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The public space Paradox: Balancing governance and street vending in urban Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how governance policies shape the use of public spaces by street vendors in urban Indonesia and explores their social, economic, and spatial impacts on vendors and the broader urban environment. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 25 participants from three major cities on Java Island, including street vendors, urban planners, government officials, and community leaders. The findings highlight significant challenges for street vendors, including bureaucratic hurdles in obtaining permits, economic strain from forced relocations, and the persistence of informality due to inconsistent policy enforcement. These governance strategies, though intended to regulate urban spaces, often marginalize vendors, exacerbate economic vulnerabilities, and disrupt urban vibrancy by limiting public access to affordable goods and services. The study underscores the need for inclusive and adaptive governance policies that balance urban order with economic opportunity, advocating for the integration of street vendors into urban planning to foster sustainable and dynamic public spaces.

1. Introduction

Public spaces have long been recognized as crucial elements in the development and sustainability of urban environments. Streets, sidewalks, parks, and plazas serve as dynamic hubs where people from diverse backgrounds engage in social, recreational, and economic activities (Jian et al., 2020; Puplambu & Bofo, 2021; Sikorska, 2020). In developing countries, these spaces often play a vital role in supporting informal economic functions. For many urban residents, public spaces are indispensable for accessing affordable goods and services, especially in areas where formal markets are either absent or inaccessible. Street vendors, widely regarded as the backbone of the informal economy, are a prominent feature of these urban spaces (Adama, 2021; Anja & Zhang, 2023; Ndawana, 2022). Beyond offering affordable goods, they contribute to the vibrancy and social fabric of city life by meeting the needs of low-income communities.

In Indonesia, a rapidly urbanizing country, street vendors occupy a central role in the urban economy, particularly in densely populated cities such as Jakarta, Surabaya, Yogyakarta, and Bandung. They

provide affordable goods and create employment opportunities for individuals excluded from formal labor markets. However, despite their significant economic contributions, street vendors often operate in a legal grey area, occupying public spaces without formal authorization (Aristyowati et al., 2024; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2022; Prasetyo, 2022). This informal use of urban areas frequently creates tension with city authorities, who are tasked with ensuring that public spaces remain orderly, safe, and accessible for all citizens. This tension highlights a paradox: while street vendors fulfill essential economic functions, their presence is often perceived as a challenge to urban governance and planning priorities.

This paradox raises critical questions about how public spaces are utilized and governed. Urban planners often view street vending as a nuisance that disrupts traffic flow, undermines city aesthetics, and complicates sanitation efforts. In contrast, street vendors argue for their right to use public spaces to secure their livelihoods and economic mobility. This complex dynamic has yet to be fully explored, particularly in Indonesia, where rapid urbanization has exacerbated tensions between formal governance structures and the realities of informal

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economies (Onyishi et al., 2021; Soliman, 2021; Thulare et al., 2021). Understanding this dynamic is essential for developing inclusive urban policies that balance the economic needs of marginalized groups with the governance requirements of rapidly growing cities.

Despite extensive scholarship on the informal economy, few studies have critically examined the governance of public spaces in Indonesia, especially in relation to street vending. Most existing research focuses either on the informal economy as a whole or on the legal struggles of street vendors seeking the right to operate in urban areas (Hamid et al., 2022; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2022; Prasetyo, 2022; Suhartini & Jones, 2020; Walker & Tebbutt, 2023). There is a significant gap in understanding the nuanced, often paradoxical relationship between street vendors and urban governance. For instance, while street vendors provide essential services to low-income communities, they are frequently marginalized in urban planning discussions, which prioritize traffic management, sanitation, and beautification over inclusivity and economic access (Asadzadeh et al., 2023; Nogueira & Shin, 2022). This oversight points to a broader challenge in how public spaces are conceptualized and managed in urban contexts.

In Indonesia, the coexistence of formal governance mechanisms and informal economic practices reveals tensions that are both practical and philosophical. On the practical side, urban authorities are often caught between enforcing regulations to maintain orderly public spaces and accommodating the economic needs of street vendors (Hegarty, 2021; Pratomo et al., 2020; Yapp, 2020). On the philosophical side, this issue raises deeper questions about the "right to the city"—who has the right to occupy and benefit from public spaces, and how are these rights negotiated or contested? These tensions are particularly evident in Indonesia, where rapid urbanization has intensified the demand for both formal and informal uses of public spaces (Aristyowati et al., 2024; Suhartini & Jones, 2020). The country's socio-political landscape, marked by decentralization and varying levels of governance effectiveness across regions, further complicates the management of public spaces. While scholars have explored the informal economy from various angles (see Alvarado et al., 2022; Khuong et al., 2021; Young, 2020), the specific intersection of street vending and public space governance remains under-researched. More specifically, the paradoxical relationship between street vendors' economic necessity and urban governance's emphasis on order and control has not been fully examined.

This study seeks to address this research gap by focusing on Indonesia as a case study, where the challenges of balancing informal economic activities with formal governance are particularly pronounced. By examining how public spaces are governed in relation to street vending, this research contributes to broader discussions on urban governance, inclusivity, and the rights of marginalized communities in rapidly urbanizing contexts.

In line with the foregoing discussion, this study aims to explore the paradox of public space utilization in urban Indonesia by focusing on the interaction between street vendors and governance mechanisms. Specifically, it investigates how public spaces are negotiated, contested, and governed in cities where informal economic activities, such as street vending, are prevalent. The central aim of this research is to understand how governance policies and practices influence the utilization of public spaces by street vendors and the social, economic, and spatial impacts of these governance approaches on both vendors and the broader urban environment. The study seeks to answer the following key research questions.

1. How do governance policies and practices influence the utilization of public spaces by street vendors in urban Indonesia?
2. What are the social, economic, and spatial impacts of these governance approaches on both vendors and the broader urban environment?

The urgency of these questions stems from the need for inclusive urban governance in Indonesia's rapidly growing cities. As urban

populations expand, public spaces face increasing demands from both formal and informal users. Poor governance risks marginalizing vulnerable groups such as street vendors, who depend on these spaces for their livelihoods. Excluding vendors exacerbates social inequality and poverty, making it essential to understand how governance can support or hinder their economic opportunities. Addressing these issues is also crucial for sustainable urban development. Policies that prioritize control over inclusivity risk deepening social tensions and undermining the equitable growth required for long-term urban sustainability.

