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The scene at Clarke Quay last night. Readers who took part in last week's online poll said they find the safe management measures that must be in place at karaoke outlets and nightclubs to be too "restrictive" or "troublesome", and that they will be deterred by them.
ST PHOTO: ARIFIN JAMAR

Would you take virus test to go clubbing?

Most polled won't patronise karaoke outlets and nightclubs in pilot if they have to take test

Cara Wong

The road to recovery for Singapore's beleaguered nightlife industry will be a long one, a Sunday Times poll has shown, with most respondents stating that they will not patronise establishments such as karaoke outlets and nightclubs during a planned pilot programme. The pilot to reopen selected establishments with strict measures in place – such as mandatory mask wearing while singing and dancing – is meant to boost the battered industry. It will begin at selected bars and pubs from next month and will widen to include certain karaoke outlets and nightclubs from January.

But readers who took part in last week's online poll said they find the safe management measures that must be in place at these establishments to be too "restrictive" or "troublesome", and that they will be deterred by them. Of the 402 respondents who took part in the poll, 62 per cent indicated they would not visit a karaoke outlet and 73 per cent said they would stay away from nightclubs.

Views on visiting bars and pubs – which will be subject to less stringent rules – were mixed, with about 35 per cent of respondents saying they would patronise the businesses and another 18 per cent responding with a "maybe".

Many respondents took issue with the mandatory Covid-19 tests, among other measures. Patrons must produce a negative test, good for the 24 hours before the end of their karaoke or clubbing session. This was also the least popular

measure among respondents. About 71 per cent said they would not take the tests. About 47 per cent of those polled also said the cost of the test should be shared between the Government, businesses and consumers, with responses varying in the configuration of such a cost-sharing arrangement.

Ms Condi Koh, 35, said she would not take the Covid-19 test just to patronise the businesses because she is afraid that the test would cause her discomfort.

Ms Koh, who works in sales, also said she would not patronise the businesses as she does not trust other patrons to stick to the rules. "Under the influence of soft lighting, music and alcohol... you'll feel very comfortable, and once you feel very comfortable, you'll tend to forget all the rules."

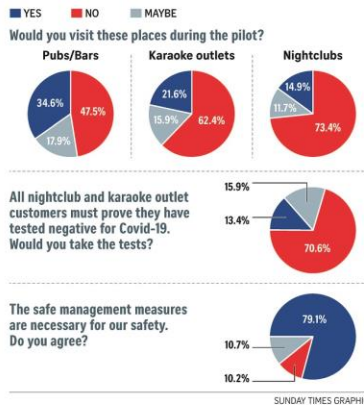
Financial trader W.K. Teo, 35, said he would take the test to frequent nightclubs and bars he used to go to. He sees the test as the "new normal going forward", much like how people must be tested for Covid-19 to travel overseas. However, he sees the cost of the test as a potential problem.

"I feel that either the Government or the businesses should cover (the cost of) the tests, and definitely not the customer. If you ask the customers to pay for the tests, they will prefer not to go to these premises," said Mr Teo.

Like others, he also questioned the need for the mandatory wearing of masks and the ban on alcohol sales after 10.30pm, which he felt were unnecessary measures after one has tested negative for Covid-19. But healthcare experts said the additional measures are a must.

Reopening of nightlife establishments

The Sunday Times polled around 400 respondents on the Government's pilot to reopen selected bars, pubs, nightclubs and karaoke outlets. Here are some of the results.



Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health at the National University of Singapore, said a negative Covid-19 test does not guarantee that a person is infection-free, since the virus has an incubation period during which a person can test negative. He also said there is always the

possibility of a false negative result. "Until there is a foolproof way of making sure every single person at a karaoke outlet or a nightclub is not infected, measures such as mask wearing and safe distancing will need to remain as a precaution, especially since we know such activities and settings are extremely risky, in terms of the ease

of infecting and the likelihood of infecting many at the same time," said Prof Teo.

Nightlife businesses The Sunday Times spoke to said they understood the need for the measures, but noted that it is still difficult for their businesses to be viable with such strict rules in place.

Ms Francesca Way, co-founder of A Phat Cat Collective which owns retro bars and clubs, said her team has decided not to apply for the pilot programme, and will proceed with plans to move into the food and beverage sector instead.

"The financial risks and uncertainty for operators are high. Going for the pilot means we lose out on the up to \$50,000 pivot grant (and potentially better revenue as the rules are less restrictive)," said Ms Way, adding that there is still no concrete idea of what will happen after the pilot ends.

Singapore Nightlife Business Association president Joseph Ong emphasised that the safe management measures are not meant to be permanent, and would be revised, scaled down or lifted when the Covid-19 situation here improves.

He added that he hopes the measures would give customers peace of mind, knowing that they are in safe environments.

Ms Iean Teo, director of popular karaoke chain Teo Heng KTV Studio, said her team made the difficult decision to apply for the pilot, as they felt they must do their part and help keep the industry afloat.

She plans to set up pop-up booths at selected outlets for patrons to do the tests, and said she would wait for the Government's suggestion on who should bear the cost of the tests.

Said Ms Teo: "As long as we are able to, we are going to go all the way to hang on."

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Proposed measures for nightlife pilot

Selected nightlife establishments will be allowed to reopen from next month and January, with strict safe management measures in place. Here are the proposed measures they are to enforce:

- Mandatory mask-wearing at all times, except when eating or drinking.
- No selling and consumption of alcohol past 10.30pm.
- Deployment of closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras in all activity areas.
- No deployment of hosts or hostesses.
- Ensuring different groups do not mingle and are at least 1m apart.
- No live music or entertainment.

BARNS/PUBS

- No loud music beyond 60 decibels.

KARAOKE OUTLETS

- Customers must prove they have tested negative for Covid-19. Tests must be taken in the 24-hour period before the end of the planned karaoke session.
- Singing must take place within enclosed rooms, in groups of five or smaller.
- Rooms must be disinfected and aired for 15 minutes between groups of customers.
- Only Singapore residents, including those on work passes, are allowed.

NIGHTCLUBS

- Customers must prove they have tested negative for Covid-19. Tests must be taken in the 24-hour period before the end of the planned clubbing session.
- Maximum capacity of 100 people in a club, with crowd split into two zones of 50 people each.
- Groups must stay 2m apart on the dance floor indicated by floor markings and physical barriers.
- Only Singapore residents, including those on work passes, are allowed.



Karaoke outlets, such as Cash Studio in Clarke Quay Central (above, left) and Teo Heng KTV Studio in Rendezvous Hotel, have remained closed as part of Covid-19 measures. The pilot to reopen selected establishments will widen to include certain karaoke outlets from January. Patrons must produce a negative test, good for the 24 hours before the end of their karaoke session. ST PHOTOS: DESMOND WEE