

Conceptual Role of Organizational Learning on Clan Culture and Performance of Small and Medium-Sized Food Tourism Enterprises (SMFTES)

Aniza Arifin¹, Wan Mohd Adzim Wan Mohd Zain², Muaz Azinuddin³

¹Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Terengganu, Malaysia

^{2,3}Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu, Malaysia

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.910000307>

Received: 10 October 2025; Accepted: 16 October 2025; Published: 11 November 2025

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a comprehensive concept for advancing learning organization strategies within small and medium-sized food tourism enterprises (SMFTES). This study elucidates how clan culture – distinguished by collaboration, trust, and shared value – shapes organizational learning through both the refinement of existing practices (exploitation) and the pursuit of novel ideas (exploration). These dual learning processes are posited to significantly enhance SMFTE performance by supporting both incremental improvement and transformative innovation. The study highlights the importance of ambidextrous learning, enabling SMFTE to strike a balance between efficiency and innovation, thereby fostering resilience and a sustainable competitive advantage. Practical recommendations are provided for managers and policymakers to cultivate adaptive and sustainable growth, particularly in the rapidly evolving context of food tourism SMFTE.

Keywords: Clan Culture, Organizational Learning, Ambidextrous Learning, SMFTE, Food Tourism.

INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized food tourism enterprises (SMFTES) are widely recognized as the backbone of modern economies, contributing over 99% of all businesses and playing a critical role in innovation, employment, and community development (Popescu et al., 2010). In the context of food tourism—a sector experiencing rapid growth due to travelers' increasing demand for authentic, locally inspired culinary experiences—SMFTE, particularly family-run and community-oriented businesses, play a pivotal role in preserving cultural heritage and stimulating local economies (Phung, Dao, & Nguyen, 2022).

Despite their significance, food tourism SMFTE face persistent challenges, including limited financial and human resources, operational inefficiencies, and intense competition from larger, often international firms. These constraints are further exacerbated by external shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the vulnerability of SMFTE but also underscored their capacity for innovation and adaptation (Zameer et al., 2021). In the same vein, challenges also occurred in relation to high market volatility, intense competition, and managing the continuous shifts between seasonal demands and supply constraints (Lee et al., 2023). Consequently, enhancing SMFTE performance hinges on developing dynamic, non-tangible resources, such as innovation capabilities and strategic resilience, rather than solely relying on scalable assets (Garcia & Chen, 2022).

To address these challenges, scholars and practitioners increasingly emphasize the importance of internal capabilities—specifically, organizational culture and learning—as key drivers of sustainable competitive advantage (Zheng et al., 2021). A clan culture, characterized by a supportive, family-like atmosphere, can foster psychological safety, encourage knowledge sharing, and stimulate both incremental and radical innovation. This paper introduces a conceptual framework that explores how clan culture supports two forms of organizational learning—exploitation and exploration—and how these learning processes mediate the relationship between culture and SMFTE performance, ultimately driving resilience and growth in food tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational Learning

The concept of the learning organization has evolved significantly over the past three decades, with a growing consensus that continuous learning and adaptation are essential for organizational survival and success (Wells & Schminke, 2001; Argyris, 1999). Organizational learning is widely recognized as a central mechanism for driving innovation and competitiveness, particularly in a rapidly changing tourism environment (March, 1991). OL elucidates the process of acquiring, processing, interpreting, and storing knowledge, which subsequently leads to the modification of behavior and the creation of new knowledge within the firm (Ntoto et al., 2024). Organizational learning comprises two primary forms:

1. Exploitation learning: Focuses on refining and improving existing processes, products, and services to enhance efficiency and effectiveness.
2. Exploration learning: Involves experimenting with new ideas, technologies, and business models to discover novel opportunities and solutions.

The ability to balance these two forms—known as organizational ambidexterity—is increasingly viewed as a critical capability for SMFTE aiming to remain agile and competitive (Zheng et al., 2021). In the context of food tourism, exploitation might involve perfecting traditional recipes or streamlining service delivery, whilst exploration could entail developing innovative culinary offerings or leveraging digital marketing platforms to reach new customer segments (Phung et al., 2022).

Recent research elucidates the role of supportive organizational cultures, such as clan culture, in enabling both exploitation and exploration learning by fostering psychological safety, openness to new ideas, and a willingness to take calculated risks (Cameron & Quinn, 2011; Zameer et al., 2021). This dual learning approach not only drives operational excellence but also supports long-term innovation and adaptability.

