



IN-STORE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE (ISCX) TOWARDS COVID-19 PREVENTIVE MEASURES OF MALAYSIAN RETAILERS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores In-Store Customer Experience (ISCX) in relation to COVID-19 preventive measures among Malaysian retailers. Grounded in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, it investigates how cognitive, affective, social, and physical experiences were influenced during the pandemic. A qualitative approach was employed, using thematic analysis on data collected through 10 in-depth interviews with Malaysian shoppers during the Movement Control Order (MCO) phases. Interviews were coded and analysed using Atlas.ti, referencing past literature to identify emerging themes. Findings indicate that affective experience especially involving negative emotions, was the most frequently cited ISCX dimension, highlighting the importance of addressing customers' psychological comfort during in-store visits. Among preventive measures, store airflow emerged as the most frequently mentioned, underscoring its significance in creating a safe shopping environment. These findings reflect the dual emphasis on physiological and safety needs within Maslow's framework. The study suggests that retailers should not only implement effective health protocols but also consider customers' emotional well-being to enhance the overall shopping experience. The paper recommends integrating additional theoretical models alongside Maslow's hierarchy for a more robust framework. Future research could adopt a mixed-method approach to strengthen the understanding of customer experience and preventive strategies. The insights offer practical implications for retailers, policymakers, and stakeholders in managing in-store operations during public health crises.

JEL Classification Code: M3, I1, I3

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1. INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, the world was shaken by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, later declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a pandemic. A team of Harvard scientists predicted that social distancing might be needed until 2022 unless the vaccine is found (AFP, 2020). For the global community, this is the first encounter where the health crisis has resulted in worldwide socioeconomic disruption in which consumer behaviors, organizations and supply chains are expected to shift to the “new normal” (McKinsey, 2020). Experts believe these social distancing rules could significantly shrink the retailers’ in-store sales growth (Arcieri, 2020). As retailers are forced to implement new protocols that limit capacity and discourage shoppers from socializing and wandering around, the spending pattern and trends are expected to differ from those in pre-pandemic days (Arcieri, 2020).

To remain relevant, retailers prioritizing physical stores and face-to-face engagement must quickly adapt to the new normal in retail (Briedis et al., 2020). In Malaysia, following the WHO recommendations, among the social distancing guidelines that have been laid out by the country’s Ministry of Health (MOH) are for people to maintain at least a one-meter distance from each other, wash hands frequently with soap or hand sanitizer and wear a mask in crowded places (MOH, 2020). Based on this situation, the research objective for this study is to explore the in-store customer experience (ISCX) towards COVID-19 preventive measures of Malaysian retailers. This study also used the Maslow Hierarchy of Needs research framework that integrates with ISCX and Malaysian retailers’ preventive measures during the Movement Control Order (MCO) phases. This study also supports Sustainable Development Goal 3, Good Health and Well-Being, by the United Nations, which helps end the COVID-19 pandemic as an infectious disease. This goal aims at ensuring healthier lives for all ages and encouraging well-being (United Nations, 2018), which is the utmost priority during the COVID-19 pandemic. Implementing crucial preventive measures in all Malaysian stores will help reduce the risk of getting COVID-19 infection (World Health Organization, 2020).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: IN-STORE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE (ISCX) DIMENSIONS

This study was conducted within the retail setting of the customers' experience. To decide on its' measurements, a review of retail customer experience was done by researchers such as Bagdare and Jain (2013), Bustamante and Rubio, (2017), Deshwal, (2016), Hermes and Riedl, (2020), Ogruk, Anderson, and Nacass (2018). There were several theoretical developments in CE's measurements on retail settings previously. Considering the study's setting will take place among in-store customers, this study has chosen the measurement from Bustamante and Rubio (2017) since these researchers studied In-Store Customer Experience (ISCX) among retailers. The measurements were also not biased toward related situations that might not occur during the COVID-19 pandemic. The measurements' descriptions from these researchers were renamed Code ISCX1 to ISCX4 to facilitate future thematic analysis of this study. The ISCX codes are mentioned in Table 1, and the detailed definitions now follow:

2.1.1 COGNITIVE EXPERIENCE (CODE: ISCX1)

Cognition is gained by experience, learned knowledge, and subjective qualities to be perceived by individuals. It helps people identify and address specific issues to the detriment of others (Da Silva and Syed, 2006; David, Miclea, and Opre, 2004; Dimofte, 2010). With regard to this study, the cognitive experience will be inquired of the participants on the retailers' overall environment of their stores, including their product display, services and preventive measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.1.2 AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE (CODE: ISCX2)

The affective mechanism is conceptualized as a "valenced feeling state," and its structure involves mood and emotion (Erevelles, 1998; Richins, 1997; Cohen and Areni, 1991). In intensity, affective responses differ from mildly positive or negative moods to extreme positive or negative feelings (Schmitt, 1999). When researching ISCX, this study focuses on the consumer emotion rather than moods, as emotions are associated with an object that activates them and is

more intense. In contrast, moods are usually not correlated with an object that stimulates them and are low in intensity (Erevelles, 1998).

2.1.3 SOCIAL EXPERIENCE (CODE: ISCX3)

In a social context, the experience is built together with other people. Physical retail outlets are social environments where the customer perceives, interprets and communicates with the service elements to engage in individual and collective processes (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Participants will be asked about their interactions with other people in retailers' stores, including other customers and staff of the retail outlet.

2.1.4 PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE (CODE: ISCX4)

ISCX's physical aspect relates to the customer physiological responses in their interaction with the environment (Bitner, 1992). This response can be defined as a state of well-being/comfort or lack of comfort/discomfort (De Looze, Kuijt-Evers, and Van Dieën, 2003; Kuijt-Evers, Groenesteijn, De Looze, and Vink, 2004). Through this aspect, the study participants will be required to explain their level of comfort toward the visited retailers' stores' overall environment, including preventive measures taken by these shops.

2.2 PREVENTIVE MEASURES (PM) DURING COVID-19

Preventive measures among retailers during the COVID-19 pandemic are essential to reduce the widespread virus in a country. For Malaysia, the Ministry of Health had urged all businesses to implement COVID-19 preventive measures at their respective premises (Bernama, 2020). Malaysia's Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs had detailed a standard operating procedure (SOP) for certain retailers during the movement control order in the country (KPDNHEP, 2020). Several differences among preventive measures however occurred during COVID-19 compared to this SOP. This study gathered several other reliable articles and SOP provided by the Malaysian Ministry to develop related substantial preventive measures components. Concerning this matter, preventive measures (PM) codes during COVID-19 among literature were extracted from 31 articles, including past research, company press releases, procedures, and newspapers (Suib, Maulan, and Ahmad Suki, 2021). The preventive measure (PM) codes from past literature are given in Table 1 as the initial codes for this study.

TABLE 1
A Summary of Initial Study Codes

No.	Codes	Study Items
1	ISCX1	Cognitive Experience
2	ISCX2	Affective Experience
3	ISCX3	Social Experience
4	ISCX4	Physical Experience
5	PM5	Social Distancing
6	PM6	Hand Sanitizers
7	PM7	On-Premise Sanitation
8	PM8	Face Mask
9	PM9	Temperature Detection
10	PM10	Effective Payment Checkout
11	PM11	Store Airflow

Source: Suib, Maulan and Suki, (2021)

