

RESEARCH

Productive Entrepreneurship: A Street Food Business Model Canvas Promoting Sustainable Innovation and Digitalisation in the Informal Economy of Bangladesh

Rahaman Hasan

Senior Lecturer, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK

Email: rahaman.hasan@canterbury.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0003-1690-2458

Richard McManus

Professor, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK

Email: richard.mcmanus@canterbury.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0001-8056-0523

Dababrata Chowdhury

Reader, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK

Email: daba.chowdhury1@canterbury.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0002-3117-3997

Andrina Halder

Principal Lecturer, London Metropolitan University, UK

Email: a.halder@londonmet.ac.uk

ORCID: 0009-0001-0682-8939

Saira Sultana

Senior Lecturer, University of Bedfordshire, UK

Email: saira.sultana@beds.ac.uk

ORCID: 0009-0003-1387-6570

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: Our study examines entrepreneurial behaviour among street food vendors functioning within Dhaka, Bangladesh's informal food sector. We consider our conceptual framework and how it moderates the entrepreneurial behaviour of vendors.

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH: We aim to investigate entrepreneurship, development, innovation and ethics which are concepts within our conceptual framework shaping the behaviour of street food entrepreneurs. To investigate associated concepts, we adopted a mixed-methods exploratory sequential approach, with qualitative data collection followed by a quantitative phase.

FINDINGS: Based on the findings, we proposed amendments to the originally developed framework to enable informal and unproductive entrepreneurs' transition towards formal and sustainable, productive, value-added outcomes with social impacts.

ORIGINALITY: Based on gaps indicated through critical evaluation of local contexts and a literature review, we explored factors influencing entrepreneurs' unproductive behaviour and developed a Street Food Business Model Canvas that is bespoke for the informal economy and street food vendors functioning within it.

KEYWORDS: *Entrepreneurial Behaviour; Productive Entrepreneurship; Sustainable Innovation; Informal Economy; Street Food; Business Model Canvas; Street Food Business Model Canvas.*

INTRODUCTION

In terms of Dhaka, Bangladesh, a 2017 report from the “Bangladesh Tourism Board” claimed that street food contributes a substantial socioeconomic role to the urban dwellers: by offering affordable food, creating employment and feeding more than 6 million customers/people daily. A significant number of these consumers are unsupervised school-going children (Hasan, 2022; Dey *et al.*, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Shane and Venkataraman (2000) view exploiting opportunities as selling products at prices exceeding their production cost. Mitra (2019) referred to market opportunities as replicating or improving an existing product. We attempted to explore and distinguish the types of opportunities and behaviour demonstrated by these street food operators, as studies on the exploitation of opportunities are closely associated with studies of entrepreneurial behaviour.

Baumol's (1996) study on entrepreneurship suggests that entrepreneurial behaviour could be productive, unproductive or destructive. While elaborating on the behavioural concepts, Lucas and Fuller (2017) and Baumol (1996) more recently state that productive entrepreneurship has a positive influence on social wellbeing, involving the launching of new processes and/or products. Whereas a rent-seeking approach is defined as unproductive behaviour, and entrepreneurial behaviour is believed to be destructive once resources are used to obtain assets/wealth.

Entrepreneurial behaviour literature invites discussions on the institutional framework and industry impacts. Gohmann *et al.* (2016) claim that the government's institutional framework significantly moderates the behaviour and type of entrepreneurship within the industry. Nonetheless, it remains unanswered how firms (large, small and medium) can become sustainable while operating in either the formal or informal economy.

In recent literature on entrepreneurship and sustainability, an amalgamation of environmental, economic and social value creation has emerged (Galpin and Hebard, 2015; Dean and McMullen, 2007). However, challenges for existing firms to implement sustainable business practices have been argued (Schick *et al.*, 2002). While Fox (2002) suggests that implementing sustainable business approaches can be advantageous for new firms or start-ups, due to having fewer procedures and processes at an early stage. Schick *et al.* (2002) claim that widespread incorporation of sustainable business practices by start-ups can influence the restructuring of the overall industry and SDGs.