A notable gap in the existing literature concerns the intersection of OL and SMFTE, particularly focusing on the unique challenges faced by this sector. While research extensively recognizes OL as a vital strategic tool for innovation and competitive advantage within the broader tourism and hospitality industry (Ghaderi et al., 2014; Ubeda-Garcia et al., 2021), its application remains under-investigated in the specific context of food tourism. Existing studies highlight general barriers to OL in SMFTE, such as a lack of managerial expertise, high employee turnover, limited financial resources, and poor communication or collaboration among stakeholders (Cooper, 2015; Jones & Comfort, 2020; Uvarova & Vitola, 2019). However, these challenges are often discussed at a macro-level of tourism or hospitality, failing to isolate the specific constraints and learning needs relevant to the dual nature of FTEs, which involve both culinary production/service and tourism experience creation.

The limited focus on FTEs means there's a scarcity of research detailing how these enterprises acquire, disseminate, and integrate knowledge specific to food heritage, sustainable sourcing practices, food safety regulations, and authentic gastronomic experience design (Dixit & Prayag, 2022). Specifically, research has yet to fully explore the extent to which informal learning mechanisms—critical in small, often family-run food businesses—are effectively leveraged and translated into formal organizational knowledge. Furthermore, despite the recognized importance of collaborative entrepreneurship between agri-food and tourism (Everett & Slocum, 2013), a clear framework for facilitating inter-organizational learning to address issues like skill gaps in promoting traditional food culture and structural barriers in local food networks is still needed (Spilioti & Marinakos, 2025). This oversight represents a significant gap, hindering the development of targeted strategies to enhance the resilience, innovation capability, and long-term sustainability of the burgeoning food tourism sector.

Clan Culture

Clan culture is defined within the Competing Values Framework as a cultural orientation marked by strong interpersonal relationships, mentoring, collaboration, and high levels of employee involvement (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). In SMFTE, where informal structures and close-knit teams are prevalent, clan culture is especially

beneficial. It fosters a sense of belonging, mutual trust, and shared purpose, which are critical for organizational cohesion and adaptability (Phung et al., 2022).

Empirical studies in the tourism sector have demonstrated that clan culture leads to higher employee satisfaction, lower turnover rates, and improved service quality, all of which contribute to enhanced organizational performance (Choi, Kim, & McGinley, 2017). Zameer et al. (2021) further highlight that clan-oriented environments promote open communication and trust, facilitating effective knowledge sharing and collaborative problem-solving. Such cultures are particularly advantageous in dynamic sectors, including food tourism, where rapid adaptation to changing customer preferences and market conditions is cardinal.

Moreover, clan culture supports the development of informal learning networks, mentorship, and collective problem-solving, which are crucial for fostering innovation and continuous improvement (Phung et al., 2022; Cameron & Quinn, 2011). These cultural attributes not only enhance day-to-day operations but also enable SMFTE to respond proactively to external shocks and opportunities

Despite the recognition that Clan Culture—characterized by a focus on internal cohesion, teamwork, loyalty, and a family-like atmosphere (Cameron & Quinn, 2022)—is prevalent and often positively related to performance in the broader restaurant and hospitality sectors (Koutroumanis & Alexakis, 2009; Khatami, Ferraris, De Bernardi, & Cantino, 2021), a significant gap exists in applying this concept specifically to the multifaceted domain of food tourism enterprises (FTEs). Existing literature often analyzes Clan Culture within traditional family firms or general hospitality settings (Farooq, 2018; Khatami et al., 2020), overlooking the unique challenges and benefits for FTEs that blend food production, service, and a curated tourist experience. Specifically, research lacks empirical investigation into the potential dualities of Clan Culture in this context: while it can foster strong internal trust and commitment around food heritage (Spilioti, & Marinakos, 2025; Almaududi, Situngkir, Edward, and Amin, 2021), it may also create insularity and a resistance to external learning and innovation that is critical for adapting to dynamic tourist demands and evolving sustainability standards (Linnenluecke et al., 2009). The long-term sustainability implications of a predominantly Clan Culture, particularly its impact on business growth, professionalization, and its capacity to engage in the necessary inter-organizational learning with the wider agri-food network, remain largely theoretical or underexplored.

