

UNVEILING THE KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW



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ABSTRACT

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a vital role in the global economy, particularly in the dynamic and competitive food industry. Various internal and external factors impact the success and longevity of food-based SMEs, making it essential to identify and understand these critical elements. Despite extensive research on SMEs across different sectors, there is a lack of studies focused explicitly on food-based SMEs. This research seeks to address this knowledge gap by exploring the factors influencing food SME performance through a bibliometric analysis to uncover emerging trends, research gaps, and key growth drivers. The study employs a bibliometric approach to analyze a broad range of academic literature, highlighting influential journals, leading authors, regional research trends, and performance metrics contributing to understanding food SMEs' success. Key performance indicators include innovation, sustainability, lean operations, entrepreneurial dimensions, market orientation, value co-creation, service quality, quality management, value chain, and organizational effectiveness. These factors help food SMEs navigate market complexities, adapt to changing consumer preferences, and enhance their competitiveness. The study also includes a systematic review of the 30 most-cited articles to assess factors shaping SME success critically. The research underscores the importance of operational efficiency and the need for SMEs to implement lean strategies to maintain agility and resource efficiency. This study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors driving food SME growth and performance, addressing critical research gaps and fostering a more resilient ecosystem for food-based enterprises to thrive in the global marketplace effectively.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the food industry has experienced a notable increase in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), drawing the attention of researchers and government officials globally. These SMEs play a crucial role in national economies, contributing to approximately 80% of the global economic growth (Amoah et al., 2022). According to the European Union's definition, SMEs are organizations with fewer than 250 employees (Doiron, 2009), and thrive across various sectors, including food. Growing public demand aligns well with the food industry's extensive potential. The fundamental human need for nourishment has been the primary driver of growth in the restaurant and dining sector (Rezaei et al., 2022). Despite the considerable growth prospects of the food industry, regulatory policies have lagged (Clapp, 2021). A recent study focusing on emerging Asian economies highlighted SMEs as key contributors to economic advancement and expansion (Zhuang & Jiang, 2016). Furthermore, SMEs are instrumental in promoting entrepreneurship and serve as the industry's cornerstone despite their limited resources (Zakzouk et al., 2023). Entrepreneurship-driven SMEs are particularly important as they stimulate economic growth and development across all economies. Small-scale food sector marketers and entrepreneurs, operating with minimal capital and basic management, often face challenges due to the influence of large, well-funded investors (O'Callaghan et al., 2017). While the number of SMEs has increased, their quality has not improved (Dharmanto et al., 2019). Low productivity remains a persistent issue, compounded by inadequate SME human resources

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in management, organization, technology, and marketing and a lack of entrepreneurial spirit (Tahir, 2024). The rapidly changing environment surrounding modern firms is characterized by accelerated technological progress, shorter product lifecycles, and intensifying global competition. Despite their limited financial and human resources, "born globals" (BGs) or "international new ventures" (INVs) have engaged in international business from their inception (Cavusgil & Knight, 2015; McDougall et al., 1994). Based on large multinational corporations, traditional internationalization models fail to provide sufficient guidance for smaller enterprises (Anwar et al., 2023). SMEs can gain a competitive edge through innovation and the development of new food products (Rudder et al., 2001). Furthermore, SMEs are instrumental in nurturing entrepreneurship, functioning as the cornerstone of this domain despite their resource limitations. The value of entrepreneurially-driven SMEs is evident in their capacity to propel economic advancement and growth across various economic landscapes (Zakzouk et al., 2023). Small food enterprises must consistently introduce new products, create innovative processes, adapt organizational structures, and explore new markets (Avermaete et al., 2003). Ensuring market suitability for new products and employing efficient, modern technologies in food production are critical challenges in creating successful new products (Ngamkroekjoti et al., 2005). Given the significance of the food industry in SMEs, this study conducted a comprehensive assessment to identify key performance indicators (KPIs) and significant publications, offering valuable insights for academics, policymakers, and industry stakeholders. KPIs are essential for achieving organizational objectives (Popova & Sharpanskykh, 2009).

Small and medium-sized enterprises operating within the food industry confront an increasingly dynamic and competitive environment. This necessitates their ability to adapt to evolving market demands, integrate innovative practices, and prioritize sustainability to maintain competitiveness. Despite their significant contributions to economic growth and food supply chains, the performance of these SMEs is often hindered by various challenges, such as resource constraints, rapidly changing consumer preferences, and limited access to advanced technologies and strategic insights. While existing literature has explored performance factors like innovation, sustainability, and operational efficiency, a lack of comprehensive, systematic analysis persists in identifying research gaps, emerging trends, and critical drivers of SME performance. Furthermore, the fragmented nature of research outputs, dispersed across diverse geographic regions and disciplines, poses challenges in drawing cohesive conclusions to guide future research and inform industry practices. This study aims to address these issues by conducting a bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review, evaluating the current state of research and identifying the strategic conditions necessary to sustain a robust and resilient ecosystem for SMEs in the food industry.

