

Exploring Survival Strategies and Family Role in Micro-Family Food Business: Piloting for Interviews in Qualitative Research

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Abstract

A range of philosophical perspectives, techniques, and comprehensions are gleaned from the viewpoints of the participants in qualitative research. Understanding how people view their experiences and actions is a significant purpose. However, it could be challenging for a novice researcher to carry out the interview with a qualitative approach. Particularly in qualitative research, where it highlights the changes to the major study, the pilot study was a crucial component in assessing the viability and evaluation of the study. The significance of pilot studies, the techniques used, and the lessons acquired during the process are all described in this article. The pilot interview was conducted with two owners of the micro-family food businesses (MFFB), as preparation for a thesis in developing the research instruments further an in-depth understanding of the challenges, adaptation and the family role influences in family food business amid COVID-19 post-pandemic in Klang Valley, Selangor, Malaysia. In addition to demonstrating the benefits of pilot studies, this paper also discusses the changes that were made to the main research as a result of the pilot test. These account for the interview guide's adjustment, specifically the interview questions.

Keywords: Interview, food business, pilot study, qualitative, survival strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

In qualitative research, the researcher and the issue being studied have a close relationship that informs both the topic choice and the research methodology (Aziz & Khan, 2020). According to Merriam (2009), qualitative research consists of six commonly used approaches in conducting qualitative research: (1) basic qualitative research, (2) phenomenology, (3) grounded theory, (4) ethnography, (5) narrative analysis, and (6) critical qualitative research. "Qualitative interviewing" is described by Mason (2002) as "in-depth, semi-structured or loosely organised modes of interviewing." This method of interview calls for a variety of open-ended questions pertaining to the study's goals as well as follow-up inquiries to clarify the interviewees' words and the concepts they expressed during the interview (Hancock et al., 2007; Elhami & Khoshnevisan, 2022).

To collect all the data on the survival tactics used by micro-family food businesses in order to change the direction of their businesses, this study will employ a fundamental qualitative research approach. Individuals construct reality through their interactions with their social environments, according to this core and interpretive study. Additionally, it will be fascinating to scholars who wish to learn more about how people construct their worldviews, interpret their experiences, and assess their significance. According to Kaushal and Srivastava (2021), qualitative research using interviews is particularly suitable for this study since it may extract participants' perspectives from them in significant detail than the quantitative method.

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The benefit of conducting an interview is that the researcher can explicitly explain the study's goal and the forms of data needed (Amran et al., 2021). The researcher must understand that the goal of a qualitative interview is not to elicit answers from the informant. Instead, the goal is to examine the participants' statements so that the researcher can better grasp how their experiences played out and the meanings they attached to them (Roberts, 2020). Due to the small number of participants, it could be difficult for a novice researcher to conduct the interview qualitatively.

Besides, managing context information, testing and improving data gathering, and analysis methods are both done through the use of pilot studies (Janghorban et al., 2014). According to Crossman (2019), a pilot study is a technique used to develop or hone a research question, determine the most effective ways to pursue it, and determine how much time and money will be needed to finish the more extensive version, among other things. A feasibility study, which is a scaled-down version of the intended study to evaluate the data gathering tools, is comparable to a pilot study (Aziz & Khan, 2020). The major objectives of the pilot study were 1) to identify the methodological problems that would need to be resolved in order to improve the main study, and 2) to clarify the adjustments made to the relevant parts of the main study.

Majid et al. (2017) described the purpose of the pilot study is to assess whether the research questions are pertinent and to provide the researcher with some initial guidance on the project's viability. Although a pilot study is frequently used in quantitative studies as a tool to evaluate the reliability and validity of a research instrument, its significance has been extended to qualitative research design (Majid et al., 2017). This might aid the researcher in identifying any flaws or restrictions in the study (Kim How et al., 2022). Therefore, based on this input and the results of the "practise interview," the initial changes can be made before the major study is undertaken (Roberts, 2020).

