

Role of Family and Survival Strategies of Micro-Family Food Business during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the challenges faced, and strategies adopted by micro-family food businesses (MFFB) in Malaysia and examine the family's role in managing such businesses during the COVID-19 crisis. A qualitative research approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews with MFFB owners. The interviews ceased after six participants, ensuring data saturation and the interpreted data's trustworthiness is explained. The findings revealed that MFFB faced multiple challenges, including a drop in sales, business closure, financial instability, and pressure on fixed costs. Besides, this research captured several unique survival strategies adopted by the MFFB owners, such as generosity towards customers, changes in operation, online advertisements, customer satisfaction surveys, maintaining food quality and prices, initiating takeaway orders, and collaboration with food aggregators. The results indicate that task management, responsibility, and reliance are essential to family-owned businesses as significant business strategies. It implies that family relationships play a significant role in the business's direction and business survival; future directions might compare the results to a larger business capacity. This study sheds light on the role of families in managing MFFB during the COVID-19 pandemic and provides practical implications for policymakers, business owners, and practitioners to support MFFB in overcoming challenges during unexpected adversity. By better understanding the challenges faced and strategies adopted by MFFB, it is anticipated to gain greater insight into how the Malaysian food business can become more resilient in the future.

Key Words: business challenges, business strategies, COVID-19, family role, micro-family food business.

JEL Classification: M1, M2, O1

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1. Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic to halt the spread of the virus and restrict economic activity (Yacoub & ElHajjar, 2020). The pandemic has affected everyone worldwide. Asian countries quickly adopted comprehensive economic and public health strategies to slow COVID-19 spread. In response to rising cases, the Malaysian government implemented health screening at all points of entry, mandatory quarantine for international travellers, increased hospital capacity to treat COVID-19 cases, a special fund, and the (Hassan et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic hit Selangor hardest, with 412,839 positive cases and 3,192 deaths by 1 August

2021 (Ministry of Health, MOH, 2021). Since that, the Malaysian government implemented the Movement Control Order (MCO) according to the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 on March 18, 2020 (Aziz et al., 2020).

Economic activity has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has also contributed to the decline of several main business sectors worldwide. One of the key industries, the service sector, which made up 57.7% of Malaysia's gross domestic product (GDP), saw a decline of 5.5% in 2020 as opposed to a 6.2% increase in 2019, with the highest gross output value of 22,952.7 MYR million (DOSM, 2022b). The food and beverage (F&B) sector of the economy is crucial in providing services to consumers. During the global COVID-19 pandemic, the food service industry was hard hit, with numerous restaurants closing down and unable to reopen (Mehnaz et al., 2021). The majority of restaurants in Malaysia were closed or only open for takeout or deliveries from March 18, 2020. Bouey (2020) found that almost all economic sectors and organizations, including small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), were badly affected. Many small businesses found themselves incapable of handling the challenges posed by the pandemic, with many firms having to discontinue operations and remain shuttered (Hasanat et al., 2020).

According to Kahveci (2021), small firms made up nearly all businesses in the United States, Germany, and Japan (Mittal et al., 2022), 92% in Turkey (Başç & Durucan, 2017), more than 99% in the Europe countries (Ključnikov et al., 2022b), 98.5% in Malaysia (Rani et al., 2019), and about 90% in the Baltic states (Eurostat, 2019). According to Husin and Haron (2020), micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Malaysia are divided into manufacturing, services, and other sectors and are managed by the SME Corporation of Malaysia. Since the focus of this study is the food and beverage business, which is a service sector, it will apply the simplified definition adopted by the Malaysian SME Corporation in 2013 as follows:

- A micro-enterprise is defined as a business with less than 5 employees or an annual sales of less than MYR300,000.
- A small business is referred as one with 5 to 30 employees and a revenue between MYR300,000 and MYR3 million.
- A medium enterprise is considered as a business with 30 to 75 employees and a total sales of MYR3 million to MYR20 million.

The majority of SMEs in Malaysia are micro-enterprises and mainly home-based firms (Ramdan et al., 2022). Likewise, Cepel et al. (2018) also noted that SMEs are the main job creator in Europe. Small-scale enterprises make up 21.2% and medium-sized businesses 2.3% of the total of all SMEs. According to the most recently updated information in the Interactive Malaysia Statistical Business Register (i-MSBR) recorded by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) on February 28, 2022, there were a total of 1,226,494 businesses comprising MSMEs in 2021; they accounted for 97.4% of all establishments in Malaysia (DOSM, 2022a). The services industry contributed 83.8% (or 1,028,403 enterprises) to the most recent MSMEs profile for 2021. Micro-enterprises also include self-employed firms, small store owners, home businesses, and street vendors. Of all the micro-enterprises, 49.1% were in the micro-service sector. Selangor, one of the states in Malaysia, had 22.5% of all MSMEs and accounted for 23.5% of the service sector. About 90% of the total MSMEs service sector in Selangor were in the micro-services sector.