The WCED's (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) characterisation of sustainable development has been debated (Mustunsir, 2015; Beg *et al.*, 2002) as the definition concentrates mainly on meeting the needs and does not consider the scope for business growth. This is a direct contradiction of the concept of entrepreneurship and is limited in considering consumers' changing behaviour and preferences, specifically when targeting children as consumers (Reddy *et al.*, 2016). As a result, the world has observed significant changes in the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development since the introduction of the concepts, which are highly impacted by the economic and political circumstances of contemporary times (Giddings *et al.*, 2002).

The Conceptual Framework

Evaluating deliberations of the reviewed context and literature, we developed the conceptual framework (see Figure 1).

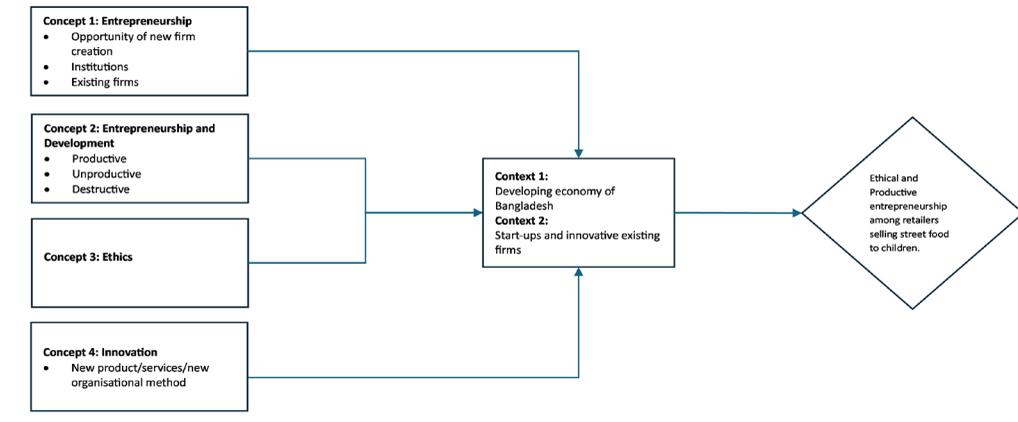


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Developed by authors

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Considering the composite nature of the phenomenon, philosophically, we embraced a pragmatic approach (Takona, 2024; Haq, 2015). Through a mixed-methods approach, the efficiency of our study could be best served, and it could be implemented within a pragmatic framework (Ambrosio, 2016; Wagenmakers *et al.*, 2018).

Sequential exploratory protocols were followed (Saunders *et al.*, 2009, pp. 169–172), and a qualitative phase was adopted first to generate an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon associated with food adulteration and aspects shaping this behaviour from the perspectives of the organisations overseeing Bangladesh’s food industry. We conducted 13 semi-structured interviews and 250 questionnaire surveys. The qualitative key findings (KF) are quantitatively tested with street food vendors functioning inside the informal street food sector.

To manage qualitative analysis and generate key findings, Grounded Theory protocols were followed. NVivo was used to manage the qualitative, and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) is an instrument to manage and analyse quantitative data.

FINDINGS

Concept 1 (Entrepreneurship) Findings

Firstly, the presence of informal and formal operators is evident in the same sector offering food to children. When the phenomenon of food adulteration was examined, we were directed towards the informal street-food sector offering commodities to children. According to participants, *“in the formal industry regulatory bodies (institutions) are having some impact, but they are unable to moderate the informal street food sector, due to lack of a registration mechanism”* (KF 4). Additionally, *“currently there are no structured mechanisms to recognise and monitor these entrepreneurs/firms from the street-food sector”* (KF 1).

Secondly, qualitative analysis claimed, *“in comparison to the formal industry selling food to children, the informal industry is larger”* (KF 2). For *“the absence of systematic monitoring and ineffective regulatory structure”* (KF 23), rural migrants are unable to find formal employment and are exploited by the opportunity. Nevertheless, *“this industry is offering street food at an affordable price range”* (KF 3), which has become a selling point for this industry as *“children and below middle-class economy customers do not have the affordability to purchase safe food that is sold at premium prices”* (KF 28).

Thirdly, our research confirmed numerous adulteration practices in the informal sector, such as *“inferior raw materials”* (KF 9), *“use of textile colours”* (KF 10) and *“sweeteners”* (KF 8) alongside *“the use of formalin”* (KF 13), *“preservatives”* (KF 14) and *“tendency to hide information relating to ingredients used”* (KF 20). We tested these findings in the quantitative phase with street food retailers, and the results confirmed the presence of these practices (Table 1).

