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Hawkers in the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study in Penang

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Hawkers in the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study in Penang

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Penang Institute interviewed 31 hawkers from 18 July to 1 Aug 2021 to understand the challenges they face amid Covid-19, in terms of economic and health impacts, and their engagement with government assistance.
- All except one hawker reported a drop in profit. Hawkers selling non-edibles and those with higher dependence on tourists were more affected. With digital adoption, hawkers were able to prevent huge losses, at the least, or even see an increase in profit.
- Financial issues were the hawkers' main source of worry, affecting their mental health. While most had mechanisms for coping, a minority did not have any support in place.
- Hawkers had low engagement with government assistance schemes executed under Covid-19, except those that disbursed cash. The main barriers preventing uptake included not knowing how to apply for schemes, high cost in time and effort, ineligibility and lack of usefulness of the aid initiatives.
- Text-messaging platforms and official government Facebook groups were the two most preferred channels for receiving information related to government assistance.
- Although most hawkers rated the cash assistance as helpful, this was not sufficient in the long term.
- This study recommends seven measures to help mitigate the challenges faced by hawkers:
 - a. Modernise wet markets and hawker premises from public health aspects;
 - b. Offer discounted rental rates for hawkers in local council premises;
 - c. Provide government aid for online advertisements;
 - d. Conduct mass disinfection in systematic and committed ways;
 - e. Implement measures to build back customer confidence;
 - f. Establish a one-stop centre to facilitate government aid application processes and information dissemination; and
 - g. Support mental health providers through funding and training.

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has adversely affected hawker businesses in Malaysia. With multiple lockdowns implemented in different stages, market and street hawkers suffered reduced income, restricted opening hours and logistics constraints. Should such conditions continue into 2022, more and more in this group will end up with significantly poorer income. It is timely therefore to understand the extent of the challenges that hawkers have had to battle with.

A case study was thus carried out by Penang Institute to examine the socio-economic and health impacts of the pandemic on hawkers on Penang Island. Specifically, this report (1) discusses issues faced by hawkers during the pandemic; (2) explores mental health among the hawkers; (3) evaluates hawkers' coping mechanisms alongside engagement with government assistance; and (4) proposes recommendations on how to better equip hawkers and enhance government preparedness for future pandemics.

1.1 Methodology

Ideally, the target population for this study would be a majority of hawkers operating in Penang Island. Due to time and data constraints however, the sample for this study focuses on registered hawkers. The sampling frame used is the list of hawkers who are registered with the Penang Island City Council (MBPP)¹.

Broadly speaking, there are six types of hawker-related licenses issued by the local council: *gerai sementara bermusim*, *gerai sementara promosi*, *lesen gerai tanah persendirian*, *lesen penjaja pasar pagi/pasar malam (individu)*, *lesen penjaja statik sementara* and *tapak penjaja sementara, pasar dan kompleks* (TPS, markets and complexes hereinafter)². At the time of the survey, only details of hawkers operating at TPS, markets and complexes were available, and it is these who are included in the study³.

In total, there were 5,845 hawkers registered with MBPP under TPS, market and complex licenses. Hawkers operating in markets accounted for 35.1%, followed by TPS (34.8%) and MBPP complexes (30.1%). Nearly 85% of them were operating in Timur Laut, while the remaining 15.1% were in Barat Daya. In terms of ethnicity, Chinese made up the largest share, with 61.1%, followed by Malay (29.7%), other ethnicities (4.8%) and Indian (4.4%).

¹ Updated as of May 2021.

² Licenses for TPS, markets and complexes are issued by MBPP for hawkers who operate at MBPP's premises, as opposed to, say, other morning or night markets managed by others.

³ The authors acknowledge the importance of hawkers operating in private food courts and coffee shops on the local economy. The lack of readily available data and the MCO restrictions limits the conclusions this study can make on the difficulties faced by the Penang hawker community as a whole.

Sampling selection

Thirty respondents were targeted⁴. Their responses were collected through computer-assisted telephone interviews. As the first step in the sampling, 300 respondents⁵ were randomly selected from the list of hawkers using a stratified random sampling method. Due to several challenges faced during the process of data collection, some respondents were contacted through a snowballing approach while meeting the sampling requirements of each stratum. Two main reasons for adopting a snowballing approach are:

- a. Nearly half of the phone numbers contacted were not in service; and
- b. Hawkers on the MBPP list were skewed towards older-age hawkers. Younger hawkers were contacted through word-of-mouth.

The sample was stratified based on district, license type and ethnicity. These variables were used because the hawkers in these groups were not equally distributed. Stratifying by these variables ensures that the sample reflected the population well. The number and percentage share of hawkers' population and collected samples are shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Distribution of hawkers' population and sample of respondents, by district, license type and ethnicity

	Complex		Market		TPS		Total	
	Population	Sample	Population	Sample	Population	Sample	Population	Sample
Barat Daya	460 (7.9%)	2 (6.5%)	351 (6.0%)	4 (12.9%)	72 (1.2%)	0 (0.0%)	883 (15.1%)	6 (19.4%)
Malay	243 (4.2%)	1 (3.2%)	123 (2.1%)	1 (3.2%)	21 (0.4%)	0 (0.0%)	387 (6.6%)	2 (6.5%)
Chinese	173 (3.0%)	1 (3.2%)	208 (3.6%)	3 (9.7%)	47 (0.8%)	0 (0.0%)	428 (7.3%)	4 (12.9%)
Indian	18 (0.3%)	0 (0.0%)	14 (0.2%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (0.1%)	0 (0.0%)	35 (0.6%)	0 (0.0%)
Others	26 (0.4%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (0.1%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	33 (0.6%)	0 (0.0%)
Timur Laut	1,297 (22.2%)	6 (19.4%)	1,702 (29.1%)	11 (35.5%)	1,963 (33.6%)	8 (25.8%)	4,962 (84.9%)	25 (80.6%)
Malay	561 (9.6%)	1 (3.2%)	349 (6.0%)	2 (6.5%)	437 (7.5%)	3 (9.7%)	1,347 (23.0%)	6 (19.4%)

⁴ As a rule of thumb, 20-50 interviews are suggested for a qualitative interview (Morse, 2000; Sandelowski, 1995; Sim et al., 2018). Given that our sample would be rather homogeneous (all hawkers), we set a sample size of 30, subject to time and human resources constraints.

⁵ Assumed a response rate of 10%.

