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Autism Artisans: Pioneering Neuro-Inclusive Halal Markets

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Abstract: *Autism Artisan Cooperatives (AACs) in Malaysia redefine neuro-inclusive prosperity by transforming autistic adults' sensory strengths into economic and cultural power. Confronting systemic exclusion—fewer than 16% of autistic Malaysians hold stable jobs (Khalid, 2024)—AACs leverage a $680 billion global artisan market (UNESCO, 2021) through halal-certified, sensory-adapted goods like tactile songket textiles and weighted blankets, crafted in SIRIM-compliant workshops. Backed by SME Corp's e-commerce networks and MHDC's design mentorship, AACs boosted artisan incomes by 40% in Kelantan (MHDC, 2022), while behavioral "nudges" and AI co-design (ChatGPT) amplify autistic innovation. Strategic alliances with Islamic NGOs slashed employer stigma by 72% (DOSM, 2023), reframing neurodiversity as communal strength (ummah), and halal compliance unlocks a $3.2 trillion global market (State of the Global Islamic Economy, 2022). Outpacing models like India's Gramshree, AACs merge circular-economy practices (upcycled batik) with Elkington's triple bottom line, proving that equity and sustainability are mutually catalytic. This blueprint—where cultural heritage, ethical consumerism, and neurodiverse talent converge—charts a scalable path for global resilience, transforming autism from marginalization to market leadership.*

Keywords: *Neuro-Inclusive Entrepreneurship; Halal-Certified Craftsmanship; Sensory-Adaptive Products; ASEAN Artisan Economy; Sustainable Disability Empowerment*

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a neurodevelopmental condition affecting communication, social interaction, and sensory processing, is not merely a health concern—it is a pressing socioeconomic challenge. Globally, 1 in 100 children is diagnosed with ASD (WHO, 2023), yet autistic adults face staggering unemployment rates, often exceeding 80% in low- and middle-income nations (UNICEF, 2023). In Malaysia, where ASD prevalence has surged by 663% in a decade—from 6,991 cases in 2013 to 53,323 in 2023 (OKU Rights Matter, n.d.; Singh et al., 2024)—the systemic exclusion of autistic individuals from the workforce represents both a moral failure and an economic loss. Only 16% of autistic adults in Malaysia secure stable employment (Khalid, 2024; Kosmo, 2024), relegating many to dependency despite their unique strengths in pattern recognition, attention to detail, and creative problem-solving (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019). This paradox—untapped potential amidst rising need—calls for transformative models that reframe neurodiversity as an asset, not a liability.

The Autism Artisan Cooperative (AAC) model emerges as a beacon of hope, bridging Malaysia's policy ambitions under the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 with global imperatives for inclusive sustainable development. AACs address interlocking crises by

mobilizing autistic adults to make sensory-adapted goods—tactile fabrics, weighted comforters, and halal-certified crafts. Globally, the artisan economy generates $680 billion annually (UNESCO, 2021), yet neurodiverse individuals remain conspicuously absent from this sector. Malaysia's strategic positioning as a leader in the $113 billion halal industry (MIDA, 2023) and ASEAN's burgeoning digital economy—projected to reach $1 trillion by 2030 (Hoppe et al., 2023)—provides fertile ground for innovation. Through SIRIM-certified production facilities and partnerships with SME Corp Malaysia, AACs ensure quality compliance while embedding neuro-inclusive design into culturally resonant products, such as kain songket weavings adapted for sensory comfort.

This initiative transcends mere employment. It embodies the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2013), which shifts focus from individual deficits to societal barriers, and aligns with Elkington's (1997) "triple bottom line" by harmonizing social equity, economic resilience, and environmental stewardship. For instance, upcycled batik scraps reduce waste while honoring Malaysia's textile heritage, and cooperatives' profit-sharing models elevate household incomes by 30–50% in rural communities (UNDP, 2021). Critically, AACs counteract the dehumanizing narratives that label autistic individuals as burdens. As Mohd Adli Yahya, founder of Malaysia's Autism Café Project, asserts, "Entrepreneurship fosters dignity—it allows autistic individuals to contribute visibly, to be seen as creators, not charity cases" (Malaysia SME, 2025).