The for-profit business model that is currently most widespread is the family business. It is a firm that is commonly family owned, managed, and led by several generations of family members who are connected by blood, marriage, or adoption (Camilleri & Valeri, 2021). These businesses are significant contributors to the Malaysian. For these businesses, growth, succession, and continuity are key challenges. The significance of continuity and succession in a family firm derives from its contribution to the nation's entrepreneurial mindset (Julita et al., 2021). Many micro-businesses make less than \$25,000 in total annual sales, and their primary motivation is survival (Munoz et al., 2014). In

contrast to big organizations, their interactions with employees are usually characterised by emphasis on values like dedication, trust, openness, and empathy.

Most entrepreneurs learned to run a business by watching their parents (Jamil et al., 2022). Family business owners have the responsibility to define their organisation's vision and to establish long-term goals. They typically participate actively in the management, organization, and leadership of the business. Co-owners of family enterprises may not all be immediate family members. Close relatives who work in a range of fields, including hospitality, leisure, recreation, and entertainment, among others, may hold a sizable number of small enterprises in the hospitality and tourism sectors. Family businesses make up a sizable fraction of businesses worldwide, ranging from modest shops to publicly traded multinational corporations with thousands of employees (Camilleri & Valeri, 2021).

However, family businesses react differently during crises and put their survival above long-term expansion. Any unexpected crisis could jeopardise the viability of local business units, which are frequently quite vulnerable to unforeseen circumstances (Marjanski & Sukowski, 2021). Furthermore, it is up to the managers to ensure and control strategic risk in day-to-day operations of the company (Ključnikov et al., 2016). Family ownership decreases the likelihood of a company following official crisis measures (Kraus et al., 2020). Family SMEs can also align business and family values by addressing succession planning and implementation challenges, which is a key strategy component. Ratnasingam et al. (2020) surveyed 748 Malaysian furniture SMEs and found that financial management and supply chain disruptions were their top concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Belás et al. (2015), financial risk management is key to managing business competency because it substantially impacts the company's present and future financial success. Due to its family-dominated ownership structure, thus, family businesses are flexible, quick to adapt, and non-bureaucratic (Wijaya & Susilo, 2021). A handful of MFFB managed to continue operating but with different business models. These companies provided a range of distinctive and innovative services, including online meal delivery through third-party collaborations with companies like Foodpanda, GrabFood, and ShopeeFood.

Furthermore, according to Piramanayagam et al. (2022), micro-enterprises commonly encounter diminishing demand, financial loss, low staff morale, insufficient cash flow, inability to meet contract agreements, and even closure during times of crisis. The prolonged COVID-19 pandemic created existential problems for small businesses (Toanoglou et al., 2021). Many SMEs struggled with cash flow after the MCO, affecting their daily business (Stoop et al., 2021). The social distancing strategy and lockdown regulations in many countries closed many hotels, restaurants, cafés, and small food enterprises, according to Abed (2021). In the F&B industry, business owners, and employees were invariably impacted by the MCO. Those that sell food and beverages, particularly small businesses, suffered greatly from slackened sales and financial flow (Kanagaraj, 2020; Louis, 2020). Most family-owned restaurants lacked the reserves needed to stay in business and would inevitably have cash-flow problems after some time.

While it is crucial to control the spread of COVID-19 to aid economic recovery, there is a strong likelihood that the financial crisis in many countries will continue for several years (Piramanayagam et al., 2022). Thus, owners of micro-family food business (MFFB) had to consider how to keep their company going and how to make improvements to their operations to increase the potential to generate income. The technique is known as "coping" when the goal is to avoid closure. But according to Purnomo et al. (2021), not all small businesses can adjust or change their business plans when the economic situation is unpredictable. The absence of formal crisis management planning for SMEs does not suggest that they are not resilient because some SMEs do organize and plan in an intuitive manner (Purnomo et al., 2021). Small business management and survival have subsequently undergone a dramatic change as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak (Budhwar & Cumming, 2020).

Omar et al. (2020) examined how COVID-19 restrictions affected Malaysian SMEs to determine owner survival strategies. Besides, Abed (2021) found financial and marketing strategies for

SMEs. Other than that, Brammer and Clark (2020) showed how the crisis could expand, contract, or revive entrepreneurial ecosystems. Similarly, the support system of micro-family food business owners shapes an entrepreneurial ecosystem (Rashid & Ratten, 2021). Conversely, there has been too much of attention on success factors for small businesses and entrepreneurs in typical economic circumstances (Kahveci, 2021). On the other hand, there is scant research on how family-owned firms handle crises like the recent COVID-19 pandemic that has affected almost the entire world. Arcese et al. (2021) note that with regard to in-depth studies on hospitality and hotels, researchers seem to have side-lined family-owned small foodservice units despite their total size, turnover, and significant economic contribution to the nation.

