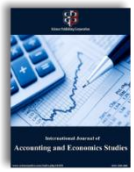
International Journal of Accounting and Economics Studies, 12 (4) (2025) 725-733

International Journal of Accounting and Economics Studies

Website: www.sciencepubco.com/index.php/IJAES
https://doi.org/10.14419/zsnynf61
Research paper



The Role of Social Support in The Face of Vulnerability to Economic Strain: Perspective from Sarawak Urban Area

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Received: July 18, 2025, Accepted: August 25, 2025, Published: August 27, 2025

Abstract

This research investigates the complex interactions between economic strain, social support, resilience, and well-being in Sarawak in the aftermath of the economic disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on a sample of 290 participants, the study utilized structural equation modeling to address three primary objectives: examining the relationships between economic strain, social support, well-being, and resilience; assessing the mediating role of social support in the relationship between economic strain and well-being; and evaluating its mediation effect between economic strain and resilience. The initial findings corroborate the presence of significant associations between economic strain and the three constructs of well-being, resilience, and social support. Social support has been identified as a crucial mediator that modulates the interaction between economic strain and well-being and between economic strain and resilience. This abstract succinctly summarizes the central inquiry of the study, focusing on how economic adversities in the post-pandemic period influenced individual and community well-being in Sarawak, with an emphasis on the mitigating role of social support networks.

Keywords: *Economic Strain, Resilience, Sarawak, Social Support, Vulnerability, Well-being*

1. Introduction

Sarawak, Malaysia's largest state by area, is rich in natural resources, diverse cultures, and economic potential. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Sarawak had a robust economy with strong sectors in energy production, tourism, and manufacturing. However, the advent of COVID-19 has brought unforeseen challenges, severely impacting the region's economic stability and growth trajectory. The onset of the pandemic in early 2020 led to widespread global disruptions; Sarawak was no exception. Stringent lockdown measures, while necessary to curb the spread of the virus, have resulted in significant economic downturns. Businesses, especially in tourism and retail, face closures or severe operational limitations, leading to job losses and economic decline. The immediate impact was a stark reduction in economic activities, affecting the livelihoods of many Sarawakians and putting immense pressure on the state's economic infrastructure.

In the era of post-COVID-19 era, the economic difficulties faced by households remain unstable in handling. Specifically, households in Sarawak might still face economic strain in dealing with daily activities. Boon (2022) also reported that there were 67,000 households in Sarawak falling into the poverty category, evidencing that economic strain exists in Sarawak. Economic strain refers to the subjective assessment of an individual's economic situation, including perceptions of financial resources, concerns, and expectations about future economic conditions, but is not an objective assessment (Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1988). It can also be defined as the financial stress experienced by individuals or households when their economic resources are insufficient to meet their basic needs. The essence of economic strain lies in the mismatch between financial obligations and the available resources.

The ongoing economic strain experienced by individuals is not merely a matter of financial hardship but has profound implications for one's well-being and resilience. This strain can permeate all aspects of life, leading to a significant decrease in mental and physical health and thereby affecting an individual's overall well-being. Thus, the psychological impact of economic strain is significant. It can lead to chronic stress, anxiety, and depression, which erode an individual's mental health over time. Additionally, economic hardship might force individuals to compromise on the well-being of someone, such as decreasing healthier food intake or purchases (French et al., 2019). Resilience, or the ability to bounce back from adversity, is also significantly compromised. Economic strain can deplete an individual's resources and energy, leaving them with limited capacity to deal with additional stressors. The constant battle with financial insecurity can lead to a sense of defeat, making it more difficult to recover from setbacks and seize opportunities for improvement or change.

One of the outstanding features of the Sarawakians is that they have a very high degree of social cohesion, notwithstanding the differences in ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds they come from (Malaymail, 2024). The tradition of living together in a multiracial society in harmony and helping each other from time immemorial builds up a very strong bond of unity and belongingness among the people of this state. Social support is part of life, and it comes out in the way of involvement in local community engagements and cultural exchanges, stressing togetherness and helping. Moreover, the spirit of gotong-royong (communal cooperation) helps foster close community relations and a strong support network, especially at times of adversity. The ability and community support revealed in this case reflect

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the strong social structure of Sarawak. This brings forth how diversity can be a source of support, strength, and empowerment for a community with a supportive and inclusive nature.