Chinese	615 (10.5%)	4 (12.9%)	1,144 (19.6%)	7 (22.6%)	1,382 (23.6%)	5 (16.1%)	3,141 (53.7%)	16 (51.6%)
Indian	63 (1.1%)	1 (3.2%)	91 (1.6%)	1 (3.2%)	71 (1.2%)	0 (0.0%)	225 (3.8%)	2 (6.5%)
Others	58 (1.0%)	0 (0.0%)	118 (2.0%)	1 (3.2%)	73 (1.2%)	0 (0.0%)	249 (4.3%)	1 (3.2%)
Total	1,757 (30.1%)	8 (25.8%)	2,053 (35.1%)	15 (48.4%)	2,035 (34.8%)	8 (25.8%)	5,845 (100.0%)	31 (100.0%)

1.2 Sample Description

There were 31 respondents in this case study. A total of 40 hawkers were contacted from 18 July to 1 Aug 2021, but nine of them did not wish to be interviewed. This means that 77.5% responded to the calls while 22.5% refused the interview⁶.

As shown in Figure 1.1, 70% of the respondents were 40 years old and above, while only 16.1% were youths aged below 30 years old. The proportion of male and female hawkers were almost equal. Males made up about 52% and female hawkers were 48%. Chinese hawkers constituted 64.5%, followed by Malay (25.8%) and Indian (6.5%). Location-wise, about 80% of the respondents were operating in Timur Laut.

A majority of the respondents, 48.4%, were market hawkers. The remaining were uniformly distributed between complexes and TPS (25.8%). In terms of products, hawkers selling food and beverages (F&B) accounted for 48.4%, followed by those selling non-edibles (19.4%) and market produce⁷ (16.1%).

Since MCO 3.0, 87% (27 out of 31) remained in operation, while 13% (4 out of 31) had closed down their enterprise.

⁶ Does not include numbers not in service.

⁷ Refer to fish, meat and vegetables.

Figure 1.1: Demographics of hawker respondents (n=31)



2. Economic impact and other challenges

This section explores the business impact of Covid-19 on hawkers, the challenges they faced, and the mitigation strategies they employed to stay afloat financially.

For the large part, the hawkers in our sample experienced large negative impacts on their livelihoods, and this had a knock-on effect mainly on their savings, retirement funds, and to a lesser extent, debt load. Many of the challenges they faced were novel, and were clearly created by the pandemic's unique circumstances. Many were pessimistic about business conditions in the near future.

2.1 Business operations and performance

Following the announcement of MCO 3.0, 87% (27 out of 31) of the respondents continued operating. Thirteen percent (4 out of 31) of them decided to fold up. Those who stopped accepted other jobs and made substantially lower incomes.

All currently-operating hawkers reported a drop in profit, except for one young hawker who reported a 30% increase in profit after adopting delivery services. Overall, the profit of these hawkers decreased by 50%.

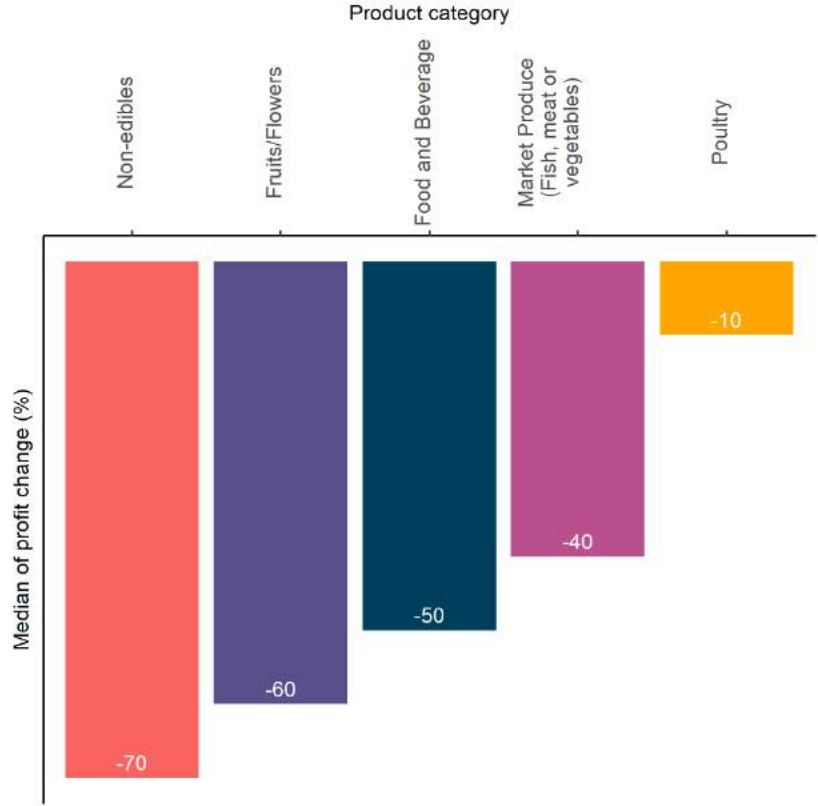
Besides their hawker businesses, only 26% (7 out of 27) had other income sources, including incomes from their spouses. Similarly, these people reported a reduction in non-hawker income, ranging between -50% and -20%, an exception being a Foodpanda rider who saw a slight increment from this income source.

For this study, the business performance of hawkers is further elaborated in terms of product category, tourist dependency and digital adoption.

a. Product category

Though almost all hawkers experienced a drop in profit, those selling fresh produce were in a better position compared to others. Some hawkers noticed customers' reluctance to leave their homes, preferring to cook at home instead; this would have impacted F&B hawkers.

Figure 2.1: Median of profit changes in hawker businesses by product category

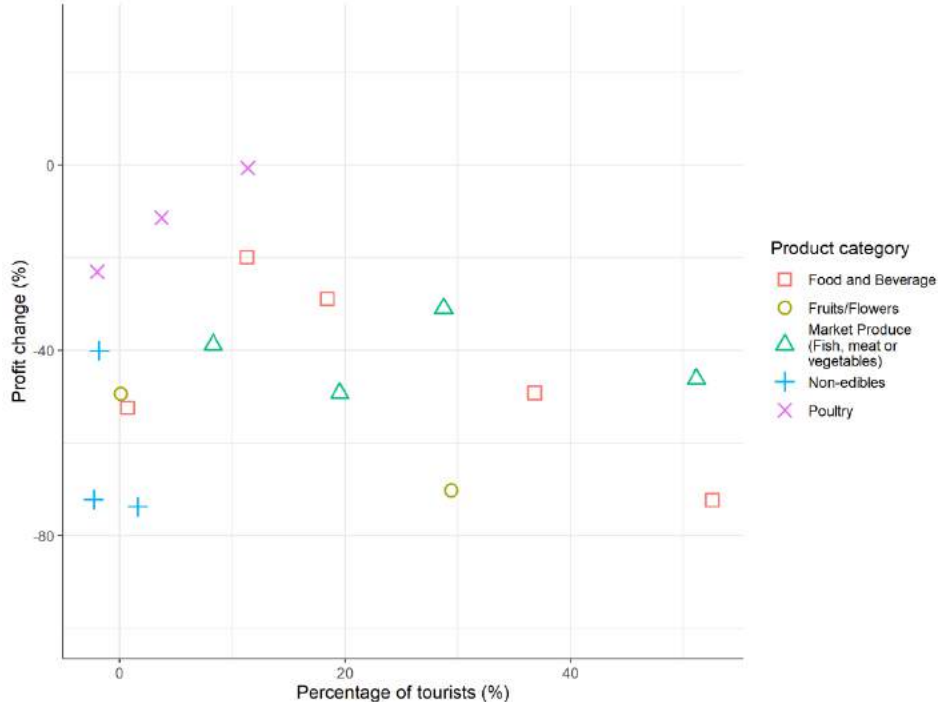


b. Tourist dependence

Figure 2.2 shows that from our sample, those who had a higher share of tourists tended to encounter larger losses.