The remaining sections of this study are organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature, Section 3 outlines the research methodology, and Sections 4 and 5 present the results, discussion, and conclusion of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SMEs, especially in the food sector, are vital to economic expansion and job creation. Notwithstanding several obstacles, including supply chain complexity, funding, and regulatory compliance, food-based SMEs can use innovation, market trends, and strategic alliances to achieve sustainability and growth.

SMEs are globally recognized as pivotal contributors to economic growth and employment generation (Abor & Quartey, 2010). Within emerging markets, SMEs, frequently function as the foundation of local economies, supplying essential products and services (Li & Sun, 2013). The food industry, in particular, encompasses a diverse array of small and medium-sized enterprises engaged in producing, processing, and distributing edible goods (Hall & Gossling, 2016).

Research indicates that SMEs in the food industry confront unique challenges, such as navigating regulatory requirements, managing complex supply chains, and adapting to shifting consumer preferences (Kara & Gok, 2021). Despite these challenges, food SMEs can capitalize on consumer preferences for locally produced, organic, and craft-made food items (Tiffin et al., 2011). Securing adequate financing has been recognized as a critical challenge for the growth and development of SMEs, particularly in the capital-intensive food industry sector (Beck & Demircuc-Kunt, 2006). Governmental policies and supportive institutional structures can profoundly shape SMEs' performance and long-term sustainability within the food industry sector (Abor & Quartey, 2010). Innovative technological solutions in areas such as production, packaging, and logistics can enhance the operational efficiency and market accessibility of small and medium-sized food enterprises (FAO, 2017). Partnering with research institutions can bolster SMEs' ability to innovate and implement best practices in food safety and quality (Hall & Gossling, 2016). Diversifying market focus, such as pursuing export opportunities and targeting specialized consumer niches, can provide food-based small and medium-sized enterprises with promising pathways for expansion and growth (PWC, 2020). The entrepreneurial mindset among SMEs is associated with adopting proactive business strategies and developing innovative product offerings (Li & Sun, 2013). Cultivating dynamic competencies in domains such as marketing, research and development, and operations management is vital for SMEs to sustain their competitive positioning (Kara & Gok, 2021). Localized procurement strategies, such as sourcing raw materials from proximal suppliers, can yield cost savings and cultivate community linkages (Besser & Miller, 2013). Robust network ties and social capital in rural or semi-urban areas can promote the exchange of knowledge and resources among food-based SMEs. In numerous geographic areas, SMEs can capitalize on growing consumer interest in ethically and environmentally responsible products to distinguish themselves from competitors (Tiffin et al., 2011). Adherence to food safety regulations, including frameworks like Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points, can be challenging for small and medium-sized enterprises but is crucial for cultivating consumer confidence in their products (FAO, 2017). The utilization of digital marketing and sales platforms can enhance the ability of food-based small and medium-sized enterprises to access broader customer segments and improve their competitive positioning (PWC, 2020). The rapid uptake of e-commerce has enabled small and medium-sized enterprises to bypass traditional intermediaries and establish direct connections with

consumers (Kara & Gok, 2021). Although online sales channels offer potential benefits, many SMEs face significant infrastructure and logistical challenges that hinder their ability to fully leverage these platforms (Li & Sun, 2013).

Collaborative partnerships between public and private entities can provide tailored technical and financial support to address the challenges faced by the local food industry (Beck & Demirguc-Kunt, 2006). Industry associations can foster knowledge exchange, which helps SMEs collectively enhance capabilities, avoid redundancy, and adopt best practices (Besser & Miller, 2013). Enhancing SMEs' managerial skills and financial acumen through targeted training and development programs is crucial for bolstering their performance within the food industry sector (Abor & Quartey, 2010). Recent studies indicate that global health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have underscored the resilience and adaptability of food SMEs (PWC, 2020). Supply chain disruptions have exposed vulnerabilities in the operations of SMEs, underscoring the need for enhanced collaboration with logistics partners and government agencies (Hall & Gossling, 2016). Food SMEs increasingly incorporate sustainability objectives, such as minimizing food waste and enhancing resource efficiency, into their strategic decision-making processes (FAO, 2017). Emerging innovative business models, including community-supported agriculture and direct-to-consumer subscription programs, have gained momentum among SMEs aiming to foster closer connections with their consumers (Tiffin et al., 2011). Entrepreneurial support systems, such as incubators and accelerators, can offer specialized mentorship and financing programs tailored to small and medium-sized enterprises' unique needs in the food industry (Li & Sun, 2013). Studies indicate that enterprises embracing collaborative approaches with stakeholders can develop a more resilient supply chain and strengthen their brand reputation (Kara & Gok, 2021). Emerging research suggests investigating the influence of novel technologies, including blockchain and artificial intelligence, on improving traceability and transparency within the food small and medium-sized enterprise sector (PWC, 2020). Harnessing innovation, robust networks, and enabling policies are crucial for food-based SMEs to thrive and sustain their contributions to local and global economic landscapes (Beck & Demirguc-Kunt, 2006).

