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# A REVIEW OF THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY IN MALAYSIA

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a disastrous impact on the production and sales of many industrial sectors. Voluminous past literature has shed light on the negative implications of the pandemic crisis on these sectors. However, this paper aims to draw light on the impact of the pandemic crisis on the automotive industry, one of the nation's largest industries. A comprehensive review will be performed to demonstrate the significant implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the automobile industry. In addition, an evaluation of the government's measures to mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19 on individuals and economic sectors is presented in this paper. An examination of the effectiveness of the government's move in assisting the recovery of the industrial sector, specifically the automotive sector, is done through the evaluation of the sales volume data. Therefore, the implications of this study are to demonstrate the association between the effect of the pandemic crisis and the automotive sector's production. Secondly, to provide a review of the government's measures and to present its association with the sales volume in gauging the effectiveness of the measures adopted. The findings of this study presented robust evidence of the negative implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on automobile production and sales volume. Notably, the decline of sales and production units is more apparent during the period of the nation's lockdown due to COVID-19. Besides, this study has made a noteworthy contribution by discussing the government's policy measures implemented during this pandemic crisis.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 implications; Automobile industry; Government's strategies; Production; Sales.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The pandemic of COVID-19 has invited increasing interest among scholars to examine its global economic implications. The lockdown of cities and the closing of the national borders have resulted in devastating macroeconomic shocks. The growing literature on the global economic

implications confirms that governments' stringent restrictions in response to the pandemic have created negative economic implications with evidence of economic shocks across countries. In addition, many reports have highlighted the severe disruptions to various industrial sectors caused by the pandemic. Both demand and supply shocks have further pressurized these industries, interrupting their operations and pushing some towards the brink of closure. Nicola et al. (2020) pointed out that the dire consequences of COVID-19 have caused further damage to the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors. The adoption of restrictive measures by many countries has either slowed, paralyzed, or even stopped the economy (Kufelová & Raková, 2020). Due to the detrimental effects of the pandemic, a recession is expected in many countries and a likely decline in the gross domestic product (GDP).

According to Kaitwade (2020), the automotive industry is an important revenue contributor in both emerging and developed economies. It is often considered the backbone of the countries' gross domestic product (GDP). This simply means that the economic growth of a country may well rely on the performance of the automotive industry. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the automotive sector was projected to witness steady growth throughout the decades. The unleashing of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 in the Chinese province of Hubei has led to massive disruption in the automotive industry. According to Trovão (2020), China, as a prominent assembling hub and a component centre serving parts manufacturers around the world, is aggravated by shocks to global demand that threaten the reduction of 20% (at worst of 40%) of the projected global sales of cars in the year 2020. Pató and Herczeg (2020) highlighted how the limitations faced by the global logistics services and the temporal shutdown of production in various factories have caused massive disruption to operation of numerous supply chains. This situation has posed a difficult challenge to most economic sectors, including the automotive industry. The automobile industry is highly desired in many countries as a driver of economic growth, job creation, and technology development (Mohd Zubir et al., 2012). Given the significance of the automotive sector to the economy, this paper will focus on reviewing the challenges faced by Malaysia's automobile industry amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

To mitigate the substantial impacts of the crisis, governments worldwide have increasingly adopted many policy strategies. The Malaysian government has also undertaken several measures to assist the severely affected sectors. Economic stimulus packages are launched to provide relief to the various affected sectors and reinvigorate economic growth. The relief comes in various forms, such as new tax incentives, financial assistance for small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs), and job protection initiatives. The government has injected a large amount of budget into the stimulus package to support the different sectors affected by the pandemic crisis. This paper will review and discuss the government measures to help recover the automobile industry. Unlike the other literature that generally assesses the impact of COVID-19 on the industrial sector as a whole, this paper will specifically explore the automobile industry. This paper will also contribute by filling the knowledge gap on the recent government measures adopted during the pandemic crisis. The preliminary review conducted will be instructive for future empirical studies on the effectiveness of these government policy strategies.

The remainder of this paper will be structured in this way: Section 2 presents the literature review of the impact of COVID-19 on the automobile industry. In the subsequent Section 3, the methodology employed for this study is explained. The data presentation of the challenge encountered by the automobile industry during the pandemic crisis will be provided in Section 4, followed by Section 5, which will present the result assessment of the government measures to assist the post-pandemic recovery of the automobile industry. Meanwhile, Section 6 discusses the findings and offers recommendations for future research. Lastly, Section 7 will present the conclusion and implications of this study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The automobile industry makes up a large share of the manufacturing sector in a country's economy. According to Childerhouse et al. (2013), the automobile industry is a flagship sector frequently regarded as a barometer that measures the current wealth of the national economy. Helper (1991) supports the argument of the importance of the automobile industry due to its large size of production, a great contributor to employment, and an important provider of lessons for firms in other industries. A literature review by Gopal and Thakkar (2015) further depicted the importance of the automobile industry in developing sustainable communities through products, particularly in developing countries.

