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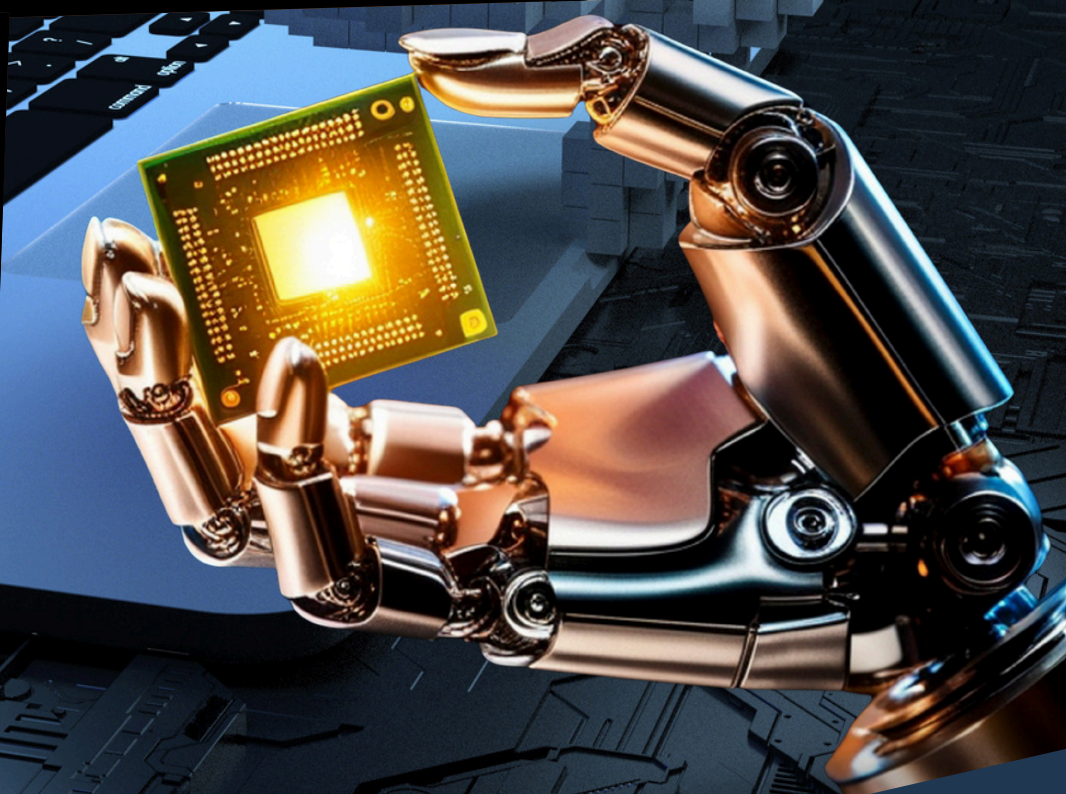


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LEVERAGING ONLINE FOOD DELIVERY PLATFORMS: THE ROLE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL COMPETENCIES AMONG MALAYSIAN SMES

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Significantly, the rapid development of digital technology has revolutionized the food service industry, with online food delivery services (OFDS) becoming the new dominant form of food consumption in Malaysia. This is facilitated by the proliferation of smartphone technology, mobile payment systems, and platform-based logistics, which have transformed the way small and medium-sized enterprises in the food service industry access the market and interact with consumers (Tan et al., 2024). The factors of convenience, time-saving, and ease of access have become key influencers in the consumption of food delivery services, with the COVID-19 pandemic playing a significant role in accelerating these trends (Suali et al., 2024). Therefore, the phenomenon of OFDS is no longer on the periphery of the food distribution chain in Malaysia, with the service now becoming structurally embedded in the food consumption market in the country, as discussed in the study by Chang et al. (2024).

However, the existing research has mostly concentrated on the behavior of consumers, service quality, and technology acceptance. There has been less focus on the entrepreneurial skills required for the effective use of the platform-mediated environment. Malaysian SMEs are confronted with unique challenges in the context of the OFDS environment. These challenges include the high commission fees charged by the platform operators, the high level of rivalry among the platforms, the limitations in terms of platform visibility based on the algorithms used by the platforms, and the changing expectations of the consumers with regard to the quality of the food provided and the reliability of the services (Sulaiman et al., 2023).

