

COVID-19 as a Non-Traditional Security Stressor: Multidimensional Social Vulnerability in a Plural Urban Community in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how a public-health emergency can extend beyond the health sector and disrupt livelihoods, social relations, everyday routines, and psychological well-being. This article examines how COVID-19, conceptualised as a non-traditional security (NTS) threat, generated multidimensional social vulnerability within a plural urban community in Malaysia. A qualitative case-study design was employed in Subang Jaya, Selangor. Data were derived from document analysis and semi-structured interviews with ten informants, selected through purposive and snowball sampling, who represented institutional and community perspectives. The data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and relationships across cases. Three interconnected dimensions of vulnerability emerged: economic, social, and psychological. Economic vulnerability was manifested through income disruption, livelihood insecurity, and difficulties meeting basic needs. Social vulnerability developed through restrictions on mobility, disruption of everyday routines, altered community interaction, and constraints associated with residential conditions. Psychological vulnerability was reflected in fear, uncertainty, confinement, and pressures associated with economic and social disruption. Cross-case analysis further indicated that these dimensions did not operate independently. Economic insecurity could intensify psychological pressure, while living conditions and disrupted social routines shaped experiences of confinement and adaptation. The intensity of vulnerability also varied according to livelihood structure, socioeconomic circumstances, residential conditions, household responsibilities, adaptive capacity, and available community support. The article argues that COVID-19 generated multidimensional social vulnerability through the interaction between a common external NTS stressor and unequal capacities to absorb disruption. The findings contribute a community-level perspective to understanding the differentiated societal consequences of non-traditional security threats.

Keywords: COVID-19; non-traditional security; multidimensional social vulnerability; human security; community vulnerability; plural society; Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary security scholarship has expanded beyond conventional concerns with military threats, territorial integrity, and state survival to recognise political, economic, societal, environmental, and health-related sources of insecurity (Baldwin, 1997; Buzan, 1991; Buzan et al., 1998). This broader orientation is reinforced by human-security perspectives, which place greater emphasis on the well-being of individuals and communities across interconnected dimensions of security (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1994). Non-traditional security (NTS) further extends this perspective by addressing predominantly non-military threats that transcend conventional sectoral boundaries, involve multiple actors, and often require coordinated responses (Caballero-Anthony, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the multidimensional character of such threats. Although it originated as a public health emergency, the pandemic rapidly affected economic activity, employment, education, mobility, social interaction, institutional functioning, and everyday life. In Malaysia, these effects were accompanied by extensive public-health interventions, most notably the Movement Control Order (MCO), which restricted

mobility and substantially altered ordinary socioeconomic activities. Malaysian studies have documented the pandemic's evolution and the measures implemented to contain transmission (Abdullah et al., 2020; Aziz et al., 2020; Elengoe, 2020; Ganasegeran et al., 2020; Hashim et al., 2021). Research has also shown that movement restrictions altered population mobility and were experienced differently across society (Rajendran et al., 2021; Tay et al., 2021). These studies support the treatment of COVID-19 not solely as a health emergency but as an NTS stressor capable of disrupting multiple conditions of everyday security.

However, exposure to a common threat does not necessarily produce equivalent vulnerability. Although pandemic restrictions applied broadly across society, their consequences were mediated by differences in employment security, livelihood structure, household resources, residential conditions, caring responsibilities, and access to support. A person able to maintain secure employment under movement restrictions, for example, encountered disruption, in a position substantially different from that of a daily-wage worker or small trader whose income depended on physical mobility and continued economic activity. Understanding the social consequences of COVID-19, therefore, requires attention not only to the external threat itself but also to the conditions that shape individuals' and households' capacities to absorb disruption.

This distinction is particularly relevant within plural urban communities. Subang Jaya, Selangor, provides an appropriate case because its urban environment encompasses diverse socioeconomic, occupational, demographic, and residential circumstances, as well as substantial residential, commercial, educational, and industrial activities. Rather than assuming that such diversity itself constitutes vulnerability, this study examines the socioeconomic and community conditions through which a common NTS stressor generated differentiated experiences of insecurity.

The study conceptualises these experiences through the lens of multidimensional social vulnerability (MSV). In this article, MSV refers to the interconnected economic, social, and psychological vulnerabilities that emerged under pandemic conditions and varied across communities. Economic vulnerability concerns pressures associated with income and livelihood disruption; social vulnerability concerns disruption to mobility, everyday interaction, routines, and support networks; and psychological vulnerability concerns fear, uncertainty, stress, and emotional pressure. Rather than treating these as independent consequences, the study examines how they coexisted and, in some circumstances, reinforced one another.