The emerging economic landscape in Sarawak, characterized by its potential as a renewable energy powerhouse, presents unique challenges akin to penetrating a new market. These challenges underscore the need for research to understand the interplay between economic strain, social support, well-being, and resilience within Sarawak's specific sociocultural and geographic settings. Despite the region's rich diversity and unique contextual factors, there is a lack of comprehensive studies on how these interconnected factors influence individuals and communities in Sarawak. Hence, this study aims to uncover (i) the relationship between economic strain, social support, well-being, and resilience, (ii) the mediating role of social support on the relationship between economic strain and well-being, and (iii) the mediating role of social support on the relationship between economic strain and resilience.

The study's importance lies in examining the relationship between economic strain, social support, well-being, and resilience within Sarawak's unique sociocultural and geographic milieu. Through analysis of these interconnected variables, this study seeks to derive informative insights to help inform further interventions, policies, and programs tailored to the population of Sarawak. Additionally, the study also examined the potential mediating role of social support in the link between economic strain and overall well-being and resilience, highlighting the need for attention on the individuals reporting a low quality of life or sense of well-being when faced with economic stressors. Through this research, this study highlighted the need to achieve better mental health, enhanced social cohesion, and economic empowerment, which contribute to the improved well-being and resilience of the Sarawak population.

2. Literature Reviews

Before the study delves into analysis, learning the definitions of key terms would likely be the first step. From the word economic strain, it could refer to the stress and challenges arising from inadequate financial resources that can negatively affect individuals, families, and communities. I Herein, the person who suffers from economic strain does not wake with a panic attack only due to running out of money in the bank, but the psychosocial stressors that are constantly close to the heel of the financially insecure. From the knowledge pool of literature, the past research suggests that the effect of economic strain is multifarious, encompassing the mental health conditions where the loss of assets and obstruction of goals have played a significant role in its impact (Stack & Wasserman, 2007). Moreover, economic strain has been shown to affect family relationships and individual behaviors, lowering parenting quality and increasing adolescent delinquency (Ron & Marcenaro, 1992). Not only that, but the recent literature has also demonstrated how economic strain can worsen mental health, with serious consequences for both community well-being and social cohesion (Assari et al., 2020; Probst et al., 2018; Viseu et al., 2018). Economic strain is a broader concept that includes a variety of experiences and consequences, emphasizing the need to consider this factor and financial stability in general as key to improving the collective health and well-being of society.

The economic strain could translate into well-being in a manner that can create a vicious circle whereby financial stress increases stress and mental health issues that, in turn, can add further injury to one's economic status. To get a better understanding of this phenomenon, Vinokur et al. Erich's (1996) study explored the relationships between financial strain and depression and relationship satisfaction, revealing that financial strain considerably affected mental well-being mediated by social factors. Considering couples' lives, Falconier (2010) showed that financial strain is related to aggression between partners indirectly, and that the psychological impact is not equal, with the female feeling the effects much earlier than her male counterpart. In this context, financial insecurity can harm household relationships, trigger conflict, stress, and poor communication. Such dynamics can eclipse emotional needs, breed resentment, and lower well-being. To add on, Chiao et al. (2011) obtained a similar negative effect of economic strain on well-being, a study that focused on the elderly in Taiwan, further illustrating the relevance of the statements.

Extending this evidence to international urban contexts, international evidence from urban settings consistently links economic strain with poorer psychological outcomes, particularly where housing costs, eviction risk, and neighborhood disadvantage intensify financial pressures. In U.S. cities, eviction, a salient form of urban economic shock, has been shown to precipitate material hardship and worse self-reported health and depression among low-income urban families (Desmond & Kimbro, 2015). Longitudinal analyses from Australia demonstrate that housing affordability stress is prospectively associated with deteriorations in mental health, with pronounced effects among renters concentrated in major metropolitan areas (Bentley et al., 2011). Complementing these findings, urban-focused work in the United States indicates that neighborhood disadvantage and poverty-related stress predict subsequent psychological syndromes among diverse low-income families (Santiago et al., 2011). Taken together, this international urban literature converges on a common mechanism: urban economic strain, via housing insecurity, concentrated disadvantages, and high living costs, elevates risks to well-being, thereby reinforcing the rationale for examining the buffering role of social support within urban contexts like Sarawak's cities.