Owing to the lack of tourism activity in Penang during the lockdown period, hawkers who relied on tourists were severely and adversely affected. At the same time, those whose customers lived in the neighbourhood saw smaller changes in income. For example, one poultry seller in Pulau Tikus said that the lockdown had not affected his business because “the majority of my customers are residents.”

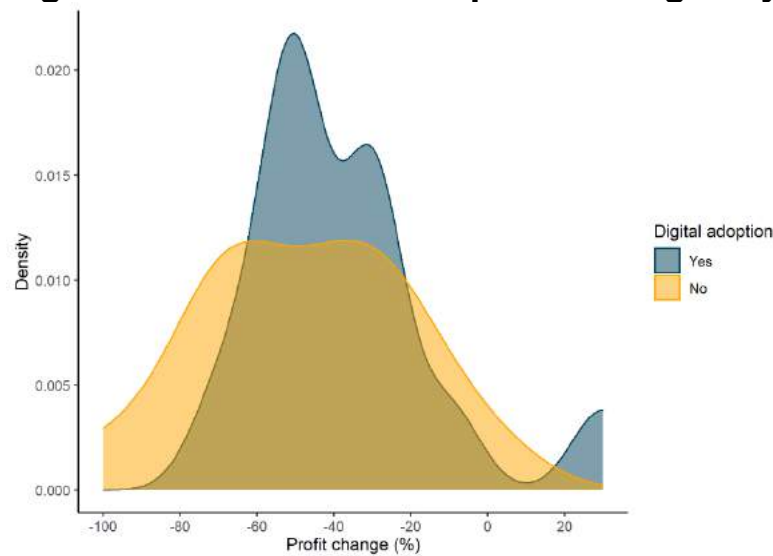
Figure 2.2: Relationship between profit changes and percentage share of tourists in the businesses (before the pandemic)



c. Digital adoption

The adoption of digital tools did not shield hawkers we interviewed from experiencing profit drops. However, as shown in Figure 2.3, the profit change was smaller for those who adopted digital tools in their businesses. With digital adoption, hawkers were able to prevent a 100% drop in profit (zero income), with some even seeing an increase in their profit.

Figure 2.3: Distribution of profit changes by digital adoption



2.2 Challenges

Hawkers in our sample faced several unprecedented challenges arising out of pandemic conditions affecting profit.

1. Lockdown regulations and avoidance of public spaces

Hawkers saw that consumers were less willing to leave their homes and that many had switched to online marketplaces to make purchases. The no-dine-in policy affected not only F&B hawkers, but also those selling fresh produce, due to low demand from F&B hawkers and restaurants.

Many hawkers were concerned about the long-term impact on business if the lockdown persisted, and these worries were exacerbated by existing financial issues. A majority of them hoped to see the pandemic in Malaysia brought under control and for the lockdown to be lifted as soon as possible. One hawker said, “I try to promote my food online so my business is better than last year. But I hope that the lockdown can be lifted so that I can operate my stall as before.”

2. Constraints in spending

According to hawkers, MCO 3.0 had a larger impact on profit compared to MCO 1.0 because household savings were lower than before, owing to weak economic conditions. People were more cautious about spending decisions, holding back demand for most items.

3. Customers not abiding by SOP

Customers violating the lockdown standard operating procedure was also an issue for profit levels, in direct and indirect ways. A roadside fruit hawker said, “When he (the authority) notices someone not following the SOP, he immediately gives a *saman* without any warning. If I sell

many types of fruit, many customers will gather at my stall, [making SOP compliance harder]. So I reduce the stock but earn less.”

4. Perceived low payoffs from learning new digital skills

Several hawkers indicated that they decided to learn new skills to promote and sell their products online. For some, however, this was a steep learning curve. Frustration grew among some hawkers when the new skills did not appear to improve their income. “I need to learn new marketing skills, but I don’t see significant changes in the online business.”

5. Health risks

Worry of being infected with Covid-19 was also another concern, given how often hawkers have close contact with others. To minimise this risk, some reduced their operating time or stopped operating completely. According to one of them, “The other reason for me to operate only three to four days per week is that I am scared of being infected by the virus; I have five children staying with me.”

6. Unintended consequences

Two hawkers stated that food banks affected their businesses as people did not buy food when there was free food being provided. And while food bank organisers would buy from hawkers, not all hawkers benefited equally.

This highlights the need to assess the impact of well-intentioned initiatives on multiple stakeholders, and not only on intended beneficiaries.

7. Higher prices of raw materials

Rising prices of raw materials also impacted sales. To a certain extent, this depends on the necessity of the good, and how long it takes for customers to find substitutes. An egg seller said, “No big problem for me yet because eggs are essential; my business is not affected much. But I think the price of eggs will keep increasing, and at some point, this will affect my business; my customers won’t be able to afford it.”

2.3 Current and future actions to support income

Figure 2.4 compares the actions already taken by hawkers to maintain their income during the pandemic, with action plans in anticipation of future unexpected events. At the time of interview, 77.4% of hawkers have used their savings to tide them over, and applied for government support (left bars on Figure 2.4). Only less than a quarter (22.6%) withdrew retirement funds from the Employees Provident Fund, and even fewer made changes to their business models (19.4%) or took out loans (6.5%).

Across all measures except for government support⁸, there was an increase in planned uptake (right bars on Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4: Current (left bars) and future actions (right bars) to support income during the pandemic (n=31)



Note: Government support includes assistance targeted at individuals and businesses.

If more hawkers thought that there was a growing need to bolster income through these strategies, it strongly signals pessimism for the near future, and/ or unsustainable incomes from their businesses or current jobs.

Most concerning is the intention to withdraw from retirement funds. This is highly risky for retirement security, given that the majority of hawkers interviewed were very close to retirement age and do not have time to replenish retirement funds.

⁸ See 4. Engagement with government schemes for factors preventing uptake.