Accordingly, this article addresses the following research question: How did COVID-19, as a non-traditional security threat, generate multidimensional and differentiated social vulnerability within a plural urban community in Malaysia? The article argues that COVID-19 did not generate vulnerability uniformly. Instead, the effects of a common external NTS stressor were mediated by the socioeconomic, livelihood, household, and residential circumstances through which individuals experienced disruption. Economic, social, and psychological pressures could consequently overlap and accumulate, producing different configurations of vulnerability across community contexts.

The article contributes to NTS scholarship by connecting the macro-level character of COVID-19 as a multidimensional security threat with its differentiated consequences at the community level. Rather than merely demonstrating that COVID-19 produced multiple social impacts, it examines how disruption across everyday conditions became translated into interconnected forms of vulnerability and why their intensity varied among individuals and households. This community-level perspective provides the analytical foundation for the multidimensional social vulnerability framework developed in the following section.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the societal consequences of COVID-19 requires an analytical perspective that connects a large-scale security threat to differentiated experiences at the individual and community levels. Although the pandemic originated as a public health emergency, its consequences extended to livelihoods, education, mobility, social relationships, access to resources, and psychological well-being. This section therefore situates COVID-19 within the widening security agenda, conceptualises it as an NTS stressor, and adopts multidimensional social vulnerability as the analytical lens for examining its community-level consequences.

The Widening Security Agenda

Security studies have progressively expanded beyond conventional concerns with military threats and state survival. Buzan (1991) and Buzan et al. (1998) contributed to this widening agenda by demonstrating that insecurity can emerge across political, economic, societal, and environmental sectors, while Baldwin (1997) emphasised the need to specify the referent, values, and threats involved when conceptualising security. These perspectives created analytical space for examining sources of insecurity that affect societies and individuals without necessarily originating in military conflict.

Human-security scholarship extended this shift by placing individuals and communities more explicitly within the security agenda. The UNDP (1994) framework identified economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political dimensions of human security, demonstrating that threats affecting everyday well-being may be interconnected. This perspective is particularly relevant to pandemics because a health-originating threat can have consequences that extend to livelihoods, social relations, access to resources, and individual well-being.

NTS developed within this broader conceptual transformation. Caballero-Anthony (2016) characterises NTS threats as predominantly non-military challenges that transcend conventional boundaries, affect multiple sectors and actors, and frequently require coordinated responses. Pandemics fit this analytical perspective because their consequences extend beyond health systems and can disrupt economic, institutional, and societal conditions. NTS therefore provides a broader security framework for examining COVID-19, while the community-level consequences of such disruption require closer attention to vulnerability.

COVID-19 as a Non-Traditional Security Stressor

COVID-19 illustrates how a public health emergency can evolve into a broader NTS challenge. Although the immediate threat arose from the transmission of infectious disease, its effects extended to economic activity, employment, education, mobility, social interaction, and access to services. In Malaysia, the Movement Control Order (MCO) and associated public-health measures substantially altered everyday socioeconomic activities while seeking to reduce community transmission. Existing Malaysian studies document both the outbreak's development and the extensive interventions implemented in response (Abdullah et al., 2020; Aziz et al., 2020; Elengoe, 2020; Ganasegeran et al., 2020; Hashim et al., 2021). Movement restrictions were particularly significant because mobility represented both a transmission risk and an important condition of everyday socioeconomic life. Rajendran et al. (2021) documented changes in population mobility during different phases of movement control, while Tay et al. (2021) demonstrated that public experiences and perceptions of the MCO varied. Together, these studies indicate that pandemic-control measures extended their effects beyond epidemiological outcomes into everyday social and economic conditions.

The present study therefore conceptualises COVID-19 as an external NTS stressor. The term stressor refers here to an external disruption that places pressure on existing social, economic, and community conditions. This framing shifts attention from infection alone to the broader pathways through which the pandemic affected work and livelihoods, education and learning, health and well-being, social interaction and networks, and access to services and resources.

