

Testing the Waters: Insights from Our Pilot Interview Study

Ana Batrisyia Azman and Mohd Aliff Abdul Majid

Department of Foodservice Management, Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam, Malaysia

anabtrsyiaazmn@gmail.com

mhaliff@uitm.edu.my (corresponding author)

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Abstract: Qualitative research provides a deep exploration of human experiences, uncovering diverse philosophical perspectives, methodologies, and insights. A key objective is to understand how individuals interpret their experiences and actions. However, for novice researchers, conducting qualitative interviews can be challenging, particularly due to the emphasis on nuanced shifts in participant responses and emerging themes. Given these complexities, pilot studies serve as a crucial preliminary step in assessing research feasibility and refining methodological approaches before conducting the main study. This article examines the significance of pilot studies in qualitative research, detailing their methodological applications and the valuable lessons drawn from the process. A pilot interview was conducted with two micro-family food business (MFFB) owners to assess the clarity, relevance, and effectiveness of the interview guide. This initial phase allowed for the identification of ambiguities, refinement of questions, and adjustments in the sequencing of inquiries, ensuring they aligned with the study's objectives. By testing the research instruments in a controlled setting, the pilot study facilitated modifications that enhanced the accuracy and depth of data collection. Beyond refining the research tools, pilot studies contribute to strengthening the overall research framework by improving researcher preparedness and mitigating potential biases. They help anticipate challenges in data collection, allowing for proactive problem-solving and methodological adjustments. Moreover, pilot studies reinforce the trustworthiness and rigor of qualitative research by ensuring coherence between research objectives, data collection techniques, and analytical approaches. This iterative process fosters reflexivity, enabling researchers to critically evaluate their methods and enhance the credibility of their findings. Importantly, pilot studies play an indispensable role in qualitative research by refining study design, optimizing data collection instruments, and ensuring methodological soundness. Through early identification of challenges and continuous improvement of research tools, pilot studies enhance the validity and reliability of qualitative inquiry. This article highlights the transformative impact of pilot studies, underscoring their significance in strengthening research methodologies and ensuring the success of qualitative investigations.

Keywords: Food business, Interview, Methodological refinement, Preliminary, Pilot study, Qualitative

1. Introduction

Qualitative research is characterized by a strong interconnection between the researchers and the subject under study, influencing the selection of the research topic and the methodology employed (Aziz and Khan, 2020). Various disciplines have utilized qualitative research methods to tackle complex social issues (Daniel, 2018), demonstrating its effectiveness in exploring nuanced perspectives and contextual understanding. Merriam (2009) identifies six common techniques in qualitative research, including (1) basic qualitative research, (2) phenomenology, (3) grounded theory, (4) ethnography, (5) narrative analysis, and (6) critical qualitative research. Mason (2002) describes "qualitative interviewing" as a method that emphasizes depth and employs semi-structured or loosely organized questions. Kaushal and Srivastava (2021) suggest that interviews are particularly suitable within qualitative research because they allow for a more detailed exploration of participants' perspectives compared to quantitative methods. The success of qualitative research depends on rigorous methodological planning and execution. In this regard, a crucial aspect of qualitative research that merits attention is the incorporation of a pilot study.

Pilot studies are a common practice in quantitative research, however, they are not as extensively discussed or emphasized in the context of qualitative research. Pilot studies in qualitative research are paramount for adapting to real-world conditions, which are inherently unique and vary across different research contexts (Nunes et al., 2010). A pilot study can often be referred to as a preliminary study. Crossman (2019) defines a pilot study as a method employed to refine a research issue, identify optimal approaches for its pursuit, and ascertain the required resources, including time and funding, for the subsequent comprehensive investigation, among other objectives. Based on the definitions provided, it is evident that a pilot study is a preliminary inquiry characterized by a small sample of respondents, which is conducted prior to a larger or primary study (Muasya and Mulwa, 2023). It serves several essential purposes, all of which contribute to the overall quality and validity

of the research findings. The feasibility study, which serves as a reduced-scale iteration of the proposed study, is akin to a pilot study (Aziz and Khan, 2020). The primary aims of the pilot study were twofold: 1) to identify any methodological challenges that would require resolution in order to enhance the main research, and 2) to clarify and implement necessary modifications made to the pertinent components of the main study.