The literature has discussed the negative implications of COVID-19 on the automobile industry. For example, Rajamohan et al. (2020) demonstrated the negative consequences of COVID-19 on the stock price of the National Stock Exchange (NSE) in the automobile industry. They demonstrated a sudden fall in stock values due to the adverse impact of COVID-19. Hence, it can be concluded that COVID-19 significantly negatively affects the automobile industry stock exchange. Another study by Yan et al. (2020) explored consumers' decisions in automobile purchases during the pandemic crisis by employing a Structural Equation Model (SEM-Logit) model. They found that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected consumers' decisions to purchase automobiles.

Other studies, such as Behaldi et al. (2021), Cai and Luo (2020), Nayak et al. (2020), and Wong (2020), discussed the economic implications of COVID-19 on various industrial sectors. Cai and Luo (2020) highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on the production disruption of raw materials and spare parts, which caused setbacks to the manufacturing industries. Supply chain interruption has greatly hit industries, particularly automobiles, electronics, and machinery industries. Besides, the change in the volume and structure of demand further disrupted the industry. Meanwhile, Wong (2020) shed light on the unprecedented effects of COVID-19. Severe disruptions to supply mechanisms and distribution chains, the collapse of domestic demand, the loss of public confidence worldwide, the negative impact on stock market exchange, and changes in the households' consumption behaviour were among the precarious effects of the pandemic crisis.

According to Behaldi et al. (2021), the raging pandemic has brought the aspirations of major automobile companies to a grinding halt. The operation of manufacturing plants in the automobile industry slowed down due to the lockdown protocols and standard of procedure taken as safety measures against COVID-19. The government-imposed lockdown restrictions have forced the closure of factories and showrooms, with potential car buyers staying at home. Major automobile firms were reported to have cut jobs as sales decreased due to the ongoing pandemic. Nayak et al. (2020) demonstrated the impact of COVID-19 on the automobile industry by discussing the effects of COVID-19 on auto dealers, auto suppliers, finance companies, and sales. A critical review was also provided on the impact of the automobile industry, considering that the automobile industry is responsible for the economic growth of the country. The national lockdown led to the disruption of transportation of vehicles by auto dealers. Meanwhile, auto suppliers will face liquidity challenges due to the delayed recovery post lockdown. Finance companies will also face a financial burden with the increase in loan evasions due to the ongoing pandemic. The automobile vehicle sales will fall as demand declines, and supply production is disrupted during the lockdown period.

A study by Accenture (2020) pointed out four major challenges to the automobile industry amid the COVID-19 crisis: the supply shortage of vehicle parts, a manufacturing shutdown, a decline in vehicle sales, and a drop in working capital and liquidity. Worldwide automobile production is highly dependent on the exports of automobile parts from China. Hence, the pandemic of COVID-19 that initially began in China has led to the shutdown of production lines, causing supply deficiency for all automobile industries. Secondly, the quarantine measures resulted in a reduced workforce and the shutdown of the manufacturing plants. Thirdly, the implementation of lockdown

further caused a decline in the sales of vehicles. Lastly, the drop in cash inflow with short-term liabilities needing to be paid has led to the depletion of cash reserves.

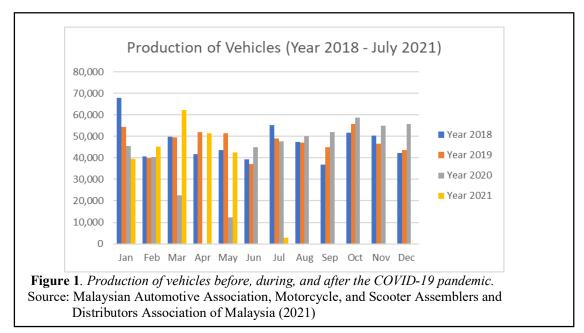
Much literature exists on the impact of COVID-19 on the industrial sectors. However, a review of the direct implications of COVID-19 on the volume of sales and production of automobiles is yet to be made. Besides, the examination of the government's policy to cope with the pandemic crisis has been largely neglected. Motivated by the literature gaps, this paper presents and describes the impact of COVID-19 on Malaysia's automobile industry. In addition, this study discusses the measures undertaken by the Malaysian government to help the automobile industry cope with the pandemic-caused economic disruption. The knowledge from this investigation will be useful for policymakers to develop strategies that mitigate the pandemic-induced economic implications and assist the post-pandemic recovery of the automobile industry.