2. Literature review

2.1. Governance and the regulation of public spaces in urban areas

Urban governance plays a pivotal role in shaping the use and regulation of public spaces, particularly in cities experiencing rapid urbanization. In this study, governance policies refer to the formal and informal regulatory frameworks, spatial planning strategies, and enforcement mechanisms used by city authorities to manage public spaces and informal economic activities (Alejo & Schoenecker, 2020; Certomà et al., 2020). These policies include licensing and permit systems, vendor relocation programs, zoning laws, and law enforcement actions such as evictions or fines. While these measures aim to ensure urban order, cleanliness, and traffic management, they often create conflicts between authorities and informal vendors, who rely on public spaces for their economic survival (Adama, 2020; Luthra & Monteith, 2023; Pulliat et al., 2024).

Urban planning frameworks frequently approach public space regulation with a focus on maintaining spatial order, prioritizing aesthetics, traffic control, and land use management. However, these objectives can be at odds with the needs of informal economic actors, such as street vendors, who depend on access to strategic locations with high pedestrian traffic (Chiodelli et al., 2021; Onyishi et al., 2021). Studies indicate that governance policies that emphasize spatial control without considering socio-economic realities often lead to the forced displacement of vendors, exacerbating their vulnerability and pushing them further into informality (Lemessa et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2021; Young, 2020).

In Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, street vendors play a crucial role in urban economies, offering accessible goods and services while contributing to the vibrancy of public spaces (Martínez & Short, 2021; Moseley & Battersby, 2020; Prasetyo, 2022). However, governance policies often prioritize modernization efforts that marginalize street vendors rather than integrating them into urban planning strategies. Studies highlight that regulatory frameworks in many cities impose strict licensing procedures, relocation schemes, or outright bans on street vending in central areas, pushing these workers into less viable economic spaces (Balarabe & Sahin, 2020; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2022). This creates a paradox where governance measures aimed at maintaining order instead drive vendors into informality, fueling ongoing conflicts with municipal authorities.

Moreover, governance approaches that fail to incorporate the perspectives of informal workers in policymaking processes often result in ineffective and unsustainable regulations. Research shows that inclusive governance strategies—such as participatory urban planning that engages street vendors—can lead to more balanced policies that consider both spatial order and economic inclusion (Aguilera et al., 2021; Mont, Palgan, Bradley, & Zvolska, 2020; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021). Cities that have adopted more flexible governance models, recognizing the role of street vendors in urban economies, have seen improvements in both social equity and urban sustainability (Suhartini & Jones, 2020; Walker & Tebbutt, 2023). This study critically examines these governance policies in Indonesia, analyzing their impacts on public space utilization and the socio-economic conditions of street vendors.

2.2. Street vendors and informality: economic and Social dimensions

Street vendors are integral to the informal economy, particularly in urban areas where they provide accessible goods and services to a wide range of consumers. As part of the informal economy, they operate outside formal regulatory frameworks but still play a crucial role in urban economic systems. Street vendors contribute to the local economy by creating jobs, supplying affordable products, and fostering a vibrant street culture that attracts both residents and tourists (Lee, 2020; Morris et al., 2020).

Economically, street vendors fulfill the demand for low-cost goods and services, making them vital for lower-income populations. Their flexibility and mobility enable them to adjust quickly to changes in market conditions, offering products where formal markets may not be present or are insufficiently accessible. This adaptability has been identified as a key characteristic that allows informal economies to thrive in urban settings, particularly in cities with high unemployment and limited formal employment opportunities (Ali et al., 2021; Tang & Zhu, 2020). Street vendors also play a role in job creation, both directly and indirectly, by providing self-employment opportunities and generating demand for goods from formal suppliers.

Socially, street vendors contribute to the social fabric of urban environments by building community relationships and serving as hubs of social interaction. In many cities, vendors often operate in the same locations for years, establishing long-term relationships with customers and other vendors. These relationships foster trust and reciprocity, creating informal social safety nets that benefit both vendors and the communities they serve. For example, studies have shown that street vendors often provide flexible credit options to low-income customers, allowing them to purchase goods even when they lack immediate funds (Allison et al., 2021; Giroux et al., 2021). This dynamic demonstrates the dual economic and social role of street vendors in supporting urban communities.

Additionally, street vending serves as a platform for entrepreneurial activity, where individuals with limited access to formal employment or capital can start their own businesses. In this sense, street vendors represent a form of grassroots entrepreneurship, demonstrating resilience in the face of regulatory and economic challenges (Adama, 2020; Duarte Alonso et al., 2020; Wierenga, 2021). However, their exclusion from formal economic frameworks often leads to vulnerability, as vendors lack legal protection, access to social services, and the security that formal business owners enjoy. This duality highlights the need for policies that integrate street vendors into urban economies, recognizing both their economic contributions and their role in supporting social networks within the city.

2.3. Challenges of public space utilization: urban aesthetics vs. livelihoods

One of the central challenges of public space utilization lies in the tension between urban beautification and the livelihoods of street vendors. Cities around the world strive to improve their aesthetic appeal through policies that focus on beautification, traffic management, and spatial order. While these policies enhance the visual landscape and functionality of urban spaces, they often come at the cost of marginalized groups such as street vendors. The displacement of vendors from high-traffic areas to designated zones as part of urban planning efforts frequently threatens their economic survival and exacerbates inequality (Haque et al., 2022; Javed et al., 2022).

Urban beautification efforts often prioritize the removal of what are perceived as "disruptions" to the urban environment, such as informal market activities. In doing so, cities inadvertently disconnect vendors from their primary customer base, as they are relocated to areas with significantly less foot traffic. Studies indicate that such policies create "dead zones" in cities, where vendors struggle to attract sufficient customers, leading to a substantial drop in income (Khalaj et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2023). This economic strain not only affects vendors but

also has ripple effects on the broader urban economy, as vendors are unable to maintain their contributions to the informal sector, which is often a vital component of local commerce.