According to Majid et al. (2017), the primary objective of the pilot study is to evaluate the relevance of the research questions and offer the researchers preliminary insights into the study's feasibility. The authors have also expanded the importance of pilot studies to qualitative research design. Including this information may assist the researchers in discerning any potential shortcomings or limitations within the study (Kim How, Zulnaidi and Rahim, 2022). However, the limited participant group may pose challenges for inexperienced researchers seeking to conduct a qualitative interview. Consequently, preliminary modifications can be implemented before commencing the main study using the input and the outcomes of the "practice interview" (Roberts, 2020).

In accordance with Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2007), several factors can influence the number of tests conducted in a research project. These factors include the size of the project, the availability of time and financial resources, the design of the questionnaire, the research question and objectives, and the number of individuals involved in piloting the questionnaire. Furthermore, several scholars, such as Seidman (2006), Kim (2010), and Ismail, Kinchin and Edwards (2018), have provided descriptions of the appropriate range for the sample size in a pilot study. This range typically varies from two to five participants, contingent upon factors such as the complexity of the research topic, the level of expertise required, and the availability of the researcher's time and resources. Hurn and Tomalin (2013) proposed that conducting an informal encounter with research participants can facilitate the establishment of rapport and alleviate tension. Consequently, we proceeded to carry out the pilot investigation with two informants.

This paper is part of a broader research project that investigates business survival strategies and the role of family members in micro-family food enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study employed a qualitative research method to gather comprehensive data on the strategies used by small family-owned food businesses. We used semi-structured interviews which directly linked to the research goals, along with probing questions to gain deeper insights into interviewees' statements and the underlying concepts they express during the interviews (Hancock, Windridge and Ockleford, 2007; Elhami and Khoshnevisan, 2022). It is important to note that the findings of the study are presented elsewhere and will not be discussed here (see: Azman and Majid, 2023), thus, this paper aims to demonstrate the importance and benefits of pilot studies in qualitative research by examining its application in our context, as the initial stage prior to main study. While there is a wealth of research detailing various methods for conducting qualitative interviews, there is a scarcity of research that specifically addresses the significance of pilot studies in the context of qualitative research. Therefore, this paper aims to fill this gap in the literature by providing a comprehensive exploration of the importance and benefits of pilot studies in qualitative research within our specific context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Qualitative Review

According to Mwita (2022), a qualitative interview is a data collection technique that relies on spoken communication to gather information to address research inquiries. It typically involves an interaction between two individuals: an interviewer who poses the research questions and an interviewee who responds to those questions. During the 20th century, social science scholars, particularly anthropologists and sociologists, began to embrace qualitative interviews as a valuable method for gathering information and advancing knowledge in their respective fields (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Over time, the utility of qualitative interviews extended into other domains, including education and health sciences. In psychology, interviews initially served both as a therapeutic approach and a means of gaining insights into mental processes within the context of therapy (Freud, 1963). In contemporary academic practice, the use of interviews has expanded significantly. It is now widely employed to collect information across diverse fields, including education, psychology, anthropology, sociology, media studies, human geography, marketing, business, and nursing science (Roberts, 2020).

These qualitative interviews have been utilized as a data collection method in research for several decades. Glaser and Strauss (1967) are widely recognized as pioneers in qualitative research within the social sciences, particularly for introducing qualitative interviews as a research tool. Moreover, Mason (2002) has convincingly argued that "extensive preparation is essential for qualitative interviews." In order to gather comprehensive data, researchers must carefully select the most appropriate interview approach. Elhami and Khoshnevisan (2022) have elaborated on various type of interviews that suitable for qualitative research. As outlined by

previous studies, these interview methods can be classified into structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (Neergaard and Leitch, 2015; Nicholls, 2009). It is worth noting that selecting the correct interview type is paramount in qualitative research.

Since this study employed a semi-structured interview, as its name suggests, it requires prior planning and thorough preparation. The interviewer should have a set of general questions related to their research or a topic guide (Hancock Windridge and Ockleford, 2007). These general questions initiate the conversation and introduce the topic without delving deeply into the interviewee's understanding. The questions serve as an icebreaker, preparing the interviewee for more in-depth and challenging inquiries. Additionally, the interviewer formulates follow-up questions based on the interviewee's responses or the flow of the conversation. Significantly, a semi-structured interview offers a high degree of flexibility, as highlighted by Neergaard and Leitch (2015), with many questions being crafted on the spot during the interview.