The Dynamics of SMFTE Performance, Organizational Learning and Clan Culture

SMFTE positively impacts the tourism economy, often succeeding by leveraging unique local food resources, which differentiates them in a competitive market (Smith & Johnson, 2024). In a specific case, the ability of SMFTE to surpass competitors is increasingly viewed through the lens of elusive, resource-based capabilities, with Organizational Learning (OL) being one of the most critical. Recent empirical studies have consistently established a direct and positive link between robust OL capabilities and superior SMFTE performance, whether measured through financial metrics like profitability or non-financial outcomes such as innovativeness (Amoah et al., 2023; Ntoto et al., 2024). Specifically, OL has been shown to enhance an organization's resilience and ability to thrive in volatile market conditions by facilitating the adoption of new strategies, such as the effective implementation of digital marketing, thereby improving competitive advantage (Ali Abbasi et al., 2022). This strong association highlights OL as a necessary foundation for sustained success in the dynamic SMFTE sector.

The capacity for Organizational Learning, however, is not uniform across firms but is largely conditioned by the underlying organizational culture. Among the competing culture typologies, the Clan Culture—characterized by internal focus, flexibility, human relations, cohesion, teamwork, and commitment—is considered particularly conducive to fostering learning (Al Mutawa & Saeed Al Mubarak, 2024). In a Clan-oriented SMFTE, employee involvement and a shared sense of "family" are prioritized, creating a psychologically safe environment where knowledge sharing, risk-taking, and experimentation are encouraged (Githuku et al., 2022). Research suggests that this type of culture is directly associated with key knowledge management processes, particularly knowledge creation and sharing, making it an essential antecedent for effective OL (Al Mutawa & Saeed Al Mubarak, 2024). Therefore, the Clan Culture acts as the fertile ground necessary for OL to take root and flourish, mediating the development of a strategic capability.

Synthesizing these findings, the literature posits a strong theoretical and empirical model where the Clan Culture indirectly influences SMFTE performance by fostering Organizational Learning. The cooperative and supportive nature of a Clan Culture diminishes the reluctance to share tacit knowledge, encourages active participation in learning activities, and ensures the collective absorption of new information, all of which are central to OL (Githuku et al., 2022). Table 1 presents the major findings, organized into four main themes that collectively inform a conceptual model on SMFTE.

Table 1: Main findings based on four themes examined on SMFTE

Theme	Key Authors	Major Findings
Clan Culture	Cameron & Quinn (2011)	Promotes teamwork, trust, and performance in SMFTE and tourism
Organizational Learning	March (1991); Jerez-Gómez et al. (2005)	Exploitation and exploration are both vital; culture enhances learning
Ambidexterity	Wang & Rafiq (2014); Zheng et al. (2021)	Balancing learning modes drives innovation and SMFTE success
Mediation Role of Learning	Zameer et al. (2021); Phung et al. (2022)	Learning mediates the culture–performance relationship in tourism SMFTE

Source: Author

This relationship is especially pertinent in SMFTE, where the owner's influence is substantial and informal structures allow cultural values to translate quickly into operational practices (Ntoto et al., 2024). Ultimately, the Clan Culture's emphasis on collective commitment and internal integration cultivates an OL environment that translates directly into enhanced performance, such as greater innovative output or improved business process efficiency, providing a critical competitive edge in an increasingly volatile global economy (Amoah et al., 2023).

Organizational Learning as a Mediator Between Culture and Performance

The mediating role of organizational learning in the relationship between culture and performance has been extensively examined in recent literature. Zameer et al. (2021) found that knowledge management and learning mechanisms act as mediators, linking organizational culture to innovation performance. Similarly, Zheng et al. (2021) demonstrated that knowledge management capabilities serve as a conduit between culture, strategy, and organizational effectiveness.

In tourism SMFTE, learning-focused cultures enhance agility and responsiveness, enabling firms to anticipate and adapt to shifts in consumer demand and industry competition (Phung et al., 2022). Jerez-Gómez et al. (2005) reported that cultures supportive of learning drive both exploitation and exploration, while Wang and Rafiq (2014) confirmed that ambidextrous learning is positively associated with innovation and SMFTE performance.

These findings suggest that organizational learning is a vital mechanism through which clan culture translates into superior business outcomes. By fostering both incremental improvements and breakthrough innovations, learning mediates the impact of culture on performance, enabling SMFTE to thrive in dynamic and uncertain environments.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual research approach, aiming to develop and propose a theoretical framework that links clan culture, organizational learning, and performance in food tourism SMFTE. The focus is on construct development, relationship modelling, and hypothesis generation, rather than empirical data collection at this stage. The proposed framework is grounded in established theories, including:

1. The Competing Values Framework (Cameron & Quinn, 2011), provides a basis for understanding organizational culture types.