This review of the literature focuses on the main obstacles and possibilities facing food SMEs, such as changing consumer tastes, financial constraints, and regulatory barriers. In order to improve these businesses' competitiveness and resilience, it highlights the significance of innovation, strategic cooperation, and supportive regulations. This study aims to go beyond conventional evaluations and offer a thorough grasp of the scholarly aspects surrounding SMEs in the food industry, supporting the sector's expansion, creativity, and sustainability.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This section illustrates the research objectives, methods, and software used to conduct a comprehensive study on SMEs in the food industry. Table 1 outlines each objective's aims, study design, and suitable instruments.

Table 1. Synopsis of the Research Aim and Approach

| Method | Research Objective | Research Methodology |
|------------------------------|---|----------------------|
| Bibliometric analysis | To comprehend the growth and patterns of SMEs in the food industry. | Publication trend |
| | To identify the leading countries, noteworthy journals, and noteworthy authors, and to identify the key performance indicators of the top 30 cited articles | Citation analysis |
| | To scope out what keywords pertain to SMEs in the food industry. | Conceptual structure |
| Systematic Literature review | To critically evaluate the performance of SMEs in the food industry of the top 30 cited articles. | Literature review |

Bibliometric Analysis and Systematic Literature Review

To achieve spatiotemporal features, researchers have followed recommendations for bibliometric data presentation and interpretation (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2014). A systematic literature review used a transparent, scientific, and repeatable methodology (Tranfield et al., 2003).

Scopus Database for Study

A valid database is necessary to obtain accurate and reliable data. The researchers used Scopus, a database with a sizable number of well-reviewed, randomized trials published in journals with high-impact factors, to gather data for the study (Groff et al., 2020).

Selecting Relevant Research Using Screening Criteria

To examine the general trend of SMEs in the food industry, this study considers 2010 - 2024. To find relevant articles, the search terms "SMEs," "SME," "small and medium-sized enterprises," or "small and medium-sized enterprises" AND "food industry" were used. For the analysis and conclusions shown in Figure 1, the researchers employed the "Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses" (PRISMA) statement (Moher et al., 2009).

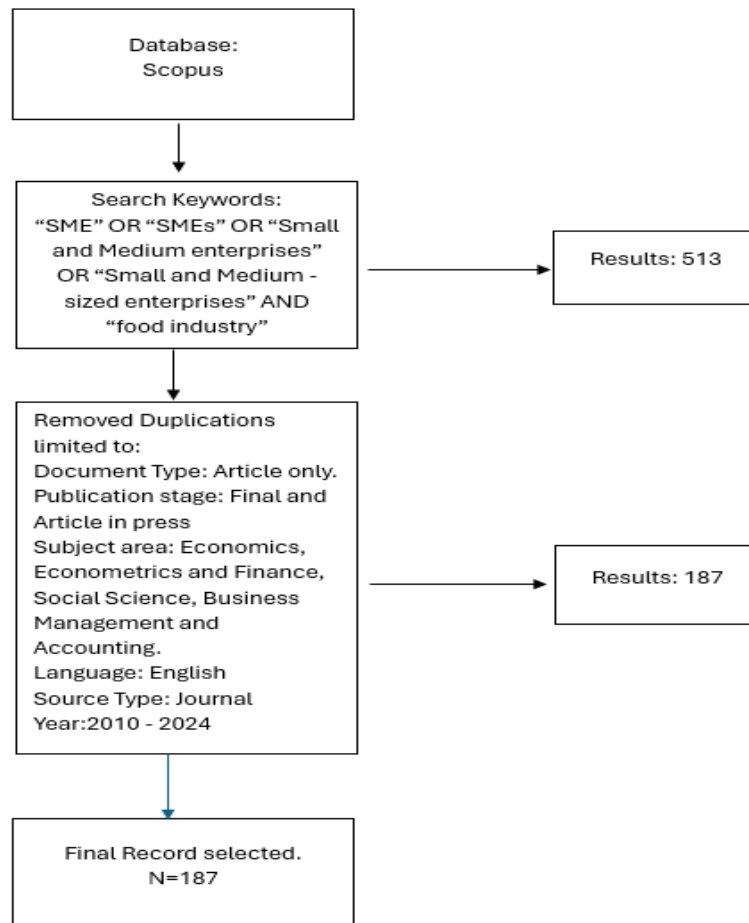


Figure 1. Procedures for extracting and processing data sets for bibliometric study of SMEs in the food industry

The dataset for this study included 513 documents extracted on November 11, 2024, from the Scopus repository. After applying the exclusion criteria, 326 documents were deleted, resulting in 187 papers for the bibliometric analysis. Downloading data from online databases can lead to bibliometric and bibliographical inaccuracies (Donthu et al., 2021). Multiple steps are required to sort and clean data for accuracy. R programming and Excel were used to apply the bibliographic techniques. Network mapping was performed using R programming, followed by additional filtering and tabulation in Microsoft Excel.

