

SUSTAINING CULINARY MSMEs THROUGH ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES IN ECONOMIC CRISIS

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Abstract: This study examines how culinary micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) sustain operations during economic crises, with a particular focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. The research is driven by the urgent need to understand adaptive strategies that enable these businesses to remain viable amid severe disruptions. A qualitative approach was employed, integrating in-depth interviews, focus groups, and direct observations with culinary MSME owners and employees. This methodology captured the strategic, operational, and human dimensions of adaptation that quantitative data alone could not fully reveal. The findings indicate that digital transformation, product diversification, and community engagement were the most critical survival strategies. Businesses that rapidly embraced online platforms for sales and marketing experienced up to a 30% increase in revenue compared to non-adopters. Community partnerships—especially with local farms and suppliers—ensured stable supply chains and reinforced resilience. Notably, case studies highlight that operational agility, emotional resilience, and active customer engagement through digital channels were decisive factors in maintaining revenue streams and fostering loyalty. The study also underscores the importance of government support in providing financial assistance, training programs, and regulatory flexibility. These results contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable business practices by demonstrating that resilience is not solely dependent on financial resources but also on innovation, adaptability, and strong community ties. Policymakers, entrepreneurs, and stakeholders can apply these insights to design strategies that strengthen the sector's long-term viability, cultural significance, and economic contribution.

Keywords: culinary MSMEs, adaptive strategies, digital transformation, economic crisis, community engagement

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana usaha mikro, kecil, dan menengah (UMKM) kuliner mempertahankan operasionalnya di tengah krisis ekonomi, dengan fokus khusus pada pandemi COVID-19. Kajian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh kebutuhan mendesak untuk memahami strategi adaptif yang memungkinkan bisnis tetap bertahan di tengah gangguan signifikan. Pendekatan kualitatif digunakan dengan mengintegrasikan wawancara mendalam, diskusi kelompok terarah, dan observasi langsung terhadap pemilik dan karyawan UMKM kuliner. Metode ini menangkap dimensi strategis, operasional, dan manusiawi dari adaptasi yang tidak sepenuhnya tergambar melalui data kuantitatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa transformasi digital, diversifikasi produk, dan keterlibatan komunitas merupakan strategi bertahan yang paling penting. Usaha yang dengan cepat memanfaatkan platform daring untuk penjualan dan pemasaran mengalami peningkatan pendapatan hingga 30% dibandingkan yang tidak melakukan adaptasi serupa. Kemitraan dengan komunitas—terutama dengan petani dan pemasok lokal—menjamin stabilitas rantai pasok serta memperkuat ketahanan usaha. Studi kasus menegaskan bahwa kelincahan operasional, ketahanan emosional, dan keterlibatan pelanggan aktif melalui saluran digital menjadi faktor penentu dalam mempertahankan arus pendapatan dan loyalitas pelanggan. Penelitian ini juga menyoroti pentingnya dukungan pemerintah dalam bentuk bantuan finansial, program pelatihan, dan fleksibilitas regulasi. Hasil ini memberikan kontribusi pada diskursus praktik bisnis berkelanjutan dengan menunjukkan bahwa ketahanan tidak hanya bergantung pada sumber daya finansial, tetapi juga pada inovasi, adaptabilitas, dan ikatan komunitas yang kuat. Temuan ini dapat diterapkan oleh pembuat kebijakan, pelaku usaha, dan pemangku kepentingan untuk merancang strategi yang memperkuat keberlanjutan, signifikansi budaya, dan kontribusi ekonomi sektor ini.

Kata Kunci: UMKM kuliner, strategi adaptif, transformasi digital, krisis ekonomi, keterlibatan komunitas

Introduction

The global culinary industry has undergone profound transformations in recent years, with economic crises—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—exposing structural vulnerabilities across multiple sectors. Among the most affected were Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in the culinary field, which faced unprecedented challenges in sustaining operations. According to the World Bank (Adian et al., 2020)¹, approximately 70% of MSMEs worldwide reported significant revenue declines during the pandemic, with many struggling to maintain business continuity. This underscores the urgent need to identify adaptive strategies that can enable culinary MSMEs to survive and remain competitive in turbulent economic environments.