These trends tell us that hawkers will have significantly lower savings (personal and retirement) as a result of the pandemic. This has at least two implications. Firstly, lacking a cushion, they will be more vulnerable to future financial shocks. This is a serious problem for elderly hawkers who can expect health expenditure to rise, and young parents who have heavy and growing financial commitments. The next crisis will push them into poverty. Secondly, hawkers will be less able to accumulate productive assets to scale their businesses.

3. Health conditions amid Covid-19

The survey showed that hawkers in our sample were under duress, both mentally and physically. While financial costs of the pandemic to hawkers are quantifiable, health costs are difficult to assess because of their non-saliency, and the lack of a metric.

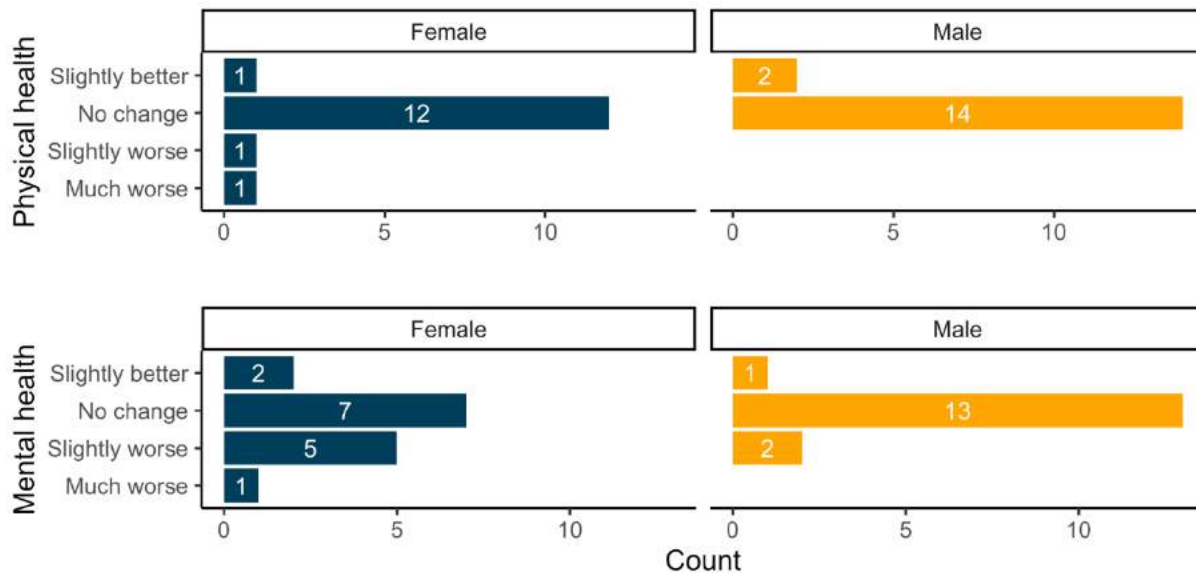
In terms of mental stress, financial issues weighed heavily on their minds. Many of these were linked to debt, and an inability to make ends meet. Virus fears and feelings of isolation were also sources of anxiety and stress for the hawkers.

The majority interviewed had coping mechanisms in place to mitigate health risks. Given the expressions of depression and anxiety received from hawkers, it is quite likely that the existing coping mechanisms helped but were insufficient. Furthermore, a small minority did not have any support in place.

3.1 Changes in physical and mental health

To get a better understanding of how MCO 3.0 has affected hawkers' wellbeing, we assess them on both mental and physical health (Figure 3.1). Hawkers were asked for *changes* after MCO 3.0, not the level of current health.

Figure 3.1: Changes in hawkers' health after MCO 3.0
 "How has your wellbeing changed since MCO 3.0 (12 May 2021)?" (n=31)



The majority of hawkers in the sample did not experience changes in their physical or mental health after MCO 3.0, compared to before. However, two mentioned poorer physical health, both women.

A small minority of hawkers interviewed were Covid-19 survivors, and they explained how post-disease effects reduced their productivity at work and ability to grow their income.

In terms of mental health, there were more negative changes. Many reported a deterioration in mental health (six women and two men).

Health risks need to be urgently addressed because of their long-term implications for society as a whole. As mentioned earlier, survivors of Covid-19 experienced lower productivity, and this would have a long-lasting impact on their ability to provide for their families. Besides, they may also face societal pressure even after recovery, which further affects their mental health.

3.2 Sources of worry

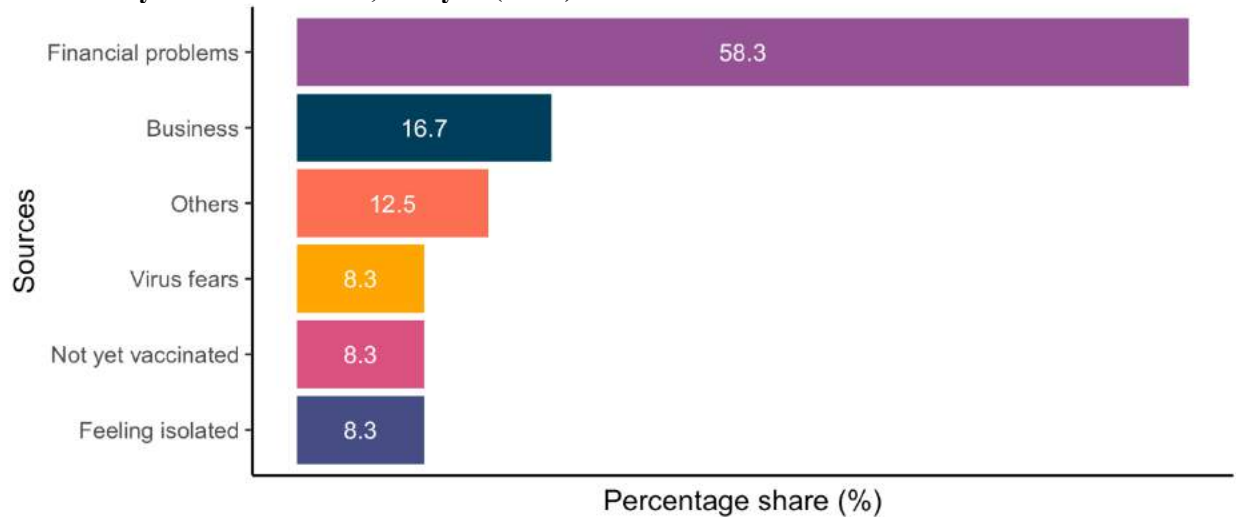
Although many hawkers did not report a tremendous change in health status, they did reveal worries over the current pandemic climate. Figure 3.2 shows the sources of worry for hawkers. "No change" or "slightly better" mental health does not necessarily indicate good levels of wellbeing, because those reports were sometimes accompanied by expressions of negative emotions and worries. In the long run, present acute mental distress is a great risk factor for physical and mental diseases (Vlachopoulos et al., 2006; Agorastos et al., 2019; Brosschot et al., 2006).