If we look from the other side, social support is a multidimensional construct critical to physical and psychological health, defined as the process by which emotional, instrumental, and informational resources are exchanged, perceived, and/or received within one's social networks. It is core to a person's sense of being cared for, being valued, and being part of a web of mutual obligations. That is why the distinction between perceived and received support is so important because it highlights that social processes and dynamics are complex, and that they also depend on social/cultural contexts. Social support is information that one is cared for and loved, and its relationship with health outcomes has been discussed in the literature (Cobb, 1976), with potential buffering of the health effects of life stress. Further, Uchino et al. (2018) have highlighted its indication on health outcomes, as well as its mediating role in the association between job control and psychological strain within occupational domains, suggesting its protective utility in ameliorating stressors and promoting mental well-being across life domains. Shumaker and Brownell (1984) further emphasized social support's function as a reciprocal exchange to promote well-being, reinforcing its critical relevance to stressor coping and health. Social support this way is all around us, both the feelings and the actions of real people, and it is a vital key to wellbeing.

Resilience is the ability to bounce back after life is difficult; the capacity to recover from a bad event. This is an ongoing process, which functions when someone successfully processes adverse events, stress, or trauma in a way in which they either maintain or return to their human level of health, psychological state, or functioning (Neenan, 2017). Need Resilience: The ability to adapt to stress and adversity. How people write the story of their lives to meet the challenges of the environment and buffer against the negative effects of stress is their resilience. Stressful life events, trauma, and chronic adversity have profound effects on the function and structure of the brain, and thus also contribute to resiliency (Wu et al., 2013). One of the important factors of resilience is social support, which acts as a protective buffer against the effects of stress and trauma. It is a buffer against genetic, developmental, and environmental risks to psychological health. Social connections also teach how to be resilient, as friends and family provide a network that, when activated, contributes substantially to the ability to cope and thrive in challenging situations (Ozbay et al, 2008).

In contrast, social support can buffer the deleterious effects of economic strain on well-being by providing emotional, informational, and financial assistance. Previous evidence indicated that social support may buffer the negative effects of stress-related factors on well-being. The role of social support as a mediator in the relationship between stress and mental health outcomes has been suggested among Korean young adults (Noh & Park, 2022). Bedaso et al. (2023) demonstrated that the perceived stress with respect to various types of social support received can mediate the relationship between perceived stress and health-related quality of life. In a study addressing the student population, Lai and Ma (2016) suggested that the role of social support is the mediator of the relation between perceived psychological well-being and health-risk behaviors of students. Moreover, the relationship between mental health and life satisfaction has been partially mediated by perceived social support, indicating the key role of social support networks in the realization of an overall sense of well-being and life satisfaction that an individual experiences (Dong et al., 2022). These results highlight the importance of promoting social support to buffer the harmful effects of stress and to increase general well-being and life satisfaction.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and Procedure

In terms of research design, this study utilized a cross-sectional quantitative approach to ascertain the perspectives of respondents to obtain primary data from the working adults in Sarawak. Also, the respondents were recruited using a non-probability sampling technique, enabling the researchers to successfully recruit a total of 290 respondents to participate in this study. To facilitate comprehension and avert misinterpretations, the survey instrument was rendered in both Malay and English. Before participation, respondents were solicited for their consent, with an assurance of the voluntary nature of their involvement and confidentiality and research-specific use of their data. The questionnaires were completed independently by the participants, who then proceeded to submit them. In terms of ethical considerations, this study obtained clearance from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak [HREC(NM)/2023 (2)/24], and all procedures complied with institutional and national guidelines, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and the protection of participants' rights and welfare.

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Economic Strain Scale

The 13-item Family Economic Strain Scale (FESS) was developed to measure economic strain in both single- and two-parent families. Initially, the scale started with 25 items, with 13 items adapted from previous research and 12 developed specifically for this study. It was pilot-tested on a sample of single-mother, single-father, and two-parent families. The FESS demonstrated high reliability and was validated through hypothesis testing, making it a valuable tool for researching perceived economic strain in family dynamics (Hilton & Devall, 1997). For items 1 to 12, each item on the scale was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always). Item 13 is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (far below average) to 5 (far above average).

3.2.2 Brief Perceived Social Support Questionnaire (F-SozU K-6)

The F-SozU K-6 is a concise instrument developed to assess perceived social support across diverse populations and cultural settings. Initially validated in a study involving participants from the United States, Germany, Russia, and China, the F-SozU K-6 demonstrated strong psychometric properties, including good reliability and unidimensional structure. This scale includes six items that gauge the general perception of social support from various sources, such as family, friends, neighbors, and significant others, reflecting the emotional, instrumental, and social integration aspects of support. The scale's efficiency and comprehensive nature facilitate its use in large-scale surveys, providing an effective means to succinctly and reliably evaluate perceived social support succinctly and reliably (Lin et al., 2018). Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

3.2.3 10-Item Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC 10)