However, only a few studies have investigated the challenges faced by micro family-owned businesses during the pandemic, despite the fact that the topic of business problems and strategies during the COVID-19 epidemic have been thoroughly explored from a variety of perspectives. It is, therefore, important to study the strategic tactics employed by MFFB owners to mitigate the negative effects of the problems due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of each action on business performance had been examined separately in an earlier study on SMEs' COVID-19 pandemic responses, protocols, and business success by Adam and Alarifi (2021). While researchers in Malaysia have focused less on family companies than on entrepreneurship and SMEs, there is growing interest in understanding the role of the family and the strategies used to keep businesses running during unexpected adversity (Mosbah & Alharbi, 2020).

In light of this, the rest of this article attempts to provide the first "insight" into how micro-family food businesses in Malaysia have responded in real time to the COVID-19 crisis. For the researchers, this is the first study that focuses on the COVID -19 impact and coping mechanisms of MFFB. To better understand the impact of the COVID -19 pandemic on Malaysian micro food businesses, this study is structured to address the challenges faced by family-owned food businesses, survival strategies and the role that the family plays in such times. In this study, the participants were the owners of MFFB in the Klang Valley, a major economic hub in Selangor, Malaysia. Three research questions guided the direction of the study, (1) what were the challenges faced by MFFB during and after the COVID-19 pandemic? (2) how did the MFFB cope during and after the COVID-19 pandemic? and (3) how did the role of the family affect business strategies of the family-owned food businesses during the crisis?

This research fills the gap by identifies meaningful survival strategies and highlights the unique role of family members in business organisation in micro-family food businesses. This knowledge helps micro-family food businesses act strategically during global economic crises. Understanding "family" in the food business can help micro-food business owners build resilience. This paper is organised into five main sections. The subsequent section reviews relevant literature. It follows with the research methodology, data collection and methods used. Next are the research findings and themes. Section five discusses the results, and this paper concludes with study findings, limitations, and future research directions.

2. Literature review

2.1 Survival of micro-family food business

Whenever a crisis occurs and businesses are adversely affected, survival is a crucial concern especially for small enterprises (Campopiano et al., 2019). The recent COVID-19 pandemic has driven home the point painfully for many businesses (Kraus et al., 2020). Smaller product lines and markets with less potential for economies of scale, informal and flat organizational structures, and limited management, leadership, and strategic capabilities are obstacles faced by small enterprises compared to bigger ones (Liu & Yang, 2019; Pati et al., 2018). Small enterprises must find alternative strategies to

appropriately address their problems because they operate in extremely unfavourable conditions (Kotikka et al., 2020). In challenging situations, business owners have been known to, among other things, change product prices, highlight their environment friendliness to likeminded clients, and reinvent their products to better satisfy consumer needs (Bourletidis & Triantafyllopoulos, 2014).

In Malaysia, there are many hawkers and micro-food vendors selling fried food, hamburgers, *nasi lemak*, *satay*, beverages, and other items from food trucks and kiosks. These operators rely on daily offline consumer purchases. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the "Stay at Home" policy restricted customers from patronising these family-run food stalls. Some had to close down their business while others managed to keep going by being innovative. There is still a lot of controversy over how family business traits affect innovative behaviour (Aparicio et al., 2019). Therefore, the findings in this study might shed some light on this issue.

2.1.1 Technology adoption by micro-family food business

According to Abed (2021), COVID-19 lockdowns gave the best chance for firms to become more adaptable and flexible in a range of circumstances. Not surprisingly, there was a surge of new methods of delivering goods and services in accordance with business needs. Goods and services were promoted through online digital platforms, thanks to modern technology (Doyle & Conboy, 2020). Offline stores were transformed into online stores as part of the digital technology adoption strategy for consumer convenience and safety. Customers may think that restaurants not utilizing these services are shut down or simply overlook them (Leone et al., 2020). By utilising internet-based technologies for both sales and delivery during the COVID-19 epidemic, businesses were able to maintain or even improve their performance.