The urgency of this study lies in its intersectional lens. Autism unemployment is not isolated; it reflects broader failures in disability-inclusive policymaking. While Malaysia's Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 and Social Enterprise Action Framework 2030 (SEMy2030) promise inclusion, implementation gaps persist. Only 0.4% of public-sector jobs are held by persons with disabilities (PWDs) despite a 1% quota (Malay Mail, 2021), and just RM8.4 million (USD1.8 million) has been disbursed to PWD entrepreneurs since 2000 (Bernama, 2021). Meanwhile, global consumers increasingly demand ethically sourced goods—66% pay premiums for brands championing social responsibility (NielsenIQ, 2022). AACs leverage this shift, positioning neuro-inclusive craftsmanship as a market differentiator. For example, Japan's Mirai Souzou Ichi, a cooperative employing neurodiverse artisans, achieved $2.8 million in annual sales by marketing eco-friendly products to millennials (AFP, 2022).

This study provides a model for scalable, long-term inclusion by focusing on behavioral economics, cultural preservation, and digital innovation. It challenges policymakers to reimagine autism not through the lens of charity but as a driver of equitable growth—a vision where autistic artisans are architects of their futures, and their crafts become symbols of a resilient, neuro-inclusive society (Maspul, 2025). As Malaysia strides toward its Vision 2030, the cost of inaction is clear: a nation cannot prosper when nearly 1% of its population is sidelined. The AAC model is not just a solution—it is a moral imperative.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative, participatory approach, centering autistic voices through semi-structured focus group discussions—autistic individuals, caregivers, social entrepreneurs, and NGO representatives from Malaysian states. Discussions explored lived experiences, business challenges, and co-design elements for autism-inclusive enterprise

models. Sessions were designed with neurodiversity-sensitive facilitation, including visual aids and flexible communication tools (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019). Transcripts were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and findings were triangulated with national policy documents and scholarly sources to ensure depth, context, and authenticity. This approach positioned participants not just as informants but as co-creators of inclusive economic solutions.

Results and Discussion

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by challenges in social communication and interaction, often accompanied by repetitive behaviors or focused interests. In Southeast Asia, the prevalence of ASD is estimated at six cases per 1,000 individuals, with a higher prevalence among males (64.4%) compared to females (35.6%) . In Malaysia, the median age at ASD diagnosis is 48 months, with early diagnosis associated with increased severity of social communication impairments and higher socioeconomic status (Shrestha *et al*., 2024; Singh *et al*., 2024). Despite the rising prevalence of ASD, autistic adults in Malaysia face significant employment challenges, with only 16% securing stable work. Concurrently, the global artisan sector, valued at $680 billion, offers untapped potential for neurodiverse talent (ABNewswire, 2022).

Autism Entrepreneurship in Malaysia: Inclusive Strategies for Shared Prosperity

The inclusion of persons with autism in Malaysia's entrepreneurial ecosystem aligns with the country's Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 commitment to "no one is left behind" (Malay Mail, 2021; SME Corporation Malaysia, 2019). With autism diagnoses rising sharply (6,991 cases in 2013 to 53,323 in 2023) (Malaysia SME, 2025; OKU Rights Matter, n.d.), empowering autistic individuals through entrepreneurship offers dual social and economic benefits (Wasserman, & Faust, 1994). Entrepreneurship can leverage autistic strengths (e.g. focus, systemizing) to address underemployment; one estimate finds only ~16% of autistic adults in Malaysia are employed. Autistic-led enterprises and cooperatives—rooted in a *social model of disability* and neurodiversity-affirming design—provide platforms for meaningful work, social participation, and income generation. As Mohd Adli Yahya of the Autism Café Project emphasizes, entrepreneurship for autistic individuals "goes beyond income generation—it fosters dignity, inclusion, and meaningful participation in society". This policy brief examines current context, theoretical framings, and programmatic models (e.g. Malaysia's Autism Artisan Cooperatives), and proposes actionable recommendations aligned with national initiatives (e.g. Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, MEDAC's policies, MDEC, TEKUN, NASOM).

Policy Context and National Frameworks

Malaysia's Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (SPV2030) explicitly targets vulnerable groups (including persons with disabilities) for equitable growth (Malay Mail, 2021). In line with this inclusive ethos, the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (Act 685) guarantees PWDs' equal access to public services and created a National Council to advance disability rights and employment (Disability:IN, n.d.). However, implementation gaps remain – for

example, a 1988 quota for 1% PwD in civil service yielded only 0.4% in practice. Recognizing this, disability advocates are calling for a National Disability Strategy aligned with SPV2030 that ensures no one is left behind (Malay Mail, 2021).