Importantly, such disruption should not be assumed to produce uniform consequences. Restrictions on physical mobility, for example, could have comparatively limited economic effects on individuals able to maintain secure remote employment, but immediate consequences for daily-wage workers, small traders, and others whose livelihoods depend on continued physical activity. COVID-19 consequently created a common environment of disruption while exposing differences in the resources and capacities available to individuals and households.

Multidimensional Social Vulnerability

Social vulnerability broadly concerns the conditions that shape the susceptibility of individuals and communities to harm and their capacity to anticipate, cope with, and recover from disruptive events. Rather than being determined solely by exposure to a hazard, vulnerability is influenced by underlying social and economic

conditions, access to resources, and capacities for adaptation (Cutter et al., 2003; Adger, 2006). Vulnerability is therefore inherently contextual and may vary considerably among individuals and communities exposed to the same external stressor. Building on this perspective, the present study conceptualises social vulnerability as multidimensional, as COVID-19-related disruption extended across several domains of everyday life simultaneously. Three dimensions are particularly evident in the empirical material: economic, social, and psychological vulnerability.

Economic vulnerability concerns financial insecurity, livelihood disruption, income loss, and difficulties maintaining household necessities. Social vulnerability concerns disruption to ordinary routines, mobility, relationships, community interaction, and support networks. Psychological vulnerability encompasses fear, uncertainty, stress, and emotional pressure associated with the health threat and its wider socioeconomic consequences. These dimensions are analytically distinguishable but need not operate independently.

The multidimensional perspective is important because vulnerability may accumulate through interactions among these domains. Economic insecurity may intensify psychological pressure when households struggle to meet basic needs, while restricted mobility and diminished social interaction may reduce access to ordinary forms of support. Residential conditions and household responsibilities may further influence the experience of prolonged disruption. MSV therefore refers here not merely to the presence of several adverse consequences but to the interaction and accumulation of vulnerability across economic, social, and psychological dimensions.

The intensity of these vulnerabilities is also shaped by context. Livelihood structure, socioeconomic conditions, household and residential circumstances, and access to institutional and community support influence the capacity to absorb disruption. Consequently, individuals exposed to the same pandemic and regulatory environment may experience substantially different vulnerability configurations. Figure 1 illustrates the analytical framework guiding this study. COVID-19 is conceptualised as an external non-traditional security (NTS) stressor that disrupts key conditions of everyday life, including livelihood, education, health and well-being, social interaction, and access to services and resources. These disruptions may generate interconnected economic, social, and psychological vulnerabilities rather than isolated consequences. Their intensity and configuration are further shaped by community context, including livelihood structure, socioeconomic conditions, household and residential circumstances, and access to institutional and community support. Multidimensional social vulnerability, therefore, represents the cumulative and interacting effects of these vulnerability dimensions across differing contextual conditions.

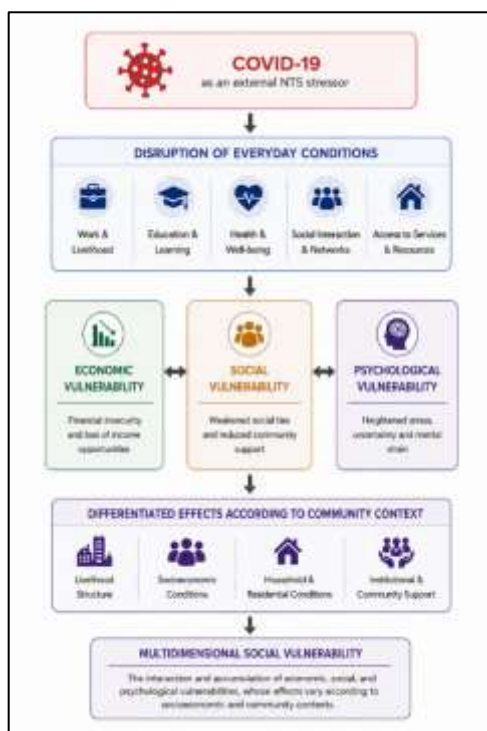


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of COVID-19-Induced Multidimensional Social Vulnerability

As Figure 1 suggests, the framework shifts the analysis from identifying individual pandemic impacts towards examining how a common NTS stressor produces interconnected and contextually differentiated forms of vulnerability.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case-study design to examine how COVID-19, conceptualised as a non-traditional security (NTS) stressor, generated multidimensional social vulnerability within the urban community of Subang Jaya, Selangor. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of pandemic-related disruption within their social contexts rather than to determine the statistical prevalence of particular vulnerabilities. Case-study research further enables a contemporary phenomenon to be examined within its real-world setting, particularly where the phenomenon and its contextual conditions are closely interconnected (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018).

