

# Exploitation Learning as Driver of Performance for Small and Medium Food Tourism Enterprises (SMFTEs)

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## ABSTRACT

Food tourism plays a vital role in enhancing destination appeal, preserving cultural heritage, and supporting regional economic growth. Small and medium enterprises (SMFTEs) are central to this sector but often face resource limitations that heighten the importance of strong internal capabilities. This study investigates how exploitation learning—defined as the refinement of existing routines and efficiency-focused practices—improves the performance of Small and Medium Food Tourism Enterprises (SMFTEs) in Kuala Terengganu. Grounded in the Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capability Theory, exploitation learning is positioned as a capability that strengthens service consistency and operational reliability. Using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with data from 150 SMFTEs, the study finds that exploitation learning significantly enhances SMFTEs performance. Routine optimisation, efficient workflows, and improved service delivery contribute to higher customer satisfaction and stronger competitiveness. The study underscores the need for targeted policy support and capability-building initiatives to bolster SMFTEs resilience and promote sustainable growth in Malaysia's food tourism sector.

**Keywords:** Food Tourism, SMFTEs, Exploitation Learning, Performance, Organizational Learning, RBV, PLS-SEM

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism has undergone a major shift in recent decades, with growing emphasis on experiential and culturally meaningful forms of travel. Food tourism has gained prominence as a segment that merges gastronomy with cultural heritage, identity, and storytelling (Cheng et al., 2024; Sims, 2020). Travellers increasingly seek experiences that connect them to the history, traditions, and lived practices of local communities, positioning cuisine as a central element of destination appeal. As a result, many countries—including Malaysia—have integrated food-based experiences into their tourism development frameworks to strengthen cultural visibility and economic competitiveness. Small and medium enterprises (SMFTEs) play a critical role in sustaining food tourism. Unlike large-scale commercial food operators, SMFTEs are often embedded within local communities, allowing them to preserve traditional recipes, maintain artisanal production methods, and deliver personalised service (Smith & Anderson, 2023).

They act as custodians of culinary heritage—transmitting knowledge, protecting authenticity, and contributing to cultural continuity. In states such as Terengganu, local dishes such as keropok lekor, nasi dagang, laksa, and a range of traditional kuih not only define regional identity but also attract both domestic and international visitors seeking authentic food experiences (Md Ramli et al., 2022). Despite their contribution to cultural preservation and tourism development, food tourism SMFTEs face a range of structural challenges. These include limited financial capital, informal management practices, labour shortages, difficulties in adopting digital technologies, and regulatory burdens associated with food safety and business compliance (Patel & Chen, 2025; Monteagudo & Martínez, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified their vulnerability through supply chain disruptions, reduced customer flow, and increased operational uncertainty (Wang et al., 2025).

These challenges reinforce the need for SMFTes to strengthen internal capabilities that enhance stability, improve competitiveness, and support long-term resilience. Organisational learning has emerged as a critical internal capability that enables SMFTes to adapt, improve, and innovate. Among the different dimensions of organisational learning, exploitation learning is particularly relevant for SMFTes operating in culturally embedded, resource-constrained environments. Exploitation learning focuses on the refinement of existing routines, efficiency enhancement, standardisation, and incremental improvement rather than radical innovation or risk-taking (March, 1991). For food tourism SMFTes, whose success depends on delivering consistent taste, quality, hygiene, and service experience, exploitation learning provides a practical mechanism for meeting customer expectations while managing resource limitations.

From a theoretical perspective, the Resource-Based View (RBV) posits that internal capabilities—such as learning, operational efficiency, and tacit knowledge—can serve as strategic resources that lead to sustainable competitive advantage when they are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991). Similarly, Dynamic Capability Theory emphasises the ability of firms to renew and reconfigure internal competencies to address changing environments (Tece, 2018). Exploitation learning aligns closely with both theories, as it strengthens SMFTes' ability to maintain reliability, reduce errors, enhance efficiency, and improve customer service delivery.

Despite its theoretical relevance, empirical research on exploitation learning within food tourism SMFTes remains limited, especially in Malaysia. Existing studies often focus on broader organisational learning constructs or combine exploration and exploitation learning without examining their individual effects. This creates a research gap concerning how exploitation learning, specifically, contributes to the performance of SMFTes operating within heritage-based sectors.