The CD-RISC-10 was utilized to assess participants' resilience levels. This scale is a shortened version of the original 25-item Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, designed to measure resilience as a trait that enables individuals to thrive in the face of adversity. The 10-item version maintains robust psychometric properties and has been validated across diverse populations and settings (Nartova-Bochaver et al., 2021). Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

3.2.4 WHO Well-Being Index (WHO-5)

The WHO Well-Being Index (WHO-5), obtained from Omami-Samani et al. (2019), was used to assess the psychological well-being of participants. This scale comprises five items, each reflecting aspects of positive mood, vitality, and general interest, which are considered indicative of overall well-being. Respondents rated each item based on their experiences over the last two weeks using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 5 (often). The total score was then calculated by averaging individual item scores, with higher scores denoting greater well-being.

3.3 Hypothesis Statement of This Study

The hypothesis of this study is as follows:
H1: There is a relationship between economic strain and well-being.
H2: There is a relationship between economic strain and resilience.
H3: There is a relationship between economic strain and social support.
H4: Social support mediates the relationship between economic strain and well-being.
H5: Social support mediates the relationship between economic strain and resilience.

3.4 Data Analysis

Prior to inferential analysis, a descriptive analysis was conducted to profile the respondents' demographic background. to achieve the objectives of this study, structural equation modelling is conducted. In structural equation modelling, it comprises of measurement model and a structural model. In the measurement model, the reliability of the items measured in this study was assessed using composite reliability analysis. Compared to Cronbach's alpha, which weighs indicators based on their reliability in the estimation process, composite reliability provides a more dependable measure (Hair et al., 2011). Our model design aligns with Becker et al.'s (2023) recommendations. We presented the path coefficients, along with their corresponding standard errors, t-values, and *p*-values, employing a resampling bootstrapping method with 10,000 samples, as described by Ramayah et al. (2018). Additionally, considering the critique by Hahn and Ang (2017) regarding the limitations of relying solely on *p*-values to assess hypothesis significance, they proposed a comprehensive approach that integrates multiple criteria, such as *p*-values, confidence intervals, and effect sizes.

4. Results

Table 1 provides a summary of the respondents, focusing on their demographic background. Demographic analysis of the respondents revealed a balanced gender distribution, with males slightly prevailing at 55.5% (161) and females at 44.5% (129). The majority were Generation Z individuals, constituting 53.8% (156), followed by Generation Y and Generation X individuals at 23.4% (68) and 20.7% (60), respectively, with Baby Boomers being the least represented at 2.1% (6). Ethnic diversity was notable among the respondents, with Chinese (34.8%, 101) slightly outnumbering Malays (32.4%, 94) and Sarawak Indigenous people (32.1%, 93). Sabah Indigenous representation is minimal (0.7%, 2). In terms of religious beliefs, Christians form the largest group at 42.4% (123), surpassing Muslims at 33.4% (97), followed by Buddhists at 21.7% (63), and a small fraction identified as freethinkers at 2.4% (7). Most respondents had attained upper secondary education (25.9%, 75), with a significant number also having post-secondary/pre-university (19%, 55) or diploma education (13.8%, 40). Interestingly, only a few had advanced degrees, with a master's degree of 4.8% (14). Most respondents were single/never married (57.2%, 166), while married individuals comprised 38.6% (112). The income data show a predominant cluster in the RM1,001–RM2,000 range (42.1%, 122), indicating a middle-income demographic, with very few earning more than RM10,000 (0.7%, 2). The descriptive analysis highlighted the young, ethnically diverse, and primarily middle-income nature of the respondent pool, with a significant number being single and having reached a level of upper secondary education.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender		
Male	161	55.50
Female	129	44.50
Age group		
Generation Z	156	53.80
Generation Y	68	23.40
Generation X	60	20.70
Baby Boomers	6	2.10
Ethnicity		
Malay	94	32.40
Chinese	101	34.80
Sarawak Indigenous	93	32.10
Sabah Indigenous	2	0.70
Religious Belief		
Islam	97	33.40
Christian	123	42.40
Buddhist	63	21.70
Freethinker	7	2.40
Educational Level		
Pre-school education or no formal education	1	0.30
Primary education	4	1.40
Lower secondary education	38	13.10
Upper secondary education	75	25.90
Post-secondary education / pre-university studies	55	19.00
Diploma education	40	13.80
Advanced diploma	12	4.10
First degree	51	17.60
Master's degree	14	4.80
Marital Status		
Single / Never married	166	57.20
Married	112	38.60
Divorced	6	2.10
Widowed	2	0.70
Separated	4	1.40
Income Group		
Less than RM1,000	38	13.10
RM1,001 - RM2,000	122	42.10
RM2,001 - RM3,000	47	16.20
RM3,001 - RM4,000	31	10.70
RM4,001 - RM5,000	20	6.90
RM5,001 - RM6,000	9	3.10
RM6,001 - RM7,000	9	3.10
RM7,001 - RM8,000	8	2.80
RM8,001 - RM9,000	2	0.70
RM9,001 - RM10,000	2	0.70
More than RM10,000	2	0.70

