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COVID-19'S IMPACT ON FOOD STALL WORKERS: NIGHT MARKETS' RESILIENCE IN PENANG, MALAYSIA

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has left an enduring mark on Southeast Asia, with lasting repercussions on financial markets, employment, and gender equality in the workplace. Various activities were halted in order to curb the virus's spread, which dealt a severe blow to Malaysia's thriving economy. The informal sector, a cornerstone of the Asia-Pacific service industry, felt these effects acutely, as it heavily relies on informal workers. Given that more than three quarters of Malaysia's service sector comprises informal workers, the country's economic recovery is now significantly reliant on this workforce. Considering the contribution of the informal sector to Malaysia's food market, this study aims to explore the impact of social shocks and economic crises on the resilience of informal workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a multistage probability sampling method, the study employed a questionnaire survey involving Penang's food stalls in night markets. Findings reveal significant variations in workers' lifestyles, attitudes, and family dynamics. Gender-related factors also exert a substantial influence on their behavior, attitudes, and engagement levels. While many studies have examined night markets as tourism spots in terms of how to increase sales or attract visitors, this study is among the first to focus on the vendors themselves, exploring the impact of COVID-19 on food stalls as an unseen vulnerable community.

Keywords: informal sector, food stall, night market, vulnerable communities, crisis preparedness, Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's economy depends heavily on the informal sector, significantly contributing to employment. Despite economic advancements, informal employment remains substantial. The proportion of the workforce employed by unregistered firms slightly increased from 9.2% (1.0 million workers) in 2011 to 9.3% (1.3 million workers) in 2019. Informal employment, including jobs without social protection, constituted approximately 16.8% (2.5 million workers) of total employment in 2019, rising to 23.2% (3.5 million people) by 2021 (DOSM, 2022).

The retail trade and the food and beverage sectors are key components of Malaysia's economy, contributing 46.2% and 18.0%, respectively, to related activities (DOSM, 2020). Food stalls in streets and night markets, known as *pasar malam*, are vibrant elements of the informal sector, offering affordable venues for locals and tourists to explore local food, crafts, and culture. These markets are not just commercial centers but also cultural hubs that promote local heritage and community ties (Chan, 2023).

Unlike permanent shops, night markets typically operate once or twice a week, with vendors traveling between districts. These vendors, part of the informal economy, face unique challenges, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic accelerated the shift to remote work and the use of digital platforms, the lack of digital skills and social security protection for self-employed individuals and informal sector workers heightened their vulnerability. As of June 2021, the Social Security Organization reported that only 6.5% of the 2.5 million self-employed workers were registered under the Self-Employment Social Security Act 2017 [Act 789], underscoring the severity of the issue (Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2021).

COVID-19 significantly impacted Malaysia's informal food sector, affecting restaurants, cafes, food stalls, and night market vendors. The Movement Control Order (MCO) disrupted supply chains and forced night markets to close, causing a dramatic drop in sales and considerable socio-economic vulnerabilities (Gerard et al., 2020; Ramli & Jamri, 2021). Although markets were allowed to resume on June 15, 2020, many vendors delayed reopening due to stringent Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and reduced customer turnout. Concerns about crowded spaces further declined attendance and sales (Ramli & Jamri, 2021). Post-pandemic, vendors face financial challenges as the cost of living has surged, with food prices rising by up to 20% (Aziz, 2023).

The lack of a crisis preparedness scheme exacerbated the challenges faced by informal workers, who received inadequate support during the pandemic. Limited access to job placement services, education, skill development, and insurance increased economic inequality, reduced incomes, and heightened poverty and indebtedness (Gururaja & Ranjitha, 2022; Martínez & Young, 2022; Samat et al., 2024). This financial strain elevated stress levels,

impacting vendors' ability to manage family affairs, their marketing, and customer relations (Mansourihanis et al., 2024). Night markets and food stalls foster social cohesion and contribute to informal economic vitality, creating entrepreneurial opportunities and enhancing food security (Halim, 2022). However, research on the resilience of vendors during crises is limited. Existing studies focused on night markets as tourist destinations, addressing sales enhancement and logistical management. This study aims to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on food stalls and night market vendors, examining their socio-economic and personal attitude preparedness, coping strategies, and potential for recovery post-crisis. By focusing on informal workers in the food industry, this research investigates the changes in the behaviors and attitudes of food stall vendors in the night markets of Penang during the COVID-19 crisis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