Furthermore, the exclusion of street vendors from prime urban locations as part of spatial planning efforts can result in greater social inequality. Relocating vendors to peripheral areas reduces their visibility and access to economic opportunities, deepening the divide between formal and informal economies. These measures often neglect the socio-economic realities of vendors, for whom public space is not just a place of business, but also a site of social interaction and community building (Castells, 2020; Habermas, 2022). When vendors are pushed out of central urban areas, they lose these critical connections, further isolating them from the social and economic benefits that urban spaces offer.

This conflict between urban aesthetics and livelihoods highlights the need for more inclusive urban planning strategies that balance the goal of maintaining order with the economic and social realities of street vendors. Cities such as Bogotá and Bangkok have implemented more flexible approaches, where vendors are integrated into urban landscapes rather than excluded from them. These models show that it is possible to maintain urban aesthetics while preserving the livelihoods of informal workers, ensuring that public spaces serve diverse populations without marginalizing those who depend on them for survival (Ortega et al., 2023; Peimani & Kamalipour). Ultimately, urban planners must consider the impact of beautification policies on vulnerable groups and adopt governance strategies that are both economically and socially sustainable.

3. Research method

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, as outlined by Merriam (2009), to examine how governance policies shape the use of public spaces by street vendors in urban Indonesia. A case study design is particularly suitable because it allows for a rigorous, context-specific investigation of governance strategies and their socio-economic and spatial impacts. In line with qualitative research principles, this study follows an inductive reasoning approach, where patterns and themes emerge from the data rather than being predetermined by existing theories. As Yin (2017) suggests, inductive reasoning is particularly useful for case studies exploring complex social phenomena within their natural contexts. One of the strengths of this study lies in its focus on capturing the perspectives of multiple stakeholder groups—street vendors, urban planners, and government officials—offering a multifaceted understanding of how governance policies operate in practice. This triangulated approach not only enhances the credibility of the findings but also reflects the real-world complexity of urban policy implementation. Moreover, the study addresses a research gap by highlighting the lived experiences of informal workers in urban public spaces, an area often underrepresented in urban governance literature. By grounding the analysis in participants' narratives, this research contributes original insights into the interplay between regulation, informality, and spatial justice, thus offering both theoretical and practical value to scholars, urban planners, and policymakers alike.

3.2. Study area

This study was conducted in three major urban cities on Java Island, Indonesia. Java was chosen due to its high level of urbanization, economic significance, and the presence of diverse governance models regulating public space use. The selected cities exemplify varying approaches to urban governance, ranging from strict regulatory frameworks to more flexible, informal governance practices. This diversity allows for a comprehensive examination of how policies impact street vendors and public space management. The cities were selected based

on criteria such as their economic role, urban governance structure, and demographic diversity. Java’s status as Indonesia’s most populous and economically dynamic island makes it an ideal setting for studying governance challenges and informal economic activities like street vending. The findings from these cities provide broader insights into governance models that could be applicable to other urban centers in Indonesia and beyond.

3.3. Research participants

The participants in this research were drawn from three key groups: street vendors, urban planners and government officials, and community leaders. In total, 25 individuals participated in the study across the three selected cities on Java Island, Indonesia (see Table 1). Each participant group provided unique insights into the governance of public spaces and the informal economy. Street vendors shared firsthand experiences regarding the challenges and opportunities they face in utilizing public spaces. Urban planners and government officials contributed perspectives on policy development, enforcement, and the regulation of street vending. Community leaders provided additional viewpoints on the broader social and economic implications of public space governance. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, allowing for the inclusion of individuals who were readily accessible and willing to participate. While this method may limit the generalizability of findings, it was appropriate for the study’s exploratory nature and the need to engage individuals directly involved in or affected by urban governance. The sampling approach facilitated the collection of diverse experiences and perspectives, leading to a rich, contextually grounded dataset for analysis.

3.4. Data collection procedure

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, a format selected for its flexibility in probing deeper into participants’ responses while maintaining consistency across key topics. The interview questions were carefully developed following an extensive review of relevant literature (e.g., Igudia, 2020; Jiang et al., 2024; Narula, 2020; Recchi, 2021) to ensure alignment with the research objectives and to capture the complexities of public space governance and its impacts on street vendors in urban Indonesia.

Table 1
Demography of participants.

Participant ID	Group	Age	Gender	Location
P1	Street Vendor	34	Male	East Java
P2	Street Vendor	28	Female	East Java
P3	Street Vendor	45	Male	East Java
P4	Street Vendor	30	Female	East Java
P5	Street Vendor	38	Male	East Java
P6	Street Vendor	50	Female	East Java
P7	Street Vendor	42	Male	East Java
P8	Street Vendor	29	Female	East Java
P9	Street Vendor	36	Male	East Java
P10	Street Vendor	27	Female	East Java
P11	Urban Planner	40	Male	West Java
P12	Urban Planner	35	Female	West Java
P13	Urban Planner	33	Male	West Java
P14	Urban Planner	50	Female	West Java
P15	Urban Planner	46	Male	West Java
P16	Government Official	44	Female	West Java
P17	Government Official	51	Male	West Java
P18	Government Official	38	Female	West Java
P19	Government Official	55	Male	West Java
P20	Government Official	37	Female	Central Java
P21	Community Leader	52	Male	Central Java
P22	Community Leader	43	Female	Central Java
P23	Community Leader	32	Male	Central Java
P24	Community Leader	60	Female	Central Java
P25	Community Leader	39	Male	Central Java

The questions were tailored to the specific roles and expertise of each participant group. For instance, street vendors were asked about their daily experiences using public spaces, including challenges related to governance policies, access, and interactions with authorities. Urban planners provided insights into the design and regulation of public spaces and how informal economic activities like street vending are accounted for. Government officials were questioned about the development and enforcement of governance policies, focusing on the legal and regulatory frameworks shaping street vending. Community leaders shared perspectives on how street vending and public space governance affect the broader urban community, emphasizing social and economic outcomes. This structured yet flexible interview process ensured the data collected was both comprehensive and relevant to each participant’s expertise, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the research topic.

3.5. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to systematically interpret the qualitative data, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach ensured a structured, transparent, and replicable process for identifying patterns and themes within the dataset. Each phase of the analysis was conducted rigorously to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

The analysis began with an extensive and iterative review of all interview transcripts to develop a deep familiarity with the data. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy, and initial notes were taken to capture recurring words, phrases, and key ideas related to the research objectives. This process helped to establish preliminary insights and potential patterns before formal coding began. Following this, an open coding process was applied, where meaningful units of text were systematically identified and labeled based on their relevance to the research questions.