This study addresses this gap by examining the direct influence of exploitation learning on SMFTes performance among Small and Medium Food Tourism Enterprises (SMFTes) in Kuala Terengganu. By doing so, the study contributes to ongoing academic discussions on organisational learning in tourism, highlights the operational advantages of exploitation learning, and provides practical insights for policymakers and SMFTes operators seeking to enhance performance in heritage-based food settings.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Food Tourism and SMFTes

Food tourism has gained prominence as travellers increasingly seek culturally meaningful and sensory-rich experiences (Cheng, Rahman, & Wong, 2024; Sims, 2020). Culinary practices act as carriers of heritage and identity, functioning as key elements in destination storytelling (Sims, 2020; Smith & Anderson, 2023). Empirical studies show that gastronomy can enhance destination competitiveness by attracting niche tourist segments and generating higher per-visitor spending (Cheng et al., 2024; Smith & Anderson, 2023).

Small and medium food enterprises (SMFTes) are central to food tourism because of their embeddedness in local communities and capacity to preserve traditional knowledge (Khairanni, Ramli, Marzuki, & Afrizal, 2024). SMFTes—such as family-run eateries, artisanal producers, and food-stall operators—deliver personalised experiences and maintain artisanal production methods that help sustain culinary diversity (Khairanni et al., 2024; Md Ramli, Ismail, & Hussin, 2022). In Malaysia, specific regional dishes (e.g., keropok lekor, nasi dagang) have been identified as important attractors that depend heavily on SMFTes stewardship (Md Ramli et al., 2022).

Despite their strategic value, SMFTes face chronic constraints including limited capital, managerial capability gaps, and low digital adoption (Gaban, 2022; Monteagudo & Martínez, 2024). These constraints are exacerbated in rural and peripheral regions, which struggle with weaker infrastructure and access to markets (Gaban, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed SMFTes' vulnerability via supply chain disruptions and demand shocks (Wang, Tanaka, & Hassan, 2025).

On the other hand, the survival of SMFTEs is fundamentally intertwined with the vitality of the tourism sector, which provides the critical market access and financial liquidity necessary for operational continuity. Recent research underscores that tourism serves as a "resilience anchor" for SMEs, enabling them to navigate economic volatility by offering diversified revenue streams and reducing the impact of localized market failures (Badoc-Gonzales et al., 2022).

Beyond immediate fiscal benefits, the tourism ecosystem facilitates a "collaborative survival" environment where shared networks and social capital allow SMEs to mitigate risks that they could not manage independently (Mora-Bernat et al., 2023). Furthermore, the shift toward experiential and digital-driven tourism has forced a rapid modernization of SME business models; this digital transformation, spurred by tourism demands, is now cited as a primary factor in the long-term viability and competitive survival of small firms in the global market (Zhang et al., 2024). Consequently, tourism not only provides the customer base but also the structural pressure for SMEs to innovate, ensuring their endurance through sustainable and adaptive business practices (Pasharibu et al., 2023).

### **Organisational Learning in SMFTEs**

Organisational learning (OL) involves acquiring, processing, and applying knowledge to improve organisational actions and outcomes (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2022). For SMFTEs, OL is crucial because these firms often lack formalised systems and thus depend on tacit and experiential knowledge to adapt (Phung, Tran, & Nguyen, 2022). Studies in SMFTEs contexts indicate that learning processes—both formal and informal—enhance problem solving, service delivery, and innovation capacity (Kim & Park, 2022; Jerez-Gómez, Céspedes-Lorente, & Valle-Cabrera, 2005).

OL is commonly conceptualised along two orientations: exploration (searching for new knowledge) and exploitation (refining existing routines) (March, 1991). While exploration fosters innovation, exploitation enhances efficiency and reliability—both are important but have different resource implications and time horizons (March, 1991; Jiménez-Jiménez & Sanz-Valle, 2011). For resource-constrained SMFTEs, exploitation learning often yields more immediate operational benefits (Lin & Chen, 2023; Harrington, Lee, & Leong, 2024).