Subang Jaya was selected as the study setting because it represents a diverse urban environment encompassing residential, commercial, educational, and industrial activities, as well as varied socioeconomic and demographic conditions. This diversity provided an appropriate setting for examining how individuals and households occupying different livelihood, residential, and community positions experienced a common pandemic-related disruption.

The study involved ten informants representing both institutional and community perspectives. Four informants (K1–K4) represented institutional perspectives and comprised current or former police personnel, while six informants (K5–K10) represented community perspectives, including neighbourhood representatives, a small trader, a food entrepreneur, and workers in the service and food sectors. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was used to identify informants with relevant institutional or community knowledge and experience, while snowball sampling facilitated access to additional participants through existing professional and community networks (Noy, 2008; Patton, 2015). This composition enabled the study to incorporate both institutional perspectives on pandemic management and community-level experiences of disruption. Table 1 summarises the participant contexts documented in the study.

Code	Informant category	Perspective	Sampling technique
K1	Former Chief of Police	Institutional	Purposive sampling
K2	Former Chief of Local Police	Institutional	Purposive sampling
K3	Police Station Chief	Institutional	Purposive sampling
K4	PDRM Officer	Institutional	Snowball sampling
K5	Neighbourhood Association (KRT) Chairperson	Community	Purposive sampling
K6	Neighbourhood Association (KRT) Member	Community	Snowball sampling
K7	Small Trader	Community	Snowball sampling
K8	Food Entrepreneur	Community	Snowball sampling
K9	Service-Sector Worker	Community	Snowball sampling
K10	Food-Sector Worker	Community	Snowball sampling

Table 1. Profile of Study Informants

The inclusion of institutional and community informants provided complementary perspectives on the pandemic. Institutional participants contributed insights into the implementation and management of pandemic-related measures. In contrast, community participants provided accounts of how these measures and the wider pandemic environment were experienced within everyday livelihood and community contexts. The study did not seek numerical representativeness; rather, the diversity of participant positions supported comparison across different experiences of disruption and vulnerability.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews provided sufficient consistency to address the research objectives while allowing participants to elaborate on experiences and perceptions emerging during the interviews. The interview protocol addressed pandemic-related

disruptions, movement restrictions, livelihood conditions, community experiences, and adaptation, while permitting follow-up questions when clarification or further explanation was required. This approach is consistent with the use of semi-structured interviewing for exploring complex experiences while maintaining a systematic interview framework (Kallio et al., 2016). Document analysis complemented the interview material by providing contextual and institutional information relevant to the pandemic environment and its management (Bowen, 2009).

Ethical considerations were observed during the data-collection process. Participation was voluntary, and the purpose of the research was explained to participants before the interviews. Verbal consent was obtained before participation, and identifying information has been omitted from the reporting of the findings to protect participants' confidentiality.

The empirical material was analysed thematically through an iterative process of coding, categorisation, and cross-case comparison. Initial coding identified meaningful statements and recurring experiences within the interview material, after which related codes were organised into broader categories. Cross-case comparison was subsequently used to identify similarities, differences, and relationships across participants occupying different socioeconomic, occupational, household, and institutional positions. For this article, the analysis focuses on three interconnected dimensions identified in the vulnerability-related evidence: economic, social, and psychological. Particular attention was given to how these dimensions interacted and how their intensity varied according to livelihood structure, socioeconomic circumstances, household and residential conditions, and access to institutional or community support.

Care was taken to distinguish between verbatim participant statements and researcher-prepared interview summaries. Only statements clearly preserved in the interview records as direct speech are presented within quotation marks, while summarised participant accounts are reported through indirect attribution. This approach was adopted to preserve the integrity of the qualitative evidence and to distinguish participants' reported experiences from the researchers' analytical interpretations. Interpretations were subsequently developed through cross-case comparison rather than reliance on individual accounts alone.

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis identified three interconnected dimensions through which COVID-19-related disruption was experienced within the Subang Jaya community: economic, social, and psychological vulnerability. Although analytically distinguishable, these dimensions frequently overlapped within participants' experiences. Their intensity also varied according to livelihood structure, household circumstances, residential conditions, and available resources and support. The findings therefore indicate that a common pandemic environment produced differentiated rather than uniform experiences of vulnerability.