Before examining the relationship between variables, a measurement model was developed to ensure reliability and validity. In the evaluation of the measurement model (refer to Table 2), an examination of the loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR) were conducted. Loadings are expected to be $\geqslant 0.5$, AVE should meet or exceed 0.5, and CR should not be less than 0.7, as posited by Hair et al. (2022). The results in Table 1 indicate that the AVE values surpass the threshold of 0.5, and the CR values are all above 0.7. Furthermore, the loadings were generally acceptable, with only a minimal number falling below 0.708.

Table 2: Measurement Model of the Model

Variables	Items	Loadings	CR	AVE
Economic Strain	ES1	0.790	0.953	0.627
	ES2	0.806		
	ES3	0.824		
	ES4	0.769		
	ES5	0.736		
	ES6	0.715		
	ES7	0.786		
	ES8	0.818		
	ES9	0.807		
	ES10	0.833		
	ES11	0.820		
	ES12	0.787		
Resilience	R1	0.781	0.948	0.648
	R2	0.696		
	R3	0.761		
	R4	0.819		
	R5	0.841		
	R6	0.870		
	R7	0.827		
	R8	0.836		
	R9	0.829		
	R10	0.779		
Social Support	SS1	0.823	0.930	0.690
	SS2	0.857		
	SS3	0.771		
	SS4	0.860		
	SS5	0.842		
	SS6	0.829		
Well-being	WB1	0.889	0.938	0.752
	WB2	0.899		
	WB3	0.871		
	WB4	0.849		
	WB5	0.827		

Notes: CR and AVE indicates cross loadings and average variance extracted. The 13th item for economic strain was removed due to low loading (0.401).

In the subsequent phase, discriminant validity was assessed using the HTMT criterion as proposed by Henseler et al. (2015) and later updated by Franke and Sarstedt (2019). The HTMT ratios are expected to be less than or equal to 0.85, according to the stricter criterion, and less than or equal to 0.90 under the more lenient criterion. The data presented in Table 2 show that all HTMT values were below 0.85, indicating a clear distinction among the four constructs by the respondents. Taken together, these findings indicate that the measurement items were both valid and reliable.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity of the Variables

	1	2	3	4
1. Economic Strain				
2. Resilience	0.166			
3. Social Support	0.189	0.464		
4. Well-Being	0.297	0.521	0.311	

Fig 1 visually illustrates the structural model assessed in this study, highlighting the direct and indirect relationships among the key constructs: economic strain, social support, resilience, and well-being. The arrows indicate hypothesized causal paths, while the associated values reflect path coefficients and p-values derived from the SEM analysis. The blue circles represent the endogenous variables along with their respective R^2 values, indicating the proportion of variance explained by the model. This figure complements the statistical results presented in Tables 4 and 5, offering a visual summary of the structural relationships tested and supporting the interpretation discussed in the preceding sections.