Qualitative interviews are valued for their capacity to provide in-depth insights into the topics under study. The research approach is recognized for its flexibility in exploring additional information from the study participants. Nevertheless, despite its significance in advancing knowledge, qualitative interviews have earned a reputation as a challenging data collection method, as highlighted by Majid et al. (2017). At the same time, both novice and experienced researchers may find the qualitative interviews less effective when they fail to adhere to the necessary principles and methodological protocols (Mwita, 2022). Besides, the inadvertent adverse effects on the data-collecting procedure and subsequent implications of the findings can be observed among both inexperienced and experienced researchers (Roberts, 2020). Thus, the article presented herein offers further perspectives on the subject matter, serving as an additional reference point for individuals new to this field.

2.2 Pilot Study

A pilot or preliminary study refers to a limited-scale investigation conducted as a precursor to the main research endeavor, primarily aimed at testing and refining research instruments such as interview guides or questionnaires (Shakir and Rahman, 2022). Pilot studies are often carried out in the context of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research. The efficacy of data collection and analysis techniques is assessed through a preliminary investigation. Morse et al. (2002) suggest that researchers enhance the establishment of content validity by conducting field tests or seeking expert opinions. Pilot testing is less prevalent in qualitative research than in quantitative research, and its significance has often been undervalued in many qualitative studies (Malmqvist et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, pilot testing plays a crucial role in identifying design flaws and potential difficulties that interviewers, participants, or the entire data collection process could encounter before, during, and after data collection. This proactive approach can assist researchers in enhancing the quality of their interviews and, consequently, the overall quality of their studies (Roberts, 2020). Besides, these approaches not only facilitate the evaluation of the questionnaire's format but also enable valuable suggestions to be provided. Furthermore, it enables researchers to make necessary modifications based on the pilot testing conducted with a group that closely resembles the final population in their sample (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007).

In addition, the management of contextual information, the testing and enhancement of data collection, and the analysis methodologies are accomplished through pilot studies (Janghorban, Roudsari and Taghipour, 2014). Identifying interview design problems and constraints is an essential element, as it permits the necessary adjustments to be made before the commencement of the primary study (Aziz and Khan, 2020). Furthermore, this opportunity allows novice researchers to enhance their interviewing skills (Roberts, 2020). This activity enables the researchers to anticipate and prepare for unforeseen challenges before commencing fieldwork. Humble and Mozelius (2022) found that students and inexperienced researchers in the qualitative field often face challenges in selecting the appropriate research design.

Previous study done in Kenya by Muasya and Mulwa (2023) which entailed the attention of pilot study in research with seven postgraduate students was done in purpose of improving the validity and reliability of research instruments. The study revealed that PhD students or graduates ignore pilot studies or give it minimal attention. Although the students did conduct the pilot study, however, they neglect or give general information about pilot studies in their thesis and dissertations. These findings highlighted the importance of taking pilot studies seriously. Therefore, a proper guidance is required especially to novice researcher among postgraduate students to conduct the pilot study. In accordance with Shakir and Rahman (2022), the study's findings highlighted the lessons learnt from the pilot study help researchers in the design and conduct of their main study. For instance, familiarise with main research site to develop overall idea of the targeted population, guided

the sequence of data collection to map the observations of the study, identify appropriate time to conduct the interviews, ways on asking questions, building rapport with participants, and importance of taking field notes. These findings indicated that conducting pilot study had enhanced the confidence as a researcher, interviewer and observer.

Similarly, we believe that these challenges extend to the data collection process, where novice researchers may struggle with formulating effective interview questions, managing participant interactions, and ensuring the reliability and depth of collected data. There is a widely held belief that conducting pilot research could enhance a qualitative research study's validity and methodological rigor (Shakir and Rahman, 2022). Thus, the pilot study aims to support emerging researchers in preparing for the interview process, fostering a receptive mindset, and improving the efficacy of qualitative interview methods. One advantage of employing interviews as a research method is the researcher's ability to clearly articulate the study's objectives and the specific types of data required (Amran et al., 2021).