Economic Vulnerability

Economic vulnerability was most apparent among participants whose livelihoods depended upon daily earnings, physical mobility, or continued face-to-face economic activity. Movement restrictions and reduced commercial activity affected some participants' ability to maintain income, particularly where employment could not be transitioned to remote work.

An enforcement officer recalled encountering an individual attempting to travel for employment during movement restrictions. According to the interview account, the individual explained that he needed to work to purchase milk for his child. Although the officer recognised the individual's circumstances, the journey could not be permitted under the restrictions then in force. The case illustrates the tension between compliance with a population-wide public health measure and the immediate livelihood needs of individuals dependent on continued physical employment.

Similar pressures were evident among community participants. A small food trader experienced a substantial decline in daily income as customer movement and ordinary commercial activity decreased. Another daily-paid worker experienced income loss when her workplace ceased operating for almost three months. For participants

whose livelihoods depended upon continuous economic activity, restrictions therefore represented not only limitations on mobility but also immediate threats to household material security.

The experience of an essential cleaner demonstrates a different configuration of economic vulnerability. Although she continued working because cleaning remained an essential service, her husband lost his job during the MCO, leaving her as the primary income earner for three school-aged children. Continued employment, therefore, did not necessarily eliminate vulnerability, as economic pressures could arise from changes in household income and dependency.

Taken together, these accounts indicate that economic vulnerability was shaped not simply by the existence of movement restrictions but by the interaction between those restrictions and participants' livelihood circumstances. Employment security, dependence upon daily earnings, household responsibilities, and the capacity to absorb income disruption influenced the severity of economic consequences.

Social Vulnerability

Social vulnerability emerged through disruption to mobility, everyday routines, interpersonal interaction, and established patterns of community life. Movement restrictions altered activities that participants had previously regarded as ordinary, including travelling between locations, social gatherings, participation in community activities, and access to public spaces.

Some participants described residents, particularly younger individuals, continuing to gather outside their homes despite movement restrictions. These behaviours were not always interpreted solely as deliberate resistance to regulations. Participant accounts also associated them with difficulties adjusting to prolonged disruption of ordinary social routines.

Residential conditions were particularly relevant. In one high-density residential setting, limited living space made prolonged confinement difficult for some households. Teenagers and adults were sometimes observed moving into common areas to interact with others. The participant, describing these circumstances, associated such behaviour partly with the pressure of remaining in small residential spaces for extended periods.

These experiences demonstrate that the requirement to remain at home was not socially equivalent across households. Individuals living in more spacious environments may experience confinement differently than those living in larger households or smaller, densely populated residences. Residential conditions therefore influenced the capacity to accommodate prolonged restrictions and maintain ordinary social well-being.

Social vulnerability consequently extended beyond temporary reductions in social contact. It disrupted everyday routines, mobility, community interaction, and access to ordinary forms of social support, with the effects shaped by the environments in which individuals and households experienced the restrictions.

Psychological Vulnerability

Psychological vulnerability emerged through fear, uncertainty, anxiety, and emotional pressure associated with both the health threat and the wider consequences of pandemic disruption. During the early stages of COVID-19, uncertainty surrounded the severity of the disease, the duration of movement restrictions, employment continuity, household income, and the possibility of returning to ordinary routines.

Institutional accounts described substantial public concern during the pandemic's initial period. At the community level, however, psychological pressure was often connected to participants' material and social circumstances. Concerns about infection coexisted with worries about employment, food, household responsibilities, and the consequences of prolonged economic uncertainty.

The essential cleaner's experience illustrates this relationship. She initially experienced anxiety when travelling through police and military checkpoints while continuing to work during the MCO. Her apprehension subsequently decreased as her interactions with enforcement personnel became more familiar. In one statement preserved directly in the interview record, she explained:

“Mereka (polis) tidak pernah berkasar” [“They (the police) were never harsh with us.”]

Her broader account nevertheless demonstrates that psychological experiences occurred within a complex household environment involving continued essential employment, the loss of her husband's income, responsibility for three children, and constrained residential circumstances.

Psychological vulnerability should therefore not be interpreted solely as fear of infection. The participant accounts indicate that emotional pressure was embedded in broader material and social circumstances, including livelihood insecurity, household responsibilities, residential confinement, and uncertainty about the crisis's duration and consequences.