Hawkers were overwhelmingly worried about financial problems, and related to that was poor business performance. Not all hawkers disclosed details about their financial problems, but debt issues were explicitly mentioned by three respondents. One hawker for example was under “a lot of stress” because of “debts taken out to support family and [the] business.” It is not clear if debt issues arose as a direct result of the pandemic, but we note that it was mentioned by those whose business profit or total income had fallen by 20-60%. Linked to that was the lack of money, and inability to cover daily expenses.

Many fears and worries stemmed from uncertainty about the pandemic situation too. Hawkets were worried about contracting the Covid-19 virus and were anxious about when they would receive their vaccines. There were also feelings of isolation as a result of the lockdown.

Figure 3.2: Sources of worry for hawkers

“What are your main worries, if any?” (n=24)



3.3 Coping mechanisms

Hawkets used a myriad of coping mechanisms during the pandemic to manage both mentally and physically.

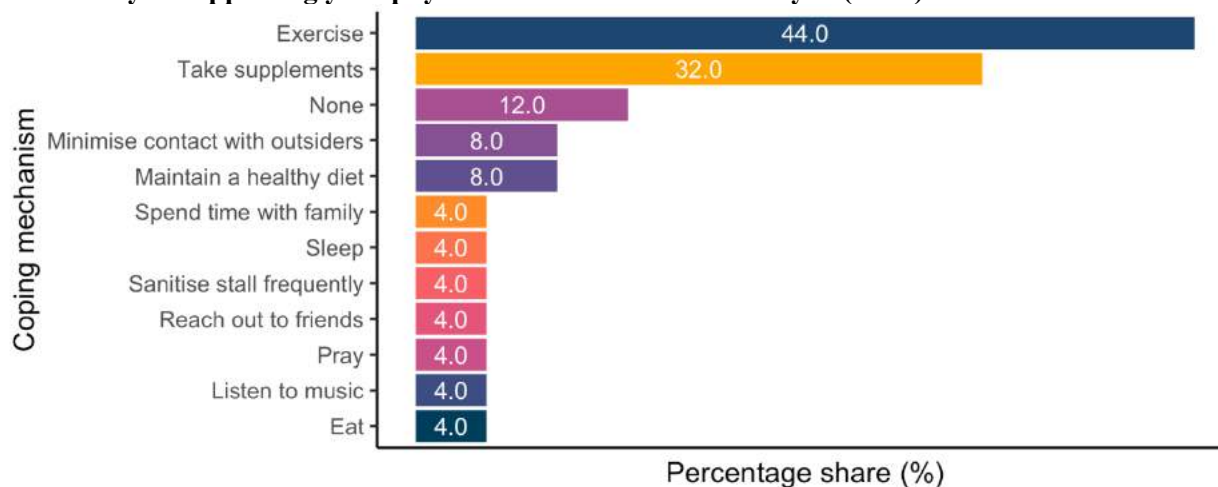
The most popular support measures were exercising, and taking supplements (Figure 3.3). Some also mentioned that they were trying to maintain healthy diets. These measures suggest that hawkets were aware of the need to maintain strong immune systems in the midst of a health crisis.

Hawkets also practised precautionary steps by sanitising stall surroundings frequently after customers had left, and cutting down on contact with outsiders.

In terms of mental wellbeing, hawkets de-stressed by spending more time with family, reaching out to friends to release emotional burdens, listening to music, sleeping more, praying, and eating.

Not everyone took active steps to counter a deterioration in their mental or physical health, however. Several hawkers did not adopt any coping mechanisms despite expressing anxiety over financial and business issues during the survey (“None” - 12%).

Figure 3.3: How hawkers cared for their welfare
 “How are you supporting your physical/ mental health currently?” (n=25)



This study focused on the hawkers themselves, but it is reasonable to expect that the hawkers’ partners and children living in the same household also experienced similar health changes. This would have inhibited their abilities to support one another, weakening one obvious way of coping during the pandemic.

Creating awareness of the importance of self-regulating, providing tools to do that, and extending information about support systems available can help hawkers manage their welfare better, as well as their families.

4. Engagement with government schemes

The Federal Government, in 2020 and 2021 (up to June), rolled out several schemes under PENJANA and PRIHATIN. In the same period, the Penang State Government launched several rounds of fiscal stimulus packages to complement national initiatives. We assess hawkers’ engagement levels with the schemes, the barriers that prevent uptake, and the impact.

Engagement was highest for schemes that disbursed cash, such as the Prihatin Special Grant (GKP), and the RM 500 PEKA handouts by the state government. Amongst the barriers hindering engagement was poor awareness. Other factors were the lack of knowledge of application procedures, pessimism regarding application success rate, inappropriate forms of help and, similar to the case of digital adoption⁹, high

⁹ See [Penang Institute's Monograph \(17 Sep 2021\): Digitalisation among Penang’s Hawkers: Targeted Policies Urgently Needed](#)

perceived effort and time cost. Impact-wise, hawkers found government cash handout schemes to be helpful only in the short term.

4.1 Responses to the federal schemes

Within our sample of 31 hawkers, engagement with national schemes was exceedingly low, and few benefited from the initiatives, although awareness levels were moderate for some (Figure 4.1).

The relatively well-known ones were:

1. The Micro and SMEs E-Commerce Campaign that seeks to bring onboard small businesses onto e-commerce platforms
2. The Wage Subsidy Programme that subsidised workers' wages
3. The Prihatin Special Grant (GKP), a cash grant of RM 1,000 disbursed to eligible businesses.

Roughly 30-60% of hawkers knew of these schemes. Yet, despite significant awareness, almost none of the hawkers benefitted from them.

Few hawkers applied for the Prihatin Special Grant (GKP) and tax relief scheme for Covid-19 equipment. For example, five applied to the GKP, but only three benefited from it. Other schemes had fewer than two applicants or beneficiaries. Low engagement for federal schemes is a cause for concern, given the immense resources put into designing them.

The Bantuan Prihatin Rakyat programme (BPR) was not listed amongst the selected schemes because it is not targeted at businesses, but at individuals. However, we note that ten out of 31 hawkers were beneficiaries.