## METHODOLOGY

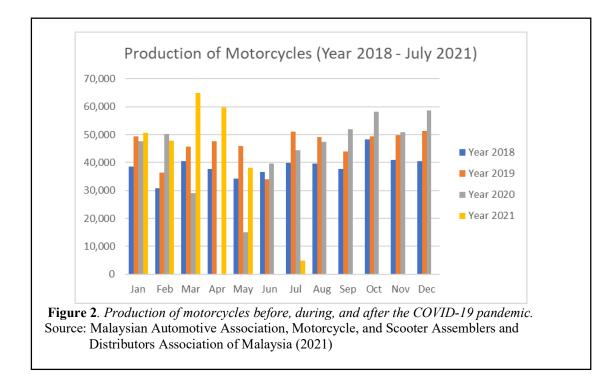
For this study, data were obtained from the Malaysian Automotive Association, Motorcycle, and Scooter Assemblers and Distributors Association of Malaysia. The automobile sales and production data from 2018 until July 2021 were analyzed and plotted. The data from the period before the pandemic crisis, during the lockdown period, and after the government's initiation of policy to assist with the recovery of the automobile industry were selected. The trend of the data was assessed to determine the COVID-19 implications on the automotive sector. This study also assessed and reviewed the government's policy measures adopted to help the automobile sector's recovery.

## **COVID-19 IMPLICATIONS ON THE AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY'S PRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed various challenges to the automobile industry, from disrupting production lines to dampening new vehicle sales. Wad and Govindaraju (2011) demonstrated that the global economic crisis has ultimately led to the contraction of the automobile industry. A collapse in the production of vehicles and a drop in the recorded total vehicle sales were evident from their analysis. This paper seeks empirical support to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on the growth of the automobile industry. Figure 1 shows the monthly data of the total vehicle production from 2018 until July 2021.



Overall, a contraction of vehicle production due to COVID-19 was evident from the data observed. The spreading of the COVID-19 pandemic to Malaysia has led to implementation of a movement control order (MCO 1.0) beginning in March 2020. The imposition of the MCO 1.0 resulted in the closure of the operations for non-essential sectors nationwide in a bid to curb the spreading of COVID-19. The data shows the disruption to the production of vehicles and motorcycles during the lockdown period. In March 2020, the production of the vehicle dropped nearly half from 40,340 to 22,657. By April 2020, the number of vehicles declined to the lowest point, with only 275 units being produced. The production of vehicles grew slowly, with 12,286 being produced in the subsequent month in view that the lockdown restriction would be gradually eased in May 2020 to allow certain sectors to resume operation. A similar trend can be observed for the production of motorcycles during the lockdown period of MCO 1.0, as shown in Figure 2. Motorcycle production declined by half from 51,843 units to 26,697 units in March 2020. The implementation of strict lockdown order resulted in a complete shutdown of the operation, leading to zero units of production of motorcycles for April 2020 alone. The gradual relaxation of the MCO 1.0 order allowed the resumption of the operation; hence, about 19,507 units of motorcycles were produced in the subsequent month. The production unit was so much fewer compared to the production in the past before the COVID-19 pandemic.



In Jun 2021, the steep climb of the COVID-19 cases forced the government to implement a Full Movement Control Order (FMCO). The lockdown led to a drastic decline in the production of vehicles from 42,522 units to only 276 units produced in Jun 2021. Similarly, the production of motorcycles dropped to 45 units in Jun 2021. With the ending of the FMCO on 28 June 2021, some economic sectors were allowed to reopen. As a result, the production of the vehicle increased to 2,775 units in the subsequent month of July 2021, and the production of motorcycles went up by 4,895 units in July 2021.

## **GOVERNMENT'S MITIGATION STRATEGIES ON COVID-19 IMPLICATIONS**

Since February 2020, the Malaysian government has launched about eight stimulus packages of USD127 billion to mitigate the economic impact caused by the pandemic crisis. The latest economic stimulus package, PEMULIH, was launched in June 2021 to support the affected households and business sectors. Table 1 summarises the measures or strategies undertaken by the Malaysian government to alleviate the burden on the people, businesses, and industrial sectors affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1

