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VALIDATING A SOCIAL COMMERCE AND BRAND AWARENESS MODEL FOR MICRO FOODPRENUER PERFORMANCE: AN EVIDENCE FROM A MALAYSIAN PILOT STUDY.

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Abstract

This study examines the development and validation of a research instrument aimed at assessing the impact of social commerce engagement and brand awareness on business performance among micro foodpreneurs in Malaysia. A pilot study involving 33 participants was conducted to evaluate the instrument's reliability and validity. The survey underwent content validation by experts, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), Cronbach's alpha, and regression analysis. All constructs exhibited strong internal consistency ($\alpha > 0.7$), as well as convergent and discriminant validity, and demonstrated statistical significance in predicting business performance. The findings affirm that the instrument is robust, reliable, and appropriate for use in a larger scale quantitative study. Implications for researchers and practitioners in digital entrepreneurship are discussed.

Keywords: Social commerce engagement, Brand awareness, Business performance, Micro foodpreneurs, Reliability and validity

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Food security has become a critical global concern, with Malaysia prioritising sector specific policies to ensure sufficient food and agricultural products (Haque et al., 2023). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), established in 2015, addresses issues of poverty, inequality, and climate change, extending the Millennium Development Goals framework (Mahdi et al., 2023). Despite progress, Malaysia dropped from 40th to 41st on the Global Food Security Index, though 26 food items achieved self-sufficiency in 2021 (Yap, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted SMEs, which recorded negative GDP growth (DOSM, 2020), yet it accelerated online shopping, creating opportunities for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to market home cooked food through social media platforms (Yeo, 2020).

Micro foodpreneurs are the owners of small scale, localised food businesses and play a vital role in economic growth by leveraging innovation and adaptability (Azman & Majid, 2023). Social commerce, integrating social media and e-commerce, has transformed consumer habits, enhanced brand awareness, and improved SME performance (Quintiro-Angel et al., 2022; Andon & Annuar, 2023). Supported by government initiatives such as the Madani Economy Framework and microfinance schemes (Yap, 2023; Bank Negara Malaysia, 2023), micro foodpreneurs increasingly use platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram to expand customer reach, build brand recognition, and sustain competitiveness.

Hence, this study investigates the impact of social commerce determinants namely, reviews and ratings, social media engagement, influencers, and convenience on the business performance of Malaysian micro foodpreneurs with brand awareness serving as a mediating factor. The anticipated findings aim to offer insights that enhance entrepreneurial resilience, foster sustainable growth, and contribute to the advancement of Malaysia's digital economy.

1.2 Statement of Problem

In recent years, the emergence and evolution of social commerce have reshaped the business landscape for micro foodpreneurs in Malaysia. Social commerce determinants such as online reviews, customer ratings, social media engagement, influencer marketing, and digital convenience have become critical tools for business visibility and competitiveness. However, several pressing challenges remain that hinder micro foodpreneurs from fully benefiting from these opportunities.

First, there is limited understanding of the factors influencing social commerce adoption among micro foodpreneurs. Although prior studies highlight technological readiness, organizational capacity, and trust as key factors for adoption in SMEs, research focusing specifically on micro food enterprises is scarce. This lack of empirical evidence restricts the ability of micro foodpreneurs to harness social media effectively for sustainable business growth (Ali et al., 2020).

Second, many micro foodpreneurs face persistent difficulties in establishing brand awareness, a vital element for long term competitiveness. Despite evidence that social media marketing enhances both brand awareness and customer loyalty, micro foodpreneurs often struggle due to limited financial resources,

insufficient time, and inadequate technical expertise to execute effective branding strategies (Akbar et al., 2024).

Third, a notable research gap exists concerning the influence of social commerce determinants such as online reviews, engagement, and influencer-driven promotions on business performance. While studies on small online businesses in specific contexts, such as Malacca, demonstrate positive effects of social media communication on sales performance, comprehensive evidence for micro-foodpreneurs remains underdeveloped (Atirah et al., 2020).

These gaps underscore the need for focused investigation, as addressing them will provide valuable insights into how social commerce can strengthen brand awareness and improve performance among Malaysia's micro food enterprises.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study's specific objectives are:

1. To analyse the impact of social commerce activities reviews and ratings, social media engagement, influencer collaborations, and convenience on micro foodpreneurs' business performance.
2. To investigate the mediating role of brand awareness in the relationship between social commerce and business performance.
3. To identify the social commerce determinants that most effectively enhance brand awareness.
4. To determine the impact of brand awareness on business performance.