Table 1: Common Adulteration Techniques

Techniques	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Sweeteners	58	23.2	23.2	23.2
Textile colours	24	9.6	9.6	32.8
Formalin	41	16.4	16.4	49.2
Preservatives	22	8.8	8.8	58.0
Inferior raw materials	49	19.6	19.6	77.6
Expiry date	56	22.4	22.4	100
Total	250	100	100	

Source: Developed by authors

“The majority of the children are consumers of street food from these sources” (KF 33). However, discussions suggested *“a number of these adulteration practices are deliberately undertaken by unproductive street-food retailers”* (KF 29), whereas these processes are practised simply due to *“having a lack or no knowledge and awareness of food safety among the street food retailers”* (KF 18 and 19).

To conclude, claims are constructed that the “unproductive behaviour is encouraged by a weak regulatory structure” amongst a number of retailers (KF 26), and that is upheld by “some food inspectors who are corrupt” (KF 25). When we tested these findings, our Chi-Square test result (Table 2, $p = 0.983$) failed to find an association between regulatory structure with specific types of retailers (i.e., formal-registered and/or informal-unregistered).

Table 2: Effective Regulatory Framework with Retailer Types

	Value	Degree of freedom (df)	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.390 ^a	4	.983
Likelihood ratio	.411	4	.982
N of valid cases	250		

Source: Developed by authors

Concept 2 (Entrepreneurship and Development) Findings

Firstly, the discussions on entrepreneurship and development contributed more revelations concerning the occurring unproductive practices amongst the retailers functioning in the sector, trading street food for children. Where “new adulteration techniques are practised in the sector” has been acknowledged (KF 36), alongside the existing common adulteration procedures, for instance, “addition of extraneous matters” (KF 34 and 35), and “use of prohibited preservatives and dyes” (KF 38 and 39).

Secondly, our study suggests that a “lack of awareness” (KF 34 and 38) and “knowledge” (KF 35 and 39) are the core motives for the practice and existence of these adulteration procedures. Our test (Table 3) shows an association ($p = 0.033$) between adulteration practice and ingredient awareness among street food retailers. Moreover, we found that “poor awareness concerning the adulteration among the consumers” (KF 40) of these street-food commodities is a worry.

Table 3: Adulteration with Ingredient Awareness

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	19.583a	10	.033
Likelihood ratio	19.658	10	.033
N of valid cases	250		

Source: Developed by authors

Lastly, these results indicate that the adulteration phenomenon is evident within the informal sector, besides “a practical regulatory mechanism to recognise these common adulteration procedures (chemical adulteration particularly) is absent” (KF 41), which is of major concern.

Concept 3 (Ethics) Findings

Firstly, the absence of a licensing mechanism is mentioned regarding the implementation of ethical standards in Bangladesh’s street-food sector. Where our study identifies “*regulations are welcomed by larger businesses*” (KF 57), these registered businesses can obtain essential resources. On the contrary, vendors of the “*informal sector do not have access to this information*” and “*remain uneducated with respect to adulteration and safe food*” (KF 50 and 51). To confirm these claims, our test (Table 4) found a strong association ($p = 0.001$) between “*adulteration practices*” and “*no access to information*”.

Table 4: No Access to Information on Adulteration Techniques

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	44.168 ^a	20	.001
Likelihood ratio	44.026	20	.001
Linear-by-linear association	1.146	1	.284
N of valid cases	250		

Source: Developed by authors

It has been identified that a key reason some vendors stay unregistered is the cost advantage. By keeping themselves “*unregistered*,” they are avoiding legal requirements (KF 62), which gives the vendors an advantage by sourcing “*inferior raw materials*” (KF 61). Primarily these “*retailers are with low investments, and meeting the legal requirements may not be a consideration for them*” (KF 59). Moreover, the perception of being registered is similarly “*not very clear to the retailers*” within the informal industry (KF 60), hence it is turning out to be “*challenging to have a positive influence on the regulatory bodies*” besides its imprint on the formal sector (KF 47). Additionally, “*lack of manpower*” has been identified as a concern in imposing regulations (KF 48).

