



Lived experiences of street food vendors amidst the phase of pandemic recovery

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Abstract

This study delved into the lived experiences of street food vendors in Panabo City in the Philippines. It utilized a qualitative-phenomenological research design. With the help of an interview guide, the researchers gathered data from the purposively selected participants. Five in-depth interviews were done to unearth essential data. Using thematic analysis, one theme category was generated: entrepreneurial adversities characterized by experiences such as; worried due to restrictions, forced to accept reality, and striving to survive with the new normal. Participants disclosed that they used innovative strategies as coping mechanisms, such as adapting to the new normal set-up, learning to thrive amidst uncertainties, and seeking strong support. Additionally, the insights gained from the street food vendors' experiences during the pandemic recovery suggest valuing the significance of strategic planning and management, exploring innovative methods to attract customers, and appreciating the importance of savings and emergency funds. Indeed, the food industry is vulnerable to uncertainties and has the slowest to bounce back; thus, prioritizing and establishing sustainable plans and efforts benefit food business development.

Keywords: *street food vendors, pandemic recovery phase, hospitality industry, Region 11 Philippines*

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Introduction

The global health crisis caused a much more significant impact on the hospitality industry. In fact, street food vendors were forced to rethink how they manage their business, or worse, they will face bankruptcy. According to Michel et al. (2020), the global health crisis has significantly affected human health and the global economy. In lieu of this, street food vendors are a sector of the population that is highly vulnerable to significant economic loss during the restrictions imposed throughout the pandemic.

In South Korea, COVID-19 has shaped food trends unimaginably, resulting in a massive increase in online food sales to forty-six percent. Unfortunately, the food stalls, including street food vendors who offer to dine, suffered because most Koreans spent on home meal replacement kits and wine as people ate and drank more at home (Global Agricultural Information Network, 2021). In the Philippines, an estimated 3.5 million Filipino women work in the informal economy operating small food stalls called "carinderias" on street corners, or small convenience shops called "sari-sari stores" that were affected by the pandemic. Most of these businesses were closed and forced to directly sell or provide personal services like washing clothes. As a result of having the most extended lockdown in the world, the street vendors and their families went hungry because they were unable to cope with the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Leyesa & Obanil, 2021). Furthermore, Alivio (2020) stated that the implementation of movement regulations has had a significant impact on individuals working in the "informal economy" sector, who rely on their daily earnings to meet their daily consumption and fundamental necessities. The street food vendors along the roadway expressed dissatisfaction with the deterioration of their lives following the implementation of the quarantine. Hence, this study address the literature gap on the further studies that should be conducted with a greater focus on the multiple issues faced by the street food vendors in Panabo City. This study may be beneficial to the local government units, business owners, street food vendors, hospitality management students, and future researchers.

Methodology

A qualitative research design and phenomenological technique was used in this study. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research focuses on investigating and comprehending the meaning individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem. The approach's primary goal is to arrive at a description of the nature of the phenomenon.

Interviews are typically conducted with people with first-hand knowledge of an event, situation, or experience. According to Creswell (2013), a phenomenological study with a heterogeneous group should have a minimum of three (3) and a maximum of fifteen (15) participants. Moreover, the study's five (5) participants were recruited through focus groups and in-depth interviews. According to Rutledge and Hogg (2020), in-depth interviews enable researchers to thoroughly explore topics of interest with the individuals, they aim to understand better. Also, the study's participant was chosen for particular attention using a legitimate and impartial purposive sampling technique. Nikolopoulou (2022) advocates for the use of purposive sampling to select street food vendors in Panabo City due to their scarcity, ensuring the study's objectives are effectively met. Furthermore, all participants have at least three years of experience running their food businesses and working as employees or vendors at the public night market in Panabo City. To ensure that participants were engaging voluntarily and without coercion, informed consent was employed. An interview guide questionnaire was developed to streamline data gathering. Thematic coding was utilized to analyze the interview transcript.