Once coding was completed, the codes were examined and grouped into overarching themes. This phase involved identifying patterns, relationships, and recurring concepts that provided deeper insights into the governance of public spaces and the lived experiences of street vendors. To ensure internal coherence and clarity, codes that shared similar meanings were merged, while those that did not fit the emerging structure were reconsidered or discarded. The next stage involved refining and reviewing the themes to ensure that they were well-defined and meaningfully distinct. Themes were systematically checked against the original data to confirm their accuracy and relevance. An iterative process was followed to refine the thematic structure, ensuring that the themes were not only representative of the data but also provided a coherent framework for analysis. To enhance the credibility of the findings, peer debriefing was conducted, where independent researchers reviewed the themes and coding process to verify consistency and eliminate potential biases.

Member checking was also employed to further validate the themes. Selected participants were consulted to assess whether the identified themes accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives. This step ensured that the interpretations remained authentic and grounded in the participants’ realities. Additionally, the final themes were cross-referenced with existing literature to establish their relevance within the broader scholarly discourse, further strengthening the study’s credibility. The final phase involved synthesizing the themes into well-defined analytical categories that provided a comprehensive understanding of governance practices, informal economies, and urban public spaces. By adhering to these stages, the thematic analysis was conducted rigorously and systematically, ensuring that the findings were robust, comprehensive, and aligned with the study’s research aims. This approach also followed established qualitative research methodologies, ensuring academic rigor.

4. Results

This research seeks to achieve two primary objectives: (1) to examine how governance policies and practices influence street vendors' use of public spaces in urban Indonesia, and (2) to analyze the social, economic, and spatial impacts of these governance approaches on vendors and the broader urban environment. The findings are detailed in the following section.

4.1. How governance policies shape street vendors' use of public spaces in urban Indonesia

This section explores the influence of governance policies on how street vendors utilize public spaces in urban Indonesia. Three key themes emerged from the interview analysis, which are detailed below.

4.1.1. Access to permits and legalization

The first theme that emerged is the complexity and cost of the permit application process. Participants identified significant barriers, with street vendors describing the system as confusing and financially burdensome. For instance, P1 characterized the process as both expensive and unclear, causing constant anxiety about being shut down for lacking a permit. Similarly, P7 noted that many vendors prioritize immediate income over navigating the lengthy and complex process, which demands time and money they cannot afford. Both vendors emphasized the absence of guidance or support, leaving them feeling overwhelmed and unsupported. Urban planners, such as P11 and P14, echoed these concerns, describing the permit system as overly bureaucratic, with critical information often failing to reach vendors and minimal assistance available. Government officials, including P17 and P19, acknowledged that while the system aims to formalize street vending, it is widely perceived as a burden. They admitted the need for reforms, such as simplifying the process, reducing costs, and providing better guidance to encourage vendors to legalize their operations. The following section includes excerpted quotes from respondents, offering direct insights into their experiences and perspectives.

"I have tried to get a permit before, but the process was confusing, and it is expensive. I do not have the time or money to deal with that, so I just sell where I can. But because I do not have a permit, I am always worried the authorities will come and shut me down." (P1: *Street Vendor*)

"My friend has a permit, but he said it took months to get. I do not see the point in going through all that when I need to make money now. Most of us do not know how to navigate the system, and there is no one to help us." (P7: *Street Vendor*)

"The permit system is supposed to regulate the number of vendors and ensure safety, but in practice, it is difficult for vendors to navigate. We see that the information does not always reach them, and there is a lack of support in making the process easier." (P11: *Urban Planner*)

"We have tried to create designated vending zones where vendors can operate legally with permits, but the uptake has been slow. It is clear that the current system is too bureaucratic, and we need to simplify the application process." (P14: *Urban Planner*)

"Our goal with the permits is to bring street vendors into the formal economy. However, many vendors see it as a burden, and we acknowledge that the system can be more accessible. We are considering reforms to make the process smoother and quicker." (P17: *Government Official*)

"We offer permits to legitimize street vending, but we have noticed that many vendors avoid it due to the paperwork and fees. We need to provide better guidance and perhaps reduce the costs to encourage more vendors to apply." (P19: *Government Official*)

4.1.2. Spatial regulation and displacement

The second theme that emerged is spatial regulation and displacement, reflecting the tension between urban development and the needs of street vendors. Participants emphasized that vendors are frequently forced to relocate due to urban beautification or development projects. Some government officials and urban planners acknowledged that municipal zoning regulations restrict vending in certain public areas, but vendors reported a lack of transparency and inconsistent enforcement regarding where they are allowed to operate. In theory, vendors should only be evicted if they violate zoning laws or obstruct public pathways, but in practice, enforcement is often unpredictable. P3, for example, was evicted after selling in the same location for over five years without being informed of any zoning violations or provided an alternative space. Vendors like P10 shared similar experiences, stating that evictions happen suddenly and without prior notice, making it difficult to secure stable vending locations. Urban planners (P12, P15) acknowledged that managing public spaces requires balancing multiple interests, but they also noted that eviction procedures often lack a clear relocation strategy, forcing vendors into a cycle of informality. Similarly, government officials (P21, P23) explained that street vendors often occupy restricted zones—intended for pedestrian access or urban beautification—but recognized that existing policies fail to account for vendors' economic dependence on high-traffic areas. The following section includes selected quotes from respondents, offering insights into their perspectives and experiences.