1.4 Research Questions

This study's research questions are:

1. How do social commerce activities specifically reviews and ratings, social media engagement, influencer collaborations, and convenience affect the business performance of micro foodpreneurs in Malaysia?
2. What role does brand awareness play as a mediating factor between social commerce activities and business performance?
3. Which social commerce determinants are most effective in enhancing brand awareness among micro foodpreneurs in Malaysia?
4. How does brand awareness influence the overall business performance of micro foodpreneurs?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it explores the relationship between social commerce determinants and the business performance of micro foodpreneurs in Malaysia, with brand awareness positioned as a mediating factor. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET), the study provides a theoretical lens to explain how interactions and exchanges on social media through reviews and ratings, influencer collaborations, customer engagement, and convenience create value that can strengthen brand awareness and ultimately improve business performance. The findings are relevant for two main groups. For micro foodpreneurs, understanding how social commerce practices shape brand awareness can enhance business outcomes by increasing sales, improving customer loyalty, and fostering long-term sustainability. Strategic use of social media engagement, positive reviews, and influencer partnerships allows micro businesses to expand market reach, optimize marketing

strategies, and strengthen competitiveness (Marolt et al., 2022; Akbar et al., 2024; Hanifah et al., 2025).

For academia and industry, this research bridges an important gap by linking social commerce determinants, brand awareness, and micro foodpreneurs' performance. It contributes to theoretical development and provides insights into consumer behaviour and digital marketing strategies, supporting practical applications for entrepreneurs, policymakers, and researchers (Marolt et al., 2022; Akbar et al., 2024). Overall, the study offers actionable recommendations for strategic planning, innovation, and resource allocation, enhancing competitiveness and sustainability in the Malaysian food industry.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Social commerce integrates social media and e-commerce to enhance customer engagement, decision-making, and business performance (Marolt et al., 2022). For micro foodpreneurs in Malaysia, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter provide opportunities to promote products, connect with customers, and drive sales (Hassan & Shahzad, 2022). However, success depends on key determinants such as reviews and ratings, engagement, influencers, and convenience, which also shape brand awareness. Guided by Social Exchange Theory, this chapter examines how these determinants influence micro-foodpreneurs' performance, with brand awareness as a mediator, offering insights for entrepreneurs, policymakers, and researchers to strengthen the sector's sustainability.

2.2 Review of Previous Research

2.2.1 Definition of Micro Foodpreneurs in Malaysia

According to Ramli et al. (2023), successful SMEs exhibit core capabilities such as risk-taking, product innovation, and the ability to identify growth opportunities. However, the extent of digital transformation adoption varies, with some firms demonstrating strong technological preparedness, moderate digitization, and limited digital competence. Notably, Azman and Majid (2023) highlight that digital tools, including virtual reality technologies, played a critical role in preventing economic collapse during the global health crisis, underscoring the importance of embracing digitalization. Within the food sector, micro foodpreneurs have shown resilience by adapting quickly to change through innovative strategies in products, services, processes, management, and marketing, all of which enhance business performance. This adaptability also reinforces the importance of competitive advantage, where innovation in goods, services, and concepts enables small businesses to sustain operations during periods of crisis (Adam & Alarifi, 2021). By leveraging social media effectively while prioritizing product quality and customer service, micro foodpreneurs can secure sustainable growth and long-term profitability in a dynamic industry.

2.2.2 The Scope of Micro Foodpreneurs in Malaysia

Micro foodpreneurs represent a rapidly growing segment within Malaysia's food industry, creating opportunities for individuals to establish and expand small-scale businesses. Despite their potential, Malaysian SMEs often face constraints such as limited cash flow and restricted access to financing, making it difficult for them to invest and scale effectively (Bagwell, 2023). In recent years, however, the utilization of information and communications technology (ICT) has transformed the way these entrepreneurs operate and promote their businesses. ICT provides competitive

advantages through tools such as digital marketing strategies, e-commerce platforms, and customer relationship management systems that enable micro foodpreneurs to attract and retain customers. In addition, ICT-driven solutions like inventory management software, supply chain analytics, and online procurement platforms help streamline operations, reduce costs, and improve overall efficiency (Hisham, 2023).

Nevertheless, micro foodpreneurs remain vulnerable to economic fluctuations, where resource limitations and risk aversion restrict their ability to innovate. To address these challenges, social commerce offers new opportunities to strengthen their market position. Guided by Social Exchange Theory (SET), this research examines how determinants of social commerce such as review ratings, influencers, customer engagement, and convenience affect micro foodpreneurs' business performance, with brand awareness serving as a key mediating factor.