2. Organizational learning theory (Argyris & Schön, 1995; March, 1991), explains how organizations acquire, share, and utilize knowledge.
3. The concept of organizational ambidexterity (Wang & Rafiq, 2014), highlights the importance of balancing exploitation and exploration learning.

The framework integrates empirical findings from recent studies (2019–2025) to hypothesize how clan culture influences both exploitation and exploration learning, and how these learning types mediate the relationship between culture and organizational performance. This conceptual model sets the stage for future empirical validation using quantitative methods such as Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which is well-suited for testing complex relationships among latent constructs in organizational research (Zheng et al., 2021).

Future research should focus on collecting primary data from food tourism SMFTE across different regions to empirically test the proposed model, examine potential moderating variables (e.g., digitalization, market turbulence), and explore the generalizability of findings across various tourism contexts.

DISCUSSION

The conceptual model presented in this paper underscores the critical role of internal organizational dynamics in shaping the performance of food tourism SMFTE. Clan culture is shown to have both direct and indirect effects on organizational performance, with the indirect effects mediated by ambidextrous learning behaviors. Exploitation learning enables SMFTE to enhance efficiency, refine traditional practices, and deliver consistent quality, which is especially important in maintaining customer satisfaction and operational stability. Exploration learning, on the other hand, allows SMFTE to innovate, adapt to emerging trends, and differentiate itself in a competitive marketplace. The ability to balance these two forms of learning is particularly vital in the food tourism sector, where customer preferences, technological advancements, and market conditions are in constant flux.

A clan culture creates the psychological safety and trust necessary for both types of learning to flourish. Employees in such environments are more likely to share knowledge, experiment with new ideas, and collaborate on problem-solving initiatives. This, in turn, enhances the organization's capacity for innovation, resilience, and long-term sustainability (Phung et al., 2022; Zameer et al., 2021).

For practitioners, these findings highlight the importance of cultivating a cohesive, trust-based culture that supports knowledge sharing and experimentation. Tourism agencies and SMFTE development programs should prioritize leadership training, organizational learning interventions, and the development of informal learning networks that align with clan culture values. Policymakers can further support these efforts by providing resources, training, and incentives for SMFTE to invest in organizational learning and innovation.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper advances the understanding of how clan culture and organizational learning interact to influence the performance of Small and Medium Food Tourism Enterprises. By proposing a framework that integrates exploitation and exploration learning as mediating mechanisms, it underscores the significance of internal cultural and learning capabilities in achieving sustainable competitive advantage.

The model contributes to organizational theory by emphasizing the mediating role of ambidextrous learning and offers practical value for SMFTE managers and policymakers. It also points to the need for future research to validate the model across various tourism contexts empirically and to explore how external factors—such as digitalization, policy support, and market turbulence—interact with internal learning and cultural dynamics.

In summary, fostering a clan culture that supports both exploitation and exploration learning is essential for food tourism SMFTE seeking to thrive in an increasingly complex and competitive environment. By investing in organizational learning and cultivating a supportive culture, SMFTE can enhance its resilience, drive innovation, and achieve long-term success.