Summarv	of Economic	Stimulus	Package	Launched
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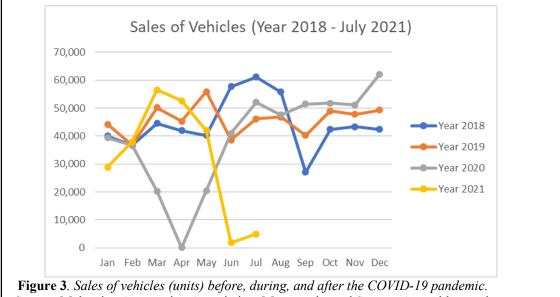
Economic Stimulus	Strategies	Expected Outcome	
Packages			
First Economic	Deferment of monthly tax	To help ease the cash flow of	
Stimulus Package	instalments	companies	
27 February 2020	Tax deductions on expenses on	To encourage companies to take up	
	disposable Personal Protective	relevant precautions to mitigate the	
	Equipment (PPE) for employees	spread of COVID-19 at the	
	incurred on business premises	workplace	
	Reduction of employees contribution	To encourage more spending by	
	from 11% to 7%	employees to stimulate economic	
		activities	
	15% electricity discount	As part of the initiative to provide	
	Exemption from the human resources	financial relief	
	development fund (HRDF) levy		
	Matching grants for HRDF by	To invest in raising the productivity	
	prioritizing affected sectors	of human capital during the economic	
	(including automotive	slowdown period	
	manufacturing)		
PRIHATIN	Wage Subsidy	To assist employers in retaining their	
27 March 2020		workers, avoiding retrenchment	
	Automatic six months loan	To ease the burden on business	
	moratorium	sectors and assist in businesses' cash	
		flow	
	EPF i-Lestari Scheme	As financial relief to individuals	
	Cash aid from the government		
	SME loan funds	To assist viable SMEs	
	Corporate loan guarantees	Restructuring repayments for the	
		affected corporate sector	
PRIHATIN SME+	Special grant for micro SMEs	To provide additional cash flow to	
6 April 2020		micro SMEs to cover their overhead	
		costs	
	Additional wage subsidy	Enhancement of wage subsidy	
		program to alleviate affected	
		employers' cash flow	
PENJANA 5. June 2020	Wage subsidy extension	To promote employee retention	
5 June 2020	Reskilling fund	To enhance the employability of	
		unemployed	

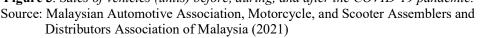
	Financing and liquidity support	To sustain business operations	
	E-commerce incentives	Encouraging the adoption of e- commerce by micro SMEs	
	Tax incentives for the purchase of passenger cars until 31 December 2020	To stimulate the automotive sector and provide financial relief to car buyers	
KITA PRIHATIN 23 September 2020	Special grant for micro SMEs	To provide financial assistance for affected SMEs	
	Wage subsidy 2.0 extension	To promote employee retention	
	Bantuan PRIHATIN 2.0	Part of the financial relief initiative	
PERMAI	Wage subsidy 3.0	To promote employee retention	
18 January 2021	EPF i-Sinar Program	To alleviate the burden of contributors	
	Loan moratorium	As financial relief and to help ease cash flow for business sectors	
	Extensions of sales tax exemption on passenger vehicles until 30 June	To stimulate the automotive sector and provide financial relief to car	
	2021	buyers	
PEMERKASA	Special grant for SMEs	Financial support to steer economic	
17 March 2021		growth	
	Wage subsidy	Retaining workers initiative	
	Loan Moratorium	Relief for loan repayment	
	Tax relief for rental discount	Support for business continuity	
	Postpone tax penalties	Reducing the financial burden on businesses	
PEMERKASA+ 31 May 2021	Extension of the wage subsidy program	Retaining employment	
	Exemption HRDF levy	Financial assistance	
	Special Prihatin grant		
	Micro Credit Financing	Financial support for businesses	
	Extension of sales and services tax	To stimulate the automotive sector	
	(SST) exemption for passenger	and provide financial relief to car	
	vehicles extended until 31 December	buyers	
	2021		
	Late payment exemption on business	Easing the burden on businesses	
	license renewal	sectors	
	~ 4 14		
PEMULIH	Cash aid	Financial relief to individuals	
PEMULIH 28 June 2021	Cash aid Electricity bill discount	Financial relief to individuals Financial assistance	
	Electricity bill discount	Financial assistance	

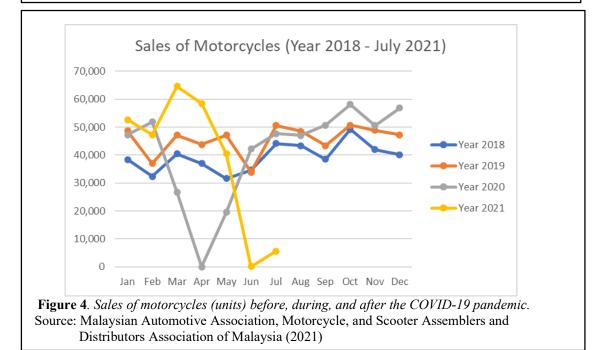
Source: Ministry of Finance Malaysia (2021)