Priyono et al. (2020) examined how SMEs changed their business models using digital technologies to respond to COVID-19 epidemic-related changes. It was found SMEs adopted digital transformation in varying degrees; they were categorised into three tracks. SMEs had, first and foremost, advanced to a high level of technological preparedness. Second, SMEs with average levels of digitization faced issues with liquidity. Third, SMEs with very low levels of digital competence faced similar issues. The use of numerous technologies, including those related to virtual reality, which most small businesses did not consider essential, proved essential to the prevention of a total economic collapse during the wave of the global health crisis (Ting et al. 2020). Additionally, Papadopoulos et al. (2020) also highlighted the significance of digital technology in boosting efficiency and performance in SMEs as a method to cope with lockdowns and restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their studies showed that not all SMEs were aware of the importance of digital know-how in business survival. Therefore, SMEs must constantly evolve in order to survive, thrive and maintain its continuity in the industry (Malkowska & Uhruska, 2022).

2.1.2 Innovative strategies by micro-family food businesses

Innovation is widely acknowledged as a crucial component in economically competitive sectors. Innovation serves as a solid foundation for gaining a competitive edge in the market (Barney, 1991; Day, 1994). While research has previously been concentrated on high-tech and manufacturing industries rather than on the services sector, innovation is crucial in all types of business. According to Ramdan et al. (2022), innovation is the core behavioural type in the dissemination process. Even though "innovation" and "innovativeness" are occasionally used synonymously in business writing, they have distinct meanings. On the other hand, a company's ability to innovate can improve their business management effectiveness (Ključnikov et al., 2022b). Thus, businesses that can incorporate fresh concepts, offerings, and marketing strategies into its daily operations are referred to as being innovative.

In contrast, innovation concentrates on the outcomes of novel elements or distinctive combinations of already-existing elements brought about by a business plan of action.

Small business owners are more capable of adapting quickly to changes and adopting new practices owing to their size and flexibility in making decisions on innovative strategies. In a study on factors affecting a company's performance in the food industry, Lee et al. (2016) discovered that innovation occurred in five key areas: products, services, processes, management, and marketing. The importance of competitive advantage in the restaurant industry is comparable to that in other industries. Small business owners may, therefore, be encouraged to be innovative in terms of concepts, goods, and services (Adam & Alarifi, 2021), especially in sustaining businesses during a crisis.

3. Methods

3.1 Study design

According to Kaushal and Srivastava (2021), a basic qualitative research strategy involving interviews is particularly suitable for a study that requires extraction of the participants' perspectives in greater depth. Additionally, it will be fascinating for scholars who wish to learn more about how people interpret their experiences, construct their worldviews, and explain the meaning of their experiences (Rababa et al., 2022). Qualitative research can assist researchers in gathering data regarding the survival methods used by micro-family food businesses to change the direction of their firms. The individuals who managed micro-family food businesses in the Klang Valley, Selangor, Malaysia, were the focus of this study. The aims were to ascertain the difficulties encountered and to identify the coping strategies during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The role of the family in the micro family run food businesses was also examined against the backdrop of the challenging times.

3.2 Sample recruitment

Participants were selected using purposive sampling among MFFB owners who fulfilled the sampling criteria. Four key criteria were taken into consideration in the selection of participants for this interview-based research. The criteria were as follows: (1) Micro-family food business owners who had been in operation for more than five years, taking into consideration the business has been operated before COVID-19 crisis; (2) the business was family-owned or had a connection to the family, such as a spouse, siblings, or other family members who met the requirements of a micro business; (3) the food business operated a food premise; and (4) the business was located within Klang Valley area, Selangor. The eligible participants must have worked in micro-enterprises with fewer than five full-time employees and had an annual sales of less than MYR300,000. Thus, this study included a certain degree of participant homogeneity using purposive sampling as the informants were selected based on shared criteria.

3.3 Data collection procedures

The researchers conducted the interviews with six participants. The researchers contacted the participants few days prior to the face-to-face, individual interviews to schedule the meeting, and they were informed the purpose of the study. The questions were shared in advance with the participants to ensure they have sufficient time to prepare, putting the participants at ease when responding during the interviews. The interviews took between 35 and 47 minutes and were conducted at the participants' food premises at their convenient time. The interviews were taken once on each participant and researchers contacted the participants for further clarification and member checking.

The participants were interviewed using semi-structured questions. Researchers believe semi-structured interviews offer flexibility and spontaneity, ensuring that key questions are covered while allowing for unplanned topics to be discussed. Each question was read audibly by the researchers and the participants were asked to provide their answers and further justify their opinions. The main questions include, “What business strategies have you implemented for your business to grow and survive?”, “What internal and external organizational capabilities helped you to develop and implement your strategies successfully?”, “How the innovation implemented help to sustain your business during the pandemic?”, and “How does the role of family works out in the business?”. Researchers asked the questions according to the flow of the discussion rather than in a sequenced form. When the explanation was unclear, based on the nature of questions, probing questions were asked to further clarify. Data collection and analysis were performed simultaneously. The participants’ demographic data are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of the participants