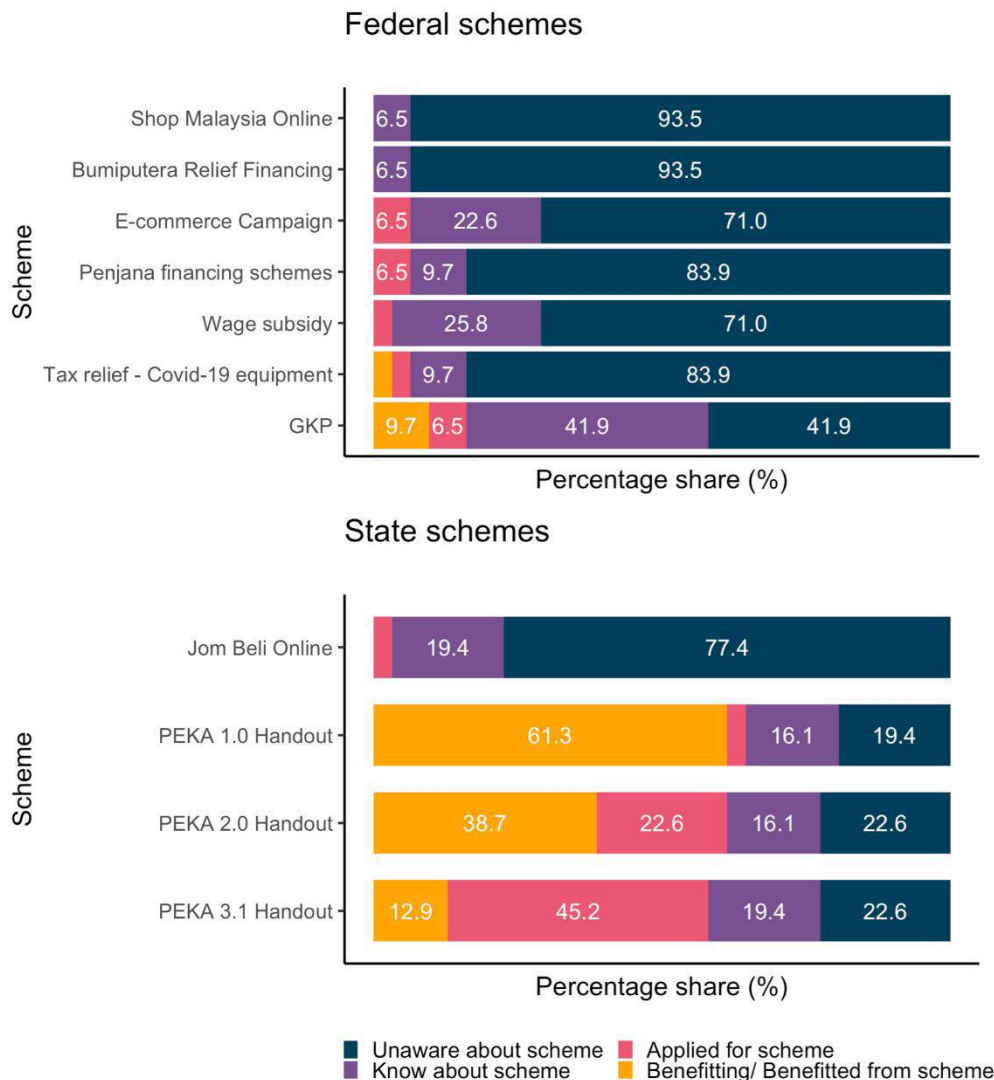
4.2 Responses to the state schemes

Particularly relevant to hawkers were the cash handouts for hawkers and Jom Beli Online, an e-commerce programme to encourage hawkers to trade online.

The handouts were most well-known – more than three-quarters of the hawkers interviewed knew about them (Figure 4.1), and 58-65% applied for them. The application success rate was 95% for the first round of handouts, and decreased with each round, hitting 22.2% for PEKA 3.1. Roughly 16-19% of 31 hawkers knew about the handouts but did not apply for them.

There was least awareness about Jom Beli Online. The majority of hawkers (77.4%) did not know about it. Only one had applied for it, but was not yet benefitting from it.

Figure 4.1: Engagement levels with government schemes
 ‘Please state your level of engagement with each of the government schemes.’ (n=31)



Note: ‘Know about scheme’ indicates awareness, but not application/ usage of scheme. Those who have benefitted from the schemes are assumed to have applied for them.

4.3 Factors preventing the uptake of government schemes

The lack of information is not the only barrier that prevents the uptake of schemes. Multiple factors related to behaviour and perception can affect uptake rates of schemes that are meant to benefit hawkers.

Figure 4.2 shows that even when hawkers were aware of the schemes, they did not apply because they did not know how to do so. This was the main reason cited (44%), and strongly suggests that information about policies, especially those that require hawkers to opt-in, need to be accompanied with clear instructions to be effective.

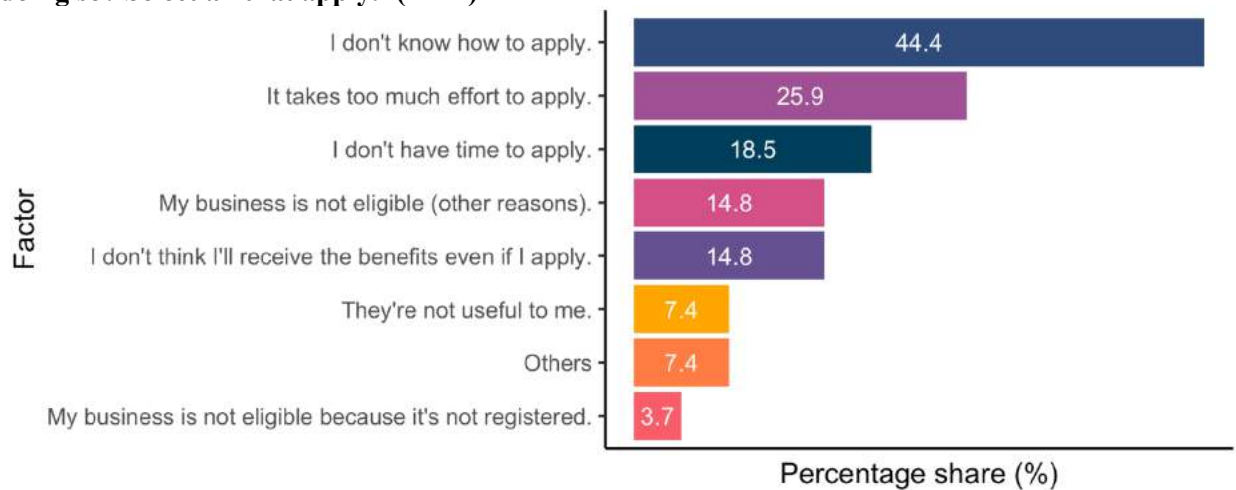
Some hawkers also found that applying was costly in terms of effort and time. According to one hawker, “Although the government provides a lot of financial aid, it is hard to apply for them.” In addition, hawkers thought that the likelihood of receiving the benefits was low even if they were to apply. High upfront costs encourage procrastination, and this behaviour is especially pronounced when expected benefits are low.

Ineligibility also poses a barrier. About 20% of hawkers found that their businesses were not eligible for various reasons. Most of these reasons were not specified. One stated that he did not have an income tax account and could not apply. Another said their business was not registered.