2.2.3 Social Commerce

Social commerce has emerged as a significant component of e-commerce, as it integrates reviews, ratings, recommendations, and social networking features into online platforms. Almahdi (2022) defines social commerce as the adoption of the social media environment to facilitate e-commerce activities and transactions. However, the literature shows that definitions vary across disciplines (Zhao et al., 2023). The most widely accepted view considers social commerce as the use of social networks to enable entrepreneurs to market, sell, and share product or service information in online marketplaces (Zhao et al., 2023). Unlike traditional e-commerce, social commerce emphasizes community-driven engagement, interactive communication, and user-generated content, making it more dynamic and personalized. Rahman et al. (2022) highlight that social commerce encompasses several key aspects: social shopping, the ability to provide ratings, reviews, and comments, product discovery structured around themes or categories, and the integration of social applications and advertisements. Its unique strength lies in enabling users to exchange reliable product information, compare alternatives, and obtain better deals, thereby shaping purchasing decisions. In this context, this research focuses on the development of social commerce and its impact on Malaysian micro foodpreneurs, particularly regarding business performance and brand awareness.

2.3 Independent, Mediating and Dependent Variables

2.3.1 Reviews and ratings (Independent Variable)

The rise in demand has led to the widespread use of social media platforms by entrepreneurs, transforming social commerce into the mainstream of online business marketing (Rahman et al., 2022). Social commerce encompasses social shopping, customer feedback, ratings and reviews, and product discovery within specific themes, tasks, or categories (Rahman et al., 2022). Reviews and ratings reflect consumers' assessments of whether a product meets their expectations, which can vary significantly among individuals (Adam, 2023). Furthermore, Adam (2023) emphasizes that food and service quality plays a crucial role in enhancing consumer trust, loyalty, and business sustainability. Furthermore, word-of-mouth, customer testimonials, and perceived experiences strongly influence customer motivation. Past studies show that social media provides customers with extensive information about products or services, often through reviews and ratings shared by previous buyers (Shandy et al., 2023). Positive reviews can generate interest, shape purchase intentions, and ultimately increase sales (Shandy et al., 2023). For micro

foodpreneurs, positive reviews and ratings are especially valuable in building reputation and credibility. Favourable customer feedback on social commerce platforms enhances trust, increases market visibility, and strengthens competitiveness. This trust can be further cultivated by actively encouraging customers to leave reviews and ratings.

2.3.2 Social media engagement (Independent Variable)

The second factor influencing marketing outcomes is the level of social media engagement. Engagement plays a critical role in determining marketing performance, especially in larger firms where customer interaction has been shown to directly influence outcomes (Rahmawati et al., 2023). It typically encompasses activities such as liking, commenting, sharing, or clicking on posts, videos, and images (Salleh et al., 2021). However, research findings have been mixed. For instance, Herlina et al. (2022) observed that during the pandemic, business activity on social media did not always translate into better marketing performance. Similarly, Da Silva Wegner et al. (2023) argue that many firms still struggle to align their social media content with their intended audience.

Nonetheless, the broader adoption of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Twitter over the past decade has reshaped communication by enabling instant and visually appealing interactions between businesses and customers (Mohd Johan et al., 2022). This trend has increased scholarly and practical interest in the role of engagement. Importantly, strong engagement supports brand development, enhances trust, and strengthens market presence (Song et al., 2023). For micro foodpreneurs, engaged customers contribute to loyalty, satisfaction, and innovation, fostering new product development, viral marketing, and ultimately, sustained sales growth (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021).

2.3.3 Social media influencer (Independent Variable)

The third determinant is the role of social media influencers, who have become a central force in shaping marketing strategies and outcomes. Their impact extends across industries, including micro foodpreneurs, who often rely on digital presence to build visibility and credibility. With the rapid expansion of platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, and Twitter, a new generation of influencers has emerged (Malik et al., 2022). These individuals, often referred to as micro-celebrities or active digital personalities, attract substantial followings by consistently creating engaging content that blends personal insights with product endorsements (Matin et al., 2022).

Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers with relatable lifestyles are often viewed as more authentic and trustworthy, enabling them to connect more effectively with niche audiences. Consumers tend to build stronger attachments to brands associated with influencers who embody competence, autonomy, and relatability (Matin et al., 2022). For micro foodpreneurs, this dynamic is particularly valuable, as influencers can amplify brand awareness, expand market reach, and encourage higher levels of customer engagement. Ultimately, by shaping consumer perceptions and purchase intentions, social media influencers' contribute significantly to business growth. In this context, brand awareness becomes the crucial mediator that translates influencer credibility and audience connection into enhanced performance for micro foodpreneurs.