	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Type of food	Relationship	Number of employees*	Business operation (years)
1	Man	54	Male	Chicken rice	Husband-wife	2	18
2	Salamon	55	Male	Tempeh	Father-son	1	20
3	Hafiz	27	Male	<i>Soto</i>	Father-son	1	7
4	Kamarul	35	Male	Johor-based cuisines	Cousin	3	6
5	Mak Nor	68	Female	<i>Lontong</i>	Mother-son	1	29
6	Pak Lan	57	Male	Curry Noodles	Father-daughter	2	16

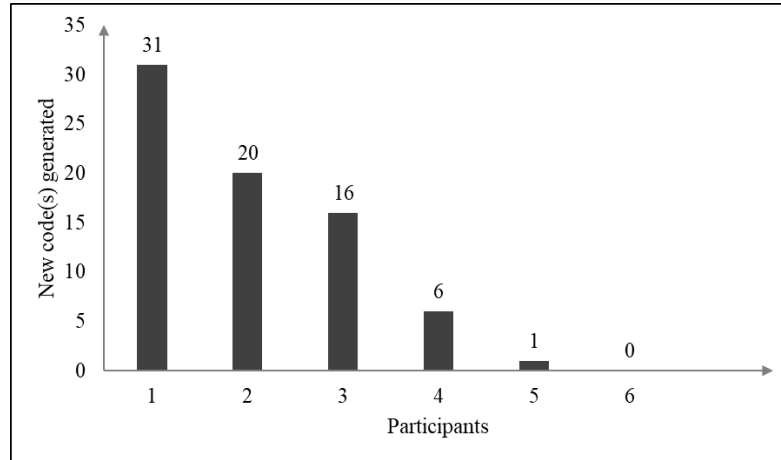
*Excluding the family members

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3.4 Data gathering and analysis

The researcher employed a six-phase thematic analysis process, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). It is also a technique for locating, analysing, and evaluating the patterns or themes found in data. Clarke and Braun (2013) mention that the analysis should not be viewed as a linear process, but rather iterative. After each interview, the researchers transcribed the recorded audio and transferred the raw data as a written text. Researchers started initial coding across the entire dataset and coded the data by tagging and naming selections of the text to capture an interesting feature related to the research question. Initially, 74 codes were generated from the interviews. However, after several discussions and amendments with the committee members, the number of new codes decreased to 39 due to redundancy and similarities among the created codes. Table 2 shows the illustration of the data saturation evidence. Researchers began to analyse the codes and considered combining those codes to form an overarching theme. The collation of codes reflected the similarity of responses among participants; thus, the themes emerged from the interviews and revised the themes. Subsequently, researchers checked the revised themes against the transcripts to ensure it reflected the original text systematically. The researchers collectively determined the essence of each theme, identified what aspect of the codes each theme encompassed, and finalized the themes. The qualitative result from the six interviews can be concluded into 15 emerging themes, dividing into three categories pertaining to the objectives of the study.

Table 2. Number of new codes generated across the data analysis



Source: Authors elaboration

3.5 Ethical considerations

An ethic approval letter (FPHP/FERC/329/2022) was acquired from the Faculty Ethic Review Committee. The researchers informed that the participation was voluntary in which they could refuse to answer any question and withdraw from the interview. Upon their agreement, they were provided with a consent letter to address their concerns regarding their right to opt-out of the data gathering procedure, confidentiality, and audio recording. Researchers assured the participants that their confidentiality will be maintained and protect them from any unnecessary consequences after the results were circulated.

3.6 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the data was assessed using four criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Adequate time was allotted for data collection, interviews, peer checking and member checking to enhance the credibility of the data. The transcripts were transcribed and shared among the authors to be checked. The researchers held discussions regarding the research progress and interpretations drawn from the interviews. Three external advisors were appointed to review the code development and data interpretations. These discussions aimed to validate the interpretations and ensure the researchers found them reasonable based on the available evidence. Researchers also shared the findings with the participants for comments and feedback as part of member checking. Suggested changes were made accordingly, and the researchers verified all the data through this process. This process ensured that the interpretations accurately reflected the intended meanings of the participants.

4. Results

4.1 Challenges faced

The six MFFB business owners who took part in the study expressed their concerns about the probability of the pandemic having a long-term effect on the foodservice industry. Their major challenges included the struggle to ensure sales, dealing with financial instability due to lockdowns, managing employee issues and facing the threat of business closure. To answer the first research

question (viz. What were the challenges faced by MFFB during and after the COVID-19 crisis?), the informants had this to say:

... During that time, I had to reduce my staff's wages. I lowered it to MYR45 from MYR70 because we did not have enough customers. My staff needed a job to pay for their rental. (Man).

... Our sales were very low even during the MCO because operation hours were limited. I can say that the differences were huge. (Mak Nor).