A very small percentage (7.4%) mentioned that some of the federal schemes were not useful to them because they were debt-averse. For example, one hawker said, “I don’t want to borrow, it’s an additional burden to me.” In times of pandemic with many uncertainties, borrowing would increase the burden of repayment even when zero interest rate is being made available.

Figure 4.2: Factors preventing the uptake of the scheme(s)

‘For the schemes that you are aware of, but have not made use of, what is preventing you from doing so? Select all that apply.’ (n=27)



Furthermore, the attitude towards new technologies could be a possible factor affecting the uptake of government schemes. Figure A (see Appendix) shows that the usage of digital tools was positively correlated with hawkers’ engagement level with the government schemes. Those who used digital tools were more likely to have greater engagement. This suggests that digital channels are useful at transmitting information about government schemes, or that those who use digital tools are also those who are more proactive about seeking out information.

The barriers reflect areas for improvement in policy design. Key aspects requiring attention are:

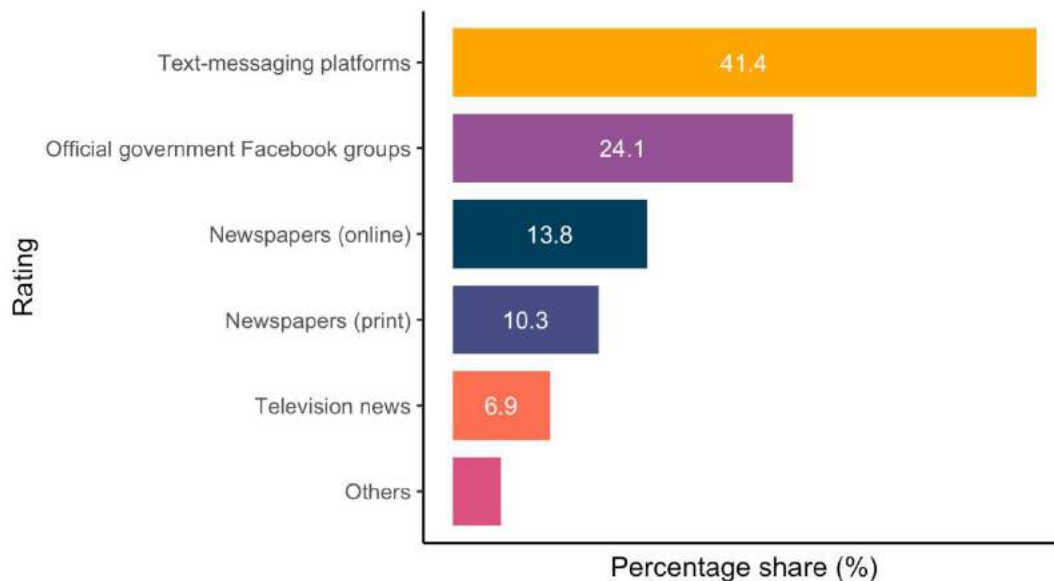
1. Marketing
2. Guidance given on application steps
3. Simplification of application procedures

4.4 Preferred information channels for government schemes

Hawkers in our sample had diverse preferences for channels from which to receive official government information about assistance.

In relation to government assistance, the majority of them opted for digital channels. As can be seen in Figure 4.3, slightly more than three-quarters of hawkers interviewed said it was easiest to receive information about government assistance through groups on text-messaging platforms (41.4%), official government Facebook groups (24.1%), online newspapers (13.8%), and television news (6.9%). The remainder preferred print news.

Figure 4.3: Preferred channels to receive information from
‘What would be the easiest way for you to get information from the government about assistance?
Select one.’ (n=28)



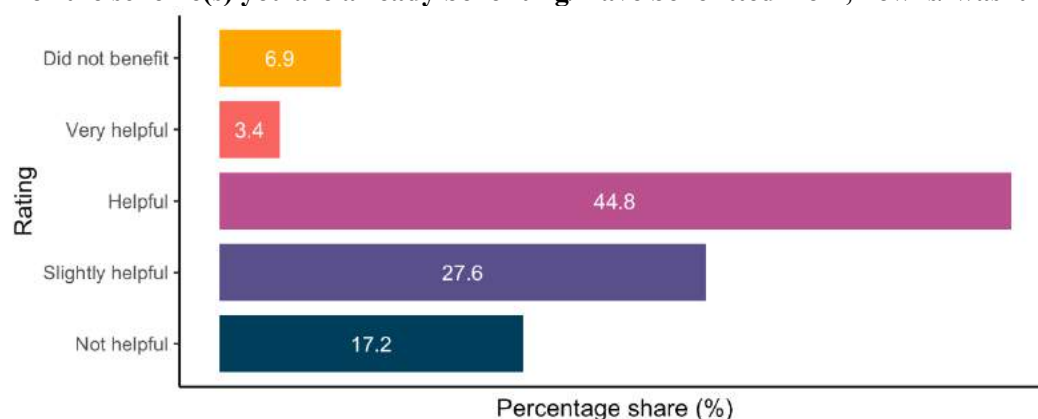
In terms of marketing, information will reach intended beneficiaries more effectively if communicated through official government websites, text-messaging platforms, and digital newspapers.

4.5 The impacts of government schemes

To gauge the impact, hawkers were asked how helpful the schemes had been to them, and in which ways. Their answers would help policymakers assess how the schemes are utilised, and if they impacted hawkers as intended.

Figure 4.4: Helpfulness of schemes

‘For the scheme(s) you are already benefiting/ have benefitted from, how is/ was it helpful? (n=28)



Hawkers’ comments and ratings were all linked to cash handouts since these were the schemes that hawkers benefited from. No feedback was given in relation to tax reliefs, loans or e-commerce initiatives.

The majority of hawkers found that the cash handout schemes were slightly helpful, or helpful (Figure 4.4). Hawkets used fiscal support to pay for living expenses (children’s education, household goods, food), shop lot rental, transport costs, food ingredients, and business assets. For example, one hawker said, “The GKP helped me buy things for the business, and I used RM 500 from PEKA 1.0 to pay for shop rental.”

However, several hawkers also qualified their ratings by saying that the handouts were only helpful in the short term, not the long term. “It was helpful in the beginning but now, it is not helpful because the lockdown still continues and the scheme cannot cover my basic expenses.”

Less than 20% of hawkers did not think the schemes they benefited from were helpful, because the cash value was too low. Others took it more positively, stating that the cash grants were better than nothing.

The feedback suggests that the cash handouts have helped hawkers as a short-term solution, allowing them to purchase assets for the business, cover rent, and support household expenditure. However, this also highlights the urgent need to have long-term and sustainable measures in place, given the prolonged lockdown and significantly affected sales (see 2. Economic impact and challenges).

5. Policy recommendations

Taking the challenges faced by the hawkers into consideration, several strategic measures are recommended to improve hawkers' livelihoods and the hawker environment in Penang amid the Covid-19 and beyond.