RESULTS

Trends in Annual Publication

Figure 2 illustrates the publication trends of SMEs in the food industry. The line graph displays the total number of documents for each year from 2010 to 2024. With a few exceptions, the number of documents generally increased with time. The number of documents expanded dramatically in 2013 and then decreased in 2014. The number of documents steadily increased until 2015, when they began to decline. Since then, the number of documents has increased. Based on existing trends, the number of studies on SMEs in the food industry is predicted to rise in the coming years.

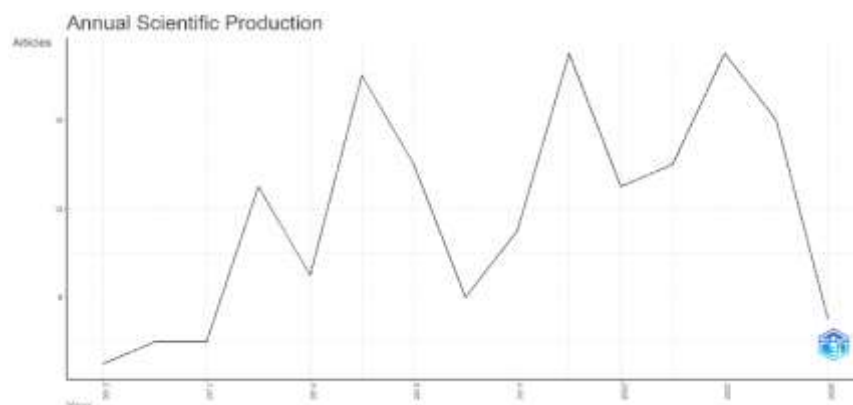


Figure 2. Trends in Annual Publication

Leading Countries

Table 2 depicts the country's production and citation counts from 2010 to 2024, which were included in studies on SMEs in the food industry. 49 articles from Malaysia ranked first, with 48 articles; Italy ranked second in research output, followed by 33 scientific publications from Spain. With 534 citations, Italy ranks first in terms of citations, followed by 326 and 289 citations from Spain, and Malaysia tied for second and third place. It is also evident that authors from the United Kingdom have a significant number of citations (196). However, the authors observed that Italy had the most citations with 48 publications, even though Malaysia made the most contributions to the subject. Developed countries received the majority of citations, although nations such as Malaysia have made substantial contributions to the field of research.

Table 2. Country Production and Total Citation (TC)

| Region | Frequency | TC |
|-----------|-----------|-----|
| Italy | 48 | 534 |
| Spain | 33 | 326 |
| Malaysia | 49 | 289 |
| UK | 23 | 196 |
| Indonesia | 22 | 147 |

Significant Authors

Citation analysis is an efficient approach to evaluate the impact of research and examine the relationships between papers in various academic and research disciplines. Analyzing the citation patterns seen in a body of work is necessary to comprehend the absorption, diffusion, and extension of ideas. Table 3 presents the authors' relevance to SMEs in the food industry. The most important contributors were Dora (177) and Batterink (171). Reardon followed 151 citations.

Table 3. Significant authors with Total Citation (TC)

| Author | TC |
|------------------------|-----|
| Dora M | 177 |
| Batterink MH | 171 |
| Reardon T | 151 |
| Martin-tapia I | 138 |
| Singh RK | 122 |
| Vanhonacker F | 108 |
| Najib M & Kiminami | 93 |
| Hosseinia G & Ramezani | 64 |
| Arzoumanidis I | 63 |
| Badrudin B | 57 |

Impactful Journals

Scholars can select the most suitable and relevant journals to publish their findings by identifying the most influential journals in a particular field of study. Between 2010 and 2024, 57 research publications were published in the top ten journals. The most significant journal in this field of study was Sustainability (Switzerland), with 18 publications. The Journal of Cleaner Production and the Journal of Islamic Production had 13 and 6 publications, respectively. Table 4 lists the leading research journals according to citations, articles, h-index, g-index, m-index, and year of publication, all of which had a significant impact.

Table 4. Source Impact

| Journals | h_index | g_index | m_index | TC | NP | PY_start |
|---|---------|---------|---------|-----|----|----------|
| British Food Journal | 12 | 13 | 0.8 | 450 | 13 | 2010 |
| Sustainability (Switzerland) | 7 | 12 | 0.778 | 165 | 18 | 2016 |
| Journal of Islamic Marketing | 5 | 6 | 0.385 | 163 | 6 | 2012 |
| Journal of Cleaner Production | 5 | 6 | 0.556 | 139 | 6 | 2016 |
| Supply Chain Management | 3 | 3 | 0.3 | 92 | 3 | 2015 |
| Agricultural Economics (Czech Republic) | 2 | 2 | 0.222 | 70 | 2 | 2016 |
| Business Strategy and The Environment | 2 | 2 | 0.286 | 67 | 2 | 2018 |
| Uncertain Supply Chain Management | 3 | 4 | 0.3 | 22 | 5 | 2015 |
| International Food and Agribusiness Management Review | 2 | 2 | 0.222 | 14 | 2 | 2016 |

Conceptual structure

The conceptual structure is the only technique that uses the content of the research paper to graphically represent the relationship between themes (Sawhney et al., 2022).