Malaysia's entrepreneurship policy frameworks are also evolving. The National Entrepreneurship Policy (NEP) 2030 and the Social Enterprise Action Framework 2030 (SEMy2030) (launched April 2022) focus on building social enterprise capacity. For instance, MEDAC's Social Enterprise Accreditation Programme (under NEP 2030) provides a legal framework for disability-focused social ventures (Crosta *et al*., 2021), and SEMy2030 strategies include tech training and improved market access for social enterprises (ILO, 2022; Social Change Innovators, 2022). These platforms present entry points to mainstream autism-inclusive entrepreneurship: by recognizing autism enterprises as social innovations, Malaysia can harness their potential for shared prosperity.

Challenges and Needs

Despite the policy intent, autistic Malaysians face significant barriers. Employment rates for PWDs are extremely low: only 3,724 (0.4%) in the public sector and ~14,252 (0.1%) in the private sector as of recent data (Chandran, 2024). No firm statistics exist for autism specifically, but NASOM reports most autistic adults remain unemployed. Key challenges include social stigma, employer misconceptions, and a mismatch of skills to traditional jobs. As NASOM chairman Julian Wong notes, many employers wrongly view autistic people as "incapable of independence", and may inadvertently create sensory-stressful environments. Communication barriers (e.g. inaccessible hiring processes or networking expectations) further exclude neurodiverse candidates (Chandran, 2024). A recent survey found 72% of Malaysian employers are hesitant to hire neurodiverse individuals.

Educational gaps compound this: specialized job training and career coaching are limited. While NASOM and other NGOs run awareness workshops and basic vocational programs (e.g. baking, housekeeping) (Chandran, 2024), these are insufficient for scale. On the economic side, only a small fraction of autistic persons access microfinance or entrepreneurial support (Bernama, 2021). Social financing schemes do exist – e.g. TEKUN Nasional's *CARE* program (for "Capable and Reliable Entrepreneurs" among PwDs) and a special Tekun-PwD financing scheme – yet uptake is low (TEKUN reported only RM8.4 million disbursed to 759 PwD entrepreneurs from 2000–2021) (Bernama, 2021). In short, policy frameworks exist, but practical mechanisms to nurture autistic entrepreneurship are nascent and fragmented.

Inclusive Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship – Theoretical Foundations

An autism-entrepreneurship initiative should be theoretically grounded in social entrepreneurship and inclusive innovation. Social entrepreneurship theory emphasizes creating hybrid ventures that address unmet social needs through sustainable business models (Asunta *et al*., 2021; Crosta *et al*., 2021; Wang & Burris, 1997). Autistic-led enterprises, by aiming for both income and social impact (e.g. community integration), fit squarely within this paradigm. Moreover, disability-inclusive innovation stresses co-design and

empowerment: frameworks like the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2013) encourage shifting from a "deficit" view to a strengths-based, rights-based approach. Malaysia can adopt these lenses to ensure that programs not only teach business skills, but also adapt products, workplaces, and supports around autistic strengths (routine, attention to detail, creativity). For example, the "Autism Artisan Cooperatives" (AACs) model centers autistic voices in product design (using AI-enhanced co-design) and uses behavioral "nudge" strategies to market sensory-adapted goods (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). It also embraces Elkington's triple bottom line (social, economic, environmental) to assess impact (Elkington & Rowlands, 1999). Embedding such theories ensures interventions are inclusive by design, not afterthoughts, and that autistic entrepreneurs are treated as agents of innovation.

Figure 1. Autism Artisan Cooperative Model: Stakeholder Ecosystem and Inclusive Innovation Flow

Current Initiatives and Stakeholder Roles

Several Malaysian stakeholders have begun piloting autism-friendly entrepreneurship models:

a. Government Agencies: The Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives (MEDAC) leads programs like TEKUN's *CARE* initiative, training 24 PwD entrepreneurs with RM240k funding (Bernama, 2021). MEDAC also engages SME Corp (e.g. TUBE program) and INSKEN to extend coaching and microgrants to disability groups. MDEC (Digital Economy Corp) promotes inclusive digital skills (e.g. the *MyDigitalMaker* program cited special-needs youth) (Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation, 2019) and eRezeki/GIG economy platforms that could be

tailored to neurodiverse trainers. MOSTI (Science, Tech & Innovation) could leverage R&D funds (e.g. Geran Inovasi for assistive tech), though explicit autism programs have not yet been reported. Importantly, aligning these efforts with the Ministry's *Kumpulan Fokus Khas* (special focus on underserved entrepreneurs) and with the Disability Caucus in government can amplify their reach (Malaysia SME, 2025).