"Last year, we were evicted from the area we had been selling in for over five years because the government wanted to make the street look nicer for tourists. They did not offer us any new location, so we had to find somewhere else, but it is not as good for business." (P3: *Street Vendor*)

"We are constantly moving because the city keeps pushing us out. One day we are allowed to be in a spot, and the next day they come and tell us to leave. We do not have anywhere permanent, which makes it hard to build a customer base." (P10: *Street Vendor*)

"Managing public spaces means balancing different interests, vendors, pedestrians, businesses, and the government. Sometimes we have to clear areas for new developments or public use, but we try to relocate vendors to designated vending zones. Unfortunately, they are often reluctant to move." (P12: *Urban Planner*)

"The issue of displacement is tricky because we understand that vendors rely on high-traffic areas for their income. However, urban planning also requires us to maintain certain areas for pedestrians and traffic flow. Relocation is an option, but it is not always well received by the vendors." (P15: *Urban Planner*)

"We try to work with street vendors, but when we have new projects, like building a park or improving road access, we sometimes have to ask them to move. We are aware that this impacts their livelihood, but the city needs to grow, and we cannot accommodate everyone in prime locations." (P21: *Government Official*)

"Street vendors often occupy spaces that were not meant for commercial activities, which disrupts urban order. When we clear these areas, it's for the greater good of the city, but we're looking into creating more spaces specifically designed for vendors to operate legally." (P23: *Government Official*)

4.1.3. Informality and enforcement

The third theme that emerged is informality and enforcement, highlighting the tension between the need for regulation and the realities faced by street vendors. Many vendors, such as P5 and P9, acknowledged selling in prohibited areas but felt compelled to do so because legal vending zones are not financially viable. These zones are often located in low-traffic areas, making it difficult to earn a sufficient

income, even if it means risking fines or confiscation of goods by authorities. Urban planners (P13, P16) recognized that enforcing public space regulations is an ongoing challenge. While the rules aim to maintain order, vendors frequently return to restricted areas because they offer better business opportunities. The planners also emphasized that the informal economy represented by street vendors is vital to the urban economy, yet it often conflicts with the city's goals for organization and accessibility. Government officials (P20, P24) admitted that while enforcement is necessary, it is not a sustainable long-term solution. Vendors continue to operate informally because designated zones fail to meet their business needs, underscoring the need for a more flexible and supportive approach—one that offers viable alternatives and rethinks permissible vending areas. The quotes below capture respondents' experiences and perspectives, offering valuable insights.

"I know I am not supposed to sell here, but if I move to a legal spot, I will not make enough money to survive. The legal areas are out of the way, and there are not enough customers. It is better to stay here, even if the authorities sometimes tell me to leave." (P5: *Street Vendor*)

"The rules are too strict, and we cannot follow them if we want to make a living. If we try to sell in the legal zones, we will not make enough. So, we keep coming back to areas that are off-limits, even if it means risking a fine or losing our goods." (P9: *Street Vendor*)

"Enforcing public space regulations is difficult. Vendors know that they are not supposed to be in certain areas, but they come back because the designated zones do not attract as many customers. We need to rethink how we manage these spaces and perhaps be more flexible." (P13: *Urban Planner*)

"We have tried to enforce the rules consistently, but the reality is that informal vending is a persistent issue. The vendors are a vital part of the urban economy, but their presence cannot always be reconciled with the city's need for order and accessibility." (P16: *Urban Planner*)

"The informal nature of street vending makes it hard to regulate. Even though we have policies, enforcement is challenging because vendors keep returning to restricted areas. We need to find a more sustainable solution that does not rely solely on enforcement." (P20: *Government Official*)

"While enforcement is necessary, it is clear that our current approach is not working. Vendors continue to operate informally because the designated vending zones do not meet their needs. We need to offer better alternatives and perhaps rethink the areas where vending is allowed." (P24: *Government Official*)

The key findings across the three identified themes are summarized in Table 2 below.

Overall, the analysis revealed that governance policies significantly shape street vendors' use of urban space through three key themes. First, the permit process is widely perceived as overly complex, costly, and lacking adequate support, discouraging vendors from formalizing their

businesses. Second, spatial regulations often result in vendor displacement from high-traffic areas without notice or relocation support, disrupting their income stability. Third, despite enforcement efforts, many vendors continue to operate informally due to the economic unviability of designated zones, which are often poorly located and lack customer traffic. These findings highlight the disconnect between regulatory objectives and vendors' lived realities, emphasizing the need for more responsive, inclusive urban governance strategies.

4.2. Social, economic, and Spatial impacts of governance on street vendors and the urban environment

This section explores the social, economic, and spatial impacts of governance on street vendors and the broader urban environment. The analysis identified three key themes, outlined below.

4.2.1. Economic impact on vendors' livelihoods

The first theme that emerged is the economic impact of governance policies on street vendors' livelihoods. Participants emphasized that relocation and restrictions significantly hinder vendors' ability to earn a stable income. For example, P2 reported a nearly 50 % drop in daily earnings after being relocated from a high-traffic area to a designated zone, while P4 expressed concerns about struggling to cover the cost of goods on some days. These vendors face constant financial uncertainty due to insufficient foot traffic in their new locations, undermining their ability to support their families. Urban planners (P11, P14) acknowledged these challenges, noting that while relocation is often necessary for urban management, it can drastically reduce vendors' sales, especially when new locations lack visibility or a steady customer base. They also emphasized the broader economic role of street vending in providing affordable goods to local communities, suggesting that restrictions not only harm vendors' livelihoods but also disrupt the communities they serve. Government officials (P19, P22) echoed these concerns, admitting that designated vending zones are often less attractive to customers. They indicated efforts to improve these areas to enhance their economic viability. Here are selected excerpts from respondents, providing a clear view of their experiences and insights.

"When the government imposes restrictions or evicts us, our income drops significantly. I used to sell in a high-traffic area, but after being relocated to a designated zone, I have lost a lot of customers. My daily earnings have gone down by almost half." (P2: *Street Vendor*)

"Some days I cannot even cover the cost of the goods I am selling because I am not allowed to stay in the busy areas anymore. The new place the government moved us to does not have enough foot traffic, so I am constantly worried about how I will support my family." (P4: *Street Vendor*)

"Economically, we understand that when vendors are relocated, it can impact their sales, especially if the new locations do not have the same visibility or foot traffic. Our goal is to find a balance, but it is clear that the transition can be economically difficult for many vendors." (P11: *Urban Planner*)

Table 2

Summary of themes on how Policies shape street vendors' use of public spaces in urban Indonesia.