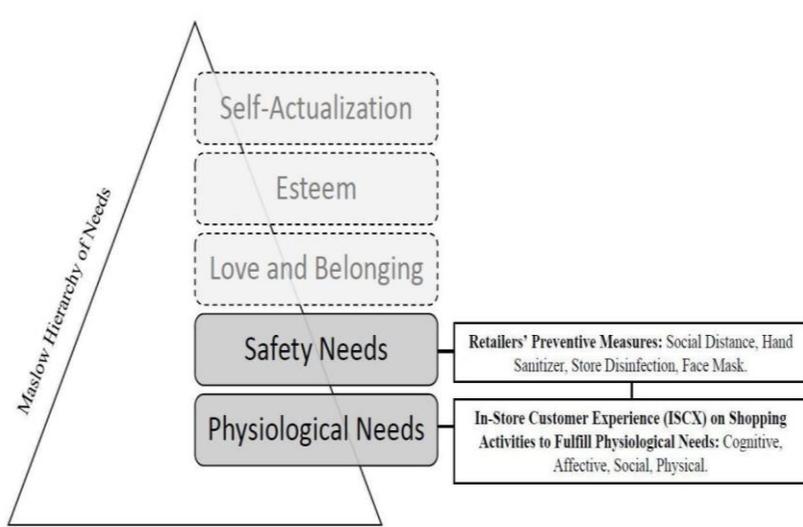
2.3 MASLOW HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was introduced by Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1962), and his concept was based on psychological needs (self-esteem, love, self-actualisation) and other basic needs (physiological and safety). According to the author, psychological needs will only become significant after the basic needs have been fulfilled. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysians are focusing on buying more necessity items such as raw materials for cooking, household cleaners, and personal care items (Kong, 2020) that fulfil their physiological and safety needs.

Due to this change in consumer buying behaviour, Maslow's theory of human needs fits well in the context of COVID-19, as the basic needs are hierarchically arranged and supersede the others when satisfied. The basic physiological needs are the lowest and most fundamental for the survival of individuals. In this case, these needs overlap with safety and security needs. Such needs usually emerge from deprivation, and the absence of which develops a sense of anxiety and stress. It can be attributed to the idea that people may think an empty stomach (without food, water, and other routine essentials during lockdown) would take their life away before the coronavirus (Singh, 2020).

This study will emphasise the basic human needs within Maslow's theory, which consists of physiological and safety needs. The consumer's buying experience in the retailers' store (ISCX) on fulfilling their physiological needs will be placed on the lowest fundamental of Maslow's model, while their experience facing retailers' preventive measures as the means to ensure their safety will be in safety needs. Figure 1 illustrates the study's conceptual model to enlighten the organisation of ideas within the Maslow Hierarchy of Needs theory.

FIGURE 1
Conceptual Framework: In-Store Consumer Experience (ISCX) and
Retailer's Preventive Measure in Maslow Hierarchy of Needs



Adapted from Bustamante and Rubio, (2017), Maslow, (1962), and Suib, Maulan and Suki, (2021)

2.4 EMPIRICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

While the theoretical dimensions of customer experience—cognitive, affective, social, and physical—are well-established, recent empirical studies have also operationalized these constructs in both qualitative and quantitative settings. For instance, Bagdare and Jain (2013) conducted a quantitative study to measure retail customer experience, providing validated scales that support the multidimensional nature of

ISCX. Similarly, Bustamante and Rubio (2017) empirically tested ISCX constructs in physical retail environments, which form the conceptual basis for this study.

Qualitative approaches have also been employed to understand retail experiences. Ogruk et al. (2018) conducted in-depth interviews to examine customer emotional states in physical stores, aligning with the affective and social dimensions highlighted in this research. Hermes and Riedl (2020) explored cognitive and emotional responses in retail settings using mixed methods, further validating the integration of Maslow's hierarchy in retail experience studies. The inclusion of preventive measures, such as store airflow, hygiene, and crowd control, has been empirically studied in response to COVID-19 (Suib, Maulan, and Ahmad Suki, 2021), supporting the relevance of safety and physiological needs in retail research frameworks.

These studies collectively justify the adoption of a qualitative methodology in this paper, particularly thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, as a suitable approach to explore how ISCX and COVID-19 preventive measures interact in shaping customer experience during crisis periods.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how in-store customer experiences (ISCX) and observed COVID-19 preventive measures shaped shopping behavior during the Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia. The research was grounded in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, with focus on the physiological and safety needs as experienced during retail visits. A qualitative design was selected because of its suitability in exploring lived experiences, emotions, and perceptions in depth.