Secondly, regarding values and norms of the entrepreneurs, our participants thought, “*young retailers in the street-food sector have improved morals*” (KF 45) and likely “*exposure to knowledge and information may be playing an important role in them being ethical with their functions*” (KF 44). Vendors functioning ethically/morally “*consider creating goodwill and have intent for long-term business*” (KF 43). On the contrary, “*unproductive retailers don’t have intentions to stay in the business for the long term*” (key finding 49), for them “*profit making is the main drive*” (KF 46).

Finally, we found evidence suggesting “*in improving awareness, government interventions are having some effect*” (KF 42), but typically amongst the vendors from the formal sector. Yet, a major awareness deficiency is apparent in the industry, amongst vendors and consumers. In addition, “*reviewing the penalty structure and a number of regulations may also be essential*” (KF 54). Ultimately, this calls for practical and essential interventions to “*improve awareness amongst the street-food retailers and consumers*” (KF 63), which should include “*enhancing awareness on value, social norms and beliefs*” (KF 65) in addition to “*educating customers on food adulteration, including children*” (KF 64).

When we tested the importance of children’s awareness of these adulteration practices against awareness of good practices, our test resulted in associations concerning the variables (Table 5).

Table 5: Good Practices Awareness of Children with Adulteration Practices

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	76.605 ^a	15	.000
Likelihood Ratio	73.299	15	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.100	1	.147
N of Valid Cases	250		

Source: Developed by authors

Concept 4 (Innovation) Findings

Firstly, we found that “*locally sourcing good quality ingredients*” rather than becoming dependent on imported raw materials can be a business approach (innovative) for the retailers selling street food in the informal sector (KF 69). Muzamwese’s (2016) study found that SMEs are heavily dependent on locally sourced ingredients within formal and/or informal economic activities. Through this, SMEs gain value-added operations and perform an impactful function in the advancement and economic growth. Additionally, operating or maintaining an “*online platform for the street-food business*” is deemed innovative/original for the sector (KF 68). Radicic and Petković (2023) suggested that digitalisation can positively influence SMEs’ product and process innovation.

Secondly, we found that vendors do not need to consider and embrace good practices existing within the same industry. A “*good practice from another sector can be implemented*” in the street-food sector (KF 67) if that is transferable. However, there is “*no procedure available to identify a good practice*” in the street food sector, not to mention other sectors (KF 66). Romero and Mammadov (2024) found that access to external knowledge, combined with skills and digitalisation, can foster innovation within SMEs.

Discussions on innovation concluded with the recommendation to “*develop a digital mechanism*” for acknowledging good practices, so that those adoptable by vendors with poorer financial strength can adopt them (KF 70) and “*educate the retailers and consumers on street-food produced in this productive process*” (KF 71). This will encourage other entrepreneurs to become productive.

When we tested the potential for adopting good practices among informal street-food vendors, our test results (Table 6) found a strong association ($p = 0.000$) between awareness of good practices and the retailers’ financial constraints, suggesting that financial limitations make it difficult for informal street-food vendors to adopt good practices even when they are aware of them (Hasan, 2022).

Table 6: Good Practice Awareness with Poor Financial Ability

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2 sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	65.301 ^a	12	.000
Likelihood ratio	72.457	12	.000
Linear-by-linear association	7.959	1	.005
Number of valid cases	250		

Source: Developed by authors

DISCUSSIONS

Proposed Amendments to the Conceptual Framework

Andersen (2000) indicates that, besides business performance, a firm needs to develop a clearer strategic direction, awareness of the changing environment and understanding of what is important. All these can be achieved by integrating sustainability into the firm's strategic directions by adopting digital transformation (Clemente-Almendros *et al.*, 2024).

To bring the required social change, this study introduces a street food business model canvas (SFBMC). A framework is identified as an illustration of what value a business contributes to revenue generation (Carter and Carter, 2020; Massa and Tucci, 2013), which focuses on innovation and technology management, environmental sustainability, social entrepreneurship and strategy (Massa *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, the framework outlines “*the justification and infrastructure of how an organisation creates, delivers and captures value*” (Johnson, 2012, pp. 14). Alternatively, publications claim that the fundamental components of a business model incorporate how resources are utilised, the firm's value proposition or capabilities.