Multidimensional and Differentiated Vulnerability

Table 2 provides a systematic comparison of the vulnerability configurations that can be established from the participant evidence reported in this article.

Participant/context	Economic vulnerability	Social vulnerability	Psychological vulnerability	Context shaping vulnerability
Small food trader	Substantial decline in daily income	Reduced customer movement and ordinary commercial activity	Not directly established in the reported evidence	Dependence on customer mobility
Daily-paid worker	Income loss during workplace closure	Disruption of work routine	Not directly established in the reported evidence	Dependence on continued workplace operation
Essential cleaner	Continued income, but increased household financial pressure after spouse's job loss	Continued mobility during restrictions; constrained residential context	Initial anxiety around checkpoints; wider household pressure	Essential employment, spouse's job loss, three children, residential conditions

Table 2. Cross-Case Configuration of Multidimensional Social Vulnerability

Cross-case analysis demonstrates that economic, social, and psychological vulnerabilities were interconnected rather than entirely independent. Economic insecurity could contribute to psychological pressure when reduced income affected the ability to meet household needs. Residential constraints could intensify the social and emotional consequences of prolonged confinement, while household responsibilities could increase the pressure associated with livelihood disruption.

The essential-worker case illustrates this multidimensional relationship particularly clearly. Continued employment provided some income security, but the loss of the spouse's employment increased household financial pressure. At the same time, the participant continued travelling for work during a health emergency, supported three children, and lived within a high-density residential environment where prolonged confinement created difficulties for community members. Economic, social, and psychological pressures therefore coexisted within the same experience rather than occurring as isolated consequences.

Nevertheless, vulnerability was not configured in the same way across participants. A daily-paid worker whose employment ceased experienced the pandemic differently from an essential worker whose employment continued, while a small trader dependent upon customer mobility encountered a different form of economic

exposure. These variations suggest that vulnerability was conditioned by the circumstances through which individuals encountered the common external stressor.

The findings therefore support the analytical framework presented in Figure 1. COVID-19 disrupted multiple aspects of everyday life, but these disruptions became socially consequential through their interactions with livelihood structures, socioeconomic circumstances, household and residential conditions, and access to support. Multidimensional social vulnerability consequently describes not merely the presence of several pandemic-related difficulties, but the coexistence and interaction of economic, social, and psychological pressures under differentiated community conditions.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that COVID-19 generated multidimensional social vulnerability through the interaction between a common external NTS stressor and differentiated socioeconomic and community circumstances. Although movement restrictions created a broadly shared environment of disruption, their consequences varied according to livelihood structure, household responsibilities, residential conditions, and access to resources and support. More importantly, economic, social, and psychological vulnerabilities were not experienced solely as separate outcomes; they could overlap and reinforce one another within everyday life. These findings provide three principal insights for understanding the community-level consequences of NTS threats.

Common Exposure but Unequal Vulnerability

The first major finding is that common exposure to an external threat does not necessarily produce common vulnerability. COVID-19 affected the wider population, and movement restrictions established broadly applicable behavioural requirements. Nevertheless, participants experienced these conditions from substantially different socioeconomic positions. Individuals whose employment could continue encountered the restrictions differently from daily-wage workers, small traders, and households experiencing sudden income loss.

This differentiation is consistent with the broader human-security perspective, which recognises that insecurity extends beyond direct physical threats and encompasses economic, health, personal, and community dimensions (UNDP, 1994). The present findings provide a community-level illustration of this principle. A health-originating threat became an economic-security concern when restrictions interacted with livelihood insecurity, a social concern when movement controls disrupted routines and community interaction, and a source of psychological pressure when financial and household difficulties compounded uncertainty.

The findings therefore suggest that vulnerability cannot be explained by exposure alone. Rather, the consequences of an external stressor depend in part on the resources and circumstances through which individuals and households experience disruption. In the Subang Jaya case, livelihood security, household dependence, residential conditions, and available support influenced participants' capacity to cope with pandemic-related pressures. This helps explain why the same external threat and regulatory environment produced different experiences of insecurity.

Interaction Across Vulnerability Dimensions

The second major finding concerns the relationship among economic, social, and psychological vulnerability. Existing Malaysian research has documented the epidemiological progression of COVID-19, movement restrictions, changes in population mobility, and differing perceptions of the MCO (Abdullah et al., 2020; Aziz et al., 2020; Elengoe, 2020; Ganasegeran et al., 2020; Hashim et al., 2021; Rajendran et al., 2021; Tay et al., 2021). The present study complements this literature by examining how different forms of vulnerability became connected within community experience.