Themes	Theme Description	Key Respondent Insights	Respondents Referenced
Access to Permits and Legalization	The permit application process is perceived as overly complex, costly, and lacking sufficient guidance from authorities.	Many vendors avoid applying for permits due to financial and procedural burdens. They feel unsupported and overwhelmed, which discourages formalization.	P1, P7, P11, P14, P17, P19
Spatial Regulation and Displacement	Urban beautification projects and zoning regulations often result in the eviction of vendors from profitable areas without prior notice or relocation support.	Vendors are frequently forced to move with little explanation or alternative spaces, disrupting their ability to maintain stable income sources.	P3, P10, P12, P15, P21, P23
Informality and Enforcement	Despite existing regulations, many vendors continue to sell in restricted areas because legal vending zones are not economically viable.	Vendors acknowledge violating rules but justify their actions by economic necessity. They often return to informal locations due to higher foot traffic and better business prospects.	P5, P9, P13, P16, P20, P24

"In terms of the broader economic impact, informal street vending contributes significantly to the local economy by providing affordable goods to consumers. When we restrict these activities, there is a ripple effect, not just on the vendors but also on the communities they serve." (P14: *Urban Planner*)

"Our policies aim to regulate street vending, but we recognize that some vendors face economic challenges due to relocation or eviction. We have heard complaints that designated vending zones are not as profitable, and we are exploring ways to make these areas more attractive to customers." (P19: *Government Official*)

"There is a definite economic downside when vendors are pushed out of prime locations. Although our aim is to maintain order, we must consider the livelihoods of these vendors, as many rely on high-traffic areas to survive. We are working on improving the economic viability of designated zones." (P22: *Government Official*)

4.2.2. Social impact on communities and vendors

The second theme that emerged is the social impact of governance policies on communities and street vendors. Vendors such as P6 and P8 emphasized the loss of long-established relationships with their local communities following relocation. P6 explained that years of selling in the same area created strong connections with the community, but relocation severed these ties, making it difficult for customers to find them and leaving vendors feeling excluded. Similarly, P8 highlighted the deeper social role of street vending, which extends beyond commerce to fostering trust and personal relationships with regular customers. Forced relocation has disrupted these bonds, making it challenging for vendors to rebuild trust and reintegrate into new areas. Urban planners (P12, P15) reinforced this perspective, noting that street vendors often act as informal community hubs, contributing to the vibrancy and social cohesion of urban neighborhoods. Relocation or over-regulation can unintentionally weaken these social ties, eroding the sense of belonging vendors create within their communities and diminishing the neighborhood's identity. Government officials (P18, P21) acknowledged that the social value of street vending is often overlooked in policymaking. While regulations are necessary to maintain public spaces, they must recognize that vendors provide more than goods—they offer a trusted presence that strengthens community interactions. Displacing vendors disrupts this social ecosystem, affecting not only vendors' livelihoods but also the community's trust and connection. The following respondent excerpts provide a direct glimpse into their experiences and perspectives.

"We have been selling in the same area for years, so we have built strong relationships with the local community. Now that we have been relocated, we have lost that connection. People do not know where to find us, and it feels like we are no longer part of the community." (P6: *Street Vendor*)

"Street vending is not just about selling goods; it is about being part of the neighborhood. We know our customers personally, and they rely on us. Since we have been forced to move, that trust is gone, and we are struggling to build those relationships again." (P6: *Street Vendor*)

"Socially, street vendors often act as community hubs, and their presence contributes to the vibrancy of urban areas. When we displace them or regulate their locations too strictly, we risk disrupting the social fabric of these communities." (P12: *Urban Planner*)

"There is a social cost to relocating street vendors. Many of them have established relationships with residents, and these interactions create a sense of belonging in the neighborhood. We need to be mindful that our governance approaches do not undermine these social connections." (P12: *Urban Planner*)

"The social impact of street vending is often overlooked. While our policies are meant to regulate public spaces, we need to recognize that these vendors provide more than just goods, they offer social value by being a familiar and trusted presence in the community." (P18: *Government Official*)

"When we enforce regulations and relocate vendors, we disrupt the social ecosystem. These vendors are not just businesspeople; they are part of the community. People rely on them not only for products but for social interaction, and we need to consider this in our policies." (P18: *Government Official*)

4.2.3. Spatial impact on urban environment

The third theme that emerged is the spatial impact of governance policies on the urban environment and street vendors' ability to operate successfully. Vendors such as P9 and P5 expressed frustration with being relocated to designated areas that are less crowded, far from main roads, and difficult for customers to access. P9 described the new location as isolated and inconvenient, making it harder to attract customers. Similarly, P5 observed that while the government prioritizes clearing streets for aesthetic purposes, the designated vending areas are often hidden and unsuitable for business, reflecting a preference for appearances over vendors' survival. Urban planners (P13, P16) acknowledged these challenges, noting that while relocating vendors helps reduce congestion and improve traffic flow, it can create "dead zones" where vendors struggle to sustain their businesses. The planners emphasized the importance of balancing aesthetics with functionality, ensuring that urban spaces remain orderly yet vibrant. However, relocation often disconnects vendors from the urban fabric, making designated zones less appealing for both vendors and customers. Government officials (P20, P24) also recognized the spatial impact of these policies, noting that while main streets and public spaces become more organized and aesthetically pleasing, relocated areas often lose vibrancy and foot traffic. They stressed the need to balance urban accessibility and attractiveness with ensuring the economic viability of spaces allocated to vendors. This requires rethinking urban planning to support both city development and vendors' livelihoods. The following quotes from respondents provide direct insights into their experiences and perspectives.

"Before we were moved, we were selling on the sidewalks, and it was crowded, but customers could easily find us. Now, the designated area is far from the main roads, and it is harder for people to reach us. The new space feels isolated and inconvenient." (P9: *Street Vendor*)

"The government wants to keep the streets clear, but the spaces they give us are in hidden corners where no one goes. The city looks nice, but it is harder for us to survive in these off-the-beaten-path locations. They care more about appearances than our survival." (P5: *Street Vendor*)

"From a spatial perspective, street vendors often occupy areas that were not designed for commercial use, leading to congestion, especially in busy areas. By relocating them to designated zones, we aim to create a more orderly urban environment, but this sometimes makes those areas feel disconnected from the rest of the city." (P13: *Urban Planner*)

"We recognize that while relocating vendors can help improve traffic flow and public space aesthetics, it can also create dead zones where vendors struggle to attract customers. Spatial planning needs to account for both aesthetics and functionality to create spaces that are both usable and lively." (P16: *Urban Planner*)

"The spatial impact of our policies is visible, main streets and public spaces are clearer and more organized. However, the flip side is that some of the relocated areas become less vibrant, and foot traffic

decreases, which is not good for vendors or the surrounding areas.” (P20: Government Official)

“Spatially, we want to maintain a balance between making the city accessible and attractive while also providing spaces where vendors can operate. Sometimes this means moving them to less prominent locations, but we are working to ensure that these spaces are still viable for their businesses.” (P24: Government Official)

To consolidate the interview data discussed above, Table 3 presents a summary of the social, economic, and spatial impacts of governance policies on street vendors and the urban environment.