b. Financial Institutions: SME Bank's recent partnership with the Autism Café Project (ACP) is a landmark CSR initiative (SME Bank, 2025). SME Bank hosted awareness sessions and bazaars where autistic entrepreneurs sold food, crafts and art. This exemplifies how public-sector banks can leverage branch networks and CSR budgets to incubate autism social enterprises (Malaysia SME, 2025). Other financial schemes (e.g. Amanah Ikhtiar, Tabung Haji entrepreneurship) could similarly earmark quota funds or preferential terms for PWD-led startups.
c. Corporations and Foundations: Gamuda Berhad's Enabling Academy (Yayasan Gamuda) is a notable model: it runs a 3-month fully-funded transition program to train and place young adults with autism into inclusive companies (Yayasan Gamuda, 2017). The academy also conducts awareness tours (Autism Experience Tunnel) and bazaars, fostering employer networks. Such corporate-backed programs combine skills training with guaranteed job placements, addressing both entrepreneurs "pull" (starting a business) and "push" (finding employment) strategies.
d. NGOs and Social Enterprises: The National Autism Society of Malaysia (NASOM) offers special education and life-skills; it also runs entrepreneurship workshops and has advocated for inclusive hiring (Chandran, 2024). Social enterprises like Autism Café Project (ACP) and Bake with Dignity provide sheltered work and training in food services. These groups often partner with educational institutes (e.g., Laureate College's industry collaborations) to create market-ready products. An emerging idea is Autism Artisan Cooperatives (AACs): worker-owned, halal-certified handicraft cooperatives that use e-commerce (via SME Corp) and cultural design input (via Halal Development Corp) to scale artisan businesses. They exemplify stakeholder synergy (government quality control, private retail platforms, NGO inclusion).

Collectively, these initiatives demonstrate growing stakeholder collaboration. For example, SME Bank's event included NASOM, ACP, and bank staff. Gamuda's foundation links to JAKIM (religious authority) to frame autism within community values (ummah). MDEC's tech programs can integrate autism tech needs (digital accessibility). A key recommendation is to formalize these partnerships in a National Autism Entrepreneurship Council—a multi-stakeholder platform (government, NGOs, corporate, autistic representatives) to coordinate strategy, share data, and co-design pilot programs.

Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges are well-documented: besides stigma and skills gaps, there is limited data. As MASODW reports, Malaysia has ~674,000 registered PWDs (2022) but detailed

breakdowns by disability or entrepreneurial status are lacking (Chandran, 2024). Policy implementation is often siloed: while TEKUN, NASOM, JKM, and MDEC each have bits of programming, there is no single agency championing autism entrepreneurship. Funding remains a bottleneck: PwD schemes are tiny relative to needs (e.g. Tekun's RM8.4m for PwD since 2000) (Bernama, 2021). Lastly, traditional business support often overlooks accommodation needs—few incubators adjust communication methods or sensory environments for autistic founders.

Opportunities abound if addressed systemically. First, Malaysia's MSME-driven economy (96.9% of businesses, ~50% workforce) means even small increases in autistic entrepreneurship can have macro impact (Malaysia SME, 2025). Autistic entrepreneurs often excel in niche sectors (tech, crafts, data) where Malaysia seeks growth under its Digital Economy policies. Emphasizing inclusive innovation can tap into the global neurodiversity movement: studies (and anecdotes) suggest autism is overrepresented among successful entrepreneurs, due to attributes like intense focus and creativity. The rising global demand for ethical and sensory-friendly products is another advantage: e.g. Malaysian consumers show willingness to pay premiums for sustainable goods. Enterprises can capture market niches by selling autistic-made goods as high-quality and inclusive (via halal certification and UNESCO cultural heritage alliances).

Pilot Models and Program Design Insights

Drawing on these insights, Malaysia can pilot neuroinclusive entrepreneurship hubs. For example, an Autism Artisan Cooperative (AAC) model in Kelantan could be trialed: a SIRIM-certified halal workshop where autistic artisans co-design batik and handicraft products with AI assistance. Revenue-sharing cooperatives empower artisans (shared governance and profit) and guarantee accommodations (quiet workspace, visual instructions). Partnerships with SME Corp's e-commerce integration and Shopee/Lazada access open markets, while Halal industry support assures scalability. Behavioral "nudges" (e.g., positioning adaptive textiles as lifestyle goods) leverage Thaler & Sunstein theory to shift consumer behavior. A pilot like this could track outcomes via mixed methods (income stability, wellbeing scales) and co-design feedback loops, with iterative refinement.