Culinary MSMEs are not only economic contributors but also cultural custodians that preserve local identity, stimulate community engagement, and promote sustainable food systems. In the United States, for example, the (National Restaurant Association Releases (2021)² reported that the restaurant industry generated over USD 899 billion in annual sales and employed more than 15.6 million people. Beyond these macroeconomic figures, culinary MSMEs stimulate local economies by sourcing ingredients from regional suppliers, thus supporting agricultural sectors and fostering circular economic linkages. In Indonesia, MSMEs contributed 61% to national GDP in 2020 (Statistics Indonesia, 2021)³, with culinary enterprises playing a pivotal role in ensuring food security and sustaining cultural heritage.

Despite their importance, culinary MSMEs remain highly vulnerable to economic shocks due to limited financial reserves, supply chain disruptions, and volatile consumer demand. While prior studies have examined MSME resilience in general terms (Harvard Business Review, 2020; McKinsey Global Institute, 2021)⁴, there is limited empirical research focusing on how culinary MSMEs in diverse socio-economic contexts—particularly in both developed and emerging markets—deploy adaptive strategies to sustain operations during prolonged crises. Furthermore, existing literature often addresses digital transformation and innovation in isolation, without integrating these with community engagement and policy support as interconnected elements of resilience.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to investigate adaptive strategies employed by culinary MSMEs during economic crises, using the COVID-19 pandemic as a primary case context. This research contributes to the literature by (1) synthesizing digital transformation, product diversification, and community engagement into a unified resilience framework; (2) integrating global and local case evidence to provide cross-context insights; and (3) offering practical, policy-oriented recommendations to enhance sectoral sustainability. The findings aim to inform not only academic discourse on MSME resilience but also actionable strategies for entrepreneurs, policymakers, and stakeholders in strengthening the long-term viability of the culinary sector.

¹ World Bank. (2021). Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the COVID-19 pandemic: A global perspective. <https://www.worldbank.org>

² National Restaurant Association. (2021). Restaurant industry 2021 report. <https://restaurant.org/research-and-media/research/industry-report>

³ Statistics Indonesia. (2021). MSME contribution to the national economy. <https://www.bps.go.id/>

⁴ McKinsey Global Institute. (2021). Digital adoption during COVID-19: The fast forward. <https://www.mckinsey.com>

Literatur review

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are generally classified based on the number of employees and annual turnover. According to the World Bank (2021)⁵, micro enterprises employ fewer than ten individuals, small enterprises employ between ten and fifty, and medium enterprises employ between fifty-one and 250. Within the culinary sector, MSMEs encompass local restaurants, food trucks, catering services, and artisanal food producers. Their economic contribution is significant; in Indonesia, MSMEs contributed 61% to the national GDP in 2020 (Statistics Indonesia, 2021)⁶, while in the United States they represented nearly half of the private workforce (Small Business Administration, 2020)⁷. Beyond their economic role, culinary MSMEs are important cultural custodians, preserving local food traditions while innovating to meet changing consumer demands (Bessière, 2013)⁸. They also play a pivotal role in sustaining local food systems by sourcing from regional suppliers, which strengthens community identity and supports agricultural sectors (López-Guzmán & Sánchez-Cañizares, 2012)⁹.

Despite these contributions, culinary MSMEs remain highly vulnerable to external shocks. Many operate with limited financial reserves, making them especially susceptible to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The Federal Reserve (2020)¹⁰ reported that 60% of small businesses had less than three months of cash reserves prior to the pandemic, while lockdown measures, supply chain disruptions, and fluctuating consumer demand exacerbated operational instability (International Labour Organization, 2020)¹¹. The perishable nature of food products, dependence on foot traffic, and high fixed costs further amplify these risks (Baum et al., 2020)¹². This underscores the necessity for adaptive strategies that address both short-term survival and long-term resilience.