1. Modernise wet markets and hawker premises from public health aspects

Amid the looming pandemic, local councils should take this opportunity to assess the level of cleanliness within the vicinity of wet markets and hawker centres. The prevalence of virus transmission at these venues suggests that greater efforts to upgrade and maintain the facilities and premises are urgently needed. This includes transforming the hawker environment to make it more sustainable from aspects such as space, logistics, ventilation, car park, customer traffic, hygiene, waste management and drainage management.

2. Offer discounted rental rate for hawkers in local council premises

Due to poor business, some hawkers stopped operations temporarily. When stall hawkers have no income, the waiving of their stall fees would help them stay open. This can be applied on a case-by-case basis.

Many hawkers hoped that the local government would offer discounts on the rental rate for all types of licenses. During the pandemic, some hawkers could not operate and were still required to pay rent. Unlike MCO1.0 where the local government had waived rent for three months, the subsequent MCOs did not have any such offer.

3. Provide government aid for online advertisements

Our survey found that more hawkers are contemplating changing their business models in order to stay afloat. Unfortunately, quite a number of them are not digital savvy and find it difficult to expand their online customer base or maintain their online platforms. Government provision for online marketing or courses related to digital marketing would be helpful to those who are in need in the long term.

4. Conduct mass disinfection in systematic and committed ways

Success in combating the pandemic lies in concerted and timely efforts from policymakers. A mass disinfection initiative should be top on the agenda, along with restricted people movement. Proactive cooperation between local, state and federal governments has been shown to be lacking.

At the time of the survey, most hawkers hoped that the state government would focus on controlling the spread of the virus by expediting vaccine administration to all hawkers and ramping up the frequency of disinfection efforts. The absence of customers from other states impacted the revenue of street food street hawkers greatly.

5. Implement measures to build back customer confidence

More health and safety measures should be strategically formulated to help hawkers rebuild customer confidence. For example, now that inter-state travel is allowed again, regular

disinfection activities by governments in popular tourist spots and crowded areas are needed more than ever, at the same as business owners are doing their part to ensure SOPs compliance and disinfection at their premises.

6. Establish a one-stop centre to facilitate government aid application process and information dissemination

There was low awareness of government assistance schemes among hawkers. In addition, they did not actively engage with the schemes due to perceived difficulties and low success rates.

The state should have a centralised platform with a streamlined system among government departments. First, the application process should be made simple so that applicants just need to fill in the form once and their eligibility would be assessed for subsequent schemes. Clear application instructions also need to be given.

Furthermore, although there were efforts taken by different ADUNs, public awareness was low due to scattered information. The same platform should also consolidate all information related to government assistance schemes so that the public can easily access the relevant information. This platform should act as a channel to receive citizens' feedback on the various government initiatives, to monitor and evaluate them.

7. Support mental health providers through funding and training

Since members of the Penang public are not inclined to seek help when faced with mental health problems, more funding should be allocated to mental health NGOs to reach out to citizens with mental issues, and to hold campaigns to destigmatise mental health issues. More community engagement programmes can then also be held to reduce stress and anxiety, such as virtual exercise classes.

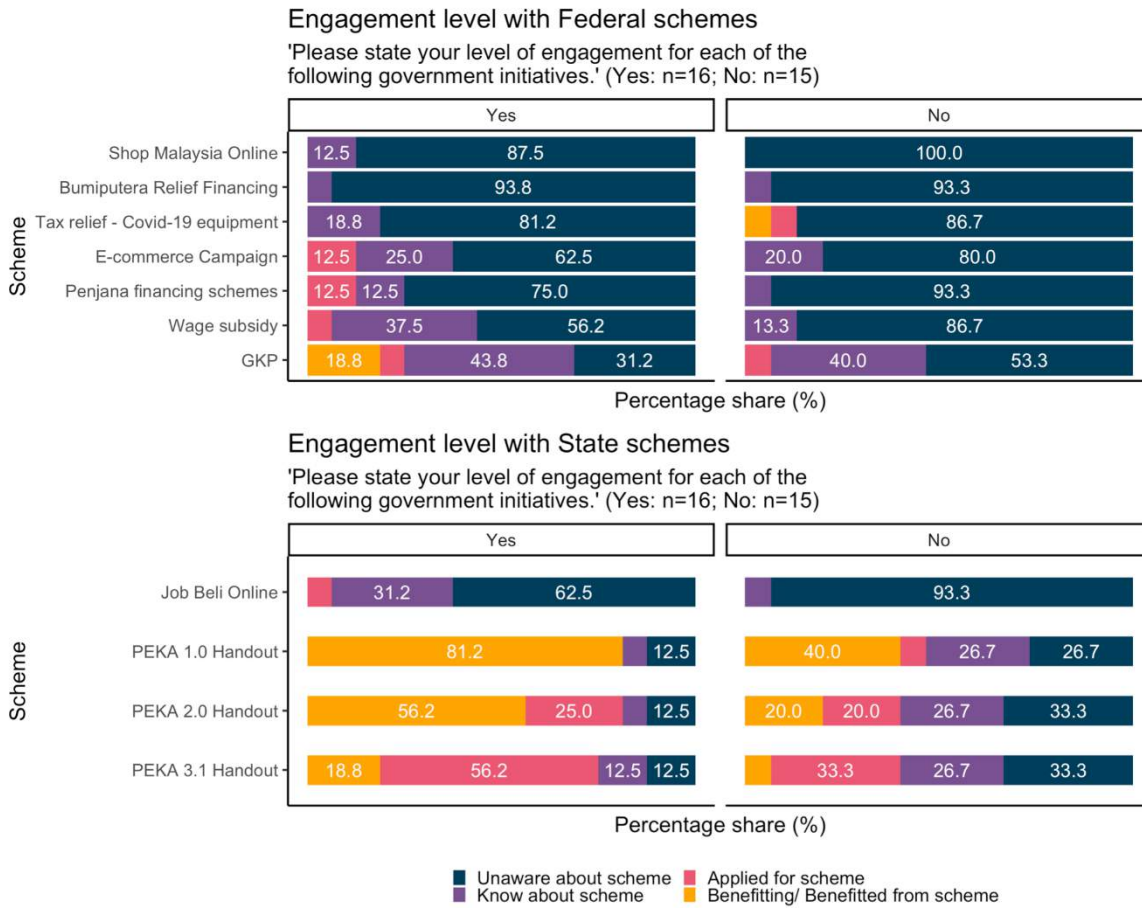
Furthermore, when parents face mental health issues, children suffer too. More mental health support for students should be delivered via school counsellors. Therefore, more training should be given to build a sustainable health workforce.

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Appendix

Figure A: Engagement levels with schemes, by usage of digital tools



Note: Yes: Used digital tools in their hawker business, No: Did not use digital tools