A thematic map plot based on the co-word analysis of the unit keyword illustrates the major themes in the field of SMEs in the food industry, as shown in Figure 3. This two-dimensional plot features density on the X-axis and centrality on the Y-axis. Centrality indicates the degree of association between themes, whereas density measures the cohesion between nodes (Esfahani et al., 2019). Figure 3 identifies ten major themes: (i) innovation; (ii) government decision-making; (iii) climate and commerce; (iv) enterprise resource planning and factor analysis; (v) environmental impact and management of

food products; (vi) strategic approach and costs in food production; (vii) human resource management; (viii) developing world and spatiotemporal analysis; (ix) cross-sectional study of Malaysian certification; and (x) adoption, education, and leadership. The thematic map was divided into four quadrants (Q1 to Q4). The driving themes were indicated by the upper-right quadrant (Q1), intrinsic themes in the lower-right quadrant (Q4), exclusive specialized themes in the upper-left quadrant (Q2), and emerging or vanishing themes in the lower-left quadrant (Q3). Innovation in SMEs in the food industry is a crucial theme, alongside enterprise resource planning with moderate work (Q1). The themes in (Q2) are niche and emerging, inviting exploration in areas such as “education,” “adoption,” “leadership,” “lean production,” “agile manufacturing system,” and “cross-sectional study.” “Developing countries” and “human resource management” are moderate, while “economics” and “food safety” are less pertinent to SMEs in the food sector (Q3). The “strategic approach” is equally important but with lower density (Q4).

