

Integrating Strategy and Control: A Sector-Specific Balanced Scorecard Framework for Food SMEs

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ABSTRACT

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the highly dynamic and competitive food sector face unique challenges, including product perishability, volatile input costs, and stringent traceability demands. Although the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) is commonly used to link strategy and performance, its traditional design often lacks the sector-specific details necessary for effective implementation in food SMEs. This conceptual paper addresses this gap by developing and conceptually validating a BSC framework tailored to the food industry that integrates the financial, operational, commercial, and digital dimensions relevant to food SMEs. Drawing on the evolution of BSC research and the food industry's unique operational realities, this study proposes a four-pillar model encompassing profitability, operational efficiency, commercial strength, and digitalisation. Each pillar is operationalised through tailored key performance indicators (KPIs) and embedded within a dynamic management control cycle to ensure continuous improvement. The proposed framework provides food SMEs with a structured, yet flexible tool to align strategy with operations, enhance decision-making, and foster sustainable competitiveness. Future research should empirically test the model to assess its effectiveness in different food subsectors.

Keywords: Balanced Scorecard; Management Control System; Food SMEs; Performance Measurement.

JEL Codes: M10, M11, L66, O33.

I. Introduction

In today's disruptive and volatile business landscape, which is characterised by uncertainty, complexity, and rapid technological change, organisations must adopt robust management tools to ensure adaptability and sustainable growth (Kumar et al., 2024). This is particularly important for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the food sector, which face dual pressures from global competition and local regulatory constraints. These firms face challenges such as fluctuating input costs and strict food

regulations in the sector, which is under dual pressures from global competition and local constraints. These firms face challenges including fluctuating input costs, strict food safety standards, short product lifecycles, and shifting consumer preferences toward sustainability and transparency (OECD, 2021). Against this backdrop, strategic alignment—the ability to translate corporate vision into operational action—becomes a decisive factor for survival and long-term success.

A well-designed management control system (MCS) is essential for achieving this alignment. It enables organisations to establish quantifiable goals, track performance, and adapt strategies in response to evolving market conditions (ACCID, 2010). However, traditional control systems often overemphasise financial outcomes, providing limited insight into the drivers of future performance. The Balanced Scorecard (BSC), introduced by Kaplan and Norton (1992), overcame this limitation by integrating financial and non-financial perspectives—financial, customer, internal processes, and learning and growth—into a comprehensive strategic management framework. Over time, the BSC has evolved to incorporate sustainability, stakeholder orientation, and digital transformation, extending its relevance across industries (Figge et al., 2002; Kumar et al., 2024).

Despite this evolution, a significant gap remains: the absence of a sector-specific BSC framework tailored to the realities of food SMEs. Although research has examined BSC applications in supply chains (Bhagwat & Sharma, 2007) and the food industry (Bigliardi & Bottani, 2010; Habbe et al., 2025), existing models frequently concentrate on large enterprises or neglect emerging priorities, such as digitalisation and sustainability, or remain focused on specific functions like retail rather than an integrated SME perspective. Generic frameworks overlook critical issues such as cost volatility, perishability, and traceability, which directly influence the profitability and long-term competitiveness of food SMEs.

This study aims to address this gap by developing a sector-specific conceptual management control framework based on the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) model. The proposed model adapts BSC principles to the strategic and operational needs of SMEs in the food industry. It links key performance indicators (KPIs) to four strategic pillars: profitability, operational efficiency, commercial strength, and digital transformation. The framework embeds these elements within a continuous control cycle to promote feedback, learning, and adaptability.

Accordingly, this paper addresses the following research questions: (i) How can the BSC be adapted to the strategic and operational realities of food SMEs? and (ii) What sector-specific KPIs and control mechanisms can enhance strategic alignment and performance in this context?

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the existing literature on MCSs and the evolution of the BSC. Particular attention is given to its application in SMEs and the food industry. Section 3 outlines the conceptual research design. Section 4 presents the proposed, sector-specific management control framework.

Section 5 discusses the implications, limitations, and directions of the framework for future research.