According to Morse et al. (2002), conducting field tests or obtaining expert opinions will aid researchers in establishing content validity in addition to allowing comments to be made regarding the questionnaire's format. Additionally, it permits researchers to make required adjustments based on the pilot testing with a group that is as comparable to the final population in their sample as possible (Saunders et al., 2007). It is a crucial component since it aids in identifying interview design problems and limitations so that necessary adjustments can be made before the main study is carried out (Aziz & Khan, 2020). Moreover, this offers inexperienced researchers the chance to improve their interviewing abilities (Roberts, 2020). The pilot project will help nascent researchers get ready for the interview process, encourage them to keep an open mind and enhance the efficiency of the tools that are utilised when conducting qualitative interviews.

Saunders et al., (2007) highlighted that the size of the research project, time and financial resources available, design of the questionnaire, research question and objectives, and a number of people with whom the researchers pilot their questionnaire will all influence how many tests are carried out. In addition, other authors, including Seidman (2006), Kim (2010) and Ismail et al. (2018) described the acceptable range for the sample size of the pilot study, which can range from two to five participants, depending on the difficulty of the subject under investigation, the level of expertise, the researcher's time and resources. Hurn and Tomalin (2013) suggested that an informal meeting with research participants can assist build rapport and ease tension. As a result, the researchers conducted the pilot study with two informants.

1.1 Background of the study

Any unexpected crisis could jeopardise the viability of the local business units, which are frequently quite vulnerable to crises (Marjanski & Sukowski, 2021). Small business owners generally put their survival above long-term expansion. Furthermore, according to Piramanayagam et al. (2022), micro-enterprises commonly encounter diminishing demand, financial loss, high employee turnover and insufficient cash flow, an inability to meet contractual obligations, and even closure during times of crisis. But the continued pandemic has created a clear existential problem for small businesses (Toanoglou et al., 2021). As a result of COVID-19, owners of micro-family food businesses (MFFBs) must consider how to improve their operations for long-term economic viability. On the other hand, the research's goal is to learn more about the family's influences on business operations. By using this unique opportunity to look into how family roles work, specifically in Malaysia, this study will contribute to the body of knowledge on family businesses.

In order to determine the crisis survival methods, the current study is evaluated based on the effects of COVID-19, especially on the small food enterprise (Majid et al., 2022). The current study, part of an ongoing thesis exploring business survival strategies and the role of the family in the micro-family food business amid the COVID-19 post-pandemic in Klang Valley, Selangor, was done in the early stages of the qualitative phase.

2. METHODS

This paper outlines the methods utilised to help the researcher collect the data necessary to meet the goals of the study. Figure 1 describes the process adapted from a previous study by Majid et al. (2017). Each step is described in detail to aid the researcher in developing a good interview guide for the primary study.

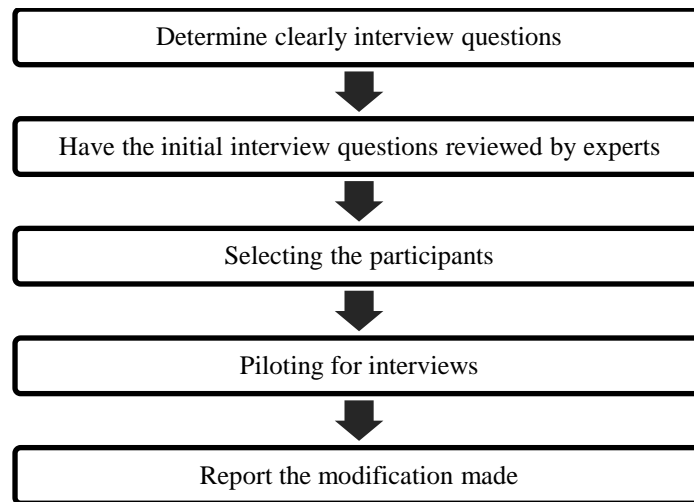


Fig. 1. Steps in conducting the pilot study.

Step 1: Determine clearly interview questions

The researcher first prepared open-ended questions about business strategy, business survival, survival strategy, financial challenges, technological adoption, and innovation that acted as a guide for the interview. Essentially, the researcher focused on ensuring that the interview questions were designed to answer the study topic. For the major query of this paper, the main question was: “What business strategies have you implemented for your business to grow and survive?” This process can improve interview questions and guarantee their significance in attaining the study's goal (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Check to see if the researcher has asked the right measurement-related questions (Dikko, 2016). The interview process includes the open-ended questions, which were then sent via email to the experts for clearance.