2.3.4 Convenience (Independent Variable)

Convenience plays a crucial role in shaping micro foodpreneurs' business performance within the social commerce context, with brand awareness acting as an important mediator. Consumers are increasingly drawn to easy-to-use and user-friendly technologies that streamline their purchasing journey, such as simplified ordering systems, secure digital payments, mobile applications, online visibility, and responsive customer support. The appeal of such features lies in the time efficiency and reduced effort required, making adoption more seamless. Adam (2023) highlights that convenience directly influences consumer behaviour, particularly their intention to purchase from food delivery platforms, while also shaping their perceptions and attitudes toward the service. Digital payment options further reinforce this preference, as consumers value flexibility and efficiency when transacting online. Supporting this, Bazi et al. (2022) observe that most retailers now operate through a hybrid model that combines physical and online presence to meet evolving consumer needs. In Malaysia, regulatory initiatives have also encouraged convenience, such as Bank Negara Malaysia's decision to waive transaction fees for micro and small businesses adopting DuitNow QR payments, thereby promoting cost-effective, cashless transactions (Chemat, 2023). Altogether, the integration of convenience in social commerce strengthens consumer trust, enhances brand visibility, and ultimately improves the performance of micro foodpreneurs.

2.3.5 Brand Awareness (Mediating Variable)

Brand awareness refers to the degree to which consumers can identify and recall a product by its name, shaping their purchasing behaviour and contributing to outcomes such as higher sales and market share (Anand, 2023). In the food sector, particularly for micro foodpreneurs, brand awareness is critical in attracting consumer attention, building loyalty, and differentiating offerings in a competitive environment (Utami et al., 2024). It not only enhances recognition but also plays a vital role in fostering trust and credibility, which are essential for growth and sustainability (Utama et al., 2023). For micro foodpreneurs with limited resources, developing brand awareness provides a strategic advantage in retaining customers and securing long-term success, as consumers often associate recognizable brands with consistent quality and reliability (Utami et al., 2024). To strengthen brand awareness, micro foodpreneurs can adopt cost-efficient strategies through social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, which enable direct engagement, storytelling, and wider visibility (Komara et al., 2024). Storytelling helps communicate the brand's unique identity and values, while interactive features such as polls, contests, and user-generated content deepen consumer involvement (Husriadi, 2024). Collaborating with influencers and maintaining consistent brand elements, including packaging and visual design, further reinforce recognition and trust (Komara et al., 2024; Husriadi, 2024). In sum, prioritizing brand awareness enables micro foodpreneurs to enhance credibility, establish loyalty, and achieve sustainable performance in the dynamic food industry (Utama et al., 2023; Utami et al., 2024).

2.3.6 Micro Foodpreneurs' Business Performance (Dependent Variable)

Social commerce has emerged as a crucial driver of growth and competitiveness for micro foodpreneurs in Malaysia. Leveraging social media platforms, these entrepreneurs can reach broader audiences, strengthen consumer engagement, and improve overall business performance. Unlike traditional e-commerce, which typically relies on standalone online stores, social commerce

integrates online communities, interactive features, and user-generated content that encourage two-way interactions between sellers and buyers (Rahman et al., 2022).

Existing literature highlights that while social commerce enhances connections between foodpreneurs and consumers, limited empirical research explores its acceptance and usage among Malaysian consumers (Rahman et al., 2022). Nevertheless, its unique characteristics such as community building, peer recommendations, and interactive marketing significantly strengthen customer trust and loyalty. These features empower micro foodpreneurs to enhance market visibility, improve customer relationships, and achieve sustained growth. Moreover, social commerce facilitates brand recognition, as consumer interactions and content sharing amplify awareness of products and services. For micro foodpreneurs, who often face resource constraints, social media platforms offer cost-effective opportunities to market their products, engage directly with customers, and compete with larger players. Thus, social commerce not only supports market competitiveness but also serves as a catalyst for long-term success in Malaysia's dynamic food industry.

2.4 Research Framework

The conceptual framework in Figure 2.1 illustrates the relationship between key social commerce determinants (independent variables), brand awareness (mediator), and business performance (dependent variable) for micro foodpreneurs in Malaysia. The independent variables reviews and ratings, social media engagement, social media influencers, and convenience are posited to positively influence business performance through social commerce practices. This framework is grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET), which suggests that reciprocal interactions in digital environments generate value and lead to

improved business outcomes (Dutta & Khurana, 2023). Social commerce platforms facilitate these exchanges, allowing micro foodpreneurs to capitalize on customer engagement, feedback, and online interactions to strengthen their business performance (Grange et al., 2020).