II. Literature review

A. Management Control Systems and Strategic Implementation

An MCS provides the framework through which organisations translate strategic goals into operational results. It encompasses the processes of planning, monitoring, and evaluating performance to ensure the efficient and effective use of resources in line with strategic objectives (ACCID, 2010). The primary purpose of an MCS is to bridge the gap between strategy formulation and implementation, ensuring that daily operations reflect and support long-term strategic goals (Kaplan & Norton, 2001). However, many organisations, particularly SMEs, struggle with this alignment due to limited managerial resources and informal strategic processes. For SMEs in the food industry, these challenges are exacerbated by environmental volatility, cost pressures, and regulatory complexity.

To overcome these constraints, SMEs need management control systems that are methodologically robust and practically adaptable. Effective MCS frameworks integrate financial and non-financial indicators, encourage continuous feedback, and foster learning across organisational levels. The need for holistic performance management paved the way for the emergence of the BSC.

B. The Balanced Scorecard: From Financial Measures to Strategic Management

Introduced by Kaplan and Norton (1992), the BSC revolutionised performance management by shifting attention from purely financial measures to a multidimensional system encompassing financial, customer, internal processes, and learning and growth perspectives. This innovation overcame the main limitation of traditional performance metrics, which includes their retrospective and narrow financial focus, by incorporating forward-looking indicators that capture the drivers of long-term value creation.

The BSC has evolved from a measurement framework into a strategic management system that emphasises cause-and-effect linkages between objectives across its four perspectives (Kaplan & Norton, 2001a) —a transformation that fundamentally repositions it as a tool for strategic communication and organisational learning (Kaplan & Norton, 2001b). For instance, investing in employee skills can improve process efficiency (internal perspective), enhance customer satisfaction (customer perspective), and ultimately, increase profitability (financial perspective). This logical approach has made the BSC a cornerstone of both academic research and managerial practice, although the validity of its linear cause-and-effect relationships has been a point of scholarly debate (Norreklit, 2000).

Over time, the BSC's adaptability has allowed it to serve diverse contexts, from large corporations to public institutions and SMEs. Each entity has tailored the framework to its strategic realities. The BSC's integration of performance measurement with strategic execution has also established it as a foundation for integrated reporting and sustainability management (Figge et al., 2002). However, despite its universal principles, the BSC's effectiveness depends heavily on contextual adaptation, especially in sectors with complex and fast-changing environments, such as the food industry.

C. Evolution and Current Trends in BSC Research

Since its inception, research on the BSC has evolved through distinct phases, reflecting changing organisational and societal priorities. The first phase (1992–2001) centred on establishing the BSC as a performance measurement and strategic alignment tool, emphasising its ability to translate vision into actionable objectives (Kaplan & Norton, 1992, 2001). The second phase (2002–2011) shifted toward integrating new dimensions, such as knowledge management, stakeholder engagement, and corporate governance. The development of the Sustainability Balanced Scorecard (SBSC) (Figge et al., 2002) exemplified this transformation by incorporating environmental and social performance metrics into strategic management systems.

The contemporary phase (2012–present) reflects the increasing impact of digital transformation and systems thinking. Studies have expanded the BSC's theoretical foundation by incorporating digitalisation, data analytics, and dynamic performance monitoring. This aligns with the broader movement toward integrated reporting and continuous feedback systems (Kumar et al., 2024). Meta-analytic findings confirm a positive relationship between BSC adoption and organisational performance across industries (Tawse & Tabesh, 2023), highlighting its lasting significance. Thus, the literature positions the BSC not as a static tool, but as a living framework that continuously evolves to accommodate sustainability, innovation, and technological disruption.

D. Evolution and Current Trends in BSC Research

Although the BSC originated in large corporations, it has proven both feasible and valuable among SMEs. SMEs benefit from the BSC's structured yet flexible design, which provides clarity of purpose and a framework for linking strategic objectives to measurable outcomes. However, successfully using the BSC in SMEs depends on simplification and focus. This means identifying a small number of critical indicators that reflect core value drivers (Giannopoulos et al., 2013). Excessive complexity can hinder implementation, especially when managerial or technological capabilities are limited.