REFERENCES

1. Ali Abbasi, A. S., Al-Khasawneh, A., & Omar, O. H. (2022). Organizational learning and business performance: A systematic literature review and future research agenda. *Management Review Quarterly*, 72(4), 1185–1220.
2. Almaududi, S., Situngkir, S., Edward, E., & Amin, S. (2021). Clan-type organizational culture in the food and beverage industry in Jambi province. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science* (2147-4478), 10(8), 114–126.
3. Al Mutawa, M., & Saeed Al Mubarak, A. (2024). Cultivating success: organizational culture's influence on innovation and performance in SMFTE. *Cogent Business & Management*, 11(1).
4. Amoah, J., Chen, H., An, C., & Wang, J. (2023). Advancing SMFTE performance: A novel application of the technological-organizational-environment framework in social media marketing adoption. *Cogent Business & Management*, 10(1).
5. Argyris, C. (1999). *On Organizational Learning* (2nd ed.). Blackwell.
6. Cameron, K. S., & Quinn, R. E. (2011). *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture: Based on the Competing Values Framework* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
7. Cameron, K. S., & Quinn, R. E. (2022). *Diagnosing and changing organizational culture: Based on the Competing Values Framework* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
8. Choi, Y., Kim, J., & McGinley, S. (2017). The effects of organizational culture on organizational effectiveness: The mediating role of organizational learning. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 65, 89–97.
9. Cooper, C. (2015). Knowledge management in tourism and hospitality. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 23(1), 1–4.
10. Dixit, S. K., & Prayag, G. (2022). The nexus of food and tourism: A critical review of literature and future research agenda. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 44, 101018.
11. Everett, A. M., & Slocum, S. L. (2013). The role of agri-food tourism in community development. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 20(2), 159–165.
12. Farooq, M. (2018). The impact of clan culture on knowledge sharing and employee performance in SMEs. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 22(4), 780–801.
13. Ghaderi, Z., Henderson, J. C., & Yang, J. (2014). Crisis management in the tourism industry: Organisational learning and change. *Tourism Management*, 40, 1–9.
14. Githuku, J. N., Kinyua, G. M., & Muchemi, A. W. (2022). Learning Organization Culture and Firm Performance: A Review of Literature. *The East African Journal of Business and Economics*, 5(1), 148–156.
15. Jerez-Gómez, P., Céspedes-Lorente, J., & Valle-Cabrera, R. (2005). Organizational learning capability: A proposal of measurement. *Journal of Business Research*, 58(6), 715–725.
16. Jones, P., & Comfort, D. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and the hospitality industry: A perspective on organizational learning and change. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 32(12), 3981–3993.
17. Khatami, F., Ferraris, A., De Bernardi, P., & Cantino, V. (2021). The relationship between food heritage and clan culture: is “familiness” the missing link in SMEs? *British Food Journal*, 123(1), 337–354.
18. Khatami, S., Suki, N. M., & Ab Hamid, N. R. (2020). The influence of clan culture on knowledge sharing in small and medium enterprises: Antecedents and outcomes. *Journal of Asian Finance, Economics and Business*, 7(12), 433–442.
19. Koutroumanis, D., & Alexakis, P. (2009). Organizational culture in the restaurant industry. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 28(4), 585–593.
20. Linnenluecke, M. K., Griffiths, A., & Russell, S. (2009). Organisational climate and culture for corporate sustainability: The role of clan culture in creating social performance. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 89(1), 107–124.
21. March, J. G. (1991). Exploration and exploitation in organizational learning. *Organization Science*, 2(1), 71–87.
22. Ntoto, F. M. Y., Cavusoglu, B., & Ismael, G. Y. (2024). Organizational culture and organizational learning: Role of environmental culture and business strategy in SMFTE. *Asian Development Policy Review*, 12(3), 194–207.

23. Phung, T. N., Dao, H. L., & Nguyen, H. T. (2022). Cultural learning and performance outcomes in small tourism enterprises: A structural approach. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 42, 100987.
24. Popescu, D. I., et al. (2010). SMFTE and the learning organization. *Annals of the University of Oradea, Economic Science Series*, 19(2), 116-121.
25. Richman-Hirsh, W. L. (2001). The impact of organizational structure and culture on learning. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 12(2), 127-144.
26. Spilioti, M., & Marinakos, K. (2025). Food Culture: Strengthening Collaborative Entrepreneurship Between Tourism and Agri-Food Businesses. *Administrative Sciences*, 15(8), 291.
27. Ubada-Garcia, M., Gascó, J. L., & Montoro-Sánchez, M. Á. (2021). Organizational learning and ambidexterity in hospitality firms. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 92, 102758.
28. Uvarova, I., & Vitola, A. (2019). Organizational learning for innovation in tourism SMEs. *Journal of Security and Sustainability Issues*, 8(3), 517–531.
29. Wang, C. L., & Rafiq, M. (2014). Ambidextrous organizational culture, contextual ambidexterity and new product innovation: A comparative study of UK and Chinese high-tech firms. *British Journal of Management*, 25(1), 58-76.
30. Wells, D., & Schminke, M. (2001). Ethical development and human resources training: An integrative framework. *Human Resource Management Review*, 11(1-2), 135-158.
31. Zameer, H., Wang, Y., YaSMFTEen, H., & Maqbool, A. (2021). Linking organizational culture with knowledge management and innovation performance. *Journal of Innovation & Knowledge*, 6(4), 255–265.
32. Zheng, W., Yang, B., & McLean, G. N. (2021). Linking organizational culture, structure, strategy, and organizational effectiveness: Mediating role of knowledge management. *Journal of Business Research*, 134, 310–320.