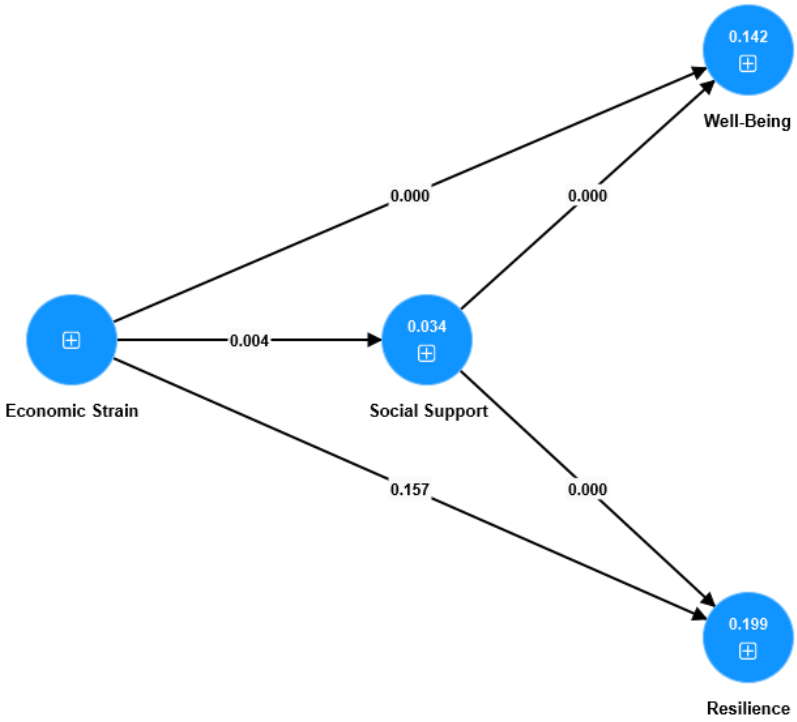


Fig 1: Structural Model of the Study

Specifically, Tables 4 and 5 illustrate the structural model and hypothesis testing of the direct and indirect effects, respectively. In the structural model, the findings indicate that Economic Strain has a small, negative, but not statistically significant effect on resilience (β = -0.092, p = 0.157), suggesting that economic strain does not statistically significantly predict resilience. However, economic strain shows a moderate, significant negative impact on social support (β = -0.192, p = 0.004) and a negative effect on Well-Being (β = -0.246, p < 0.001), meaning that as economic strain increases, both social support and well-being tend to decrease. Additionally, the results demonstrated a strong positive relationship between social support and resilience, with a path coefficient of 0.427 and a p-value of less than 0.001, indicating that higher levels of social support are associated with greater resilience. Similarly, social support was positively related to well-being (β = 0.252, p < 0.001), suggesting that increased social support contributed to better well-being. The effect sizes (f^2) for these relationships ranged from small to large, and the impact of social support on resilience was particularly substantial (f^2 = 0.230), highlighting the significant role of social support in enhancing resilience and well-being in the face of economic strain.

Table 4: Hypothesis Testing Direct Effects

Relationship	β	SD	t-stat	p-value	BCI LL	BCI UL	f^2
R1: ES → R	-0.092	0.064	1.414	0.157	-0.21	0.038	0.015
R2: ES → SS	-0.192	0.064	2.896	0.004	-0.301	-0.05	0.043
R3: ES → WB	-0.246	0.063	3.839	p < 0.001	-0.353	-0.104	0.074
R4: SS → R	0.427	0.06	7.045	p < 0.001	0.292	0.527	0.230
R5: SS → WB	0.252	0.06	4.18	p < 0.001	0.131	0.363	0.077

In the mediation analysis, Hypothesis H6 shows that economic strain has a small, negative indirect effect on well-being through social support, with a path coefficient of -0.046. This effect was statistically significant, as indicated by a p-value of 0.027, suggesting that social support mediates the relationship between economic strain and well-being. For hypothesis H7, the analysis revealed that economic strain had a small to moderate negative indirect effect on resilience via social support, with a path coefficient of -0.078. This relationship was also statistically significant (p = 0.011), implying a significant mediating role of social support between economic strain and resilience. This finding reinforces the notion that social support plays a crucial role in the impact of economic strain on resilience and well-being. The confidence interval bias-corrected 95% also did not show any intervals straddling a 0, thus confirming our findings.

Table 5: Hypothesis Testing Indirect Effects

Relationship	β	SD	t-stat	p-value	BCI LL	BCI UL
R6: ES → SS → WB	-0.046	0.021	2.207	0.027	-0.138	-0.02
R7: ES → SS → R	-0.078	0.031	2.542	0.011	-0.092	-0.012

5. Discussion

First, the findings suggest that economic strain negatively affects social support among Sarawakians. As the economy deteriorates, we could likely observe reduced social activity. This observation is in line with those of Vinokur et al. (1996) and Rusu et al. (2018) regarding economic strain hindering access to support. Economic hardship may lead individuals to withdraw from social participation, either due to affordability or the stigma associated with financial distress. In Sarawak, where community and familial bonds are strong, such withdrawal can be particularly damaging. Civilizational regression, economic woes, and other pressures push individuals toward survival priorities, leaving less time and capacity for social engagement. This effect may be even more pronounced in rural areas of Sarawak, where economic pressures tend to be greater and the absence of support networks can heighten isolation and stress. Understanding this dynamic is crucial, given the historical role of Sarawak's social networks in offering emotional support, resource sharing, and collective coping during difficult times.