COVID-19 in Penang

Malaysia identified its first COVID-19 case on January 25, 2020. Despite early measures, the first confirmed local case appeared on February 4, 2020, and by March 2020, cases were reported in Penang and other states. Although international borders remained open, the government implemented travel warnings to China and health screenings at airports. A significant spike in cases followed a late February religious gathering, leading to nearly 5,000 infections by March 21, 2020. By March 17, 2020, Malaysia had recorded its first two COVID-19 deaths, with cases surging daily, making it the Southeast Asian country with the highest number of cases at that time. This led to strict movement control measures (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2024).

Following the WHO's pandemic declaration on March 11, 2020, Malaysia imposed movement restrictions starting March 18, 2020. These included five stages: MCO, CMCO, RMCO, Restricted MCO, and FMCO, lasting until June 28, 2021 (Maghsoodi Tilaki et al., 2021). The prolonged restrictions heavily impacted the economy, particularly vulnerable groups. To address this, the government introduced economic stimulus packages totaling RM 530 billion from 2020 to 2021. RM 273.30 billion was allocated for business support through wage subsidies, special grants, loan moratoriums, and other relief measures (Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2021).

The government also enforced strict SOPs to ensure public safety and reduce transmission risk. After 17 months, night markets and wet markets reopened in Phase 1 areas of the National Recovery Plan in August 2021. Vendors and visitors were required to follow SOPs, including wearing masks, maintaining physical distancing, using hand sanitizer, frequent cleaning, and having complete vaccination.

Night Markets in Malaysia

As mentioned earlier, in Malaysia, night markets are vital tourist attractions and significant economic activities. The authorities recognize them as revenue-generating businesses (Ramli & Jamri, 2021). These markets provide an accessible platform for starting small businesses with minimal capital investment, fostering community entrepreneurship. Despite their informal nature, vendors must register with local district councils to operate legally (Suhaimi et al., 2016). Vendors typically come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, including laid-off and unemployed individuals, as entry barriers are low and the markets offer a basic livelihood (Li et al., 2021).

The socio-economic status (SES) measures access to financial, social, cultural, and human capital resources. It is determined by education, income, occupation, and factors like neighborhood safety and community support, affecting an individual's quality of life (T. Y. Han et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2021). Higher SES often correlates with better adaptation, access to care, and quality of life (Arpey et al., 2017; McMaughan et al., 2020). Night markets are crucial for Malaysia's economy, with Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) comprising 97.4% of all business institutions in 2021 and 78.6% being micro companies (SME Corporation Malaysia, 2021). Among these, night market traders provide essential retail services. These markets are popular among locals and tourists, offering budget-friendly necessities and unique cultural experiences, mainly through local food and crafts. Night markets vary in size, typically having 50 to 300 stalls (Ishak et al., 2012). Located in residential areas, they are accessible by walking, bicycles, cars, public buses, and taxis, operating from 5:00 pm to 10:00 pm, and the businesses are often run by family members (Ishak et al., 2012).

Night Market & COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted Malaysia's night markets, causing vendors to lose customers and income. They adapted by using digital platforms and cashless payments. Nevertheless, they still faced unemployment and income declines during closures and reopening, which were made worse by rising goods prices and increasing stress (Ramli & Jamri, 2021). Despite challenges, cashless payments boosted sales by eliminating physical contact (Mashuri, 2022). Digital platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook improved sales, but older B40 vendors struggled with new technologies. Lower SES vulnerability was evident during the pandemic, with higher SES individuals at lower risk of infection and mental distress (Wu et al., 2021). Lower SES individuals lacked healthcare access, suffered from misinformation, and neglected government warnings, leading to inequalities. Income reduction and job insecurity heightened stress, impacting community response (Coulombe et al., 2020).