The empirical evidence indicates that multidimensional vulnerability involves more than the simultaneous presence of several adverse consequences. Economic insecurity could intensify psychological pressure when households faced difficulties meeting everyday needs. Residential constraints could increase the social and

emotional burden of prolonged confinement, while household responsibilities could amplify the effects of livelihood disruption. The relationship among the three dimensions is therefore better understood as interactive rather than simply additive.

This distinction is central to the analytical framework presented in Figure 1. COVID-19 operated as an external NTS stressor that disrupted multiple conditions of everyday life. These disruptions did not automatically produce identical outcomes but interacted with existing socioeconomic and community circumstances. Multidimensional social vulnerability consequently emerged through both the accumulation and interaction of pressures across economic, social, and psychological domains.

The findings further suggest several mechanisms through which vulnerability became differentiated. Dependence on physical mobility translated movement restrictions into livelihood insecurity for workers unable to shift economic activity away from face-to-face settings; household dependency amplified the consequences of income disruption; constrained residential environments intensified the social effects of prolonged confinement; and economic and household pressures contributed to psychological strain. Vulnerability therefore emerged not simply from exposure to the pandemic but from the interaction between the external stressor and the material, social, and adaptive conditions through which disruption was experienced.

This interpretation also avoids treating vulnerability as a fixed characteristic of particular groups. The evidence does not indicate that vulnerability resulted automatically from demographic identity. Rather, vulnerability developed through circumstances such as livelihood insecurity, household responsibilities, limited residential space, and unequal capacity to absorb prolonged disruption. This distinction is particularly relevant in a plural urban setting because demographic diversity should not itself be treated as a causal explanation when more direct socioeconomic and contextual mechanisms are evident.

Community-Level Contribution to NTS Analysis

The third contribution concerns the level at which NTS threats are analysed. The broadening of security studies has established that contemporary threats extend beyond conventional military concerns and may affect political, economic, societal, environmental, and human security domains (Baldwin, 1997; Buzan, 1991; Buzan et al., 1998). NTS scholarship similarly draws attention to non-military threats that cross sectoral boundaries and require responses involving multiple actors (Caballero-Anthony, 2016).

The Subang Jaya findings complement these perspectives by demonstrating how a macro-level NTS threat becomes embedded within everyday community life. COVID-19 was significant not only because it challenged public health and governmental institutions but also because it altered the conditions under which individuals maintained livelihoods, household security, social relationships, and psychological well-being.

At the community level, the findings suggest a pathway through which an NTS stressor disrupts everyday conditions and subsequently generates differentiated and interacting vulnerabilities that contribute to broader community-level insecurity. COVID-19, as an external NTS stressor, disrupted livelihoods, social routines, household conditions, and psychological well-being; however, these disruptions were experienced differently depending on the socioeconomic and community circumstances of individuals and households. Economic, social, and psychological vulnerabilities could consequently intersect and reinforce one another, translating a macro-level security threat into differentiated forms of everyday insecurity. This pathway represents the principal contribution of the study: rather than merely demonstrating that COVID-19 produced multiple socioeconomic and psychological effects, the findings show how an external NTS stressor becomes socially differentiated and interconnected across domains of vulnerability at the community level.

This interpretation also strengthens the relevance of community context within NTS analysis. Security interventions may be designed at national or institutional levels, but their consequences are experienced within households and communities possessing unequal resources and adaptive capacities. Analysing these differences provides a more socially grounded understanding of how NTS threats become translated into everyday insecurity.

Implications for NTS Preparedness

The findings suggest three priorities for NTS preparedness. First, vulnerability assessment should identify households whose livelihoods depend heavily on physical mobility, daily earnings, or continuous customer interaction, because restrictions may translate rapidly into income insecurity. Second, crisis-support mechanisms should consider household dependency and residential conditions alongside employment status, since continued employment does not necessarily indicate low vulnerability where household income has declined, or living conditions intensify confinement pressures. Third, psychosocial support should be considered alongside socioeconomic assistance because psychological strain may arise through the interaction of health uncertainty, livelihood insecurity, household responsibilities, and social disruption.