3.1 SAMPLING AND PARTICIPANT SELECTION

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 10 Malaysian participants who had engaged in in-person shopping during MCO phases 1 to 3. Participants were recruited via social media and academic networks. Inclusion criteria were: (i) Malaysian citizen, (ii) aged 18 and above, (iii) had visited a physical retailer at least once during the MCO (Table 2). This sampling approach aligns with qualitative best practices (Creswell, 2013) for capturing rich, context-specific experiences.

The participants also had face-to-face retail experiences and were able to recall their shopping experiences in these retailers. The interviews were recorded from online meetings through Google Meet. These semi-structured interviews were composed of 10 open-ended statements that allowed participants to share their knowledge on the study topic. With consent from the participants, the researchers agreed to replace their respective names with numbers (P1 until P10).

TABLE 2
Participants Profiles

Participant (P)	Age	Occupation	Address	Chosen Retailer	Visit on MCO Phase
P1	26	Teacher	Klang, Selangor	Giant Hypermarket	1, 2, 3
P2	27	Admin Executive	Tawau, Sabah	Taih Yang Supermarket	1, 2, 3
P3	23	Entrepreneur	Bangi, Selangor	Parkson	1 and 2
P4	25	Auditor	Shah Alam, Selangor	Aeon Mall	1 and 2
P5	48	Trainer	Bangi, Selangor	Mr DIY	3
P6	25	Service Sales Engineer	Petaling Jaya, Selangor	Tesco	2
P7	36	Lecturer	Shah Alam, Selangor	Jaya Grocer	1 and 2
P8	36	E-Hailing Rider	Shah Alam, Selangor	i-City Mall	1 and 2
P9	37	Lecturer	Klang, Selangor	Aeon Mall	1 and 2
P10	28	Student	Raub, Pahang	Tong Fatt Trading Sdn Bhd	3

3.2 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Google Meet to comply with COVID-19 safety guidelines. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. The interview protocol was developed based on:

- The four ISCX dimensions (Bustamante and Rubio, 2017),
- Common COVID-19 preventive measures (Suib, Maulan and Suki, 2021),
- Maslow’s physiological and safety needs (Maslow, 1962).
- Sample questions included:
- “How did you feel emotionally while shopping in-store during MCO?”
- “What preventive measures did you notice and how did they affect your shopping experience?”

3.3 JUSTIFICATION FOR CUSTOMER-ONLY SAMPLE

This study intentionally focused on the consumer perspective, as the aim was to assess how customers experienced and interpreted in-store preventive measures, not to evaluate the measures themselves from the retailer's operational standpoint. While the preventive measures were implemented by retailers, their effectiveness and emotional impact were best evaluated through customer experiences. Thus, gathering data from retailers was beyond the intended scope of this study. Future mixed-method research, however, could include retailer input for triangulation and deeper analysis.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

Interview transcripts were coded using Atlas.ti and analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step approach. Codes were both theory-driven (Maslow’s framework) and data-driven, allowing emergent themes to surface organically. ISCX and PM codes were adapted from prior literature (Bustamante and Rubio, 2017; Suib et al., 2021) and modified based on interview data.

4. FINDINGS

The analyses of this study's findings were run through Atlas.ti software from the interview transcriptions. The results were analyzed into safety needs represented by In-Store Customer Experience (ICSX) dimensions and physiological needs represented by retailers' preventive measures (PM).

4.1 IN-STORE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE (ICSX) DIMENSIONS

The shopping experiences of the participants were labelled as ICSX codes in the findings' transcriptions. Initial codes were mentioned in Table 1, and the arrangement of these codes was changed based on the code's identification frequency (highest to lowest) among the interviews; transcripts. Table 3 showed that affective experience had the highest frequency when all participants mentioned their affective experiences the most, while physical experience had the lowest frequency or mentions.