Besides, the quality of the research instrument is crucial in this context, as the conclusions drawn from any findings are contingent upon the information gathered via research instruments that are both accurate and valid (Muasya and Mulwa, 2023). The researchers must comprehend that the objective of a qualitative interview is not to extract responses from the informant. It is imperative for researchers to understand that the main purpose of a qualitative interview is not to elicit responses from the interviewee. This study aims to examine the statements made by the participants in order to deepen the researcher's comprehension of how their experiences unfolded and the importance they ascribed to them (Roberts, 2020). Hence, conducting a pilot study allows researchers to modify certain aspects of the primary study to address issues that have been identified or surfaced during the piloting stage.

3. Methodology

3.1 Piloting Study for Interview

This paper presents reflections on a pilot study conducted as part of the main research project. The study used a fully qualitative design, utilizing semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. The interviews were conducted by the first author (ABA) under the close supervision of the second author (MAAM), who provided methodological guidance throughout the process. Given that this was the first author's first practical exposure to qualitative interviewing, the pilot phase was deemed essential. It was to ensure the clarity of the interview guide, enhance interviewing proficiency and strengthen the overall rigor of the data collection process.

This paper highlights the methodologies employed by us to gather the requisite data in order to accomplish the objectives of the study. The technique depicted in Figure 1 is derived from a prior investigation conducted by Majid et al. (2017) with modification made to the original framework. A comprehensive explanation is provided for each stage to assist this study in constructing a well-structured interview guide for the main research.

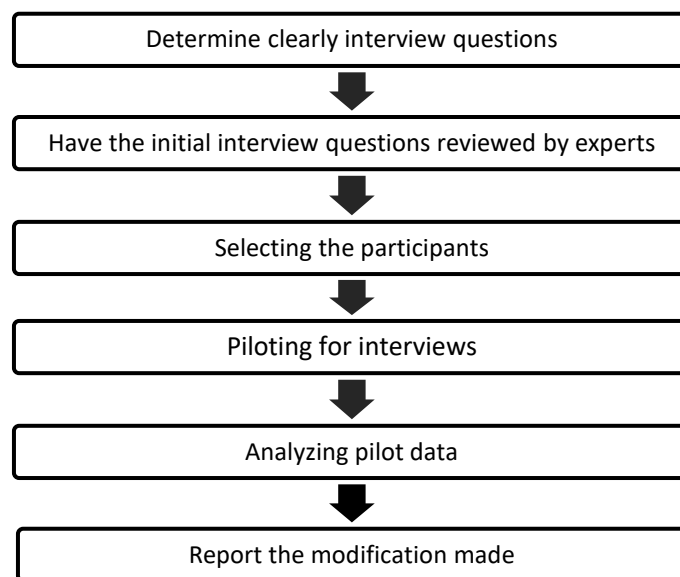


Figure 1: Steps in conducting the pilot study

3.1.1 *Piloting study for interview*

We prepared semi-structured interview questions about business strategy, survival strategy, financial challenges, technological adoption, and innovation to guide the interviews, ensuring the interview questions addressed the study issue. The key subject of this paper was: "What business strategies have you implemented for your business to grow and survive?". Initially, there were seven interview questions pertaining to the context of the study. The interview questions were emailed to the experts for feedbacks and approval.

3.1.2 *Have the initial questions reviewed by experts*

The second step focuses on having experts review the questionnaires. The number of reviewers can range from two to five or more, depending on the complexity of the topic under investigation, and the level of knowledge, time, and resources available to the researcher (Aziz and Khan, 2020). We sought the advice of two food industry specialists. The supervisory committee members then evaluated the interview questions to ensure appropriate language and wording were used. Following the preliminary evaluations, the seven major questions were examined in the pilot project, and we used probing questions to extract the participants' opinions that required further explanation.