According to Massa *et al.* (2017), in a traditional business approach, firms are assumed not to have any other purpose than maximising financial gains, and consumers' demand is to have their demand supplied (Haque *et al.*, 2025). This bid to surge financial or economic rewards destructively impacts the formation of social values. Mustunsir (2015) argued that the economy and economic growth of businesses dominate most aspects of society, regardless of whether they are environmentally friendly or not. In the case of Bangladesh's informal street food sector, the entrepreneurs operate mostly on the traditional business approach. The increasing urban population has created a demand for affordable food among the middle- and lower-income people of the society, and street food has emerged as the supply to meet that demand.

Our proposed SFBMC aims to transform the informal street retailers from traditional methods to more sustainable and productive practices. A Business Model Canvas (BMC) offers entrepreneurs a greater conception of the business process to generate value, with value propositions set as the cardinal focus in the analysis of the business model. The purpose of adopting the BMC and its assembly of nine dimensions (see Figure 2, by Johnson (2012) is to offer the users a clear knowledge of the business's uniqueness (Carter and Carter, 2020; Sort and Nielsen, 2018; Massa *et al.*, 2017; Kristensen and Ucler, 2016).

Key Partners	Key Activities	Value Proposition	Customer Relationship	Customer Segments
	Key Resources		Channels	
Cost Structure		Revenue Streams		

Figure 2: Business Model Canvas

Source: Johnson, 2012

Reviewing the Dhaka street-food industry’s elements for a BMC, it becomes evident that the BMC will fail to accommodate the areas of concern our research identified, suggesting that we need to adjust the BMC to accommodate and address the issues of Bangladesh’s informal street-food sector to generate anticipated sustainable, productive entrepreneurship outcomes.

Inspired by Mitra (2019) Triple Layered Business Model Canvas (TLBMC) and Joyce and Paquin’s (2016) Social Enterprise Model Canvas (SEMC), where authors in both cases adopted and modified the BMC to serve a specific purpose, we introduce the Street Food Business Model Canvas (SFBMC, see Figure 3).

The Street Food Business Model Canvas

Our discussions on the conceptual framework components found gaps broadly over three areas, which we could not incorporate in the standard Business Model Canvas (BMC) (Johnson, 2012). To accommodate them in the BMC, we are introducing the following three additional dimensions alongside the existing nine dimensions.

Additional Dimension 1: Regulatory framework

We found that the concern of adulteration and food safety is mainly evident in the informal street-food sector, where vendors function without registration, and the regulatory framework is unable to regulate them appropriately.

Afrifa and Tauringana (2015) and Wadesango’s (2015) studies claimed that SMEs can achieve economic growth and sustainable entrepreneurship with strong support from the government through policies, which enable government institutions to regulate the industry and support SMEs in accessing relevant resources effectively. Romero and Mammadov (2025) claimed that adopting digital transformation can provide access to external resources/knowledge to small and medium enterprises (SMEs). For Dhaka Street food, the dimension of the regulatory framework should include the following elements:

- Implement registration, routine monitoring and oversight.
- Modernise penalty formation and regulations.
- Entry criteria for new vendors.

Additional Dimension 2: Good Practices

We found the absence of a framework to identify exemplary practices in Bangladesh's street food sector. Therefore, vendors intending to achieve productive outcomes struggle to recognise a suitable strategy and process to improve their current business functions and/or processes. As Majukwa *et al.* (2020) and Wadesango (2015) found, it is essential for SMEs to learn good/successful practices from others to achieve sustainable business practices within their own operations and digitalisation (Sagala and Óri, 2025) can enhance SME resilience. Thus, the good practice dimension should incorporate the following components:

- Good or exemplary practice bank.
- Framework to proclaim and access good/exemplary practices.
- Digitalisation and good practice consultation.

Additional Dimension 3: Awareness Programme

We found that the non-existence of entry barriers has made the sector appealing to rural migrants, many of whom come with inadequate education, knowledge, awareness and skills. Customers of this sector also tend to show low awareness regarding food safety. When Zhao *et al.* (2025) found that digitalisation among SMEs can support social progress, it is essential to elevate knowledge and awareness among the vendors and customers to mitigate this social knowledge deficiency. The awareness programme dimension should incorporate the following components:

- Vendor's compulsory training programmes.
- Vendor's food safety education programmes.
- Enhancing vendors' and customers' knowledge and awareness.