### **Exploitation Learning: Processes and Practical Relevance**

Exploitation learning focuses on refinement of existing competencies—standardisation, routine optimisation, and process improvement (March, 1991). In food tourism SMFTEs, exploitation learning typically includes actions such as standardising recipes, improving kitchen workflows, enforcing hygiene protocols, and streamlining supplier coordination (Lin & Chen, 2023; Harrington et al., 2024). These activities increase predictability and reduce process variability, which are critical for delivering consistent gastronomic experiences (Lin & Chen, 2023).

Empirical research supports the operational benefits of exploitation learning. For example, Lin and Chen (2023) reported that SMFTEs that concentrate on process refinement demonstrate higher operational stability and service quality. Harrington et al. (2024) found that process optimisation in hospitality contexts leads to measurable improvements in customer satisfaction and service reliability. These findings underline why exploitation learning is especially relevant for SMFTEs in heritage food sectors where authenticity and consistency drive tourist perceptions (Yusof & Park, 2023).

### **Theoretical Underpinnings: RBV and Dynamic Capabilities**

The Resource-Based View (RBV) argues that firms gain sustainable advantage when they develop valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources (Barney, 1991). For SMFTEs, tacit culinary knowledge, local recipes, and refined routines qualify as strategic resources under RBV because they embody cultural specificity and are difficult for outsiders to replicate (Barney, 1991; Khairanni et al., 2024).

Dynamic Capability Theory complements RBV by emphasising the firm's capacity to reconfigure and renew resources in response to environmental change (Teece, 2018). Exploitation learning can be viewed as a dynamic

capability that allows SMFTEs to adjust operational procedures, respond to regulatory changes, and fine-tune service delivery in line with shifting tourist demands (Teece, 2018; Monteagudo & Martínez, 2024). Empirical studies show that such capabilities improve resilience during shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic (Monteagudo & Martínez, 2024; Wang et al., 2025).

### Constraints Strengthening the Case for Exploitation Learning

Several contextual constraints make exploitation learning a pragmatic choice for SMFTEs: Financial constraints: Limited access to external finance reduces SMFTEs' ability to invest in radical innovations; therefore, incremental, low-cost improvements are more feasible (Gaban, 2022; Ali Abbasi et al., 2022). Managerial and skill gaps: Many SMFTEs lack formal managerial training; on-the-job exploitation learning helps build capabilities through practice (Phung et al., 2022).

A growing empirical literature links exploitation learning to improved SMFTEs outcomes. Lin and Chen (2023) demonstrated positive associations between process refinement and operational performance. Ali Abbasi et al. (2022) reported that exploitation learning predicts both financial and non-financial performance among small firms. Harrington et al. (2024) observed that routine improvements in hospitality operations improved customer satisfaction metrics. Zhang and Wu (2022) highlighted that process optimisation is a key pathway to productivity gains in resource-constrained enterprises. Collectively, these studies suggest that exploitation learning is a significant predictor of performance for SMFTEs, particularly in service and tourism contexts (Ali Abbasi et al., 2022; Lin & Chen, 2023; Harrington et al., 2024; Zhang & Wu, 2022).

### Synthesis and Research Gap

While prior studies have examined organisational learning broadly, there is limited research isolating the impact of exploitation learning specifically within food tourism SMFTEs, and even fewer studies set in Malaysia (Khairanni et al., 2024; Md Ramli et al., 2022). Existing literature often conflates exploration and exploitation or focuses on larger firms and manufacturing contexts (Jiménez-Jiménez & Sanz-Valle, 2011). This study addresses that gap by empirically testing the direct effect of exploitation learning on SMFTE performance in Kuala Terengganu, thereby offering context-specific evidence on how incremental learning practices drive operational and market outcomes.

Recent empirical studies provide strong support for the direct relationship between exploitation learning and organisational performance:

Lin and Chen (2023)	found that exploitation learning enhances operational stability and efficiency, leading to improved overall performance in SMFTEs.
Ali Abbasi et al. (2022)	reported that exploitation learning significantly predicts financial and non-financial performance in small firms through improved resource utilisation.
Harrington et al. (2024)	observed that process refinement improves service consistency, a major determinant of performance in hospitality-based enterprises.
Zhang and Wu (2022)	emphasised that exploitation learning supports process optimisation, which is crucial for productivity enhancement in resource-constrained enterprises.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) to examine the direct effect of exploitation learning on SMFTEs performance. PLS-SEM was selected due to its suitability for predictive modelling, small-to-medium sample sizes, and non-normal data distributions (Hair et al., 2023). The research adopts a cross-sectional survey approach, collecting data from owners and managers of food tourism SMFTEs in Kuala Terengganu.