Building upon this, the study also reported a positive influence of social support on well-being in Sarawak. This finding is consistent with Wilson et al. (2020), Chu et al. (2015), and Milner et al. (2016). It suggests that individuals with strong social networks, or who are embedded in a socially supportive environment, generally report better well-being. This is especially relevant in Sarawak, where close-knit family units and strong community ties form the foundation of an individual's identity. Such support systems provide emotional sustenance, practical assistance, and protection against life stressors. Even in low-income contexts, collective support can help individuals maintain better psychological well-being. Thus, the buffering role of social support is not only a theoretical consideration but a culturally grounded reality in the Sarawakian context. This underscores the value of community-based interventions that reinforce social cohesion, particularly in economically vulnerable settings.

Extending these findings further, social support was also positively associated with resilience, highlighting that Sarawakians with strong social ties are better positioned to overcome adversity. This result aligns with findings from Mei et al. (2021), which similarly emphasized the role of social support in fostering resilience during the COVID-19 period. Prior literature has established that increased social support enhances emotional regulation by reframing life stressors as less threatening (Sippel et al., 2015). In Sarawak, resilience is often experienced communally, supported through emotional and practical assistance as well as the sharing of indigenous knowledge. The traditional practice of gotong-royong (community cooperation) serves as a cultural mechanism for strengthening resilience. Acts of mutual aid enable the development of a robust social fabric capable of absorbing economic and psychological shocks. This cultural context provides a valuable foundation for designing resilience-enhancing initiatives that resonate with local values.

In addition to these direct effects, the evidence of mediation was statistically significant for social support in the relationship between economic strain and both well-being and resilience. Migerode et al. (2012) suggested that social support can mediate the effects of stressors on quality of life. Our findings parallel this, showing that social support moderates the impact of economic strain on well-being in Sarawak. Strong social networks appear to act as a buffer against the psychological burdens of financial hardship. This suggests that even amid economic pressures, collective support embedded in Sarawak's social fabric can alleviate negative outcomes. Accordingly, policies that reinforce such networks may not only prevent decline in well-being but also actively promote recovery and adaptation. These results point to the importance of strengthening community ties through policies and programs that foster engagement and cohesion, especially among those facing socioeconomic challenges.

Finally, in considering the nuanced role of social support, Ong et al. (2018) showed that it may also mediate the relationship between resilience and stressor variables. In our study, the mediating role of social support reinforces its importance in the context of economic strain and resilience. However, we also observed a nuance: economic strain did not directly predict lower resilience. Instead, individuals receiving social support were more resilient when facing economic hardship. This highlights the powerful role of social networks in helping individuals adjust and recover from stress. It also supports the implementation of community-based support mechanisms that build resilience through increased social capital. In Sarawak's context, where communal values are embedded in daily life, reinforcing these bonds can significantly mitigate the impact of economic adversity. This layered understanding of mediation invites future research to further explore the mechanisms by which social support facilitates both resistance and recovery in the face of prolonged economic pressures.

6. Conclusion

In urban areas, social support serves as a critical mitigator against the adverse effects of economic strain, enhancing the well-being and resilience of Sarawakians. It is on this point that the findings from this study are worthy: social support is not only related to better well-being but also mediates the link between economic strain and psychological resilience. In this way, social support would offer a critical buffer in translating potentially adverse economic pressures into difficulties that might be overcome and that would not unduly compromise the welfare of the individual. As such, the effect has been echoed by the socio-demographic patterns across the Sarawakian context, which clearly sets out the universal role that social support systems play in containing economic stressors. These relationships and community connections are key factors of an individual's resilience, in such a way that people might be flowing through economic challenges with a lot more psychological stability, particularly in urban settings where economic strain could take someone out of sudden. The strength and accessibility of social support networks are central to buffering the adversarial consequences of economic strain. This only points out that community support should be developed in an integrative approach that focuses not only on the present, but also enhances such things further, especially during times when economic uncertainty becomes prevalent.