The framework also aligns with recent studies emphasizing the importance of social, commercial, technological, and behavioral dimensions in shaping social commerce practices, highlighting the need for comprehensive models to capture these relationships (Leong et al., 2023). Brand awareness is introduced as a mediating variable, serving as the mechanism that connects social commerce determinants to business outcomes. As a mediator, brand awareness enhances consumer recognition, trust, and loyalty, thereby reinforcing the effect of digital engagement on performance outcomes (Sadeli et al., 2022). This mediating role is supported by findings that interactive practices such as customer reviews, influencer collaborations, and social media content contribute to building brand equity, which in turn strengthens long-term business growth (Zhao et al., 2022; Sadeli et al., 2022). For micro foodpreneurs, brand awareness is particularly critical in differentiating products, attracting new customers, and retaining loyal ones in a competitive market. Drawing on this framework, four hypotheses are developed to examine both the direct and indirect effects of social commerce determinants on business performance, with brand awareness positioned as the mediator. This structure provides a robust foundation for empirical investigation and contributes to the growing body of research on social commerce by offering insights into how digital interactions translate into tangible performance outcomes (Zhao et al., 2022; Sadeli et al., 2022).

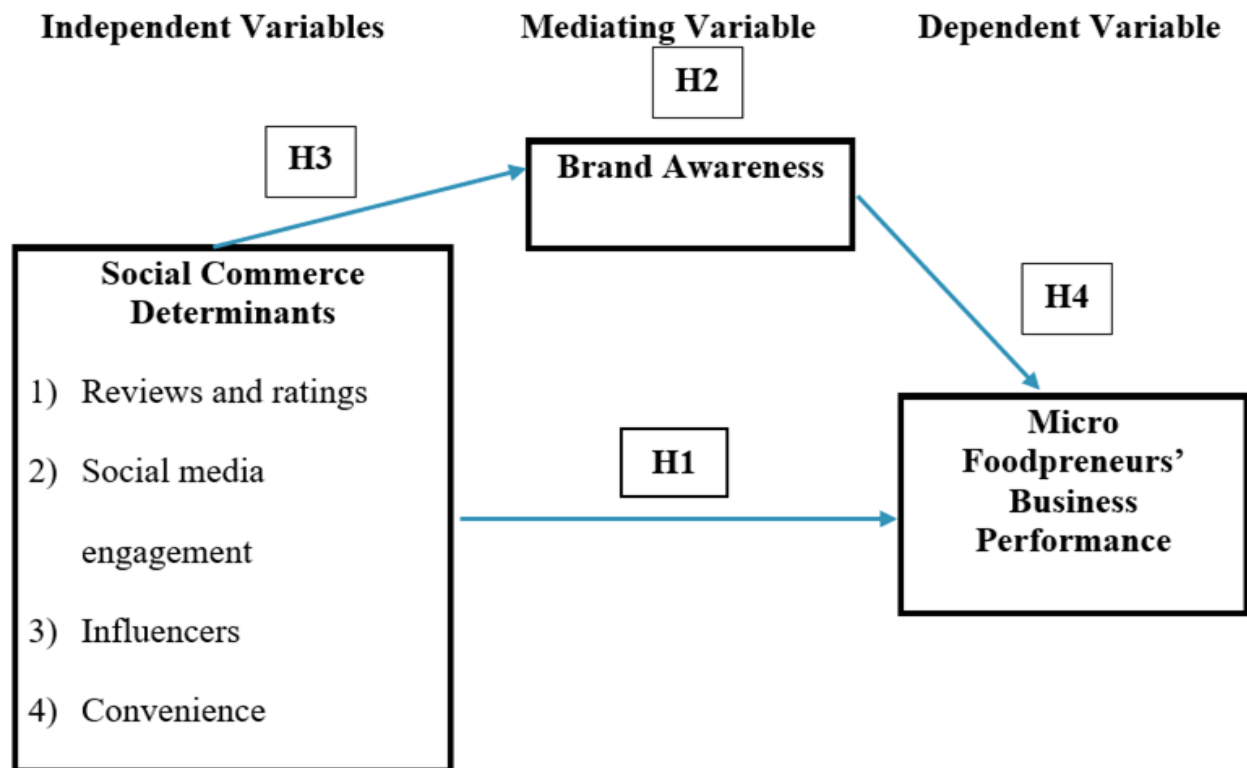


Figure 2.1: Research Framework

The study tests the following hypotheses:

- H1: Social commerce determinants (reviews and ratings, social media engagement, influencers and convenience) have positive effect on micro foodpreneurs' business performance.