TABLE 3
Findings for In-Store Customer Experience (ICSX) Codes

ICSX Codes	Quotation Frequency	Sources from Participants
ISCX2: Affective Experience	32	All participants
ISCX1: Cognitive Experience	18	All participants
ISCX3: Social Experience	15	All participants
ISCX4: Physical Experience	10	P1, P2, P5, P6, P7, P10

The researcher further categorized the ICSX codes into negative and positive emotions mentioned by the participants. Affective experience with negative emotion had the highest frequency and mentions, while physical experience with negative emotion had the least frequency and mentions.

TABLE 4
Findings on Positive and Negative Emotion of In-Store Customer Experience (ISCX)

ISCX Codes	Quotation Frequency	Sources from Participants
ISCX 2: Negative Emotion	18	P1, P2, P3, P7, P8, P9, P10
ISCX 3: Negative Emotion	13	All participants
ISCX 2: Positive Emotion	10	P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10
ISCX 1: Positive Emotion	10	P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P10
ISCX 1: Negative Emotion	10	P2, P3, P4, P8, P9, P10
ISCX 4: Positive Emotion	8	P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P10
ISCX 3: Positive Emotion	6	P1, P2, P4, P5, P8, P9, P10
ISCX 4: Negative Emotion	2	P2, P7

4.1.1 ISCX 1: COGNITIVE EXPERIENCE WITH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

The cognitive experience was the inquiries of participants' overall retailers' environment of their stores, including their products' display, services, and preventive measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic. The positive emotion of satisfaction shown by participant 2 (P2) on her visit to the chosen retailer's overall environment:

“I think it is good enough because the retailer is really umm.. adapting to the new norm and really take the initiative to follow the SOP by the government.” (P2)
 [Cognitive Experience with Positive Emotion]

On the other hand, participant 3 (P3) mentioned she was being cautious of the environment of her chosen retailer. This emotion was recognized as being negative in her cognitive experience:

“I can feel the umm.. You can say that all the staff, including me and all the customers, are being cautious with each other.” (P3) [Cognitive Experience with Negative Emotion]

4.1.2 ISCX 2: AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE WITH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

The affective experience is conceptualized as a “valenced feeling state,” and its structure involves mood and emotion (Cohen and Areni, 1991; Erevelles, 1998; Richins, 1997). In affective experience, participant 6 felt excited (positive emotion) during her overall shopping experience in her chosen retailer:

“I would feel that I’m very excited during shopping in MCO. The only time we can go out during MCO. I’m enjoying the moment.” (P6) [Affective Experience with Positive Emotion]

In contrast, participant 3 (P3) felt some discomfort during her visit to the retailer during MCO:

“I did feel quite cautious and umm.. there are some discomforts during shopping because you are exposed to the possibility of getting the virus since I don’t get the vaccine yet during that time.” (P3) [Affective Experience with Negative Emotion]

4.1.3 ISCX 3: SOCIAL EXPERIENCE WITH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

For social experience, the participants were asked about their interactions with other people in retailers’ stores, including other customers and staff of the retail shop. Participant 5 (P5) reflects the positive emotion in this experience by having some normal conversations with the retailer’s staff and other customers despite the MCO:

“The interaction with the staff was normal. I have to ask aaa.. Certain of their staff to aaa.. To get to know where is the location of the one [product] that I was looking for. It was a normal interaction between a customer and the staff of the outlet.” (P5) [Social Experience with Positive Emotion]

However, participant 1 (P1) lacked interactions with the retailer’s staff, only to help her find her desired product at the store.

This situation reflects a decrease in communication between a customer and retailer's employees; thus, a negative emotion in social experience.