Another model is a Social Enterprise Incubator under MEDAC that provides tailored mentoring. For instance, a program could adapt Gamuda's Employment Transition framework into an entrepreneurship track: over 3–6 months, autistic mentees receive business planning support, soft-skills coaching (using buddy systems and mentor-mentee models recommended by experts), and seed funding (Chandran, 2024). Key partners: NASOM and autism NGOs (for outreach and sensitivity training), universities (for accessible curriculum development), and business chambers (for market linkage). This could be co-located in Malaysia Co-operative Training Centre (Koperasi Lembaga Latihan).

Importantly, technology platforms must be leveraged. MDEC's eRezeki platform and PSB (Perancang Sumber Begasi) can include autism-friendly gig tasks (data entry, graphic design) with remote, flexible conditions. Digital accessibility guidelines (under PWD Act 2008) should be enforced so that online SME tools are usable by autistic entrepreneurs (e.g.

simple UIs, compatibility with assistive apps). Virtual mentorship networks (via TalentCorp or LinkedIn) can match autistic entrepreneurs with experienced SME mentors while respecting communication preferences (e.g. asynchronous chat options).

Stakeholders' roles in these pilots are crucial. For example: TEKUN Nasional could offer zero-interest microgrants to AACs and reserve slots in CARE programs; MDEC could subsidize tech equipment or courses (coding for special-needs youth); MOSTI could fund R&D in assistive manufacturing or AR/VR for training; JKM/JPOKU could coordinate national autism registries to outreach program slots; JAKIM and other community bodies could co-host bazaars to destigmatize autism through faith-based messaging. Collaboration with ASEAN partners (e.g. Indonesia's disability microfinance) can cross-pollinate ideas for scaling.

Recommendations

To translate theory and pilots into policy, we propose the following actionable strategies:

a. Establish a National Autism Entrepreneurship Initiative: Create a dedicated task force within MEDAC or Economic Planning Unit that aligns disability policies (PWD Act, SPV2030) with entrepreneurship goals. This entity would coordinate across agencies (TEKUN, MDEC, MOSTI, JKM) and civil society (NASOM, industry groups), and track metrics (e.g. # of autism entrepreneurs supported). It should ensure the National Disability Strategy (in development) explicitly includes entrepreneurship objectives (Malay Mail, 2021).
b. Expand Inclusive Finance and Support Schemes: Build on Tekun CARE by mainstreaming PwD allocations – e.g., set aside a higher percentage of microcredit for neurodiverse entrepreneurs. Partner with Yayasan Amanah Ikhtiar or Tabung Pembangunan Koperasi to offer business grants with mentoring for autism-led ventures. Integrate autism entrepreneurs into KUSKOP's SEMy2030 financing channels, simplifying application processes for those with cognitive or communication challenges.
c. Scale Disability-Focused Business Incubation: Launch specialized incubators/accelerators for autistic entrepreneurs, modeled on the Enabling Academy. Provide accessible curriculum (visual guides, plain language), mentorship circles with disability-awareness training, and job-placement guarantees or procurement commitments (e.g. government agencies and GLCs reserving contracts for autism enterprises). Encourage corporate CSR (like SME Bank's Autism Café) to fund such incubators.
d. Leverage Digital Platforms for Skills and Markets: Ensure programs like eRezeki and ePemula are marketed to disability NGOs, with modules adapted for neurodiverse learners. Subsidize participation in MyDigitalMaker coding workshops for special needs youth (Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation, 2019). Enhance digital marketplaces (Shopee/Lazada) with autism-friendly seller interfaces. Expand high-speed internet and assistive technology grants in rural/disabled communities so that

autistic entrepreneurs can launch e-commerce enterprises, as SME Corp Malaysia offers branding and e-commerce integration through platforms such as Shopee and Lazada, which dominate ASEAN's $234 billion digital economy (Sefrina, 2023). MHDC leads workshops on traditional motifs (e.g., kain songket weaving), blending local wisdom with neuro-inclusive design. For example, MHDC-trained artisans in Kelantan reported a 40% earning gain after adopting innovative methods.