Similar to informal workers in Vietnam, street vendors faced income shocks and lacked government support, leading to drastic consumption reductions (Thanh & Duong, 2022). SES highlights inequalities in resource access, with higher SES communities having better economic positions and education (Manstead, 2018). The pandemic widened SES gaps, increasing insecurity and emotional exhaustion among lower SES communities. In Bangkok, vendor stress levels rose by 42.6% due to financial constraints and quarantines (Pongutta et al., 2021). Viewing challenges as growth opportunities can lead to better outcomes.

Resilience

Resilience, as defined by various theorists, refers to an individual's ability to face adversity with a positive intent to overcome it. Research consistently highlights the pivotal role of family, neighborhood, and community settings in fostering stress resilience, rather than succumbing to risk factors. Numerous theories have attempted to explain the reasons for resilience and how it boosts communities during and after a crisis. Although resilience theories share similarities, they vary in scope and focus.

Rutter underscored protective factors like social competence and psychological coping processes in promoting resilience, while Garmezy broadened the perspective to include the impact of family and community environments (Rutter, 2013). Werner examined resilience development across the lifespan, emphasizing the role of family and community relationships (Werner, 2005). Benard advocated for nurturing resilience from childhood, highlighting the significance of positive environments in fostering resilience.

Walsh underscored the family's role in providing sustained support during adversity. Walsh applied resilience concepts to families and communities facing adversity, emphasizing social support and community involvement in resilience promotion (Walsh, 2016). Family resilience guides the understanding of various crises at individual, familial, community, and societal levels. Resilience, viewed from a sociocultural perspective, is influenced by individual, family, and societal factors. Considering diverse adversities, such as biological, psychological, and social challenges, necessitates examining broader systems and structures (Walsh, 2016).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study aims to investigate the changes in the behaviors and attitudes of vendors in Malaysia subsequent to the COVID-19 crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted communities worldwide, leading to lifestyle changes. This impact can be categorized into economic uncertainty, job uncertainty, social behavior, and psychological well-being.

Prior research has established that COVID-19 has exacerbated job loss, income instability, and economic downturns, patterns anticipated to persist after

the pandemic (Rahman et al., 2021). Social behaviors, such as hygienic practices, social distancing, remote employment, and online activities, persisted for nearly two years of implementation (Abolfotouh et al., 2021; Han et al., 2022). The pandemic has also worsened mental health, and increased stress, anxiety, and depression caused by fear, isolation, and uncertainties (Kumar & Upadhy, 2017; Li et al., 2021). Even post-pandemic, mental health vulnerabilities remain.

To address the research questions and aims, a conceptual framework based on the problem statement and literature review was constructed to examine the impact of the changes on vendors, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