In the food sector, contextual adaptation is essential. This industry faces unique challenges, such as product perishability, strict traceability and safety regulations, and high cost sensitivity. Generic BSC models fail to capture these realities. This aligns with critiques that overly generic BSC frameworks may overlook unique operational contexts and oversimplify complex strategic relationships (Norreklit, 2000). Bigliardi and Bottani's (2010) foundational work demonstrated how the BSC could be tailored for food supply

chains by emphasising KPIs such as supplier rejection rates, delivery reliability, and inventory cost. More recent adaptations have incorporated sustainability metrics (e.g., waste/loss ratios) and digitalisation indicators (e.g., level of process automation) to align with current regulatory and market demands (OECD, 2021; Kumar et al., 2024). Further underscoring its practical value, a recent empirical study by Habbe et al. (2025) successfully applied the BSC to evaluate performance in a food retail setting, demonstrating its efficacy in a related segment of the industry.

Despite these advances, research remains fragmented. Current models either focus on specific functions, such as logistics or sustainability, or lack integration across strategic dimensions. Few studies address how digital transformation, sustainability, and operational efficiency can coexist within a unified control framework designed specifically for food SMEs. Closing this gap requires an integrative approach that contextualises BSC principles within the operational realities and resource constraints of food industry SMEs.

E. Identified Research Gap

The literature confirms the BSC's theoretical versatility and empirical success across sectors. However, it also reveals a gap in applications tailored to SMEs that integrate financial control, sustainability, and digitalisation holistically. Although prior research (e.g., Bigliardi & Bottani, 2010; Bhagwat & Sharma, 2007) has laid the groundwork for measuring the performance of food supply chains, these studies predate the current wave of digital transformation and sustainability initiatives. Furthermore, there is currently no comprehensive framework to guide food SMEs in customising the BSC to their strategic context.

This paper aims to bridge the gap by proposing a conceptually integrated management control framework tailored to food SMEs. The framework adapts the multi-perspective structure of the BSC to address the sector's unique challenges, such as perishability, cost volatility, traceability, and digital integration, while maintaining the simplicity required for SME implementation. The next section outlines the conceptual methodology used to design and validate the framework.

III. Methodology

To achieve the objective of developing a sector-specific management control framework for food SMEs, this study employs a conceptual research design. This approach is ideal for developing new frameworks or models by synthesising and organising existing knowledge to solve a specific theoretical or practical problem. The main goal is conceptual development rather than empirical testing (MacInnis, 2011).

To ensure a systematic and rigorous development of the proposed framework, the research process was structured into three sequential phases. The first phase, Theoretical Foundation and Literature Synthesis, involved a thorough analysis of existing literature to determine the fundamental components of the model. The second phase, Framework Design and Integration, involved constructing the model by mapping the identified strategic elements onto the BSC structure and selecting relevant performance indicators.

The final phase, Model Refinement and Validation, involved an iterative process of critical analysis to enhance the internal coherence, logical consistency, and practical applicability of the framework for its intended users.

A. Phase 1: Theoretical Foundation and Literature Synthesis

The first phase involved a comprehensive analysis and synthesis of extant academic literature to establish a robust theoretical foundation. We first reviewed the foundational and contemporary literature on MCS (e.g., ACCID, 2010) and the BSC (Kaplan & Norton, 1992, 2001a) to understand the core principles of strategic performance management. This included examining the evolution and current trends of the BSC, as identified by Kumar et al. (2024), to ensure the contemporary relevance of the framework.

First, we conducted a literature review on the specific characteristics and challenges of SMEs, with a focus on their need for effective yet simplified control systems. Additionally, we synthesised studies on operational, strategic, and market challenges unique to the food sector (OECD, 2021), including prior research on performance measurement in food supply chains (Bigliardi & Bottani, 2010). These findings led to the identification of four strategic pillars that underpin the framework: profitability and cost control, operational efficiency, commercial strength, and digitalisation.

B. Phase 2: Framework Design and Integration

In the second phase, the four strategic pillars were systematically mapped onto the four perspectives of the BSC—financial, customer, internal processes, and learning and growth—in order to construct the sector-specific framework. This process guaranteed that each strategic objective was backed by cause-and-effect logic connecting performance drivers (e.g., digital capability and process efficiency) to outcomes (e.g., profitability and customer satisfaction).