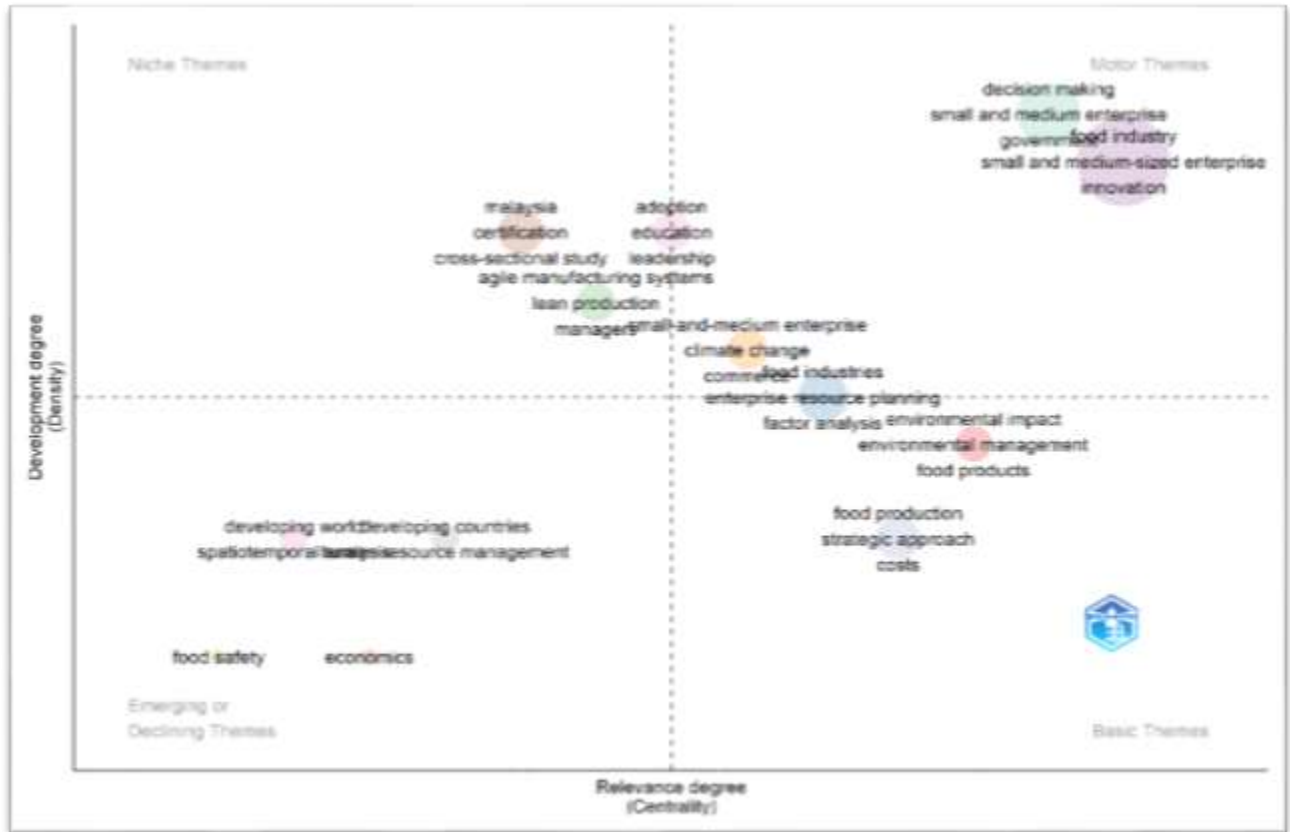


Figure 3. Thematic Map

Key performance Indicators of top 30 cited articles

This section presents the findings of an extensive investigation of key cited works on SMEs in the food industry, encompassing innovation, sustainability, marketing, entrepreneurship, and lean manufacturing KPIs. It provides a critical assessment and overview of the findings, enabling researchers to understand current trends, address literature gaps, and advance their field. Table 5 presents the key performance Indicators of the 30 most frequently cited articles.

Table 5. Key performance Indicators of the top 30 cited articles

| Article title | Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) | TC |
|--|--|-----|
| “Determinants and barriers to lean implementation in food processing SMEs - A multiple case analysis” | “Lean manufacturing” | 176 |
| “Orchestrating innovation networks: The case of innovation brokers in the agri-food sector” | “Innovation” | 171 |
| “The Hidden Middle: The quiet revolution in the midstream of agrifood value chains in developing countries” | “Value chain” | 149 |
| “Environmental strategy and exports in medium, small and micro-enterprises” | “Environmental practices” | 137 |
| “Applications of information and communication technology for sustainable growth of SMEs in India food industry” | “Information and Communication Technology” | 122 |
| “Profiling European traditional food consumers” | “Consumers” | 108 |
| “Innovation, cooperation and business performance: Some evidence from Indonesian small food processing cluster” | “Innovation and Cooperation” | 93 |

| | | |
|--|---|----|
| “Factors influencing sustainable entrepreneurship in small and medium-sized enterprises in Iran: A case study of food industry” | “Sustainable Entrepreneurship” (SE) | 64 |
| “Is there a simplified LCA tool suitable for the agri-food industry? An assessment of selected tools” | “Life Cycle Assessment” (LCA) | 63 |
| “Clients’ perception towards JAKIM service quality in Halal certification” | “Service quality” | 57 |
| “Circular economy and corporate social responsibility in the agricultural system: A case study of the Italian agri-food industry” | “Corporate social responsibility” (CSR) and “Circular economy” (CE) | 55 |
| “External sources for innovation in food SMEs” | “External information and innovation” | 55 |
| “Critical success factors of quality management practices among SMEs in the food processing industry in Malaysia” | “Quality management” | 53 |
| “Market orientation and marketing management of traditional food producers in the EU” | “Market orientation” (MO) | 53 |
| “A comparison of family and nonfamily small firms in their approach to green innovation: A study of Italian companies in the agri-food industry” | “Green innovation” | 49 |
| “Developing and validating a measurement instrument of ISO 9001 effectiveness in food manufacturing SMEs” | “Customer satisfaction” | 48 |
| “Emergent supply chains in the agrifood sector: Insights from a whole chain approach” | “Supply chain management” (SCM) | 45 |
| “Value co-creation in the beverage and food industry” | “Value co-creation” | 45 |
| “Regional Horizontal Networks within the SME Agri-Food Sector: An Innovation and Social Network Perspective” | “Social network and innovation” | 42 |
| “Entrepreneurial strategies of Etna wine farms” | “Supply chain management” | 42 |
| “External and internal R&D, capital investment and business performance in the Spanish agri-food industry” | “Resource and Development” (R and D) | 42 |
| “The emergence of the halal food industry in non-Muslim countries: a case study of Thailand” | “Supply chain management” | 35 |
| “Evaluation of knowledge, halal quality assurance practices and commitment among food industries in Malaysia” | “Knowledge management” | 35 |
| “Enhancing Organisational Innovation Capability Through Systemic Action Research: A Case of a Swiss SME in the Food Industry” | “Organizational innovation capability” | 35 |
| “The effect of entrepreneurial marketing on halal food SMEs performance” | “Entrepreneurial marketing” (EM) | 35 |
| “The capital structure choices of agro-food firms: Evidence from Italian SMEs” | “Capital structure” | 33 |
| “The effect of internal capabilities and external environment on small- and medium-sized enterprises’ international performance and the role of the foreign market scope: The case of the Malaysian halal food industry” | “Internal and external factors” | 33 |
| “What are the fundamental knowledge-sharing drivers of small family businesses in the restaurant and fast-food industry?” | “Knowledge management” | 33 |
| “Operating leverage and profitability of SMEs: agri-food industry in Europe” | “Operating leverage” | 32 |
| “Explaining innovation in mature industries: evidences from Italian SMEs” | “Innovation and collaboration” | 32 |

Systematic literature review of top 30 cited articles

This section critically evaluates SMEs in the food industry to make informed decisions by identifying the key findings and rendering practical implications.