Step 2: Have the initial questions reviewed by experts

The focus of the second step is to have experts review the questionnaire. Depending on the intricacy of the topic under inquiry, level of knowledge, time, and resources available to the researcher, the number of reviewers can range from two to five or even more (Aziz & Khan, 2020). Two experts in the food business industry were consulted by the researcher. The members of the supervisory committee then reviewed the interview questions to make sure the language and wording were appropriate. The ten primary questions were explored in the pilot study after the preliminary evaluations, and the researcher used probing questions to extract the participants' viewpoints that required further explanation (Majid et al., 2017).

Step 3: Selecting the participants

Permission is requested to enlist the owners of a micro-family-run restaurant in Selangor, Malaysia, particularly in the Klang Valley regions, during the participant selection phase. A formal letter was submitted to the organization's representative staff, and approval was obtained. The researcher suggested that participants in pilot interviews should possess as many characteristics as the group that will take part in the main study. The owners of MFFB were located once the researcher had previously provided the inclusion criteria for participants through suggestions from the pertinent organisation. It showed that the participants were selected based on their cooperation and the purposive sampling outcomes (Majid et al., 2017).

The researcher has personally met with each of the potential participants to introduce himself and briefly discuss the purposes of the study. The participants were given the consent letter to address the concerns of voluntary participation, maintaining confidentiality, the participants' rights to opt-out of the data collection process, and audio recording. The participants were informed that they were used as a sample for the pilot study and that the

main study's suggested strategy would be guided by their involvement (Aziz & Khan, 2020). The researcher attempted to conduct interviews with two male MFFB business owners. Table 1 lists the participant's demographic information.

Table 1. Participants.

	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Food Business	Family relation	Business experience
1	Man	54	Male	Chicken rice	Husband-wife	18 years
2	Salamon	55	Male	Tempeh production	Father-son	20 years

Step 4: Piloting for interviews

The pilot study was carried out in the fourth stage. Jacob and Furgerson (2012) advise using a setting that provides the maximum level of comfort to the participants of the inquiry when using an interview as a research instrument, particularly face-to-face interviews. Due to this, the participants were free to select the interview location of their preferences (Aziz & Khan, 2020). As a result, interviews proceeded at the proprietor's MFFB facility. The researcher will obtain the consent of both informants and provide letters of informed consent to each participant. The interview should not go longer than 90 minutes to allow for the participants' other commitments (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

The researcher will also find it simpler to establish a rapport with the participants and gain experience conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews owing to the pilot study. A notable advantage of the pilot study was that it helped the researcher improve their interviewing methods and conversational fluency. At the end of the session, the researcher will ask the participants for their preferred aliases.

Step 5: Report modification made

The final stage is modification. When the pilot study is concluded, researchers will have the opportunity to manage and code the data, verbatim transcript it, and analyse it. Researchers that have experience with transcribing and data administration will be able to summarise transcripts and recognise codes (Majid et al., 2017). The researcher will be able to make adjustments after the pilot trial. Moreover, the preliminary interviews resulted in the rewording of previously closed or ambiguous questions (Wheaton, 2021).

Unquestionably, the importance of the pilot study enabled the researcher to improve techniques before starting the main study phase. The pilot research led to several modifications being made. First, the researcher realised after the initial interview that the interview questions needed to be improved. Prior to making some revisions, the questionnaire did not ask about the impact of family involvement in the firm. As a result, the interview framework was expanded to include the extra three essential questions in order to improve the quality of the data and the depth of the participants' responses. Ten open-ended questions would be included as a result, increasing the interview questions' usefulness in gaining insight into the participants' actual experiences for the main study.

Next, the researcher identified that the selection criteria of participants should be extended more clearly. The MFFB can be in a wide range of food businesses such as grocery stores, food stalls and restaurants. After the pilot study, the researcher found that the MFFB from restaurants or cafés is highly affected and struggled to maintain their business even after the pandemic. This is because they not just have to pay for the rent, but also employees' wages, as highlighted by Man. He was saying, "... at the beginning stage of the pandemic, it is quite difficult for us. There are not many sales as we hoped for. The orders were decreased, and I have to lower my staffs' salaries." Meaning that, adding the criteria of participants who run a restaurant or café would help the researcher to put insights into the business strategy and survival done by the MFFB owners which relate to this study's focus. Therefore, the researcher chose to include this specific rationale as one of the selection criteria of participants for the primary study to ensure that the MFFB setting remains aligned and comparable throughout the data collection.