Specific KPIs and strategic initiatives were identified for each perspective based on relevance, measurability, and actionability. The selection criteria emphasised indicators that (i) directly reflect the operational realities of food SMEs, (ii) can be monitored despite resource constraints, and (iii) align with strategic objectives. The result of this step was a tailored BSC that translates abstract strategy into measurable outcomes while maintaining simplicity and applicability.

To enhance the model's usability, a strategy map was developed to visualise the interrelationships among the different perspectives. The map serves as a diagnostic tool for managers, showing how improvements in learning and process efficiency can impact financial and commercial outcomes.

C. Phase 3: Model Refinement and Validation

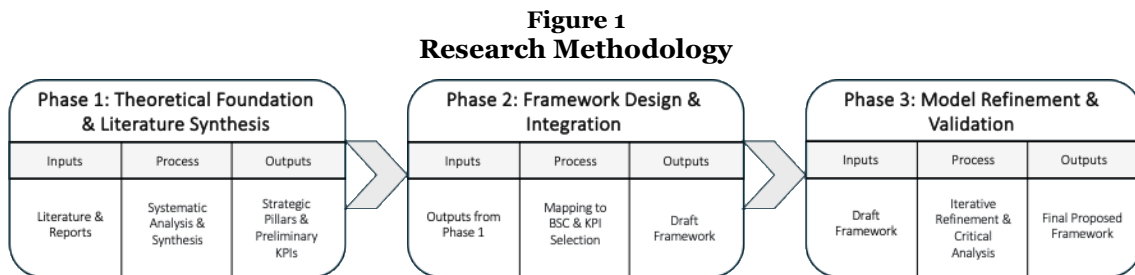
The third phase was an iterative process of refining the model to ensure internal coherence, logical consistency, and practical applicability. The draft framework was evaluated based on the theoretical foundations and sector-specific challenges identified in Phase 1. This process tested the logical linkages between strategic objectives, KPIs,

and initiatives to ensure that the causal pathways were conceptually sound and contextually appropriate.

Although empirical validation is beyond the scope of this conceptual study, the model was validated conceptually through theoretical cross-checking and consistency analysis. This included verifying its alignment with established BSC theory (Kaplan & Norton, 2001), ensuring its adaptability to SME realities (Giannopoulos et al., 2013), and addressing sectoral priorities, such as waste reduction, traceability, and digital transformation (OECD, 2021; Kumar et al., 2024). The resulting framework is a logically coherent, actionable tool designed to support future empirical testing in real-world SME contexts.

D. Summary of Research Design

Figure 1 illustrates the methodological process adopted in this study, which involves a structured progression from theoretical synthesis to framework construction and validation. This multi-phase approach ensures that the proposed management control framework is grounded in the operational and strategic realities of food SMEs while resting on a robust conceptual foundation. The next section presents the resulting model in detail, including its strategic pillars, BSC design, and dynamic control cycle.



IV. The Proposed Management Control Framework

This section presents the primary output of the conceptual research process: an integrated management control framework designed specifically for SMEs in the food industry. The framework synthesises findings from the literature into a structured model based on foundational strategic objectives. These objectives are operationalised through a tailored BSC and enhanced by a dynamic management control cycle. These elements enable SMEs to translate strategy into measurable, actionable outcomes and ensure continuous improvement.

A. Foundational Strategic Objectives

The proposed framework is grounded in four interdependent strategic pillars that were identified during the literature synthesis phase: profitability and cost control, operational efficiency, commercial strength, and digitalisation. These pillars encapsulate

the fundamental priorities of food SMEs operating in a competitive and volatile environment.

The first objective is to improve profitability and cost control. This foundational goal involves strengthening financial stability by managing margins and expenses more efficiently. This is a necessity in a sector characterised by volatile input costs and intense price competition (ACCID, 2010).

The second objective is to optimise production efficiency, which directly addresses the sector's significant challenges related to waste and resource utilisation, which are critical to maintaining competitiveness in a sector where perishability and resource utilisation significantly affect profitability (Bigliardi & Bottani, 2010).