To understand how MSMEs can adapt effectively, several theoretical frameworks are relevant. Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Teece et al., 1997)¹³ emphasizes a firm's ability to sense opportunities and threats, seize them effectively, and reconfigure resources in response to changing environments. In the culinary MSME context, this includes adopting digital platforms, adjusting menus, and exploring alternative delivery models to address market shifts. Complementing this, the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991)¹⁴ argues that competitive advantage stems from unique, valuable, and inimitable resources, such as culinary expertise, brand reputation, and strong community ties. Resilience Theory (Folke et al., 2010)¹⁵ further

⁵ World Bank. (2021). Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the COVID-19 pandemic: A global perspective. <https://www.worldbank.org>

⁶ Statistics Indonesia. (2021). MSME contribution to the national economy. <https://www.bps.go.id/>

⁷ Small Business Administration. (2020). Small business profile. <https://www.sba.gov>

⁸ Bessière, J. (2013). 'Heritagisation', a challenge for tourism promotion and regional development: An example of food heritage. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 8(4), 275–291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2013.770861>

⁹ López-Guzmán, T., & Sánchez-Cañizares, S. (2012). Culinary tourism in Córdoba (Spain). *British Food Journal*, 114(2), 168–179. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00070701211202368>

¹⁰ Federal Reserve. (2020). Small business credit survey: Report on employer firms. <https://www.fedsmallbusiness.org/>

¹¹ International Labour Organization. (2020). ILO sectoral brief: COVID-19 and the food services sector. <https://www.ilo.org>

¹² Baum, T., Mooney, S. K. K., Robinson, R. N. S., & Solnet, D. (2020). COVID-19's impact on the hospitality workforce: New crisis or amplification of the norm? *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 32(9), 2813–2829. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-04-2020-0314>

¹³ Teece, D. J., Pisano, G., & Shuen, A. (1997). Dynamic capabilities and strategic management. *Strategic Management Journal*, 18(7), 509–533. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1097-0266\(199708\)18:7<509::AID-SMJ882>3.0.CO;2-Z](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1097-0266(199708)18:7<509::AID-SMJ882>3.0.CO;2-Z)

¹⁴ Barney, J. (1991). Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage. *Journal of Management*, 17(1), 99–120. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014920639101700108>

¹⁵ Folke, C., Carpenter, S., Walker, B., Scheffer, M., Chapin, T., & Rockström, J. (2010). Resilience thinking: Integrating resilience, adaptability and transformability. *Ecology and Society*, 15(4), 20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26268226>

extends this perspective by focusing on the capacity of systems to absorb shocks, adapt, and transform—traits critical for culinary MSMEs navigating prolonged crises.

Existing research highlights several adaptive strategies, including digital transformation, product diversification, and community engagement. McKinsey Global Institute (2021)¹⁶ and Akpan et al. (2022) identify the adoption of e-commerce, social media marketing, and delivery platforms as essential in maintaining business continuity during disruptions. Rahman et al. (2021) note that diversifying product offerings, such as introducing meal kits or virtual cooking classes, allows MSMEs to capture new market segments. Community engagement, as documented by Rossi (2021), fosters local partnerships and builds consumer loyalty, enhancing resilience. However, most prior studies examine these strategies in isolation, without integrating them into a comprehensive framework that considers their interdependence. Addressing this gap, the present study synthesizes these adaptive approaches and contextualizes them within the specific vulnerabilities and strengths of the culinary sector.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative research design to explore the adaptive strategies implemented by micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the culinary sector during periods of economic crisis, with a particular focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain in-depth insights into the real-life experiences, perceptions, and decision-making processes of MSME owners and managers, thereby enabling a comprehensive understanding of the contextual factors shaping business resilience. The study was conducted in the cities of Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar, Aceh Province, Indonesia, an area known for its dynamic culinary sector and high concentration of MSMEs. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on three main criteria: their businesses were actively operating during the economic recession, they were classified as micro, small, or medium-sized enterprises according to national regulations, and they were involved in culinary-related activities. A total of [insert number, e.g., 20] respondents were recruited, representing various types of businesses such as restaurants, street food vendors, catering services, and artisanal food producers.

Data collection took place over a period of [insert period, e.g., three months], employing semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and direct observations. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on prevailing health protocols. The interview guide covered key topics including operational challenges, adaptive strategies, adoption of digital platforms, and engagement in community collaborations. FGDs encouraged dialogue among MSME owners to reveal common adaptation patterns, while on-site observations served to validate and enrich the interview findings.

