create a more inclusive and accepting environment for individuals with ASD in Malaysia. In addition, empirical evidence of SE's importance will effectively promote SEs and raise awareness of ASD in Malaysian society, which is currently at an early stage of development compared to other nations. As such, future studies are recommended to investigate the social impacts of social enterprises towards individuals with ASD in Malaysia to further understand the effectiveness of these support systems. Moreover, incorporating feedback from individuals with ASD themselves can help tailor these accommodations to better suit their needs and preferences. Further research in this area will be needed to shape the country's policies and practices that support the employment and well-being of individuals with ASD.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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