The third objective is to strengthen commercial management and digital presence. This is essential for enhancing sales performance and adapting to pronounced market seasonality. One way to achieve this is by leveraging digital tools for marketing and customer engagement to build resilience.

Finally, the framework highlights the need to promote digitisation and control of information. This objective aims to enhance traceability and coordination between production, logistics, and sales, thereby improving decision-making speed, operational reliability, and responsiveness to the market (Kumar et al., 2024). These four pillars form the conceptual foundation of the framework, linking strategic intent with operational reality through measurable objectives and indicators

B. Mapping onto the Balanced Scorecard (An Integrated Strategy Map)

The four strategic pillars are mapped onto the four classic BSC perspectives to operationalise them: Financial, Customer, Internal Processes, and Learning & Growth. This mapping ensures that each objective contributes to a coherent cause-and-effect chain connecting operational drivers to strategic outcomes. The result is an integrated strategy map, where improvements in learning and process efficiency lead to enhanced customer satisfaction and, ultimately, financial success. The proposed BSC for food SMEs is presented in Table 1.

This tailored BSC strikes a balance between lagging and leading indicators. Lagging indicators include profitability, while leading indicators include employee training and automation. For instance, increasing the level of process automation (learning and growth) reduces delivery lead time (internal processes), enhancing customer satisfaction (customer) and, ultimately, profitability (financial). This interconnected logic reflects the systemic nature of strategic management in food SMEs.

Table 1– The Proposed Balanced Scorecard for Food SMEs.

Perspective	Strategic Objective	Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)	Formula / Calculation	Strategic Initiatives
Financial	Improve profitability and cost control	Operating Margin (%)	$(\text{Operating Income} / \text{Net Sales}) \times 100$	Budget control system; Supplier negotiation programmes
		Average Cost per kg Distributed	Total Distribution Costs / Total Kilograms Shipped	
Customer	Increase customer satisfaction and loyalty	Repeat Purchase Rate (%)	$(\text{Number of Repeat Customers} / \text{Total Number of Customers}) \times 100$	Loyalty campaigns; Improved post-sales service
		Customer Satisfaction Index	Average Score from Customer Satisfaction Surveys (e.g., 1-5 scale)	
Internal Processes	Optimise production and distribution efficiency	Delivery Lead Time	Average Time from Order Confirmation to Customer Delivery (in hours/days)	Process standardisation; Preventive maintenance schedules
		Waste/Loss Ratio (%)	$(\text{Cost of Production Waste} / \text{Cost of Raw Material Used}) \times 100$	
Learning & Growth	Strengthen digitalisation and employee development	Percentage of Employees Trained	$(\text{Number of Employees Trained in Period} / \text{Total Employees}) \times 100$	ERP system implementation; Digital skills training
		Level of Process Automation (%)	$(\text{Number of Processes with Digital Tracking} / \text{Total Number of Processes}) \times 100$	

C. The Integrated Management Control Cycle

Although a static BSC provides a strategic framework, achieving continuous improvement necessitates a dynamic management control cycle. The proposed model incorporates the BSC into an iterative cycle consisting of four phases: Strategic and Budget Planning; Execution and Operational Control; Evaluation and Analysis of Deviations; and Feedback and Continuous Improvement (see Figure 2).

The cycle begins with strategic and budget planning. During this stage, the strategic objectives from the BSC are translated into quantifiable targets and annual budgets. These budgets serve as financial forecasts and primary control tools for the subsequent phases. Next is the execution and operational control phase, which involves implementing the strategic initiatives. This phase requires establishing regular monitoring mechanisms based on the BSC's KPIs and ensuring consistent communication between departments to maintain strategic alignment.

Figure 2
The Integrated Management Control Cycle



The third phase is evaluating results and analysing deviations. During this phase, the actual performance is rigorously compared with the targets set in the planning phase. This analysis becomes a fundamental instrument for identifying inefficiencies, structural problems, and unforeseen opportunities for improvement. The model concludes with a feedback and continuous improvement phase, during which strategies, processes, and the BSC itself are reviewed and refined based on insights gathered. This closes the loop and fosters a culture of adaptive learning, which is essential for SMEs operating in volatile environments (Kumar et al., 2024). This cyclical process transforms the BSC from a reporting tool into a living management system by embedding strategic reflection and adaptation within the organisation's control culture. This ensures that performance management in food SMEs is proactive, iterative, and responsive to changing market conditions.