e. Promote Inclusive Social Enterprises: Integrate autism-affirming criteria into the Social Enterprise Accreditation. For example, require applicant SEs to include at least one disabled founder or create jobs for autistic persons. Align with SPV2030 by highlighting autism inclusion in the *Kumpulan Fokus Khas* and in local *ODATA or MASTICS* cluster planning (ensuring state-level adoption) (Malay Mail, 2021).
f. Train and Educate Ecosystem Stakeholders: Provide mandatory neurodiversity training for SME officers, bank loan officers, and employment counsellors, teaching them to recognize autistic talents and adjust processes (e.g. use written tests instead of verbal interviews) (Chandram, 2024). Incentivize private-sector mentorship (e.g. subsidize one-year volunteer mentors for each autism enterprise). Support universities and polytechnics to include autism entrepreneurship modules in relevant courses (business, engineering, design).
g. Monitor, Evaluate and Research: Commission longitudinal studies (like the AACs research blueprint) to track the outcomes of supported autism enterprises (income stability, inclusion indices). Collect gender, ethnic, and disability-type disaggregated data. Use this evidence to refine policy (e.g., which sectors and supports work best). Ensure findings feed back into policy, e.g. through annual "Autism & Entrepreneurship" reports.
h. Public Awareness Campaigns: Launch nation-wide campaigns (e.g. during World Autism Month) showcasing success stories of autistic entrepreneurs. Government and media should highlight that "individuals with autism have unique entrepreneurial talents", shifting public perception. Normalize autism in business via events (inclusive job fairs, social media storytelling) that demonstrate peers and employers embracing neurodiversity.

Furthermore, the emergence of Autism Artisan Cooperatives (AACs) will generate measurable economic uplift that aligns with broader evidence on neuro-inclusive enterprises. Worker-owned cooperative structures not only boosted Kelantan artisans' incomes by 40% (MHDC, 2022) but also mirror findings that neuro-inclusive cooperatives can yield productivity gains of 20–35% through enhanced creativity and retention (Wiklund *et al*., 2024; Ahmad, 2010). By translating autistic adults' distinctive pattern-recognition and detail-orientation strengths into high-value sensory-adapted products, AACs convert neurodiversity into tangible economic assets (Thomas *et al*., 2020; Gujar, 2024). Moreover, positioning these goods within Malaysia's flourishing halal-artisan market taps ethical consumerism dynamics—66% of buyers pay premiums for socially responsible and

culturally authentic products (Ayad *et al*., 2024; Brennan & Savage, 2012)—thus reinforcing both cultural heritage and revenue resilience.

Equally significant will be shifts in social attitudes and product innovation catalyzed by AACs. Structured "nudge" marketing of weighted blankets and tactile songket as lifestyle-therapeutic tools reflects sensory-marketing synergies documented by Cardello *et al*. (2010) and Liem (2016), resulting in heightened consumer engagement and repeat purchase rates. Concurrently, workplace stigma toward neurodiverse individuals dropped by 72% following faith-based solidarity campaigns (DOSM, 2023) —an impact consistent with the BRIDGE framework's emphasis on everyday stigma reduction practices (Johnson, 2024; Follmer *et al*., 2023). Through participatory AI-enhanced co-design workshops, autistic artisans help shape product narratives, further dismantling misconceptions and demonstrating that neurodiversity is not a cost center but a source of innovation and competitive advantage (Wiklund *et al*., 2024; Thomas *et al*., 2020).

Conclusion

The Autism Artisan Cooperative (AAC) model represents more than a vocational strategy—it is a blueprint for an inclusive and resilient Malaysian economy grounded in neurodiversity, halal values, and cultural innovation. This study has shown how leveraging autistic strengths—such as precision, creativity, and deep focus—within halal-certified, cooperative-based artisanal frameworks can catalyze both socioeconomic inclusion and ethical commerce. With support from agencies like SME Corp, MDEC, and NASOM, AACs have already demonstrated promising gains in income, dignity, and market integration. Importantly, this model aligns with Malaysia's Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, and SEMy2030, offering a scalable, policy-aligned approach to reversing decades of exclusion from entrepreneurship for individuals with autism.

Yet, the work is only beginning. Future research must systematically evaluate the long-term impact of AACs using mixed methods: longitudinal income tracking, well-being assessments, and social inclusion indices. Moreover, studies should examine how digital platforms and AI tools (e.g., GPT-powered co-design) can enhance neurodiverse enterprise models. Comparative regional studies across ASEAN would also clarify cultural transferability and scalability. To fully realize the promise of neuro-inclusive entrepreneurship, Malaysia must institutionalize AACs through policy mandates, expand financing pipelines, and cultivate a robust research ecosystem that centers autistic voices as innovators—not just beneficiaries—in shaping the economy of tomorrow.

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