Findings

This study revealed street food vendors' pandemic recovery experiences. It indicates street food sellers struggled during pandemic recovery. Street food vendors said restrictions generate financial issues, employee and employer issues, and management issues, ultimately leading to business closure. Furthermore, the pandemic has devastated the livelihoods of street vendors, disrupting their ability to work, and leaving many struggling to survive even as lockdown measures begin to ease (Balbuena, 2020). In addition, small food enterprises must strictly follow the government's tighter food safety regulations to survive the new normal. There are identified entrepreneurial adversities faced by the street food vendors characterized by the following experiences: worried due to restrictions, forced to accept reality, and striving to survive with the new normal. According to Bartik et al. (2020) that the Covid-19 pandemic precipitated a swift collapse of the global economy, posing an unprecedented challenge to the hospitality sector. Numerous hospitality businesses temporarily shut down due to Covid-19 containment measures, resulting in a substantial decrease in demand even for those permitted to remain open. Hence, successful pandemic recovery requires efficient and innovative methods, according to participants. Business owners and the government should collaborate to plan well to achieve sustainability and success of the industry.

Pandemic recovery requires solving the above challenges. Adapting to uncertainty, street food vendors thrive. Owners and street vendors adapted and innovated to survive, but many small enterprises still need to prosper. Other survivors aim to leverage pandemic technologies to boost revenue and create new opportunities when the economy recovers, but the impact on millions of street food sellers is unknown. Street food vendors must adapt to the new standard setup and overcome obstacles, reimagining the customer experience and re-engaging with customers to build and maintain operational alertness and financial flexibility to navigate the reservation of doing business in an epidemic-ravaged world.

Food vendors also seek support from family, friends, food vendor associations, and the government during the lockdown because even though are allowed to sell, they said they needed economic aid to survive. Lin et al. (2022) emphasized that small and medium-sized companies play a significant role in global economies, prompting governments worldwide to prioritize supporting them during the COVID-19 pandemic through various initiatives like direct financial aid, public loan guarantees, and tax relief programs. Street vendors and informal workers have won several urgent needs battles. Working with public health specialists to develop informal trade safety norms reduced the risk of contracting and spreading. COVID-19. In carrying out routine business activities and dealing with common problems, businesses need substantive capabilities to solve everyday problems.

The street food vendor comments on their experience. One participant emphasized that the street food industry, like other businesses, requires a clear vision and a strong business plan, with an understanding that strategic planning and management are essential. Lai (2020) highlighted the challenges faced by SME eateries during the Malaysian government-enforced Movement Control Order (MCO) due to the COVID-19 epidemic, emphasizing the importance of adapting operations and management strategies for future resilience, relevant to decision-and policymakers. Most respondents believe that food vendors should innovate to attract customers by adapting their food offerings and creating a suitable atmosphere that promotes social distancing. Street sellers employ several methods to earn a living, such as setting up permanent or semi-permanent stands, selecting ideal locations, and implementing effective promotion strategies. Fowler (2022) emphasized the importance of pre-emptive financial preparation to navigate unexpected crises like unemployment or medical issues, especially during times of widespread economic disruption and limited government assistance eligibility. Pricing is another crucial aspect of street food marketing; vendors often offer lower prices

compared to traditional businesses to entice customers. They are continually seeking new ways to expand their businesses, attract clients, and increase sales. Moreover, Hira (2012) underscores the importance of fostering a positive financial attitude, knowledge, and behavior to enhance financial literacy and capabilities.

Conclusion

It has been determined that the lived experiences of street food vendors during the pandemic recovery phase are diverse and significantly impact day-to-day lives. Street food vendors can navigate numerous challenges by adapting to new standards, embracing uncertainty, and seeking robust support from relevant individuals and sectors. Valuable lessons can be gleaned from their experiences, such as the importance of strategic planning and management, innovative customer-attracting strategies, and the significance of emergency savings. When the country entered a virtual lockdown, many individuals lost their jobs and income. Street food vendors, being among the hardest hit by the pandemic, serve as a reminder of the importance of saving and maintaining emergency funds to prepare for unforeseen circumstances. Establishing an emergency reserve for daily expenses is crucial, as government financial assistance may take time to materialize. Prioritizing sustainable plans and efforts is essential for the development of food businesses in such challenging times.

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