3.1.3 *Selecting the participants*

During the participant selection phase, permission is requested to enlist the owners of a micro-family-run restaurant in Selangor, Malaysia, specifically in the Klang Valley district. An official letter was sent to the business owners as invitation to participate in the study. The participants in this pilot interviews have the same characteristics as those who participated in the main study as we believed it provides a more realistic simulation of the actual research conditions. Participants for this research were chosen using purposive sampling, adhering to specific selection criteria. The selection criteria comprised four key factors which are: (1) micro-family food business (MFFB) owners who had been in operation for more than five years, taking into consideration the business has been operated before COVID-19 pandemic; (2) the business either had to be family-owned or have a familial connection, such as involving spouses, siblings, or other family members; (3) operate from a food premise; and (4) the business located within the Klang Valley area, Selangor. Following the prior establishment of inclusion criteria, we have successfully identified the participants.

ABA personally met the participants and briefly described the study objectives. The consent letter was given to the participants to address concerns about voluntary participation, confidentiality, the participants' opportunity to opt out of the data-gathering procedure, and audio recording. The participants were informed that they would be utilized as a sample for the pilot project and that their participation would lead to the suggested strategy for the main study (Aziz and Khan, 2020). This pilot study undertook interviews with two MFFB owners whose business is located in Selangor as the participants. These two participants share similar criteria as a micro-enterprise following the definition by Malaysian SME Corporation (2020), which incorporates less than 5 employees with annual sales of less than MYR300,000. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1: Profile of the participants

No	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Food Business	Family Business Relation	Number of employees*	Business Experience
1	Man	54	Male	Chicken rice	Husband-wife	2	18 years
2	Salamon	55	Male	Tempeh production	Father-son	1	20 years

*Excluding the family members

3.1.4 *Piloting for interviews*

In the fourth stage, a pilot study was conducted. When employing an interview as a research technique, Jacob and Furgerson (2012) encourage adopting a setting that affords the maximum amount of comfort to the participants of the inquiry, particularly face-to-face interviews. As a result, the participants were free to choose their preferred interview venue (Aziz and Khan, 2020). In this study, the interview sessions were conducted at the MFFB owner's food premise location. We then obtained both informants' consent and give each participant with letters of informed consent. The interviews typically run for 30 to 40 minutes. To better accommodate participants' other commitments, it is suggested that the interview duration should be extended to a maximum of 90 minutes (Jacob and Furgerson, 2012).

The pilot study also makes it easier for us to establish rapport with the participants and gain experience conducting semi-structured interviews. The pilot study significantly assists us in improving their interviewing skills and conversational fluency. At the end of the interview sessions, the participants were asked for their preferred pseudonym to represent their actual name.

3.1.5 Analyzing pilot data

With the help of NVIVO 10, we transcribed the data, organized key themes, and identified patterns that informed necessary modifications before the full-scale study. The analysis involved selectively transcribing areas of interest. This approach enabled us to refine our coding framework, ensuring that key themes were accurately captured and categorized.

3.1.6 Report modification made

Modification is the final step in the process. We were able to make modifications prior to the main data collection. Additionally, the initial interviews led to revising previously formulated closed or unclear inquiries (Wheaton, 2021). The feedback from pilot participants allowed us to refine question phrasing, improve clarity, and ensure alignment with research objectives. Furthermore, the pilot study helped identify any logistical challenges, such as interview duration and participant engagement, allowing for necessary adjustments before the full-scale data collection.

4. Discussion

The significance of the pilot study allowed us to enhance the methods before commencing the primary study phase. As Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2002) noted that researchers often claim to have gained valuable insights from conducting a pilot study and made necessary modifications. Yet, they typically refrain from offering explicit details regarding their specific findings. The pilot study allowed us to refine methodologies before beginning the major study phase, including the interview questions. This aligns with prior research, which underscores the effectiveness of pilot studies in assessing the feasibility of research methods and procedures, demonstrating their capacity to address the qualitative research questions (Dikko, 2016; Williams-McBean, 2019). Several changes were implemented due to the pilot study, potentially producing a high-quality research and scientifically valid work and contribute to advancing the relevant field of study.