“Not really having interaction with the store assistant coz I just went to buy my stuff.. unless I have something to ask the assistant where I can find my things that I want to buy.”
(P1) [Social Experience with Negative Emotion]

4.1.4 ISCX 4: PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE WITH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

The study participants were required to explain their level of comfort toward the overall environment of the visited retailers' stores, including preventive measures taken by these shops in the physical experience of this study. Participant 4 (P4) felt comfortable during her overall shopping experience, which reflects the positive emotion of physical experience:

“Umm.. Yes, surprisingly I feel comfortable shopping in the shop during MCO.” (P4) [Physical Experience with Positive Emotion]

On the other hand, participant 7 did not feel comfortable with her shopping experience during MCO because of the retailer's cleanliness and preventive measures:

“Umm.. As we know we need to keep ourselves, we still keep hygiene and keep our safe, sanitise where we touch things, so it's not comfortable during shopping in MCO. In terms of security wise, that make me feel so not comfortable of going out to the retail shop. same as inside the retail shop.” (P7) [Physical Experience with Negative Emotion]

4.2 PREVENTIVE MEASURES (PM) OF MALAYSIAN RETAILERS DURING COVID-19

Preventive measures (PM) codes were collected and analyzed from interview transcripts concerning Malaysian retailers' preventive measures during MCO phases. The frequencies of these codes (PM5 to PM13) are mentioned in Table 4. In contrast to the initial codes in

Table 1, there were two additional preventive measure codes added as new codes (Scan MySejahtera (PM 13) and Gloves (PM12)) found among the interview transcripts. All participants mentioned how the retailers keep the store airflow low and balanced during MCO, which achieved the highest frequency and mentions among the preventive measures, while only one participant (P1) mentioned store payment as the preventive measure she noticed during her visit to the chosen retailer.

TABLE 4
Findings on Preventive Measures (PM) Codes

PM Codes	Quotation Frequency	Sources from Participants
PM11: Store Airflow	19	All participants
PM5: Social Distance	18	P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10
PM7: Face Mask	13	P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10

TABLE 4 (continued)

PM Codes	Quotation Frequency	Sources from Participants
PM13: Scan MySejahtera	13	P2, P3, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10
PM6: Hand Sanitizers	12	P1, P2, P3, P7, P8, P9, P10
PM9: Temperature	10	P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10
PM8: On-Premise Sanitation	4	P1, P7.
PM12: Gloves	4	P3, P4, P7, P8, P9
PM10: Store Payment	1	P1

5. IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

5.1 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for Malaysian retailers and public health policymakers. First, the affective experience, particularly negative emotional responses such as anxiety,

discomfort, and fear of infection, was the most frequently reported dimension by participants. This indicates that emotional well-being is a crucial factor in customer satisfaction during pandemics. Retailers should therefore go beyond enforcing SOPs and invest in creating emotionally safe environments through clear signage, empathetic staff interactions, and transparent communication about hygiene protocols. Second, the preventive measure most frequently mentioned was store airflow, highlighting its perceived importance in making customers feel physically safe. This suggests that store layout and ventilation design should be prioritized in retail planning during health crises. Policymakers may also consider incorporating customer perception feedback into SOP revisions.

5.2 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study supports the relevance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, particularly the role of physiological and safety needs in shaping in-store experiences during a public health crisis. It extends existing ISCX models by embedding them in the pandemic context, showing that emotional and environmental triggers are interconnected. Future research may further explore how Maslow's theory integrates with crisis or health behavior models in retail settings.

5.3 LIMITATIONS

This study is limited in several ways. First, the sample was restricted to 10 Malaysian customers who had in-store shopping experiences during MCO phases. While thematic saturation was reached, the findings may not generalize to different demographics or post-pandemic conditions. Second, the study relied solely on customer perspectives, despite evaluating retailer-initiated preventive measures. Although the customer viewpoint was sufficient for assessing perception and emotional response, incorporating retailers' perspectives could have provided a more holistic understanding. Third, this research employed a purely qualitative design. While appropriate for exploratory purposes, future studies could adopt a mixed-methods approach to quantify the relationship between ISCX dimensions and specific preventive strategies.

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