Parenthetically, although the interview guide's questions were non-directional, the researcher discovered that non-leading question intonation, question closure, and paraphrasing of interview responses were necessary throughout the actual interview process. This was evident during the pilot interview when the participants fell silent, indicating that they needed some time to reflect on the question and to gather their recollections of the occurrence. Researchers must have effective interviewing techniques using both indirect and direct probes, according to Aziz and Khan (2020). Thus, taking field notes and recordings audio would aid a novice researcher in gaining a greater grasp and deeper understanding of the phenomenon while also serving as an early type of data analysis.

3. DISCUSSION

The main objective of this study is to demonstrate a pilot study for an interview in a qualitative research approach on the MFFB owners in the Klang Valley area. The current study extends the understanding of the business survival and strategies employed by the two micro-family food business owners. The results show that food quality and service quality is the main priority of a business strategy. As mentioned by Man in the interview, "... I learn and practice how to prepare the dish to meet the customers' taste. And, I believe that being generous to the customers and good supervision to the staff will assure my business to sustain." Previous studies also highlighted that the attitudes of the employees will cause affections to the quality of the services (Norazha et al., 2022) and it is crucial in producing the healthiest and best-tasting food for consumers (Liu et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Salamon also pointed out that business experiences are the key to business survival. He said, "... I have been in the food business for quite a long time. So, I was thinking, what if we produce something that can cater for people during the movement control order (MCO)? This is because I saw the opportunity to provide something which is in demand, yet not been done by others." Thus, these aspects show that family food business owners especially the micro-enterprises should therefore adjust and improve their food quality, and service quality and being highly experienced in business is crucial for them.

Besides, the findings suggested that shifting business nature from business-to-customer (B2C) to business-to-business (B2B) is a lot to take in for the MFFB survival strategy. Salamon highlighted as "... at this age, I would rather say that I prefer this type of business than before. I have supplied the tempeh in bulk to the retail stores and supermarket, and they will sell my products to the market." Likewise, the adaptation of using third-party food delivery such as Foodpanda and GrabFood is a great decision by made the MFFB owner during and after the MCO. Man quoted, "... since we cannot open for dine-in, the food delivery really helps to increase the sales. Plus, the customer can choose from a variety of menus in the food delivery apps." According to Chetty et al. (2020), business owners should upgrade their advertisement through online applications as online purchasing including food ordering is still rising in demand since the COVID-19. This study provides strong evidence to support the notion that innovation should be implemented by the MFFB owners in order to make sure their business stays afloat and sustain. Apart from that, family members play an important role in this micro-family food business. However, the participant pointed out that it is difficult for them as a parent and restaurant owners to manage the business when it comes to their own children. Therefore, they have to hire employees who are not family-related to help them run the business. Relevant studies on this discussion produced conflicting results regarding the working environment and organisational culture of family businesses, where family businesses exist as a result of the mutually beneficial economic and non-economic value that is produced when family and business systems are combined (Camilleri & Valeri, 2021).

4. CONCLUSION

The limited sample size of this pilot study means that data saturation was not achieved, which is a limitation. Small-scale pilot research was conducted to evaluate the data collection tools, look for any methodological problems associated with future improvement, and make necessary revisions for the main study. Even if qualitative studies only involve a small number of interviews, pilot testing of the questionnaire is still crucial. Interview piloting is an important and efficient step in conducting qualitative research since it shows how the main study may be improved. Upon reflection, the pilot interviews improved the deductive coding technique used in the theme analysis and served to retain the study's credibility by strengthening the research instrument and research focus. As the pilot study aided researchers in determining the viability and evaluation of their planned major study, particularly in qualitative research, there is hope that this article may offer some assistance for additional qualitative research in the relevant context.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the participants for their willingness to take part in this study.

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