4.1 Lessons From Methodological Challenges

4.1.1 Improve interview skills

Next, initiating a conversation can take a lot of work for an inexperienced researcher. The researchers may need help determining what questions to ask and how to pose them in a way that encourages participants to share their stories without hesitation. Interestingly, even though the interview guide's questions were non-directional, we discovered that non-leading question tone, question closing, and paraphrasing of interview responses were all required throughout the interview process. This was evident during the pilot interview, when the participants fell silent, indicating they required time to think about the question and gather their memories of the event. The following sentiments supports the statements:

"... hmm I do not know... my menu is not that big, neither too weak. It is moderate. Maybe, the reason that my business can sustain is because of the price." (Man)

"... my business... I think... it was worse during the pandemic... the sales were dropped, and I am forced to close my business since that." (Salamon)

Furthermore, we made necessary adjustments to the precise phrasing of the questions, prompts, and probes in order to pursue intriguing and pertinent lines of inquiry based on their conscious remembrance of the encounters. According to Aziz and Khan (2020), non-verbal cues, like head nodding, can indicate comprehension of the participant's comments. On top of that, using fillers like "mm-hmm" and brief pauses can foster a sense of encouragement, enabling participants to delve more securely into their experiences. Hence, we decided to reduce the use of direct probes in instances where the depth of responses could be improved.

4.1.2 Building rapport with participants

Aziz and Khan (2020) state that effective interviewing procedures must include indirect and direct probes. Besides, Elhami and Khoshnevisan (2022) also highlighted that conducting qualitative interviews in a manner that resembles casual, informal conversations is imperative. Maintaining this natural approach facilitates

participants' unrestricted expression of their perspectives and experiences. As a result, we applied various prompts to deal with this circumstance effectively. After the interview, we learned that building trust and rapport with participants could create comfort during the interview sessions and maximize the participants' involvement.

On the other hand, we discovered that the choice of language used during the interview is another significant aspect that warrants consideration through the pilot study. We revised the instructions before the main data collection to ensure that participants understood the interview process. As a result, the interview session primarily took place in Malay, with minimal use of English, to foster a comfortable and engaging conversation with the participants. This is evidenced by the following extracts:

"... Is there any other factor that helps you to maintain the business?" (Researcher in English)

"... Selain daripada itu, apakah faktor lain yang membantu mengekalkan perniagaan encik?" (Researcher in Malay)

As suggested by De Fina (2019), encouraging the participants to express themselves in their mother tongue would enhance comprehensibility and produce high-quality data. Furthermore, the interviewer must establish a strong rapport with the interviewee to encourage open sharing and mutual exploration of their experiences. Consequently, fostering alignment and harmony with the participants reduces the likelihood of reluctance to engage in dialogue and withholding information (Elhami and Khoshnevisan, 2022). Therefore, it is advisable to conduct interviews in the interviewees' native language. Besides, the interview method also involves assessing language and revising questions to make them more understandable for the participants (Muasya and Mulwa, 2023).

4.1.3 Taking field notes

Lastly, taking field notes and collecting audio helps novice researchers obtain a better knowledge of the occurrence while also functioning as an early type of data analysis. For instance, it is important to consider what, how, and how much information should be documented and tested in the interview. However, we believed that going to the field, conducting the pilot study would help us to better understand how to conduct interviews properly, especially with food business owners. Furthermore, considering detailed field notes would encourage the researchers to obtain a rich study context, especially critical reflection, to guide future data collection (Phillippi and Lauderdale, 2018). Likewise, Shakir and Rahman (2022) suggested that sufficient practice in taking field notes would help the researchers to be guided by and refer to their research questions as well as to read through and adopt some framework from the relevant literature for a more focused observation. Other than that, it is essential to transcribe conversations for data analysis in qualitative research. Nonetheless, researchers must secure consent to record the interviewees' voices. Today, most smartphones offer multifunction, including voice recording capabilities. However, Elhami and Khoshnevisan (2022) stated that activating flight mode on the mobile device is crucial to prevent interruptions during the interview session from notifications and ringtone sounds. Hence, the field notes are widely proposed for qualitative research since they enable an in-depth, comprehensive contextual analysis of the study.