Entrepreneurial competencies, such as market sensing, digital literacy, service quality management, strategic decision-making, and customer relationship management, are, therefore, crucial in understanding the ways in which Malaysian SMEs can effectively use OFDS for sustainable performance (Jaish et al., 2023). Past research findings indicate that for SMEs to achieve success in OFDS, it is not only important for them to use the platform but also for them to be able to integrate digital tools with effective operations and marketing strategies (Jaish et al., 2023). However, empirical research that focuses on the relationship between OFDS and entrepreneurial competencies of SMEs in Malaysia is yet to be conducted. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the ways in which entrepreneurial competencies can enable food SMEs in Malaysia to effectively use OFDS, with the aim of filling the existing knowledge gap.

From a competency perspective, digital competency is essential for small business owners in an environment characterized by OFDSs (Gupta & Jagtap, 2024). This encompasses

the ability to manage applications in OFDSs, curate digital menus, analyze platform analytics such as sales trends and customer ratings, and respond strategically to visibility mechanisms driven by algorithms (Ha & Tan, 2023). Digital literacy allows owners to leverage platform features such as promotions, pricing tools, and customer feedback mechanisms for optimal benefits (Mohamed et al., 2022). A lack of digital competency may undermine the visibility and efficiency of SMEs in the platform ecosystem, as well as create an over-reliance on platform intermediaries (Raihan, 2024).

Besides this, marketing competency and customer relationship competency are also important to leverage OFDS as a tool for acquiring new customers as well as retaining existing ones (Praswati et al., 2024). For this, it is important that SME owners develop skills related to digital branding, menu positioning, pricing psychology, and managing their reputation through OFDS platforms. This includes managing reviews in a professional manner, maintaining high quality of service, and integrating social media marketing with OFDS platforms to increase customer engagement (McCain et al., 2024). Developing strong customer relationship competency also helps SMEs to gain a competitive advantage in a highly competitive digital ecosystem (Adam et al., 2024).

In addition, there is a need for strong operational and process management skills in the ecosystem of OFDS. This is because the owner of the SME will need to manage different service channels, including dine-in, takeaway, and delivery. They will also need to ensure the accuracy of orders and their timeliness, as well as the quality of food during the delivery process (Lai et al., 2020). This is particularly important since the profit margin of the business is very low in the case of OFDS, as noted in the study by Khan et al. (2024).

Furthermore, financial competency is important because of the commission fees, promotional costs, and demand variability involved in the OFDS platforms. The owners of SMEs need to be competent in the development of price strategies that consider the costs involved in the platforms, including the commission fees, packaging, and labor costs, in order to ensure profitability (Akpuokwe et al., 2024). The capacity for cost-benefit trade-off analysis helps SMEs avoid dependence on the platform, which is important for financial stability (Cachon et al., 2025).

Finally, strategic and adaptive competencies are necessary for SME owners to manage platform dependency and market uncertainties. This entails making informed decisions about platform participation and diversification, and business positioning in general (Marei et al., 2022). Adaptive competency, which entails learning and innovation and adapting to changing consumer behavior and platform governance structures, is a significant aspect in a constantly changing digital food ecosystem (Suali et al., 2024). Therefore, SME owners with high strategic and adaptive competencies have a better chance of leveraging OFDS-related challenges as sustainable sources of competitive advantage.

The study also points out the significance of the strategic role played by online food delivery services (OFDS) for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in the food industry, especially in the context of Malaysia. Indeed, as the role of OFDS becomes an integral part of the structure of modern food consumption patterns, the success of SMEs in the food industry is no longer determined by the ability of entrepreneurs to engage with the platform but also by the presence of entrepreneurial competencies such as digital, marketing, operational, financial, and strategic skills. Indeed, the study points out the significance of entrepreneurial competencies for the SME owner in terms of the ability of the entrepreneur to improve the

efficiency of the business and reduce the risks associated with the use of the platform in the context of high competitive pressure and the presence of the cost structure of the platform (Sudirman et al., 2025).

However, as we move forward, the sustainability of SMEs' involvement in the ecosystem of the OFDS will depend on the development of capabilities and adaptive strategic orientation. For instance, as the platform becomes more data-driven and the needs of consumers change with respect to quality and convenience, along with the increasing focus on sustainability, the owners of SMEs will have to develop skills with respect to data analytics and branding in the online environment. Moreover, as the platform becomes more competitive with respect to differentiated offerings and the focus on sustainability increases, the owners of SMEs will have to develop skills with respect to innovation. In this context, it is important that the government and other stakeholders provide support with respect to the development of entrepreneurial skills and adaptive strategic orientation.

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