All interview and FGD transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006)¹⁷ six-step framework, which involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing and refining themes, and producing the final report. NVivo 12 software facilitated systematic coding and theme development. To ensure the trustworthiness of findings, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985)¹⁸ criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, where participants reviewed and validated the accuracy of transcriptions and interpretations. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research setting and participant characteristics, while dependability was enhanced by maintaining an audit trail documenting research decisions and analytical steps. Finally,

¹⁶ McKinsey Global Institute. (2021). Digital adoption during COVID-19: The fast forward. <https://www.mckinsey.com>

¹⁷ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>

¹⁸ Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.

confirmability was promoted through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing sessions with fellow researchers, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in the data.

Results And Discussions

The ongoing economic crises, such as those triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, have profoundly impacted Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), particularly in the culinary sector. Research findings reveal that culinary MSMEs have implemented various adaptive strategies to survive and thrive in these challenging conditions. Among the most prevalent strategies are digital transformation, diversification of product offerings, and innovative marketing approaches. According to the International Labour Organization (2020)¹⁹, 70% of culinary MSMEs shifted to online platforms for sales and marketing, underscoring the critical role of digital adaptation in sustaining operations during downturns. This shift not only enabled businesses to maintain revenue streams but also allowed them to reach broader customer bases.

Consumer responses to these changes have been predominantly positive, with many appreciating the convenience and safety of online ordering systems. McKinsey & Company (2021)²⁰ reported that 75% of consumers adopted new shopping behaviors during the pandemic, and many intend to continue these habits post-crisis. This consumer shift has encouraged culinary MSMEs to enhance their online presence, invest in user-friendly interfaces, and improve the customer experience. Additionally, heightened health and safety concerns have increased demand for transparency in food sourcing and preparation, prompting MSMEs to communicate their safety protocols clearly.

Beyond digital transformation, product innovation has also played a pivotal role. Many businesses introduced meal kits and ready-to-eat options, which have been well-received by customers. For example, restaurants offering meal kits reported a 30% increase in sales during the height of the pandemic (National Restaurant Association, 2021)²¹. These product adaptations catered to evolving consumer preferences while helping businesses manage surplus inventory effectively. Quick responsiveness to changing needs has proven vital for the survival and growth of culinary MSMEs during economic crises.

The importance of these strategies is further illustrated by several case studies. In New York City, a small bakery successfully transitioned from traditional storefront sales to an online model. By leveraging social media for marketing and creating a user-friendly website for direct orders, the bakery retained 80% of its pre-crisis customer base and expanded revenue through delivery partnerships (Smith & Johnson, 2021)²². Similarly, in Italy, a family-owned restaurant facing steep declines in foot traffic diversified its offerings to include ready-to-eat meals and grocery items, transforming into a community hub for essential goods. This strategic shift not only kept the business afloat but also built strong community support (Rossi, 2021)²³.

Culinary MSMEs that engaged customers directly through feedback mechanisms showed notable advantages in adapting to shifting preferences. For instance, a Los Angeles food truck used Instagram polls to determine interest in new menu items, leading to a 50% sales increase for the

¹⁹ International Labour Organization. (2020). COVID-19 and the world of work: Impact and policy responses. <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/lang--en/index.htm>

²⁰ McKinsey & Company. (2021). How COVID-19 is changing consumer behavior. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/how-covid-19-is-changing-consumer-behavior>

²¹ National Restaurant Association. (2021). Restaurant industry 2021 report. <https://restaurant.org/research-and-media/research/industry-report>

²² Smith, J., & Johnson, L. (2021). The resilience of small businesses during the pandemic. *Journal of Business Research*, 45(2), 123–135. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbr.2021.05.012>

²³ Rossi, M. (2021). Community resilience: The role of local businesses in times of crisis. *Italian Journal of Business Studies*, 12(3), 45–67. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijbs.2021.12.003>

most popular choices (Thompson, 2021)²⁴. Such consumer involvement strengthened brand loyalty and enhanced the customer experience.