The key to the success of lean adoption is organizational culture, structure, training, resources, and top management commitment (Dora et al., 2015). This study highlights the importance of training in both soft and technical skills, identifying a "change agent" to inspire during the change process. The "Framework for successful network orchestration by innovation brokers" revealed that innovation brokers have orchestrated innovation networks (Batterink et al., 2010) effectively. Policies and public investment will create "enabling conditions" in the midstream Asian food value chain, facilitating foreign direct investment (FDI) (Reardon, 2015). SMEs' export intensity of SME is positively correlated with environmental policies, although this relationship diminishes with increasing firm size (Martín-Tapia et al., 2009). Research in India indicates that "government initiatives and policies" are crucial for adopting information communication technology (ICT) applications to reduce food waste in supply chains (Singh et al., 2019).

Beyond traditional food consumers (TFC), consumer familiarity with product specifics and origin aids in product positioning and market communication (Vanhonacker et al., 2010). To foster innovation among SMEs, the government should promote partnerships among SMEs, other businesses, and research institutes (Najib & Kiminami, 2011). In the context of sustainable entrepreneurship, customer orientation is the top factor among SMEs in the food sector, with entrepreneurs prioritizing social and environmental dimensions (Hosseininia & Ramezani, 2016). A discrepancy in the influence of innovation phases and environmental impact categories hinders the full implementation of simplified LCAs (Arzoumanidis et al., 2017). JAKIM should focus on enhancing overall satisfaction and service quality (Badruldin et al.,

2012). Integrating CSR and CE can mitigate the environmental impacts of agriculture and foster a sustainable, circular business model (Fortunati et al., 2020). A study on "external sources of innovations in food SMEs" highlights the importance of relationships among actors in food chains owing to their high similarity (cognitive, cultural, etc.) (Lefebvre et al., 2015). This study builds on the findings that significant "push" factors for innovation in food SMEs come from market players to scientific actors (Sawang & Unsworth, 2011).

Research on quality management practices has identified 22 essential components for implementing and assessing total quality management (TQM) that are valid and reliable for evaluating quality management practices. The study "Critical Success Factors of Quality Management Practices among SMEs in the Food Processing Industry in Malaysia" has gained increasing significance (Talib et al., 2014). Additionally, a study on marketing management in SMEs revealed that they are price takers rather than price makers, lacking a long-term perspective, branding, and benchmarking (Gellynck et al., 2012). No significant differences exist between family-owned and non-family-owned enterprises in terms of green innovation attributes, obstacles, or outcomes (Dangelico et al., 2019). One study indicated that SMEs in the food production industry are yet to achieve the ISO 9001 objective, suggesting room for improvement (Psomas et al., 2012). Due to limited evidence of entrepreneurial commitment, the authors advise incorporating entrepreneurial orientation into supply chain management (Anastasiadis & Poole, 2015). Food and beverage (F and B) SMEs innovate to provide customer value and mitigate resource constraints (Tardivo et al., 2017).

Food industry SMEs risk losing their networks without a commitment to long-term innovation and strategic objectives (McAdam et al., 2015). Research on wine companies has emphasized that regional interactivity enhances competitive advantage, income, and overall well-being (Tudisca et al., 2014). R and D in low-tech agri-food industries occur both internally and externally (Alarcón & Sánchez, 2013). Limited regression analyses yielded significant results, highlighting the need for a medium-term focus due to its benefits. Thailand's international halal market success was due to its financial and consultative support (Nawawi et al., 2019). Malaysia's halal industry emphasizes the importance of "Human capital" and "Socialization" in addressing compliance reluctance (Othman et al., 2016). Understanding innovation dynamics may require focusing on systems and interaction levels (Kocher et al., 2010). Production performance did not reliably indicate financial performance, and entrepreneurial marketing (EM) did not affect production performance (Fard & Amiri, 2018). Contrary to the Trade-Off Theory, the Pecking Order Theory adequately explains SME loan policies (Rossi et al., 2015).

The lack of networks in Malaysia's halal industry underscores the importance of 'Human capital' and 'Socialization' (Ismail & Kuivalainen, 2015). Organizational drivers (OD) are key factors in knowledge sharing in food companies (Rezaei et al., 2022). The most profitable SMEs are younger and have more intangible assets, with intensity determined by the country and operating leverage (Grau & Reig, 2020). Repeated collaborations and public policy positively influence firms' innovation (Caiazza, 2015).

Over the past 14 years, SMEs in the food industry have addressed obstacles such as limited capital and intense competition by focusing on unique products, such as organic, artisanal, and locally sourced foods. Social media and crowdfunding enabled SMEs to establish brands and secure funding in the 2010s despite increased competition from larger firms. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the industry's digital transformation, leading SMEs to adopt direct-to-consumer models and data analytics to improve customer satisfaction. This may include introducing new product offerings or new operational models where SMEs are poised for expansion (Lavanya & Rajkumar, 2024). The adoption of fintech has also become necessary for SMEs to face competition. A study by Islam & Khan (2024) has identified that financial self-efficacy is a critical factor in the adoption of fintech among financial literacy, digital literacy, and financial self-efficacy. Additionally, SMEs can use microcredit in their financial strategy, the majority of microcredit programs rely on a group borrowing model created by Muhammad Yunus, winner of the Nobel Prize, and his Grameen Bank (Hulme, 2009), which was first practiced in Bangladesh (Ayanle et al., 2022).