Incorporating the three additional dimensions into the BMC, we propose the "Street Food Business Model Canvas (SFBMC)" (Table 7) for adoption in Bangladesh's street food vending sector. Adoption of the SFBMC will ensure sustainable, productive entrepreneurship functions amongst its vendors. Moreover, we affirm that the structure of our SFBMC can be adapted to other industries simultaneously, due to its transferable features.

Table 7: Street Food Business Model Canvas (SFBMC)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regulatory Framework Implement registration, routine monitoring and oversight Modernise penalty formation and regulations Entry criteria for new vendors 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness Programmes Vendor's compulsory training programmes Vendor's food safety education programmes Enhancing vendors' and customers' knowledge and awareness 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good Practices Good or exemplary practice bank Framework to proclaim and access good/exemplary practices Digitalisation and good practice consultation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Value Proposition Fresh and safe food Unique taste High quality Locally sourced safe ingredients Affordable price Accessibility Comfort food Offer a platform for customer feedback Growth to attract investors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customer relationship Word of mouth Friendly and close relations with customers Online platforms (social media/rating/review/YouTube) Channels Portable food cart or static street food stalls Presence in online platforms Declare good practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customer segments Mass market Children Parents Families People from middle- and low-income backgrounds
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key Partners Suppliers of raw materials Suppliers of produced food Investors (if/when needed) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key Activities Maintaining the same taste, quality and food safety Training and knowledge on food entrepreneurship Raise awareness activities Restaurants comparability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key Resources Financial capabilities for innovation Own recipes Knowledge and awareness of food safety Training and education on food safety Develop goodwill/brand Physical presence 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of valid cases 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cost Structure Cost of producing safe food Salaries for the staff (if any) Trade licence Income tax (post-registration) Cost associated with innovation 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revenue Streams Sales of safe food Goodwill

Source: Developed by authors

The New Conceptual Framework

Incorporating the SFBMC into the initial conceptual framework, the new conceptual framework is developed (Figure 3). The Street Food Business Model Canvas (SFBMC) sits between the concepts and context of this study. This process will enable both regulators and entrepreneurs operating within the industry to have a holistic oversight of the businesses and the industry (from the regulator's viewpoint). This view will enable the entrepreneurs to develop and redevelop their business plans accordingly to become innovative and create value, considering the economic context of their business at any given time. Successful execution of this process will enable the Bangladesh street food sector to encourage and deliver sustainable, productive entrepreneurship. As Majukwa *et al.* (2020) found, evidence suggests that SMEs have the potential to impact sustainable, productive entrepreneurial ventures, providing a significant groundwork for the advancement of new businesses and industries, and stimulating the economy to sustain productivity and wealth creation with positive social changes.