All in all, the findings reveal three major impacts of governance policies on street vendors and the urban environment. Economically, relocation policies reduce access to high-traffic areas, leading to significant drops in income and financial insecurity, especially in poorly trafficked designated zones. Socially, these relocations disrupt long-standing relationships between vendors and their communities, weakening trust and eroding the social cohesion that vendors help sustain in urban neighborhoods. Spatially, while governance efforts aim to enhance aesthetics and manage congestion, they often result in vending zones that are isolated and lack vibrancy, making it harder for vendors to attract customers. These insights highlight the need for governance strategies that balance urban development with economic viability and social inclusivity.

Table 3
Summary of themes on the social, economic, and spatial impacts of governance on street vendors and the urban environment.

Themes	Theme Description	Key Respondent Insights	Respondents Referenced
Economic Impact on Vendors' Livelihoods	Relocation policies reduce vendors' access to high-traffic areas, significantly lowering daily earnings and threatening financial stability.	Vendors experience sharp income declines after relocation. Designated zones lack foot traffic, pushing many into precarious economic situations. Authorities acknowledge the problem and are exploring ways to enhance the viability of these areas.	P2, P4, P11, P14, P19, P22
Social Impact on Communities and Vendors	Relocation breaks long-standing vendor-community relationships and erodes trust, disrupting the social role of vendors within urban neighborhoods.	Vendors feel disconnected after being moved from familiar areas, losing visibility and community ties. Planners and officials admit that over-regulation may weaken neighborhood identity and cohesion.	P6, P8, P12, P15, P18, P21
Spatial Impact on the Urban Environment	Governance policies improve public space aesthetics and reduce congestion but often result in poorly located vending zones that lack accessibility and vibrancy.	Vendors struggle in isolated, hard-to-reach areas. Urban planners and officials stress the need to balance city beautification with the functionality and liveliness of designated spaces.	P5, P9, P13, P16, P20, P24

5. Discussion

This research has two primary objectives: first, to explore how governance policies shape street vendors' use of public spaces in urban Indonesia, and second, to examine the social, economic, and spatial impacts of these policies on both vendors and the broader urban environment. The first set of findings focuses on how governance policies affect street vendors' daily operations, revealing three central themes: access to permits and legalization, spatial regulation and displacement, and informality and enforcement. Each theme offers key insights into the regulatory challenges vendors face.

The first theme, access to permits and legalization, highlights the difficulties vendors encounter in navigating complex and costly permit systems. Many vendors reported that obtaining a permit is prohibitively expensive and time-consuming, making it unfeasible given their immediate income needs. In most Indonesian cities, individuals seeking to legalize their vending activities must comply with municipal regulations that require a business registration, proof of identity, location approval, and adherence to zoning laws. Additionally, some cities impose permit fees, periodic renewal costs, and health or safety compliance checks for food vendors. While these policies aim to regulate public space usage, vendors often struggle with bureaucratic complexity, unclear requirements, and inconsistent enforcement. These findings align with Avila et al. (2021), who emphasize that bureaucratic obstacles and high costs discourage informal workers from transitioning to the formal economy. Similarly, Gong et al. (2020) revealed that street vendors in other Southeast Asian cities face comparable challenges, as government systems designed to formalize their activities often lack adequate support structures. A key unintended consequence of these policies is that they push vendors further into informality. Rather than encouraging legalization, the burden of compliance often discourages vendors from engaging with formal governance structures, reinforcing cycles of informality and regulatory evasion. This highlights the need for alternative approaches that balance regulatory oversight with economic inclusion. (Haque et al., 2022; Javed et al., 2022).

The second theme, spatial regulation and displacement, examines vendors' frustrations over being relocated from high-traffic, lucrative areas to designated zones with insufficient foot traffic. These relocations create economic strain as vendors struggle to sustain their businesses in spaces disconnected from the urban fabric. This aligns with Visagie and Turok (2020), who found that urban planning policies aimed at decongesting cities often displace informal workers to economically unviable locations, jeopardizing their livelihoods. A similar situation can be observed in Bangkok, Thailand, where authorities have repeatedly relocated street vendors from central commercial districts to designated vending areas with significantly lower foot traffic. Research by Zafri et al. (2023) shows that despite the government's intent to improve urban order, these relocations have severely impacted vendors' incomes, forcing many to return to informal vending in restricted areas. An unintended consequence of designated vending zones is that they may exclude vendors from profitable areas, leading to economic hardship. As vendors are often relocated to areas with low consumer activity, their businesses become unsustainable, leading many to abandon these zones altogether. A more flexible policy that integrates vending activities into commercial centers rather than segregating them may yield better outcomes (Grabs et al., 2021; Solly, 2021).

Moreover, governance effectiveness in regulating street vending varies significantly across different Indonesian cities. While Jakarta has established formal vending zones and permits, secondary cities often lack clear policies, leading to inconsistent enforcement. Vendors operating in smaller cities outside Java report facing arbitrary evictions, with little legal recourse. This disparity suggests that governance models should be adapted to local urban contexts rather than applying a uniform national framework.

The third theme, informality and enforcement, explores the persistent challenges in regulating street vendors. Many vendors continue to

operate informally in restricted areas because legal vending zones fail to offer comparable business opportunities. This creates a recurring cycle of enforcement, where vendors face fines or eviction but return to high-traffic areas to sustain their livelihoods. These findings echo Igudia (2020), who argues that enforcement alone is insufficient to regulate street vending, as it fails to address vendors' socioeconomic realities. Studies in other developing cities show that enforcement mechanisms often perpetuate informality rather than resolving it (Masuku et al., 2023; Osiki, 2020; Senyo et al., 2023). Flexible governance strategies, such as creating more accessible and attractive legal vending zones, could mitigate these conflicts between enforcement and informality (Giroux et al., 2021; Pulliat et al., 2024). Without addressing the root causes, enforcement is unlikely to achieve its intended outcomes. A more community-driven approach to vending regulations, where vendors actively participate in decision-making processes, could create sustainable solutions. Community engagement in policy design has been shown to increase compliance and reduce tensions between authorities and vendors.