- H2: Brand awareness mediates the relationship between social commerce activities and the business performance of micro foodpreneurs.
- H3: Specific social commerce determinants (e.g.: reviews and ratings, social media engagement, influencers and convenience) positively influence in enhancing brand awareness among micro foodpreneurs.
- H4: Brand awareness positively affects the micro foodpreneurs' business performance.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a deductive research approach, beginning with hypotheses derived from established theories and prior literature on social commerce, digital marketing, and brand awareness. A deductive design is appropriate as it allows for theory-driven testing of relationships between variables while ensuring methodological rigor. Consistent with recent studies, the hypotheses predict associations between social commerce determinants such as reviews and ratings, social media engagement, influencers, and convenience and business performance outcomes, including sales, customer retention, and brand recognition (George et al., 2023; Nadeem et al., 2021). This structured movement from theory to empirical testing ensures that the research contributes novel insights while remaining grounded in established knowledge.

To test these hypotheses, structured surveys and standardized questionnaires were employed, as they are widely recognized for reliability and validity in quantitative research. This approach enables consistent measurement across respondents, supporting robust statistical analysis and allowing both direct and indirect effects to be examined, particularly the mediating role of brand awareness. Survey-based methodologies also align with current practices in social commerce research, where large-scale, structured instruments are used to explore the relationship between digital engagement, branding, and performance among SMEs and micro-enterprises.

The study focuses on micro foodpreneurs in Malaysia, an emerging but underexplored sector in social commerce research. By targeting both entrepreneurs and their customers, the survey provides dual perspectives: business owners' insights into adoption and implementation, and consumers' evaluations of engagement, trust, and loyalty. This dual lens ensures findings reflect practical realities of social commerce.

The sampling strategy was guided by Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, leading to an estimated 384 respondents. A pilot study with 30 participants confirmed the clarity and reliability of the questionnaire, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.7. Overall, this methodology ensures rigor, reliability, and contextual relevance, producing findings of both academic and practical significance.

3.2 Population and Sampling

This study focuses on Malaysian micro foodpreneurs, a vital segment contributing to job creation, economic diversity, and national development. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2023), there are approximately 767,421 such businesses engaged in food manufacturing, services, and related activities. In research methodology, the population refers to the entire group relevant to the investigation, while the target population represents all micro foodpreneurs in Malaysia. The accessible population,

however, consists of those reachable via official records, business associations, and social media platforms (Thacker, 2019). Defining this distinction ensures representativeness and external validity (Azman & Majid, 2023).

To minimize bias and strengthen validity, this study adopts a probability-based simple random sampling technique. This method ensures each micro foodpreneur has an equal chance of selection, thereby reducing selection bias and improving generalizability (Cochran, 1977; Saunders et al., 2019). The sampling frame integrates multiple reliable sources, including SME Corp Malaysia, the Department of Statistics Malaysia, business associations, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. This integration captures both formally registered businesses and digitally active entrepreneurs, offering a balanced representation.

The determination of sample size follows Cochran's formula, widely applied in social science research for large populations. Using a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and maximum variability ($p = 0.5$), the recommended sample size is 384 (Cochran, 1977). This is sufficient for a population exceeding 50,000, such as Malaysia's 767,421 micro foodpreneurs, ensuring both feasibility and statistical reliability. Previous studies on MSMEs in Malaysia have also employed similar sample sizes with robust outcomes (Nasir et al., 2021).

In conclusion, defining the population precisely, employing a probability-based sampling strategy, and determining the sample size using Cochran's table enhances the reliability and validity of this study. This rigorous approach provides a strong foundation for examining how social commerce and brand awareness influence micro food business performance.

3.3 Instruments

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys and structured interviews to ensure comprehensive data collection and enriched findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Saunders et al., 2019). The primary tool is a structured questionnaire measuring social commerce determinants, brand awareness, and business performance. Determinants such as reviews and ratings, social media engagement, influencer endorsements, and convenience were adapted from established frameworks (Hajli et al., 2022; Alalwan et al., 2022). Brand awareness was assessed using Keller's (2021) framework with a five-point Likert scale measuring recognition, recall, and reputation (Lim et al., 2023). Business performance indicators, including sales growth, customer retention, and market share, were derived from Rahman et al. (2022) and Lee & Ali (2023). Demographics such as age, gender, education, and experience were included for context. A pilot study ensured validity and reliability. Surveys were distributed online and in-person, while structured interviews explored digital strategies and challenges (Yusof et al., 2022; Koay et al., 2023).