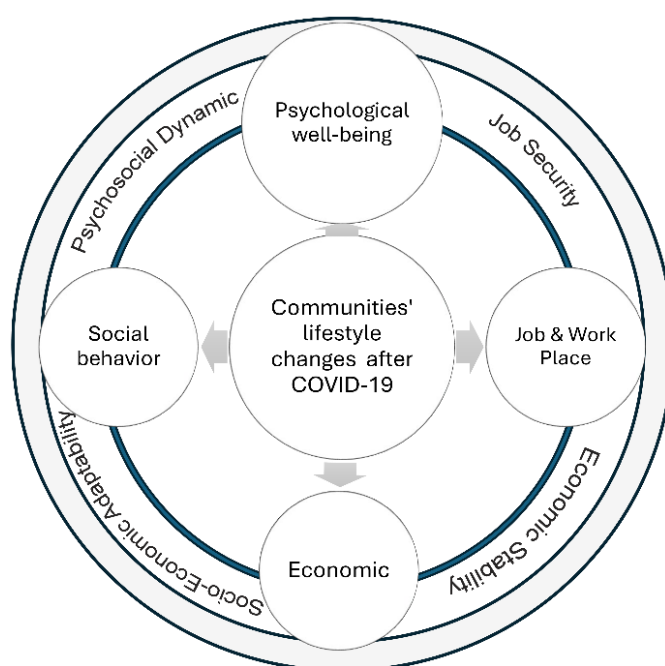


Figure 1: The study conceptual framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explore how external shocks from social and economic crises impact their lives and whether government stimulus packages influenced their businesses during COVID-19. Employing a quantitative approach, the study employed a closed-ended questionnaire to address the research objectives in the nine-night markets of Penang, Malaysia, in 2023. This study used quantitative analysis methods such as correlational and descriptive methods to analyze the collected data. It is a descriptive-correlational study that examines the relationship between research variables. Using SPSS 24, the study evaluated

monotonic and linear relationships between study variables by statistical measurement.

Questionnaire

The data collection phase of the study included vendors aged 18 and above at the night markets in Penang who had been operating in the night market since January 2020 or earlier. Consequently, a face-to-face questionnaire survey was conducted in June 2023.

The data collection employed a stratified sampling method, wherein respondents were randomly selected from each night market. The total number of night market vendors was 735. Hence, the sample size was set at equal to or less than 253 to ensure the validity of the data collected. In the study, a total of 270 vendors participated in answering the questionnaire. After cleaning the data and removing incomplete responses, 263 questionnaires were considered for analysis.

Table 1: Questionnaire description

Variables	Questions	Description
Demographic	Q1-Q8	age, gender, ethnicity, educational level, occupation, monthly household income, number of occupants in the household, and type of housing
Economic uncertainty	Q9-Q15	Including a) The household and b) The individual levels. Indicators were adapted based on the work of (European Union Statistics, 2021) (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)
Job uncertainty	Q16-Q22	Including a) Job Insecurity and b) Job Satisfaction. Indicators were adapted based on the work of (Vander Elst et al., 2014) & (Spector, 1985) (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)
Social Behavioral	Q23-Q41	Including a) Social Participants, b) Healthcare Utilization, c) Precautionary Measures, d) Response strategies, and e) Self-Quarantine Activities. Indicators were adapted based on the works of (Abolfotouh et al., 2021; Coulombe et al., 2020; Montpetit et al., 2011) (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)
Psychological well-being	Q42-Q45	Including a) Mental health (anxiety and depression), b) Social support (family and friends), c) Hope in life, and d) Attitude changes. Indicators were adapted based on the works of (Abolfotouh et al., 2021; Kroenke et al., 2001) (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)
Resilience	Q46-Q51	Including adaptation. Indicators were employed by Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) by (Smith et al., 2008)

Source: Authors

Participants were asked to provide their demographic characteristics in the initial section of the questionnaire. They were also tasked with responding to 47 statements designed to elucidate their experiences of economic suffering for

themselves and their families, job uncertainty, the impact of these conditions on their social participation and healthcare utilization, their levels of anxiety and depression, willingness to support family and friends, hope in life, and changes in attitudes over the COVID-19 period. Additionally, they were asked to respond to statements regarding their well-being and preparedness in crisis, which included precautionary measures, response strategies, and self-quarantine activities.

Based on 263 completed questionnaires, all the respondents were Malaysian. The majority were Malays (51.00%), followed by Chinese (47.90%) and Indian (1.10%). In terms of gender, 57.00% were males and 43.00% were females. The age distributions were 33.50% (25-32 years), 28.50% (32-40), 17.10% (40-50), 16.70% (18-25), and 3.80% (50-60).

Regarding employment, 80.60% worked full-time, while 19.40% were part-time vendors. Marital status showed that 65.00% were married, 34.60% single, and 0.40% were divorced or separated. Household sizes were 68.10% with 3-5 occupants, 22.10% with more than 5, and 9.90% with 1-2 people. For education, 68.80% had completed secondary education. Household income distributions were 30.00% (RM 3,001-RM 4,000), 10.30% (RM 2,501-RM 3,000), and 5.70% (RM 1,001-RM 2,500), with one respondent earning less than RM 1,000.