... Before the pandemic, everything was fine. But when the sales dropped, I had to close my restaurant during the MCO. And I had to look for alternative ways to support my family. I cannot be too dependent on this restaurant. (Salamon).

... Although there are not much sales per day, it is still enough to support my wife and me. I have to depend on my savings for our sustainability. (Pak Lan).

... No, I did not take any loans. When I switched to tempeh production early this year, I had to buy the necessary machines with my savings. (Salamon).

... The steamboat restaurant had to stay closed for a while, not long enough until it was closed for good. So, I had to find another job and became a part-time food delivery rider. (Hafiz).

The main points from the interviews were as follows: Due to the prolonged uncertainty of lockdowns, the participants experienced slower sales even with takeaways, so much so that one of them had to close for two weeks. They still experienced difficulty ensuring the survival of their restaurants even after dine-in was allowed. They had to dip into their savings to pay for their staff's wages. And when the restaurant was closed, the alternative was to switch to another line of work such as *tempeh* production, using personal savings to buy the necessary machines.

4.2 Adopted strategies

Regarding the second research question about strategies adopted to keep their business afloat during and after the COVID-19 crisis, the interviewees revealed that they employed a variety of coping mechanisms. Commonly adopted strategies included being generous and kind to customers, conducting customer satisfaction surveys, pricing strategy, maintaining food quality, operational changes in terms of food products, online promotion in social media, collaborating with food aggregators and shifting to takeaway food. The informants stated:

... When customers asked for more cockles in their noodles, I would not hesitate to add more. (Pak Lan).

... My core business used to be catering. I started to supply *tempeh* since the MCO and my restaurant had to be closed. So, I took the opportunity to supply *tempeh* to some catering companies and grocery shops, before anyone else did. After the MCO was lifted, I continued my catering business and *tempeh* production. (Salamon).

... We keep on boosting our content and promote it every day on our social media platforms. (Kamarul).

... I can say that moving our café here, which is near to a neighbourhood, hospital, and schools, is a good decision. Indeed, it is a very strategic location. (Kamarul).

... One thing I always do is that I always taste the food that is served in my restaurant. Once a week, I would taste the food when I drop by. I also ask the customers how the food tastes. (Man).

... Most of the big orders were from the neighbourhood, mosques, and others nearby. I still have to deliver the orders by myself, although there were so many roadblocks here and there. (Hafiz).

... My other means of livelihood was selling *nasi ambeng* to support my family. We took orders online and advertised on Facebook. (Salamon).

... Ever since the MCO, I have signed up for Foodpanda. It helps to boost our sales. (Mak Nor).

The results showed that the participants were capable of using a range of tactics to maintain their businesses both during and after the pandemic. The social media was utilised as a platform to advertise their businesses online and to increase the number of consumers. Additionally, the participants switched their business operations from business-to-customer (B2C) to business-to-business during the MCO (B2B). The findings also indicated the need for these micro-family food company operators to find effective means of coping during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.3 Impact of family role

The third research question was: How did the role of the family affect the business strategies of the family-owned food businesses? The interviewees emphasised the role of the family on business recovery strategies:

... This business is run by me and my wife, with help from my sister-in-law. My sister-in-law has been in this business for quite a long time. I have learnt a lot from her. (Man).

... During the MCO, we took orders online with the help of my children. They managed everything. They also needed income to support their own family. (Salamon).

... I feel like I am responsible to take taking care of this business for my dad. He is the one who always wanted to open a restaurant. (Hafiz).

... I took full responsibility for every dish and food item being prepared and served. I taught my staff how to cook, plate, and serve. The food here all are homemade. I made them. (Kamarul).

... I would encourage my daughters to start selling my curry noodles from home. They have the initiatives and effort to gain something as a side income. I fully support them. (Pak Lan).

... Family is important for the business. They are the support system, physically, emotionally, or even financially. And my son here, he is the one I can rely on for this business. (Mak Nor).

The participants stressed that the family had an important role in keeping the business running. They had to instil trust, ensure responsibility and have efficient task management. The parent who ran the micro-food business required someone in the family who had the ability and willingness to take over the business eventually so that it remained in the family. The participants also pointed out that it was hard to expect the same quality of service from unrelated employees, and hence family members had to play their part to keep the business profitable.