3.4 Pilot Study

A pilot test involving 33 micro food enterprises was conducted to refine the research instrument and ensure its validity and reliability. The questionnaire was assessed for internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.70 across all constructs, confirming reliability (Alalwan et al., 2022; Mohd & Hassan, 2021). Face validity was established through expert review, while exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was applied to assess construct validity. All item loadings exceeded 0.70, demonstrating strong construct representation (Chong et al., 2022). In total, 33 valid

responses were collected from micro foodpreneurs engaged in social commerce, achieving a 100% response rate.

The survey instrument employed a five-point Likert scale to measure three central constructs: Social Commerce (SC), Brand Awareness (BA), and Business Performance (BP). Social commerce was operationalized through determinants such as reviews and ratings, social media engagement, social media influencers, and convenience. Business performance was evaluated using indicators including sales revenue, customer retention, and brand recognition, while brand awareness was examined as a mediating construct.

The study adopts a deductive research approach, developing hypotheses derived from existing literature and theories on social commerce and brand awareness. This approach enables empirical testing of the proposed relationships between social commerce determinants, brand awareness, and business performance within the context of micro foodpreneurs in Malaysia.

The pilot study served as a critical preliminary step, ensuring the robustness of the measurement instrument prior to large-scale data collection. By applying systematic validation procedures such as reliability testing, expert review, and factor analysis the research instrument was confirmed to be both credible and suitable for further analysis. These results provide a solid methodological foundation for examining how social commerce engagement and brand awareness influence the performance of micro food enterprises in Malaysia.

3.5 Validity of the Research Instrument

Validity refers to the degree to which the instrument measures what it is intended to measure. Ensuring validity is essential to establishing the credibility and generalizability of the study findings.

Content validity was ensured by consulting two independent subject matter experts in digital commerce and micro-enterprise performance. These experts reviewed the survey items and interview protocol to assess the appropriateness and alignment with the study’s objectives. Their feedback led to necessary revisions that improved the instrument’s relevance and clarity (Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D., 2023). Construct validity was established through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), which confirmed that all items loaded strongly (above 0.70) onto their intended constructs without significant cross-loadings. This confirms that each set of items collectively represents the specific latent construct: Social Commerce, Brand Awareness, and Business Performance.

Convergent validity was assessed using Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Each construct achieved an AVE value above 0.50, confirming that the items share a high proportion of common variance. Discriminant validity was tested using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. The square root of each construct’s AVE exceeded its correlation with other constructs, indicating that the constructs were empirically distinct. Triangulation further enhanced validity by cross-verifying data from surveys, interviews, and secondary sources (Tan, Y. M., & Ng, S. H., 2022; Reuschke, D., Mason, C., & Henley, A., 2022).

3.5.1 Internal Validity

Internal validity refers to the degree to which observed effects are attributable to the variables being studied rather than extraneous

factors. Several strategies were implemented to ensure internal validity:

- Control variables such as business size, years in operation, and industry segment were considered to reduce the influence of confounding factors (Reuschke, D., Mason, C., & Henley, A., 2022).
- Survey items were adapted from previously validated scales found in recent empirical studies (Lee, K., & Ali, M., 2023; Tan, Y. M., & Ng, S. H., 2022).
- The pilot study tested the clarity and relevance of survey items, followed by refinements based on feedback from participants (Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D., 2023).

These strategies help isolate the effects of social commerce and brand awareness on business performance.

3.5.2 External Validity

External validity refers to the generalizability of the study findings beyond the sampled respondents. The following strategies were adopted:

- Probability sampling ensured representation of micro food enterprises across diverse regions and operations in Malaysia (Trinugroho, I., Tarazi, A., & Arief, A., 2022).
- Data was collected in real-world business settings, ensuring authenticity (Melo, C., Gomes, A., & Ferreira, M., 2023).
- A transparent and replicable methodology enhances the potential for replication in other settings (Reuschke, D., Mason, C., & Henley, A., 2022).
- Data triangulation added robustness and credibility, enhancing generalizability within similar contexts (Tan, Y. M., & Ng, S. H., 2022).

3.6 Reliability of the Research Instrument

Reliability concerns the internal consistency and stability of the instrument. Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were calculated for each construct:

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Social Commerce (SC)	5	0.85	Good
Brand Awareness (BA)	5	0.88	Good
Business Performance (BP)	5	0.90	Excellent

Table 3.1

All constructs exceeded the threshold of 0.70 (Lee, K., & Ali, M., 2023), confirming good internal consistency. Test-retest reliability was conducted with a subset of participants. The results demonstrated consistent responses over time, reinforcing the stability of the instrument (Telukdarie, A., Dhamija, P., & Marwala, T., 2023).