4.2 Necessary Modifications to the Main Study

4.2.1 Review and revise research instruments

Following the initial interview, we discovered that the interview questions needed to be revised. After various changes, the questionnaire only asked about the impact of family engagement in the firm. As a result, the interview framework was modified to incorporate the three additional crucial questions to increase the data quality and the depth of the participants' responses. These modifications further support the idea of Shakir and Rahman (2022) that the researchers would need to be slightly more explicit in their inquiries because the participants might not be accustomed to being asked questions in such an unstructured manner, potentially due to unease with the research culture. In addition, Muasya and Mulwa (2023) mention that pilot study facilitates qualitative researchers in mitigating the likelihood of errors or imperfections and identifying and resolving potential uncertainties or concerns. As a result, ten open-ended questions were included, strengthening the effectiveness of the interview questions in gaining insight into the participants' actual experiences for the primary study. Table 2 shows the revised interview questions after the pilot study.

Table 2: Modifications made on interview questions

Section	Structured Items	Modification to Main Study	Source
Business Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What business strategies have you implemented for your business to grow and survive? What are the business strategies that proved most useful in helping to sustain the growth of your restaurant? 	None	Tshwete (2020); Matson (2021)
Business Survival	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What internal and external organizational capabilities helped you to develop and implement your strategies successfully? 	None	Tshwete (2020)
Survival strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What data sources did you use to develop the survival strategies used to sustain your restaurant? What assessments did you use to confirm that the survival strategies used were successful in sustaining the business? 	None	Matson (2021)
Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the innovation implemented in your business? How the innovation implemented help to sustain your business during the pandemic? 	None	Purnomo et al. (2021)
Family role	None	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does the role of family work out in the business? What are the presumed limitations and difficulties faced during the pandemic in terms of recovery? How do you see this business is evolving? 	Xiong, Ukanwa and Anderson (2018); Piramanayagam, Dixit and Seal (2022)

4.2.2 Review and revise research instruments

Secondly, qualitative researchers are encouraged to choose individuals for inclusion in their studies accurately. According to Mwita (2022), identifying suitable participants also proves advantageous in terms of time and resource efficiency. From the pilot study, we determined that the selection criteria for participants should be clarified. The MFFB can be found in various food establishments, including grocery stores, food stalls, and restaurants. Throughout the pilot study, we discovered that the MFFB from restaurants or cafés was severely harmed and struggled to stay in business even after the pandemic. As pointed out, they must pay not just the rent but also the wages of their staff. He was saying,

“... at the beginning stage of the pandemic, it is quite difficult for us. There are not many sales as we hoped for. The orders were decreased, and I have to lower my staffs’ salaries.” (Man)

Negrin et al. (2022) mentioned that understanding the study population is crucial for determining the inclusion and exclusion criteria to answer the research question. Consequently, we decided to include restaurant and café owners as the participants’ criteria to gain insights into MFFB owners' business strategy and survival, which was relevant to the main study. This adjustment is aligned with recent studies indicating that a strategic selection of interviewees can enhance the likelihood of future trial success through thoughtful deliberation (Baldeh et al., 2020). Besides, including multiple selection criteria posed a hurdle to their capacity to gather informants for certain specified groups. This is because utilizing more comprehensive selection criteria can prompt the identification of an adequate number of eligible participants (Price et al., 2020).

Similarly, suppose a researcher conducts interviews with individuals who need more requisite information for the study. In that case, there is a higher tendency to search for other individuals with the necessary information, thus potentially extending the data collection period needlessly. Undoubtedly, having the appropriate individuals on board enhances the likelihood of achieving data saturation sooner (Mwita, 2022). This variation provided rich comparative insights into how different business models experience and respond to the questions. These differences informed the refinement of the interview guide to better capture context-specific challenges and strategies in the main study. Thus, we incorporated this rationale as a participant selection criterion for the main study to ensure that the MFFB setting remains aligned and comparable throughout data collection. Table 3 demonstrated a more specific selection criteria of participants being added after the pilot study.

Table 3: Modifications made

Inclusion criteria of participants	Modification to The Main Study
Three inclusion criteria: (1) MFFB owners who have operated their businesses for more than 5 years and financially viable after the first 5 years (2) the business is a family-owned with a family connection that fulfil the requirement of micro business (3) the business is based in Selangor.	Four inclusion criteria: (1) MFFB owners that had operated their businesses for more than five years (2) the business was family-owned with a family connection that fulfil the requirement of micro business (3) the business operated in a food premise (4) located within Klang Valley, Selangor.