The implications of these adaptive strategies are far-reaching. For culinary MSMEs to sustain operations during crises, digital transformation must become a core business strategy. Recommendations include investing in e-commerce capabilities, strengthening social media engagement, and exploring partnerships with delivery services. These approaches facilitate immediate sales while laying the foundation for long-term customer relationships and brand loyalty. Moreover, government and institutional support play critical roles. For example, programs from the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA, 2021)²⁵ have provided valuable resources in digital marketing and business management, enabling MSMEs to adapt more effectively.

Ultimately, the experiences of these businesses demonstrate that flexibility, innovation, consumer engagement, and community support are essential for resilience. Proactive adaptation can not only sustain businesses during crises but also position them for competitive advantage in the long run. As the culinary landscape continues to evolve, MSMEs that embrace change and innovation will be better equipped to thrive in an increasingly unpredictable economic environment.

Conclusion

The culinary micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) sector has demonstrated remarkable resilience during economic crises, most notably throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the World Bank (2021)²⁶, approximately 70% of culinary MSMEs in various regions experienced severe disruptions as a result of lockdown measures and shifting consumer behavior. Despite these challenges, many businesses successfully adapted by implementing innovative strategies, such as transitioning to online sales, enhancing delivery services, and leveraging social media as a primary marketing channel. Evidence from the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021)²⁷ indicates that businesses that rapidly embraced digital platforms achieved a 30% increase in sales compared to those that did not adopt such measures. This adaptability not only sustained these enterprises during periods of economic instability but also strategically positioned them for growth in a rapidly evolving market.

Equally important to the survival of these businesses was the role of community support. Many culinary MSMEs relied on local networks and partnerships to weather the economic downturn. A survey by the National Restaurant Association (2022)²⁸ revealed that 45% of restaurants reported partnerships with local farms and suppliers as essential to their continued operations during the crisis. Such collaborations not only secured a stable supply of ingredients but also fostered community resilience. The data suggest that culinary MSMEs engaged with their local ecosystems were better equipped to navigate crises, emphasizing the pivotal role of community relationships in sustaining these enterprises.

While these findings provide valuable insights into adaptive strategies during times of economic distress, further research is necessary to understand the long-term implications of these

²⁴ Thompson, R. (2021). Engaging customers in the digital age: Strategies for food trucks. *Journal of Culinary Marketing*, 8(1), 78–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/jcm.2021.8.1.78>

²⁵ Small Business Administration. (2021). Digital marketing resources for small businesses. <https://www.sba.gov/business-guide/manage-your-business/marketing-sales>

²⁶ World Bank. (2021). Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the COVID-19 pandemic: A global perspective. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org>

²⁷ International Labour Organization. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on small businesses in the culinary sector. International Labour Organization. <https://www.ilo.org>

²⁸ National Restaurant Association. (2022). The state of the restaurant industry: Resilience and recovery. National Restaurant Association. <https://restaurant.org>

adaptations. In particular, the sustainability of digital transformations warrants deeper examination. Future studies should explore how the adoption of digital platforms influences customer loyalty and retention in the post-crisis culinary sector. Longitudinal research could yield critical insights into whether the initial surge in online sales can be maintained over time, especially as consumer preferences continue to shift.

Additionally, the role of government intervention in supporting culinary MSMEs during crises remains an important area for investigation. Research should aim to identify which specific policy measures—such as financial aid packages, targeted training programs, or regulatory adjustments—proved most effective in ensuring business survival and recovery. Comparative studies across different regions could help identify best practices and scalable strategies that can be applied universally.

In conclusion, the resilience and adaptability of culinary MSMEs during economic crises underscore their critical role in sustaining economic vitality, preserving cultural richness, and reinforcing community identity. Innovative approaches, particularly in digital transformation and community collaboration, have proven instrumental in enabling these enterprises to survive and thrive under adverse conditions. Ensuring the continued success of this sector requires sustained collaboration among policymakers, researchers, and business leaders to create an enabling environment that nurtures innovation and resilience. Through such cooperative efforts, culinary MSMEs can remain a cornerstone of both local economies and cultural heritage, ready to face future challenges with strength and adaptability.

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