This paper highlights the government measures in supporting the automobile industry through the exemption of sales and services tax (SST) on passenger vehicles aiming to stimulate the

automobile industry. Under this measure, 100% exemption was given for CKD (locally assembled) cars and 50% for CBU (fully imported) cars. This exemption applies to all passenger vehicles (including MPVs and SUVs) but does not include trucks considered commercial vehicles. The sales tax exemption lowers the prices of passenger vehicles to boost sales. However, the global semiconductor shortage will result in poor production of automobiles, and the tax exemption move may not be enough to boost the local automobile industry. To review the effectiveness of the tax exemption in boosting consumption of the automotive industry, the total sales of passenger vehicles from 2018 until July 2021 will be presented and discussed. Figure 3 and Figure 4 show the total sales (units) obtained by the automotive industry for passenger vehicles during the period of study.







The sales of vehicles (units) plummeted to a mere 131 vehicle sales in April 2020 from 20,260 units due to the lockdown implemented at the start of the pandemic. This recorded a decrease of about 99.35% compared to the previous month's sales. Another lockdown in 2021 resulted in another demand shock, with 1,841 sales (units) recorded in Jun 2021. This was another massive decline of about 95.62% demand short. With the tax incentives introduced under PENJANA stimulus program, the sales and services tax of passenger vehicles were exempted until 31 December 2020. Following this announcement, the sales of passenger vehicles showed an increasing trend beginning from Jun 2020, with 40,944 sales (units) recorded. The sales continued to increase and peaked at 62,122 sales (units) in December 2020.

In January 2021, the government extended the tax incentive to boost automotive industry sales further. The tax exemption percentage remained unchanged, with a 100% exemption for locally assembled (CKD) cars and 50% for fully imported (CBU) cars. This extension continued to encourage increasing consumer demand following the reduced prices for passenger vehicles, with 56,478 sales recorded by March 2021. However, another wave of the pandemic led to the implementation of the Full Movement Control Order (FMCO) implementation, which again affected vehicle sales. The sales of vehicles experienced another round of decline to 1,841 units sold in Jun 2021. Hence, the government announced the extension of the tax exemption until December 2021 to induce the sales of passenger vehicles. In the recently tabled Budget 2022, the sales incentives for passenger car purchases were further extended until June 2022 to drive sales in the automotive sector.

#### DISCUSSION

The current review aimed to evaluate the impact of the pandemic crisis, specifically on the automobile sector. The presentation and review on the sales and production trend gathered from the Malaysian Automotive Association, Motorcycle, and Scooter Assemblers and Distributors Association of Malaysia was conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of the implications of COVID-19 on this sector's production level. The review was also done to explore the government's policy and recovery strategies during the pandemic crisis. The results from this demonstration provided a better understanding and knowledge of the lessons that can be learned from this pandemic crisis. Besides that, the findings of this study have implications for policymakers to develop strategies that can support the recovery of this industry in the post-pandemic. The results of this study further suggest that future research should be conducted to highlight the success of the government's measures, such as the vehicle tax exemption. The review of this paper will assert the need for future research on determining whether the policy measures are effective in boosting automobile sales in the coming months.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, this paper presented a comprehensive review of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on industrial sectors, specifically the automotive industry. Besides that, this paper also drew attention to the government strategies in implementing various economic stimulus packages to help the recovery of industrial sectors. A review of the available data for both the production and sales in the automotive sector during the pandemic crisis was also conducted to demonstrate the implications of the pandemic on the automobile industry. The review was further extended to shed light on the effectiveness of the government's strategy to help the recovery of the sector. An inspection was done to observe any changes in the sales of the vehicles in the subsequent months after the sales tax was exempted. A preliminary evaluation of the data suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly caused a drop in production and sales of vehicles. Meanwhile, the government strategy of exempting the sales tax appeared to be effective in bringing up sales. However, experts speculated that the global shortage of semiconductor chips could affect domestic production and sales volumes (Yusof, 2021). The shortage of the components will likely dampen the government measures to boost sales in the automotive sector. Besides that, the continued

shipping delays of components will further slow down production, causing manufacturers to struggle to meet the increasing demand. Hence, this paper recommended that a further evaluation and thorough empirical analysis be conducted to examine the effectiveness of the government's sales exemption measure in helping the recovery of the automotive industry.

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