Table 3. Themes developed from the interviews

Themes	Examples of selected interview transcripts
<i>Challenges experienced</i>	
Drop in sales	“Our sales dropped because of limited operation hours”.
Financial instability	“I had to buy the <i>tempeh</i> -making machines with my own savings since early this year”.
Over-dependence on the restaurant business	“I cannot be too dependent on this restaurant business”.
Business closure	“When sales dropped during the MCO, I had to close my restaurant”.
Pressure of fixed costs	“I had to reduce my staffs’ daily wages from 70 MYR to 45 MYR”.
<i>Strategies adopted</i>	
Generosity	“We were generous and kind to our customers”.
Change in operations	“I started to produce <i>tempeh</i> since the MCO was implemented”.
Online advertisements	“We took orders online and advertised on Facebook”
Market research	“When we moved here, I know this location is strategic”.
Maintaining food quality	“Once in a week, I would taste the food when I dropped by”.
Takeaway orders	“We managed takeaway orders for six months”.
Food aggregators collaboration	“I collaborated with Foodpanda”.
<i>Role of family</i>	
Tasks management	“My son always there helping me here with all the tasks”.
Responsibility	“I am responsible to look after this restaurant for my father”.
Reliance	“I encouraged my daughter to sell it as her side income”.

Source: Authors’ elaboration

5. Discussion

The objectives of the present study were to examine the difficulties that a small sample of micro-family food enterprises encountered during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, their coping strategies, and the role of the family in such challenging times. Table 3 presents the results, indicating 15 emerging themes. This study found that the MFFB owners struggled with slow business, financial instability, business closure, and pressure from fixed costs. The results showed that the government's prolonged lockdowns, which were enforced as a measure to curb the spread of COVID-19, presented the MFFB owners with numerous difficulties.

The participants believed that their food business has small chances to survive and could continue to operate in the middle of the pandemic as well as in the post-pandemic. Nevertheless, some of them had to shut down their business during the MCO. As noted by Zamri et al. (2021), the MCO in Malaysia has started on March 18, 2020 and continued with several phase of restrictions like Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) on May 4, 2020, Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) on June 10, 2020 and re-instalment of MCO on June 1, 2021. As of June 15, 2021, The National Recovery Plan was unveiled to improve MCO before it was fully open for economic activities on December 18, 2021 (National Recovery Council, 2021). Piramanayagam et al. (2022) confirmed that

lengthy lockdowns created many problems that endangered business viability, besides having detrimental long-term effects. Even though the food and beverage industry is slowly getting better, COVID-19 has had lasting effects on some businesses, especially MSMEs (Abhari et al., 2021). In fact, most SMEs have to compete continuously during their business lifecycle with bigger companies and competitors with better financial resources (Civelek et al., 2021). Their sales declined drastically, particularly during the MCO as customers were prohibited from dining in and only takeout orders were allowed. These findings are in line with those of Priyono et al. (2020) who note that during the COVID-19 crisis, small firms have been impacted negatively as they are heavily dependent on the pace at which money pours in from daily product sales.

Besides, most of the participants were struggled with their financial resources. It is because COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affect the Malaysian food industry and small businesses. Although the Malaysian government has provided many businesses with financial relief packages to help them cover costs during this difficult time, however, the financial assistance alone cannot guarantee their sustainability (Purnomo et al., 2021). Moreover, Ključnikov et al. (2022c) clearly stated that financial resources issues caused difficulties for the micro-business to remain afloat. Thus, the MFFB had to plan for their food business longevity. Other than that, the results showed that the MFFB owners had to reduce their employees and cut the salaries, because the business had to close for so long during the outbreak. Since the business was completely shut down, it was hard for them to keep their employees. These results were the same as those of studies done by Baert et al. (2020) that the stalled employment system led to a huge loss of jobs and the suspension of many employment agreements. Shafi et al. (2020) agreed that many companies have already laid off employees. If the lockdown persists, it is probable that businesses will lay off employees and cease paying wages or salaries to those who are not working.

According to the results of the current study, the owners of MFFB used a variety of tactics to deal with the pandemic's numerous challenges. Generosity, shifting company processes, market research, working with food aggregators, facilitating takeaway orders, and technology adoption are some of the strategies used. The fact that these different methods are used shows that family-owned and operated micro-family food businesses have done their best to deal with the problems they face and have made hard decisions to stay in business and build resilience. However, micro businesses have advantage as compared to a bigger business as they can respond to market disruption more effectively as they have ability to shift to new concepts. This indicates that MFFB have the potential to build resilient in their operation due to smaller business capacity. Leone et al. (2020) asserted that when considering ways to enhance the business resilience and be better equipped for future crises, "smaller is better" could be one potential for adaptation strategy. In other countries, Miele, a German household and commercial appliance manufacturer, has cut production, operations, and working hours since April. Meanwhile, the Austrian family-owned dairy Woerle has tried to meet rising cheese demand despite new hygiene regulations. Sennheiser, a German family-owned microphone and headphone manufacturer, has taken steps in production and marketing to preserve and maintain business relations and activities, including a minimum level of productivity (Kraus et al., 2020).