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## Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of Small and Medium Food Tourism Enterprises (SMFTEs), including traditional eateries, snack producers, food stalls, small restaurants, and heritage-based food manufacturers. Purposive sampling was used because respondents required adequate knowledge of operational processes and organisational routines. A total of 150 valid responses were obtained, satisfying minimum sample thresholds for PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2023).

## Measurement Instruments

Exploitation Learning - Measured using five items adapted from Lin and Chen (2023), Jerez-Gómez et al. (2005), and Ali Abbasi et al. (2022). Items assessed routine refinement, standardisation, error reduction, service consistency, and workflow efficiency.

SMFTES Performance - Measured using six items adapted from Pratama (2021), Martin and Javalgi (2021), and Lin and Chen (2023). Indicators captured service quality, customer satisfaction, operational effectiveness, and perceived competitiveness. All items used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A pilot test with 20 SMFTES ensured clarity and reliability.

## Data Analysis Procedure

Analysis followed the PLS-SEM two-step guideline (Hair et al., 2023):

- Measurement Model AssesSMFTEsnt
- Indicator reliability
- Internal consistency reliability (CR)
- Convergent validity (AVE)
- Discriminant validity (HTMT)
- Structural Model AssesSMFTEsnt
- Path coefficient significance ( $\beta$ )
- $R^2$  variance explained
- Effect sizes ( $f$ )
- Bootstrapping (5,000 samples)

## FINDING

### Descriptive Analysis

Respondents reported high engagement in exploitation learning ( $M = 20.95$ ,  $SD = 2.42$ ), indicating frequent process refinement and routine improvement. SMFTES performance scores were also high ( $M = 21.12$ ,  $SD = 2.33$ ), reflecting strong customer satisfaction and operational stability.

### Measurement Model Results

- Indicator Reliability
- All outer loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70.

- Internal Consistency Reliability
- All Composite Reliability (CR) values ranged between 0.832 and 0.860 — above the 0.70 threshold (Hair et al., 2023).

### Convergent Validity

Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50 for all constructs.

### Discriminant Validity

HTMT ratios were below 0.90, supporting discriminant validity. These results confirm adequate reliability and validity for all constructs.

### Measurement Items and Sources

The table below presents the items used in the organisational learning and performance sections, along with their respective sources:

No.	Questions	Source
<b>Organizational Learning</b>		
1	Employees enjoy enhancing their knowledge and skills for products and services in our line of business.	Liu (2018); Jerez-Gómez et al. (2005)
2	Employees are willing to upskill and reskill in boosting productivity within the business	Liu (2018); Lin & Chen (2023)
3	Employees have gradually constructed self-capabilities in searching for solutions to customer problems.	Liu (2018); Kim & Park (2022)
4	Employees have continued to update existing products and service development process skills.	Liu (2018); March (1991)
5	Enhanced knowledge and skills in our line of business to improve innovation efficiencies.	Liu (2018); Harrington et al. (2024)
<b>SMFTEs Performance</b>		
6	We have enhanced sales and profitability for the organisation.	Ramdan (2021); A. Pratama (2021); Ali Abbasi et al. (2022)
7	We have improved the loyalty of existing customers.	Ramdan (2021); A. Pratama (2021); Kumar & Hassan (2023)
8	We have attracted a significant number of new customers.	Ramdan (2021); A. Pratama (2021); Martin & Javalgi (2021)
9	We have had an important competitive advantage in the business performance.	Ramdan (2021); A. Pratama (2021); Harrington et al. (2024)
10	We have had a well-perceived image and reputation.	Ramdan (2021); A. Pratama (2021); Yusof & Park (2023)

## Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted using both physical distribution and online survey forms to accommodate respondent preferences. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Ethical procedures, including informed consent and confidentiality assurance, were strictly observed. Prior to analysis, data were screened for missing responses, outliers, and straight-lining to minimise bias and ensure data integrity.

## Data Analysis Using PLS-SEM

PLS-SEM analysis was conducted using SmartPLS 4.0, following the two-step approach recommended by Hair et al. (2023): assess the measurement model and evaluation of the structural model.