This implies that social support networks at the community level should be built by the government. Social support mediates between economic strain and well-being, so policymakers should focus greater attention on community support networks. In such networks, one may find emotional, informational, and practical support, each capable of mitigating, to varying degrees, the deleterious consequences of financial stress on mental health and resiliency. This can be supported by governments through policies that fund the formation and empowerment of support groups, counseling services, and community-led programs. These centers would serve as places where people can find a range of help, from financial advice to mental health services or group social activities, that offer support, a sense of community, and mutual assistance. This develops an approach not only for addressing the immediate effects of economic stress but also for building a constant framework of support that reinforces general community strength. Further, the spirit of gotong-royong can help communities stricken by economic strain live better lives. This community self-help ethic is directly aligned with Malaysia's Keluarga MADANI agenda, which prioritizes caring, participatory, and inclusive development; embedding gotong-royong as a delivery modality for local welfare, mental health outreach, and livelihood support operationalizes Keluarga MADANI at the neighborhood level. Importantly, leveraging digital tools, such as mobile apps, virtual support groups, or AI-powered helplines, could extend the reach of these support networks, especially in remote or under-resourced areas. In practical terms, local councils and district offices can co-fund and coordinate MADANI gotong-royong hubs as hybrid physical–digital touchpoints for social support, with implementation metrics aligned to Keluarga MADANI outcomes. This aligns with the broader move toward digitally enabled governance and community service delivery.

Finally, we consider the significance of social support and incorporate it into economic policy. These established relationships between economic strain, well-being, and resilience, mediated by social support, clarify that broader economic policy frameworks will have to contain mechanisms, guidance, and recommendations on social support. This could mean that the economic relief programs included social support services as part of the financial aid package, including counseling and peer support networks. The policy may require companies and employers to grant access to necessary employee assistance programs in the form of various psychological and social support services. This will entail economic policies for the government that embed social support to ensure that wherever there are economic hardships faced by people, this should be met by sensitively sophisticated support packets meeting not only the financial aspect but also the psychological, hence minimizing damage to well-being and enhancing resilience. Governance-wise, this calls for inter-ministerial collaboration, linking

economic planning units, health agencies, and digital communication authorities, to deliver integrated support strategies. These efforts would reflect adaptive governance principles aligned with the digital era, promoting more agile and inclusive social safety nets.

Third, policies for social investment should be continuously promoted. The mediation of social support on the relationship between economic strain and psychological outcomes was positive, meaning that paying attention to social capital is important for enabling society to have the ability to bounce back. This suggests that policymakers should focus on promoting policies that support social investment, especially in education, community development, and programs for social cohesion. These investments will then enable environments in which nature strengthens its support for systems, community engagement, and volunteerism. Encouraging businesses and individuals with friendly policies to invest in community programs, offering taxation incentives to contribute towards social services, and supporting initiatives for social networking and community building. In this context, digital platforms could also serve as vehicles for social capital development, facilitating volunteer coordination, awareness campaigns, online fundraising, and digital inclusion. These developments underscore not only the technological modernization of support systems but also the evolving role of government in regulating and enabling inclusive digital infrastructure.

Nevertheless, given that the sample is robust and appropriate for the applied analytical techniques, this study still acknowledges the inherent limitation regarding the generalization of its results. Considering Sarawak's diverse demographic composition spanning both urban and rural locales, a sample of this magnitude may not adequately reflect the broad spectrum of socioeconomic and cultural differences inherent to the region. This limitation potentially restricts the extrapolation of the study results to the entire population of Sarawak. However, the findings provide a useful foundation for hypothesizing how these dynamics might manifest in rural Sarawak, where community structures, cultural practices, and social support mechanisms differ significantly from urban areas. In rural settings, traditional values, communal living, and kin-based support systems may offer different forms or intensities of social support, potentially leading to stronger buffering effects against economic strain or, conversely, unique vulnerabilities due to limited access to formal services. These differences highlight the need for comparative studies that examine whether the mediating role of social support observed in urban areas is equally relevant in rural contexts. Such investigations would enrich our understanding of how social support operates across Sarawak's diverse geographical and cultural landscape and provide evidence-based guidance for tailoring interventions to different regional contexts.

Additionally, the employment of a cross-sectional study design captures data at a single point in time, which limits the ability to observe changes or causal relationships among economic strain, social support, well-being, and resilience. This approach neglects the dynamic nature of these constructs, particularly how they may evolve in response to prolonged economic hardship or shifts in social structures. To address this limitation, future research should consider adopting longitudinal designs, which would enable the tracking of temporal changes and better capture the directionality and persistence of effects. Although structural equation modeling provides a robust method for analyzing relationships among variables, its effectiveness is constrained by the static nature of cross-sectional data. Furthermore, the study's reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases such as social desirability and recall bias, which may lead participants to overstate their well-being or perceived social support. These limitations underscore the importance of methodological refinement in future studies to enhance the validity and generalizability of findings regarding the interplay between economic strain, social support, and psychological outcomes.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge financial support from the RISE Research Grant Award (UNI/F01/RISE/85772/2023) and the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest that could influence the interpretation of the findings or bias the conclusions drawn from this study.

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