

Cultivating a culture of post-COVID-19 prevention: understanding knowledge, awareness and practices of COVID-19 in Sarawak

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the relationship between public knowledge, awareness and attitudes towards post-COVID-19 infection prevention in Sarawak. At present, Sarawak is in the post-pandemic stage, marked by a gradual return to normalcy, albeit with some persistent changes caused by the pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected from various geographic areas in Sarawak through a Google Form link and QR code during a cross-sectional study, resulting in the acquisition of 1,128 responses. Data analysis was performed using SPSS 28.0 and WarpPLS 8.0.

Findings – The result revealed that out of five hypotheses, four were found to be supported, indicating a positive relationship between public knowledge, awareness and attitudes towards COVID-19 infection prevention. However, an unsupported relationship was found between public awareness and infection prevention practices.

Research limitations/implications – This study is limited to the Malaysian population and has a cross-sectional design, affecting generalizability. It is recommended that future research complete an in-depth study of the knowledge, awareness and practices of COVID-19 using other data collection techniques.

Practical implications – Public health and policymakers can use the study to implement effective communication strategies and prioritize digitalization for economic recovery. It highlights the importance of preventive measures and the public's role in managing future pandemics.

Originality/value – The originality of this research can be drawn from key findings that indicate that people overall gained knowledge on the prevention measures during the post-COVID-19 pandemic, and the accuracy of the information significantly impacts public knowledge, awareness and practices of COVID-19 infection prevention.

Keywords Public knowledge, Public awareness, Attitude, Post-COVID-19, Infection prevention practices, PLS-SEM

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

The onset of COVID-19 in Malaysia began towards the end of January 2020, when the country declared its initial confirmed cases of the virus. The first three patients were Chinese nationals who had arrived in Malaysia from Wuhan, the epicentre of the outbreak. In response to these cases, the Malaysian government enforced multiple measures to hinder the spread of the virus, including travel restrictions and mandatory quarantine protocols for individuals who had recently travelled to China (Shah *et al.*, 2020). In spite of these interventions, COVID-19 infections surged across Malaysia, with the virus spreading swiftly throughout the nation. To curb the escalating spread of the virus, the Malaysian government imposed strict measures, including a nationwide movement control order (MCO), first implemented in March 2020. This measure entailed an array of restrictions, such as the closure of schools and non-essential businesses, as well as limitations on travel and social gatherings. These interventions led to a significant decline in the number of COVID-19 cases reported in Malaysia in the months that followed. As of March 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that Malaysia had confirmed over 2 million cases of COVID-19, with more than 20,000 fatalities. Although Malaysia is still grappling with the pandemic's impact, increasing vaccination rates and the ongoing implementation of various measures to contain the spread of the virus indicate that Malaysia is transitioning towards the post-pandemic stage, characterized by a gradual return to normalcy, while some of the pandemic's changes may persist.

In the year 2020, an unparalleled and daunting pandemic gave rise to a health and economic crisis, causing disruptions to businesses and impacting people's livelihoods worldwide. The pandemic has significantly weakened the global growth outlook, as stated by Vo and Tran (2021). Malaysia's economy contracted by 5.6%, marking its most substantial decline since the 1998 Asian Financial Crisis. Sarawak was not exempt from the economic downturn and witnessed a widespread decline in economic activities. Furthermore, exports fell by 24.2%, and the unemployment rate rose to 4.3% in 2020. The pandemic has spurred digitalization across various sectors, popularized "work from home" as the new norm, and emphasized the significance of a resilient global supply chain in withstanding unforeseen events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Rao *et al.*, 2022). It has also brought into focus the impact of economic activity on the environment. In spite of posing many challenges to socio-economic norms, the pandemic has also presented new opportunities for Sarawak to move forward and create a promising future.

According to Shin and Kang (2020), the utilization of digital technology has been instrumental in facilitating pandemic prevention measures and promoting consumption patterns in the post-pandemic era. The adoption of digital technology has led to the emergence of novel products, services, business models and industries, such as education, health and smart homes, which have contributed significantly to the circular economy and economic growth in Malaysia. The digital economy has emerged as a potent force driving sustainable economic recovery and disruptive changes in production processes, enabling the accelerated adoption of digital technology (Jiang, 2017; Jiang, 2020). The pandemic has expedited the shift towards digitalization and technology adoption, and this trend is expected to persist in the post-pandemic phase (Hao *et al.*, 2020). The majority of individuals are likely to continue relying on technology for work, education and socialization, and digital technology and infrastructure may witness further advancements (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2020).

To ensure Sarawak is able to embark on a full-fledged transformation capitalizing on megatrends around the world such as globalization, supply chain resilience, digitalization, new industrial revolution and the circular economy, the Sarawak Economic Action Council (SEAC) was formed to formulate the Post-COVID-19 Development Strategy 2030. This plan