4.2.3 Adjust data collection approach according to participants' availability

Apart from that, after the pilot study, we discovered that participants' convenience should be considered when conducting the qualitative interview. It revealed that while participants were the owners and generally willing to share their experiences, however, their operational commitments often limited their availability for extended interviews. We encountered challenges in recording the conversation effectively during the interview sessions. Despite the participant's clear voice, there were rowdy background noises that proved to be distracting while transcribing the audio recordings. Guo et al. (2022) and Lloyd (2020) advised that a place where the interview session will be held should be quiet and comfortable for the participants. Thus, it is crucial for us to conduct the interview at which time is appropriate for the participants, where the interview surroundings are quieter and offer more privacy for them to answer questions comfortably. This is due to the reason that a participant who is interviewed at an inconvenient time may hastily provide irrelevant and undetailed answers. As Jackson and Andipatin (2021) suggested, research participants must not be preoccupied with other tasks or distractions during interview sessions. Following these pilot interviews, we re-scheduled subsequent interviews with the participants during non-peak hours to ensure their availability, maintain privacy, and control excessive noise prior to the main study. As a result, the data collection approach for the main study was adjusted to allow for flexible scheduling and shorter interview slots where necessary.

Supporting our proposition, Malmqvist et al. (2019) emphasize that a well-organized and skillfully executed pilot study holds the potential to elevate research quality by providing valuable insights that can inform and enrich subsequent phases of the research process. Furthermore, the explanation of ways pertinent aspects of the main study undergo modifications serves to validate and affirm the significance of the pilot study, particularly within the context of qualitative research (Muasya and Mulwa, 2023). Hence, the lessons learnt from the pilot studies highlighted the significance of conducting a pilot study and provided researchers with proper guidance to conduct the main study in future. On top of that, the modification made to the pertinent components of the main study allowing us to adjust the research interview questions, selection criteria of the participants, and data collection approach following participants' convenience before commencing the main study. Based on the experiences, it is highly advisable for researchers to do a pilot study prior to initiating the primary research to enhance direction and subsequently the credibility of the research.

5. Conclusion

Piloting interviews is an important and helpful step in qualitative research because it shows how the main study could be improved. After reviewing the modifications, the pilot interviews improved the deductive coding method used in the theme analysis. They helped keep the study's trustworthiness by making the research tool and focus more vital. Conducting a pilot study allows the novice researchers to become more familiar with the entire research process, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation. It provides an opportunity to practice and gain experience before conducting the main study.

During this preliminary study, we refined our methodologies and interview questions, and it helped ensure that the data collected were relevant to the research objectives and that the questions were clear and effective in eliciting the desired information. Importantly, this pilot study enhanced the validity and reliability of the research entirely. This statement highlights the significance of conducting a pilot study, emphasizing its ability to facilitate us in making essential adjustments to the selection criteria of the participants and interview questions before commencing the primary study. Furthermore, we identified potential sources of bias and take steps to minimize them in the main study. While it offers advantages for qualitative research, it is essential to acknowledge that achieving data saturation can pose a challenge when working with a small sample size.

This pilot study, despite its small group size, provided valuable insights into the research process. Data saturation was not reached, which serves as a limitation. Nevertheless, the primary purpose of this pilot study was to assess data collection tools, identify potential methodological issues for future refinement, and make necessary adjustments for the main study. Even in qualitative studies with limited questions, a pilot study remains essential. By conducting this pilot study, we gained critical insights into the feasibility of their planned main study and how to approach it, particularly in the context of qualitative research.

Consequently, a pilot study holds indispensable importance in qualitative research, allowing novice researchers to evaluate the feasibility and quality of their prospective primary study by drawing upon insights gleaned from preceding interview outcomes. Although some qualitative researchers assert that conducting a pilot study is unnecessary as data emerges, we believe it plays a crucial role in shaping novice researchers, not only students but also first-time researchers conducting qualitative studies. It provides them with hands-on experience in refining interview techniques, identifying potential challenges, and enhancing their confidence in data collection. Therefore, it is hoped that this article contributes to the broader body of knowledge in this area, guiding future qualitative research endeavors within the same sector and enhancing the research's quality, particularly when employing qualitative interviews as a data collection method.

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Artificial intelligence statement: AI was utilized solely to support the exploration of ideas. No content was generated or written directly by AI and all writing presented herein are the original work of the authors.

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