Reliability Test

A reliability test was employed to measure the accuracy of the selected variables. The value of Cronbach's Alpha is considered very strong when the alpha value is above 0.8. On the other hand, an alpha value below 0.6 is regarded as poor reliability (Malhotra, 2010).

Based on Table 2, the overall Cronbach's Alpha value is accepted as all the values are above 0.6.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis for each Variable

Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Remarks
Dependent variable			
Resiliency	6	0.886	Very strong
Independent variable			
Economic uncertainty	7	0.949	Very strong
Job Uncertainty	7	0.776	Moderate
Social behavioral	19	0.847	Very strong
Psychological well-being	14	0.818	Very strong

Study Area

The study was conducted in Penang, Malaysia, located in the northwestern part of Peninsular Malaysia. It is the second smallest state in the country by land mass and ranks the second highest in tax collection behind Sarawak. As of 2021,

Penang's estimated population stands at 1.77 million, with a total area of 1,049 km² (DOSM, 2022).

Boasting industrial zones, technology parks, a vibrant heritage zone, diverse culinary offerings, and colonial architecture, Penang attracts a plethora of investors, enterprises, SMEs, and both local and foreign workers. Since being classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, it has become a popular destination for travelers, with night markets attracting both residents and tourists. The study focused on all nine-night markets in Northeast Penang Island: Batu Feringghi, Tanjung Bungah, Kimberley Street Food, Macallum Street, Pasar Malam Van Praagh, Paya Terubong, Farlim, Sungai Dua, and Pantai Jerjak. These markets were selected because the mean household income in the area dropped by RM 3,367, reaching RM 5,126 on average during the pandemic period of 2020-2022 (DOSM, 2022), severely impacting the economic well-being of the food stalls and night market vendors.



Figure 2: Distribution of night markets in Northeast Penang, Malaysia
Source: Google map (2024)

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-economic Impact on Vendors' Resilience

In this study, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient was employed to assess the relationships between the independent variables (economic uncertainty, job uncertainty, social behavior, psychological well-being) and the dependent variable (resilience). This statistical measure was chosen for its ability to quantify the strength and direction of linear relationships between continuous variables. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient provides a straightforward interpretation, with values ranging from -1 to 1, where values closer to 1 or -1 indicate stronger relationships and values closer to 0 indicate weaker relationships.

In Table 3, Pearson's Correlation for each variable is displayed. The correlation coefficients range from 0.121 to 0.379, indicating that the relationships between the independent variables and the vendors' resilience are small but significant. This suggests that while the independent variables impact resilience, the strength of these relationships is relatively weak.

Table 3: Pearson's Correlation analysis

		EU	JU	SB	PWB	RS
EU	Pearson Correlation	1	.223**	.203**	.152*	.344**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0	0.001	0.013	0
	N	263	263	263	263	263
JU	Pearson Correlation	.223**	1	-0.098	.379**	.234**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0		0.113	0	0
	N	263	263	263	263	263
SB	Pearson Correlation	.203**	-0.098	1	-0.006	.121*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	0.113		0.925	0.049
	N	263	263	263	263	263
PWB	Pearson Correlation	.152*	.379**	-0.006	1	.303**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.013	0	0.925		0
	N	263	263	263	263	263
RS	Pearson Correlation	.344**	.234**	.121*	.303**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0	0.049	0	
	N	263	263	263	263	263

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Legend: EU- Economic uncertainty, JU- Job Uncertainty, SB- Social Behavioral, PWB- Psychological Well-being, RS- Resilience

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Results

This section presents the results of the ANOVA tests conducted to examine the differences in resilience scores across various levels of economic uncertainty, job uncertainty, social behavior, and psychological well-being.

Based on the ANOVA results presented in Table 4, social behavior ($F = 2.054$, $p = 0.130$) does not show a significant difference in the resilience of

night market vendors. Therefore, social behavior does not have a significant impact on their resilience. In contrast, the other independent variables—economic uncertainty ($F = 17.426$, $p = 0.000$), job uncertainty ($F = 8.441$, $p = 0.000$), and psychological well-being ($F = 15.273$, $p = 0.000$)—all show significant differences in resilience, indicating that these factors do affect the resilience of night market vendors.