DISCUSSIONS

A bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review elucidated a comprehensive global approach to Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in the food industry. Annual publication trends demonstrate SMEs' significance in the food industry since 2013. The country's production with its citations was revealed, wherein Malaysia ranked first in the number of documents produced. However, Italy ranked first in terms of citations with 534 citations, whereas Malaysia received 329 citations, indicating that developing countries should expand their ideas globally. This study highlights the authors' significant contributions to SMEs in the food industry. The journal's prominence was delineated to identify the key journals, and the *British Food Journal* was the leading journal in its citation counts, which emphasized the various dimensions of entrepreneurship, marketing, innovation, knowledge management, and networking to strengthen the field of SMEs in the food industry. Similarly, *Sustainability* (Switzerland) focused on green innovation, sustainable packaging, and regulations to implement sustainability, while the *Journal of Islamic Marketing* highlighted the importance of halal certifications in the performance of SMEs in the food industry, emphasizing proper training in halal practices globally. Other journals, such as the *Journal of Cleaner Production*, emphasize wastewater management and industrial practices to ensure environmental well-being. The conceptual structure of this study was illustrated by a thematic map using co-word analysis, which elucidated the underlying themes, from basic, motor, and niche to declining themes. This will assist SMEs in identifying the areas of development in the food industry. The key performance indicators of the top 30 cited articles were disclosed to SMEs to identify their goals and measure their success in different areas. Finally, a systematic literature review was conducted by critically evaluating the key findings of the articles to render practical implications for managers in making informed decisions.

CONCLUSIONS

Bibliometric analysis influences citation patterns, institutional scholarly strength, and collection development. This study employs Scopus to visualize subjects, research trends, and notable studies, emphasizing novel elements and valuable contributions to the field of SMEs in the food industry. Systematic literature critically evaluates the performance of the top 30 cited articles. Researchers can explore this evolving field, provide practitioners and policymakers with insightful data, and offer deeper insights into the evolution, new areas, and future possibilities of SMEs in the food industry. Future studies could focus their bibliometric analysis on papers in the SCI, SSCI, and ABDC lists to fully understand the research paradigm through reliable articles.

This study offers crucial insights for both academics and practitioners by pinpointing key performance drivers, including innovation, sustainability, and operational efficiency, that shape the success of SMEs in the food industry. For industry professionals, it highlights actionable strategies to boost competitiveness and resilience in a dynamic market context. Policymakers can leverage these findings to develop supportive frameworks that address resource constraints, facilitate access to innovative technologies, and promote sustainable practices. Furthermore, the research cultivates a cohesive understanding of SME performance, paving the way for more targeted future investigations and industry-wide collaboration to build a robust and sustainable ecosystem.

Researchers in developing economies should undertake investigations to explore the opportunities and challenges confronting small and medium-sized enterprises as they seek to scale up their operations. These studies should focus on analyzing key performance indicators through longitudinal research methodologies. Additionally, future academic inquiries should examine the sustainable practices employed by these SMEs, assessing their environmental and business impacts, as well as identifying strategies to enhance the resilience of their supply chains during periods of disruption. Researchers must also investigate the financial challenges faced by SMEs, evaluate the viability of funding sources, and analyze the influence of training initiatives on improving productivity and overall success. Quality control through certifications such as HACCP enhances product safety and consumer confidence, while research and development investment facilitates innovation aligned with market demands (Mishra & Biswal, 2024). Employee engagement and training in safety, service, and technical skills are vital for productivity. Interdisciplinary collaboration among government entities, academic institutions, and various organizations can bolster the sustainability of small and medium-sized enterprises. Additionally, the application of digital technologies can enhance SMEs' networking capabilities, information-sharing processes, and innovative capacities (Anand et al., 2023). Researchers should evaluate the impact of policy frameworks, government initiatives, and public-private collaborations on the network-based competitiveness of SMEs. Additionally, examining the strategies employed by successful agri-food small and medium-sized enterprises can yield insights into the drivers of internationalization and best management practices. The halal sector has significantly contributed to foreign investment and job creation. For halal food small and medium-sized enterprises, addressing regulatory and cultural challenges, enhancing supply chain transparency, and employing digital technologies can facilitate improved international trade capabilities (Fujiwara, 2022; Elsrag, 2016; Susanty et al., 2024). Future studies should further investigate the relationship between entrepreneurial mindset and governmental support, assessing the influence of specific policy interventions on the competitiveness and innovative capacities of SMEs (Nakku et al., 2020). Analyzing the adaptive strategies employed by small and medium-sized enterprises in response to technological disruptions and evolving global circumstances can provide actionable insights to inform policymaking and industry practices.

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