3.6.1 Descriptive Statistics of Constructs

The mean and standard deviation for each construct based on the pilot study data are summarized below:

Construct	Mean	Std. Deviation
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Social Commerce	3.89	0.62
Brand Awareness	4.02	0.59
Business Performance	3.95	0.65

Table 3.2

The responses indicate that participants generally agreed with the statements on social commerce practices, brand awareness, and business performance.

3.6.2 Regression Analysis for Hypothesis Testing

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the influence of social commerce and brand awareness on business performance.

Model Summary:

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square
0.82	0.67	0.64

ANOVA Summary:

- Significance: $p < 0.001$

Regression Coefficients:

Predictor	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig. (p-value)
Social Commerce	0.43	3.21	0.004
Brand Awareness	0.47	3.54	0.002

Both predictors significantly and positively influence business performance. These findings support the study hypotheses and demonstrate the predictive validity of the constructs.

4.0 DISCUSSION

The pilot study confirmed that the research instrument was reliable, valid, and suitable for assessing the relationships between social commerce determinants, brand awareness, and business performance among micro foodpreneurs. The internal consistency of the scales, combined with their ability to capture distinct constructs, demonstrated strong methodological rigor. Analysis results showed that both social commerce and brand awareness significantly predict business performance, thereby supporting the hypothesized model. These findings are consistent with recent studies that emphasize the dual role of social commerce platforms. Rather than functioning solely as transactional spaces, they also strengthen brand equity and awareness. For food and beverage SMEs, social media richness has been shown to enhance both brand equity and overall performance, with brand equity acting as a mediator between social media engagement and financial outcomes (Shandy et al., 2023). The pilot results align with this perspective, demonstrating that micro foodpreneurs benefit from sales while simultaneously building long-term brand strength. Brand awareness also emerged as a mediating factor in this study, linking digital interactions such as customer reviews, influencer engagement, and online convenience to improved customer retention and revenue growth. Prior research confirms that brand awareness, cultivated through social media marketing, significantly impacts consumer loyalty and business performance for micro and small enterprises (Akbar et al., 2024; Utami et al., 2024). This underscores the importance of branding as a mechanism that translates digital engagement into sustainable competitive

advantage. Moreover, evidence from structural equation modeling and regression analyses in recent studies supports the dual predictive pathways, with both direct and indirect effects of social commerce engagement and brand awareness on business performance (Shandy et al., 2023; Ramzah, 2024). Collectively, the pilot study and recent literature affirm that social commerce is not only a driver of short-term sales but also a catalyst for long-term growth through enhanced brand recognition and customer loyalty among micro foodpreneurs in Malaysia.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study validates a conceptual framework in which social commerce engagement and brand awareness collectively enhance the performance of micro food enterprises. The pilot confirmed the instrument's reliability, validity, and practicality, with all constructs showing strong internal consistency and distinctiveness. Findings revealed that social commerce serves not only as a sales channel but also as a mechanism for cultivating customer engagement, trust, and loyalty. Importantly, brand awareness emerged as a mediating factor, reinforcing the link between social commerce activities and business outcomes. When micro foodpreneurs successfully establish brand recognition and credibility, they are better positioned to translate digital interactions into sustainable improvements in business performance. Recent research strongly supports this framework.

Social commerce and social media engagement are increasingly recognized as critical drivers of performance for micro and small food businesses, functioning as dual-purpose tools that foster both financial outcomes and long-term customer relationships (Akther et al., 2022; Roosdhani et al., 2023; Ramzah et al., 2024).

Brand awareness plays a pivotal mediating role, with evidence showing that strategic digital engagement enhances brand recognition, which in turn drives customer loyalty and repeat patronage (Ramzah et al., 2024; Akbar et al., 2024). The practical implications of these findings are significant. Equipping micro foodpreneurs with digital marketing and branding skills is essential for enabling them to harness the opportunities of social commerce. In a competitive and digitally driven economy, building strong brand awareness in online spaces is vital not only for survival but also for long-term growth.

Nonetheless, this study acknowledges limitations, including the small pilot sample size and reliance on self-reported data, which may affect generalizability. Future research should validate these findings with larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal approaches to capture dynamic shifts in digital consumer behavior.

Overall, both the pilot and recent literature affirm that social commerce engagement, mediated by brand awareness, is a key driver of business performance among micro food enterprises.

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