Table 4: Summary of ANOVA result by independent variables and Resilience

	Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
EU	Between Groups	13.228	2	6.614	17.426	0.000
	Within Groups	98.681	260	0.38		
	Total	111.909	262			
JB	Between Groups	6.823	2	3.412	8.441	0.000
	Within Groups	105.085	260	0.404		
	Total	111.909	262			
SB	Between Groups	1.741	2	0.87	2.054	0.130
	Within Groups	110.168	260	0.424		
	Total	111.909	262			
PWB	Between Groups	11.766	2	5.883	15.273	0.000
	Within Groups	100.143	260	0.385		
	Total	111.909	262			

Legend:

Sum of Squares (SS); Degrees of Freedom (df); Mean Square (MS); F-Statistic (F)

EU- Economic uncertainty; JU- Job Uncertainty; SB- Social Behavioral; PWB- Psychological Well-being; RS- Resilience

Based on the ANOVA results in Table 4, significant differences are found in economic uncertainty ($F = 17.426$, $p = 0.000$), job uncertainty ($F = 8.441$, $p = 0.000$), and psychological well-being ($F = 15.273$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that these factors influence resilience.

These findings align with previous research showing a strong relationship between economic instability and individual resilience, where high economic uncertainty correlates with lower recovery from stress (McMaughan et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2021). Economic uncertainty, such as job market fluctuations and financial insecurity, can cause worries about job security and basic needs. Individuals with higher resilience can adapt their financial strategies, seek alternative income sources, or adjust their lifestyle to manage economic uncertainty effectively.

Job uncertainty also relates to resilience among night market vendors. Fear of job loss, changes in work conditions, and income reduction can increase stress. However, our findings suggest that vendors with high job uncertainty

possess better resilience, possibly due to proactive planning for future unemployment. This helps them develop a proactive mindset and remain motivated during job challenges (Coulombe et al., 2020).

Additionally, the study shows a positive relationship between psychological well-being and resilience, consistent with previous research. Individuals with better psychological well-being tend to have higher resilience (Dehnel et al., 2022; Pongutta et al., 2021). Good psychological well-being, encompassing mental and emotional health, helps individuals cope with economic and job uncertainties through self-care, social support, and positive coping mechanisms like exercise and hobbies.

In contrast, social behavior ($F = 2.054$, $p = 0.130$) does not show a significant difference with resilience. Resilience does not necessarily affect people's social behavior, as it depends on individual beliefs and decisions. Post-pandemic hygiene practices, social distancing, and online activities continue, but people's social behavior gradually returns to normal (Abolfotouh et al., 2021; S. Han et al., 2022). However, resilience may still be related to social interactions, as they play a significant role in coping with adversity. Resilience also depends on individual characteristics, coping strategies, personal beliefs, and external resources. Some individuals may naturally have higher resilience, while others may need to actively develop it over time.

CONCLUSION

This study focuses on informal workers in night markets, which serve as hubs for locals and tourists to explore local culture and find authentic food, crafts, entertainment, and souvenirs at affordable prices. The attitudes and behaviors of the vendors are crucial in shaping the residents and tourists' image of the community and state. Their reactions and attitudes significantly contribute to the transition from post-crisis to normalcy. However, there is limited research on the resilience of night market vendors, particularly during the pandemic.

This study examines resilience (the dependent variable) and its relationship with economic uncertainty, job insecurity, social behavior, and psychological well-being (the independent variables). Findings indicate that most vendors demonstrated resilience in normal conditions after the reopening of night markets post-pandemic but exhibited low compliance with COVID-19-related behaviors. This is likely due to the community's acclimation to COVID-19 and high vaccination rates, which increased confidence in participating in social activities without strict adherence to previous SOPs. Additionally, the study indicates that demographic factors such as ethnicity, employment status, and marital status influence individual behaviors, while ethnicity, marital status, educational level, and income affect attitudes.

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