The participants mentioned that keeping the food price unchanged and researching their target market helped keep their business open. In addition, the decision to work together with food aggregators like Foodpanda and GrabFood helped revitalise and sustain their business. These findings corroborate the ideas of Lesníková et al. (2022), who suggested that strategic management actions are critical in the business world for establishing new directions for long-term survival, stability, and expansion, even during times of crisis. For the MFFB owners, switching from catering to providing direct food sales was key to building a long-term, sustainable business. In addition, the kinds of services offered had evolved to make it easier for takeaways when dining-in was forbidden. These results were

comparable to those of earlier investigations (Madeira et al., 2021; Piramanayagam et al., 2022). The participants also mentioned the use of technology, such as using social media websites to advertise their culinary goods and services in an effort to raise awareness and draw in new clients. The results are in accord with the study on social media usage of SMEs in the Czech Republic by Žufan et al. (2020) indicating that variety of marketing strategies employ by the micro-enterprises created customers' market awareness as well as their sales and demand for their products and services to become more competitive. Plus, social media encourages enterprises to use more environmentally friendly marketing techniques, as much as other technology-enabled marketing tools (Ključnikov et al., 2022a). Interestingly, in this study, the act of generosity was the kindness of the proprietors of MFFB towards their customers that kept their business going. It implies that being open and kind might help to build a business as it tells that customers are the priority. The culture of generosity has become the provision of such social service by the micro and small businesses owners particularly during the pandemic. This view was supported by Amoah et al. (2022) who write that these social relations in service industries helped SMEs to build better relationships and opportunities with their customer, which has positive effects on customer repurchase intention.

The participants agreed that the effective task management, accountability, and reliance were the key thrusts in terms of the role of the family. Without a doubt, this has been the key contributor to business survival of MFFB. Strong personal relationships among the family members drive them to work together and support each other, which can help the business survive through tough times. Moreover, without the constraints of outside investors, MFFB can make quick decisions and pivot quickly in response to changing circumstances. The participants mentioned that they work together to keep the business going and provide a sense of purpose and direction, especially during a crisis. According to Jamil et al. (2022), good task management is a key part of a successful family business. Thus, positive business performance was linked to delegating work to family members. The participants also agreed that they would rather have their children take over their business. It implies that family businesses distinguish themselves from nonfamily enterprises by taking into account other crucial qualities (in addition to profit) such as family legacy, trust, devotion, and reputation (Camilleri & Valeri, 2021). Moreover, the participants also said that getting trust from family members is a form of appreciation that could boost business performance and motivation. From the results, it is clear that most participants agreed that reliance changes the role of the family in the micro-family food business. These statements were aligned with Julita et al. (2021), who believe their family's successors are the children and trusting them to run the business is another form of appreciation. Rachmawati et al. (2020) note that family members' traits and qualities are crucial to the long-term success of their family business. Thus, the results described that family members' support had motivated them to preserve the business and continuity of operation despite the challenges they have experienced.

The current study shows that regardless of size or sector, family business owners can survive and thrive despite future challenges. The study's outcome from Dvorský et al. (2020) also highlighted a similar research contribution on business operations in service sectors of the SMEs. Furthermore, this study clarified how families manage food business strategies, which corroborated the findings of Jamil et al. (2022), who identified entrepreneurial qualities as necessary for family business sustainability. The study's findings gave MFFB owners a playbook to prepare for future global economic crises. Thus, this study informed important policy as it shows that investigating this issue will help company and government officials to expand the Malaysian family food business concept.

6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 epidemic still has a lingering impact on many micro-family food companies. Three main objectives were addressed in this work. The results brought to light several key discoveries. The MFFB proprietors encountered significant challenges due to the crisis's impact on their food

business. To ensure the survival of their enterprise, they had to be resilient while reaffirming their goals and principles. The family played a significant role in the direction of the business and its sustainability, even as it struggled to ensure that the company would stay within the family. The results of this study suggest that micro-family restaurant owners will have more success sustaining their businesses if they use balanced strategic and operational tactics, i.e., implementing innovation in products or production methods, acquiring crisis management training, and seeking new business potentials.

Although the current study presents several pertinent discoveries, some limitations must be acknowledged. Although the study involved a small number of individuals, indicating limited information and elaboration extracted from the interviews. However, the saturation point is deemed crucial in the qualitative study rather than the number of participants. This study could be expanded by incorporating participants from SMEs, investigating the difference between business strategies and technology adoption. Additionally, future research should go deeper into the business and survival strategies used, enhancing understanding of the difficulties MFFB entrepreneurs face in Malaysia. Moreover, moving into the post-pandemic era, a more in-depth investigation could be carried out to examine how restaurants adapt to digital transformation. The authors believe that the research may present some intriguing findings and new reasons for further research and discussion on the survival strategy and family roles from the perspective of MFFB owners in Malaysia.

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