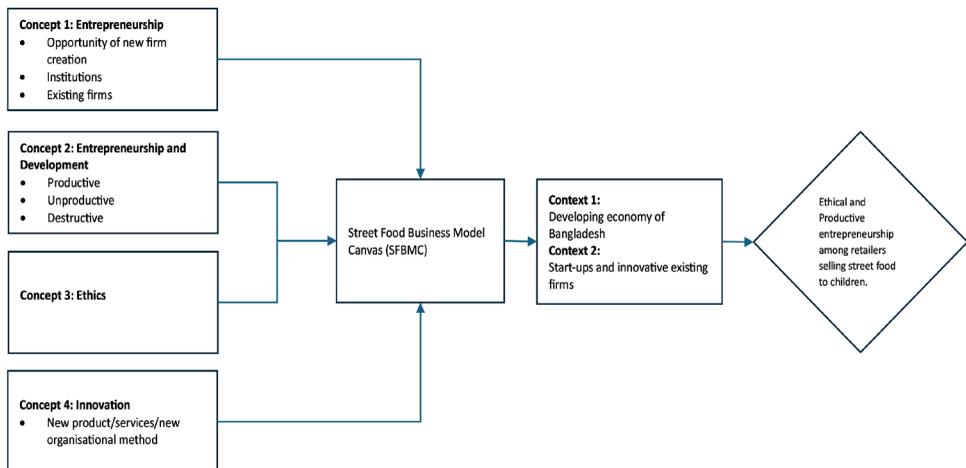


Figure 3: The New Conceptual Framework

Source: Developed by authors

CONCLUSIONS

We investigated entrepreneurial behaviour amongst the street-food retailers operating within the informal economy/sector in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Special attention was given to unproductive behaviour, specifically food adulteration, which is encouraged by limited awareness, poor regulatory structure, financial challenges and insufficient access to resources. While street-food vending maintains a central socioeconomic role in the city through offering food at an affordable price and providing livelihoods, our findings suggest that the unproductive practices stem mainly

from institutional and structural deficiencies rather than individual intentions. Our study indicates transferable cross-industrial good practices and digitalisation as likely drivers for innovative and productive behaviour, though financial constraints remain a concern within the informal economy/sector for their adoption.

To address these deficiencies and challenges, we propose the Street Food Business Model Canvas (SFBMC). Through this paper, we extended the nine dimensions of the original Business Model Canvas by integrating three additional dimensions: regulatory framework, awareness mechanism, and good practices. The transition towards a more ethical, productive and sustainable entrepreneurial behaviour within the informal sector is supported by the context-sensitive feature of this SFBMC. The framework will have broader implications for the regulatory and policymaking agencies seeking to encourage entrepreneurial growth within and beyond the informal street-food sector. We recommend future empirical research to examine the SFBMC across contexts and industries and explore sustainable entrepreneurial transformation through (the adoption of) digital platforms.

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BIOGRAPHY



Dr Rahaman Hasan is a Senior Lecturer at Christ Church Business School. He is specialised in Entrepreneurship in his PhD from the University of Essex, UK. Rahaman is an active researcher with specific interest in Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurial Behaviour, Street Food, SMEs, Marketing and UK Higher Education (UKHE). Rahaman has over 17 years work experience in UKHE, which includes extensive experience of teaching, assessment and quality assurance in the sector. Furthermore, providing academic training and workshops to academics and professionals is his special skill. Rahaman is a Senior Fellow at the Higher Education Academy (SFHEA).



Professor Richard McManus is the Director of Research Development at Christ Church Business School. A graduate of the University of York with a BSc in Economics, he went on to qualify as a Chartered Accountant with Ernst and Young. Richard's research in macroeconomics focuses on the impact of constitutions on economic outcomes, and tax changes on tax revenue. He has published widely in academic journals and in mainstream media, and his work is cited in *The Telegraph* and *Times Higher Education* in the UK, as well as in the US and Turkey. He has written for *The Guardian*, *The Conversation*, and been interviewed on *Faculty*.



Dr Dababrata Chowdhury, a Reader in Entrepreneurship, provides strategic and academic leadership in research, knowledge exchange and postgraduate education, and contributes to the development and operation of a joint research partnership for the supervision of doctoral students. Previously, Daba was an Associate Professor in Entrepreneurship and Marketing in the Suffolk Business School at the University of Suffolk (UoS). Daba is a fellow of the Higher Education Academy with over 20 years of work experience in Higher Education. His skills include technology, innovation, creativity, improving student employability, entrepreneurial development, and Knowledge Management.



Dr Andrina Halder is a Principal Lecturer and has been working with Londonmet since 2019. She holds a PhD in Digital Marketing and is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (SFHEA). She's currently the Course Leader for International Business Management MSc, Digital Business Management BSc and Business Management BA (Top-Up). As a retired Bangladesh Armed Forces Officer, Dr Halder is also an expert in international business management and relations. Furthermore, she leads and teaches multiple Digital Business Management, Artificial Intelligence, and International Business-related modules. Additionally, Dr Halder has industry experience in providing management training for business managers.



Dr Saira Sultana is a Senior Lecturer with extensive teaching experience across a diverse range of units at various higher education levels. Her disciplinary focus includes qualitative research methods, strategy, and marketing. An internationally minded educator, she holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Social Media Marketing from the University of Bedfordshire. Her research interests lie in social media marketing and consumer behaviour. Saira is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (SFHEA), a Certified Management and Business Educator (CMBE), and a member of both the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