These implications do not imply that population-wide interventions are inherently inappropriate. Rather, they indicate that crisis-management measures should anticipate differentiated secondary consequences alongside their primary public-health or security objectives. Preparedness frameworks that combine threat exposure with livelihood structure, household circumstances, residential conditions, and access to support may therefore provide a more comprehensive basis for identifying communities with limited capacity to absorb prolonged disruption.

Limitations And Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, this study employed a qualitative case-study design focused on the urban community of Subang Jaya, Selangor. The purpose of the research was therefore to develop a contextualised understanding of how COVID-19-related disruption was experienced within a particular community setting rather than to produce statistically generalisable conclusions about the Malaysian population. The findings should consequently be interpreted as evidence of processes and relationships observed within the case.

Second, although six of the ten informants represented community perspectives, only a subset provided direct accounts of livelihood disruption and multidimensional vulnerability. The evidence should therefore not be interpreted as representing the prevalence or full diversity of vulnerability within the wider Subang Jaya population. Its analytical value instead lies in identifying processes through which economic, social, and psychological pressures emerged and interacted under differing community circumstances.

Third, the interview records varied in their level of transcription detail. To preserve the integrity of the qualitative evidence, the present article distinguishes clearly documented verbatim statements from researcher-prepared interview summaries. Consequently, only statements preserved as direct speech have been presented as quotations, while summarised accounts have been reported through indirect attribution.

The study is also limited to vulnerability associated with the COVID-19 context. It therefore cannot establish whether the same configuration of economic, social, and psychological vulnerability would occur under other NTS threats. Future research could examine the analytical transferability of the multidimensional social vulnerability framework across other Malaysian communities and crisis contexts. Comparative studies involving different urban settings, smaller towns, or rural communities could determine whether livelihood structure, socioeconomic circumstances, residential conditions, and access to support shape vulnerability in similar ways. Larger quantitative or mixed-method studies could additionally examine the relationships among the economic, social, and psychological dimensions identified here and assess their prevalence across broader populations.

Although the findings are context-specific, analytical transferability may be considered in settings sharing relevant characteristics with the Subang Jaya case, particularly urban communities characterised by heterogeneous livelihood arrangements, dependence on physical mobility, socioeconomic inequality, varied household and residential conditions, and uneven access to institutional or community support. Transferability should therefore be assessed according to similarity in these contextual mechanisms rather than assumed based on geographic or demographic resemblance alone.

The study also provides less systematic evidence concerning individuals or households that adapted effectively despite comparable exposure. Future research should therefore examine protective resources, coping strategies, and adaptive capacities alongside vulnerability to identify conditions that may interrupt or mitigate the accumulation of multidimensional vulnerability. The MSV framework could also be examined in relation to other NTS stressors, including climate-related disasters, economic crises, displacement, and other prolonged emergencies, in which external disruption may similarly interact with unequal socioeconomic and community capacities.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how COVID-19, conceptualised as a non-traditional security stressor, generated multidimensional social vulnerability within a plural urban community in Subang Jaya, Malaysia. The findings demonstrate that the pandemic extended beyond an immediate public-health threat and disrupted the economic, social, and psychological conditions of everyday life. These disruptions manifested through livelihood and income insecurity, altered social routines and interactions, residential pressures, fear, uncertainty, and psychological strain.

More importantly, economic, social, and psychological vulnerabilities were not experienced as isolated consequences. Economic insecurity could intensify psychological pressure, while household and residential circumstances could shape the social and emotional effects of prolonged restrictions. Multidimensional social vulnerability therefore reflects the interaction and accumulation of vulnerabilities across different domains of everyday life rather than the simple coexistence of separate pandemic impacts.

The findings also demonstrate that vulnerability was differentiated according to livelihood structure, socioeconomic circumstances, household responsibilities, residential conditions, and access to support. Individuals and households exposed to the same pandemic environment consequently possessed unequal capacities to absorb and adapt to disruption. The central conclusion of this study is therefore that common exposure to an NTS stressor does not necessarily produce common vulnerability.

This study contributes to NTS scholarship by connecting a macro-level security threat with its differentiated consequences at the community level. The multidimensional social vulnerability framework demonstrates how an external NTS stressor can become translated into interconnected forms of everyday insecurity through unequal socioeconomic and community conditions. This perspective highlights the importance of considering both the immediate threat and its secondary social consequences in future NTS preparedness, particularly the conditions that shape individuals' and households' capacity to withstand prolonged disruption.

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