The second set of findings explores the broader social, economic, and spatial impacts of governance policies on street vendors and the urban environment. Three key themes emerged. The first theme, economic impact on vendors' livelihoods, reveals that relocation policies significantly reduce vendors' earnings, making it difficult for them to support their families. Vendors reported substantial income losses after being moved from high-traffic areas to less accessible zones. These findings align with Korsunova et al. (2022), who found that relocation policies often fail to consider the economic realities of informal workers reliant on spontaneous customer interactions. Additionally, relocation creates new vulnerabilities by placing vendors in economically unsustainable locations (Bassett et al., 2021; Glaeser, 2022; Lowe & Vinodrai, 2020). While relocation aims to improve urban order, it frequently exacerbates vendors' financial instability. The second theme, social impact on communities and vendors, highlights the disruption of long-standing relationships between vendors and their local communities. Vendors emphasized their role not only as providers of goods but also as trusted, familiar figures within their neighborhoods. Relocation severs these social ties, weakening the social cohesion of urban areas. These findings align with Mizes (2023), who found that street vendors often serve as informal community hubs, and their displacement fractures the networks that sustain both vendors and their customers. Similarly, Coletto et al. (2021) observed in South American cities that removing vendors from their traditional locations undermines the sense of community and social trust. These results highlight the need for governance policies to account for the broader social contributions of street vendors, beyond economic considerations.

The third theme, spatial impact on the urban environment, illustrates the trade-off between urban aesthetics and functionality. Governance policies often aim to clear main streets and reduce congestion but result in the creation of "dead zones" where vendors struggle to attract customers. This spatial disconnection not only affects vendors but also reduces the vibrancy of urban areas. These findings echo Khalaj et al. (2020), who noted that urban beautification and traffic management goals can lead to reduced foot traffic and economic stagnation in relocated areas.

A similar trend is evident in Mersin, Turkey, where efforts to pedestrianize major streets and relocate informal vendors have inadvertently led to commercial decline in newly designated vending zones. Research by Öz and Eder (2021) found that while these policies were intended to enhance urban aesthetics, they disrupted the natural flow of street commerce, resulting in underutilized public spaces and economic hardship for vendors. This aligns with Zheng et al. (2023), who emphasized that successful urban planning must balance aesthetics with functionality, ensuring spaces remain lively and accessible. These findings suggest that spatial policies focused solely on aesthetics risk neglecting the needs of both vendors and the broader urban environment. In conclusion, the second set of findings highlights the complex

interplay between governance policies and the economic, social, and spatial dimensions of street vending. While these policies aim to regulate and improve urban spaces, they often disrupt vendors' livelihoods, sever social ties, and create spatial challenges that undermine the vibrancy and functionality of urban areas.

This study provides critical insights into the governance of street vendors by highlighting the economic, social, and spatial challenges they face under existing policies. Rigid permit systems, forced relocations, and enforcement-driven approaches often perpetuate informality rather than integrating vendors into urban frameworks. The findings emphasize the need for inclusive, flexible, and participatory governance that considers vendors' economic realities, their social contributions to communities, and the spatial implications of relocation. Addressing these issues through transparent policymaking could foster sustainable urban management, balancing urban order with economic growth and social cohesion.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of bias, as responses may reflect personal perceptions or social desirability. Second, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings to all urban areas in Indonesia. Furthermore, the focus on specific cities may not capture the diverse experiences of vendors in other regions, where governance policies may vary. Future research should expand the sample size and examine a broader range of cities to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how governance policies affect street vendors. Additionally, involving vendors in policymaking processes could ensure that policies are both practical and supportive of their economic and social needs. Flexible, accessible permit systems and well-designed vending areas with high foot traffic could create a more sustainable environment for street vendors while aligning with urban development goals.

6. Conclusion

This research aimed to examine how governance policies shape street vendors' use of public spaces in urban Indonesia and to analyze the social, economic, and spatial impacts of these policies on vendors and the broader urban environment. The findings indicate that street vendors face significant challenges related to complex permit processes, spatial regulations, and enforcement practices. Key themes that emerged include difficulties in obtaining permits, economic strain caused by relocation, and the persistence of informality due to ineffective enforcement. While these policies are intended to manage urban spaces, they frequently result in negative economic and social consequences for vendors and disrupt the vibrancy of urban environments. The implications of this research highlight the need for more inclusive and flexible governance approaches. Policymakers must account for the economic realities and social roles of street vendors within their communities, as well as the spatial dynamics that influence urban functionality. Addressing these broader concerns can enable governance strategies to promote both economic stability for vendors and a balanced urban environment that supports aesthetics and functionality. However, this study has limitations. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases, and the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings across all urban areas in Indonesia. Furthermore, the focus on specific cities may not fully capture the diverse experiences of street vendors in regions with different governance policies. Future research should expand the sample size and investigate a wider range of cities to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how governance policies affect street vendors in varying contexts. It is also recommended that policymakers involve vendors in the planning process and implement more accessible, flexible permit systems. Additionally, designated vending areas should be carefully selected to ensure high foot traffic, supporting vendors' livelihoods while aligning with urban development goals.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Nurul Widyawati Islami Rahayu: Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Mohammad Sawir:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Fitri Melawati:** Validation, Resources, Project administration. **Ahmad Mu'is:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Investigation, Formal analysis.

Ethical statement

This study adhered to stringent ethical guidelines. Participant confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously protected, and informed consent was secured. Complete transparency was upheld in every facet, encompassing methodologies, analysis, and reporting procedures. The research observed intellectual property norms, conformed to institutional policies, and swiftly addressed any ethical issues that arose. These measures were taken to ensure the integrity of the research, foster trust among participants and the academic community, and generate knowledge that is both dependable and respectful.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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