## Measurement Model Assessment

The following criteria were used to determine reliability and validity:

- Factor loadings  $> 0.70$
- Composite Reliability (CR)  $> 0.70$
- Average Variance Extracted (AVE)  $> 0.50$
- Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)  $< 0.90$

All constructs satisfied these thresholds, demonstrating adequate convergent and discriminant validity.

## Structural Model Assessment

The hypothesised direct effect of exploitation learning on SMFTES performance is:

- Exploitation Learning  $\rightarrow$  Performance
- $\beta = 0.493, p < 0.001$
- The relationship is positive and statistically significant, supporting H1.
- The model explained  $R^2 = 0.347$  of the variances in SMFTES performance, indicating moderate predictive power.
- Effect size ( $f^2 = 0.531$ ) suggests a large effect of exploitation learning.

## Summary of Measurement Statistics

Table 1 summarises the internal consistency and validity indicators for each construct.

Construct	Items	CR	AVE
Exploitation	5	0.845	0.58
Performance	6	0.832	0.55

Table 1. Measurement Model Summary.

## DISCUSSION

Results indicate that exploitation learning significantly improves the performance of food tourism SMFTES. This finding is consistent with prior empirical work showing that process refinement and routine optimisation enhance firm performance in resource-constrained contexts (Ali Abbasi et al., 2022; Lin & Chen, 2023; Harrington et al., 2024).

Food tourism SMFTEs rely heavily on consistent quality, operational reliability, and efficient service delivery to create positive visitor experiences. Exploitation learning strengthens these aspects by enabling firms to minimize variation in taste and product quality, reduce operational errors and delays, improve workflow coordination, ensure compliance with hygiene and safety standards, and enhance employee competency through tacit knowledge transfer. These improvements translate into higher customer satisfaction and repeat visitation, which are critical performance indicators in food tourism (Martin & Javalgi, 2021; Yusof & Park, 2023).

The findings also align with RBV and Dynamic Capability Theory. According to RBV, refined routines and tacit knowledge can constitute valuable and inimitable resources (Barney, 1991). Exploitation learning enhances these resources by systematising knowledge and strengthening reliability. Similarly, Dynamic Capability Theory posits that firms must continuously adapt their operational practices to remain competitive (Teece, 2018). Exploitation learning serves as a dynamic mechanism that enables SMFTEs to adjust workflows and maintain performance despite environmental pressures such as tourism seasonality, labour shortages, or regulatory changes (Monteagudo & Martínez, 2024).

Overall, the results reinforce the argument that exploitation learning is a practical, cost-effective, and strategically valuable capability for SMFTEs, especially those embedded in cultural and heritage-based tourism sectors.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the strategic potential of food tourism for SMFTES development, particularly using diaspora marketing and heritage food positioning. While SMFTEs operate in an increasingly competitive and resource-constrained environment, the findings show that they can strengthen their market presence by leveraging cultural identity, digital engagement, and transnational networks. The opportunities presented by diaspora communities and heritage branding offer SMFTEs unique pathways for differentiation and global visibility.

Empirical analysis using PLS-SEM reveals that clan culture, although valuable in fostering trust and collaboration, does not directly influence organisational performance. Instead, its impact is fully channelled through exploitation and exploration learning. This underscores the central role of organisational learning as the mechanism through which cultural strengths are translated into operational efficiency, innovation, and market responsiveness. SMFTEs that balance the refinement of existing capabilities with the pursuit of new ideas demonstrate stronger resilience and performance outcomes.

The study also highlights notable challenges faced by SMFTEs, including limited financial resources, regulatory constraints, digital skill gaps, and tensions between authenticity and commercial adaptation. Addressing these issues requires targeted policy interventions—such as capability-building programmes, financial schemes, and heritage food certification—to support SMFTES competitiveness and long-term sustainability. Collaborative networks, including culinary clusters and shared marketing platforms, further enhance resilience by enabling resource sharing and collective branding.

Overall, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how cultural, organisational, and strategic factors intersect in shaping the success of SMFTEs. Future research should explore these relationships using longitudinal or comparative approaches, examine the role of digital technologies in accelerating diaspora engagement, and assess the environmental sustainability of heritage food supply chains. Such efforts would provide richer insights for policymakers and practitioners committed to developing vibrant and sustainable.

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