D. Framework Synthesis and Managerial Implications

The resulting framework provides food SMEs with a practical, yet theoretically grounded approach to strategic management. It provides managers with a comprehensive toolkit for decision-making and improvement by linking strategic objectives with measurable KPIs and embedding them within a dynamic control process. The framework emphasises simplicity and adaptability, making it ideal for SMEs with limited resources.

Furthermore, incorporating digitalisation as a core strategic pillar aligns the model with contemporary Industry 4.0 and sustainability management trends. It enables firms to leverage data-driven insights to enhance traceability, efficiency, and customer engagement. Ultimately, the framework serves as a strategic compass and operational dashboard, guiding food SMEs toward sustainable competitiveness and long-term growth.

V. Discussion and Conclusions

A. Discussion of the Findings

This study aimed to develop a management control framework tailored to the food sector, addressing the limitations of generic BSC applications in capturing the operational, commercial, and digital complexities of the food sector. The resulting model, anchored in four strategic pillars, a customised BSC, and a dynamic control cycle, offers theoretical and practical contributions to strategic management control.

First, the framework advances the theoretical understanding of the BSC by contextualising it within the specific constraints and dynamics of the food SME environment. While prior research has established the BSC as a flexible performance management tool (Kaplan & Norton, 2001; Tawse & Tabesh, 2023) and provided case-specific adaptations for food companies (e.g., Lagarda-Leyva et al., 2016), few studies have holistically integrated the themes of digital transformation, sustainability, and resource limitations specific to SMEs into a generalised framework. The proposed model synthesises these emerging perspectives, extending the BSC's conceptual boundaries beyond its traditional focus on corporations and finances and beyond single-company case studies.

Second, the study bridges the gap between theory and practice by providing a structured yet pragmatic approach for SMEs. It operationalises strategic objectives through tailored KPIs and embeds them within an iterative control cycle. The recent empirical findings of Habbe et al. (2025), which confirm the BSC's value in the food sector, provide external validation for the potential applicability and effectiveness of our proposed framework. This cyclical structure aligns with modern management paradigms that focus on continuous learning, agility, and data-driven decision-making (Kumar et al., 2024). For SMEs in the food sector, which are often characterised by limited formalisation and reactive management, this approach provides a coherent method to institutionalise strategy execution and performance monitoring.

Third, the framework addresses sector-specific challenges identified in the literature (Bigliardi & Bottani, 2010; OECD, 2021). For example, indicators such as the Waste/Loss Ratio, Delivery Lead Time, and Level of Process Automation reflect the operational and technological pressures that food firms face. Thus, the model links sustainability and efficiency objectives with financial performance, promoting an integrated view of competitiveness that balances economic and environmental priorities.

B. Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study theoretically contributes to the field by synthesising established BSC principles (Kaplan & Norton, 1992, 2001a) with the latest trends (Kumar et al., 2024) and sector-specific knowledge (Bigliardi & Bottani, 2010; Bhagwat & Sharma, 2007). The study provides a conceptual model that can serve as a foundation for future empirical research, offering testable propositions about the relationship between strategic objective alignment and performance in food SMEs.

From a practical standpoint, the model offers food SME managers a thorough yet practical control tool. Its key strengths include simplicity, scalability, and alignment with

real-world challenges. Managers can apply the framework directly to: (i) translate strategic priorities into measurable goals across financial, operational, and digital domains, (ii) establish feedback-driven performance monitoring routines, (iii) integrate sustainability and digital transformation into everyday management practices, and (iv) develop organisational learning cycles that enhance responsiveness and innovation. By combining conceptual rigour with managerial relevance, the framework enables SMEs to professionalise strategic management without creating an excessive administrative burden.

C. Limitations and Future Research

As a conceptual study, the primary limitation of this research is that the proposed framework has not yet been empirically validated. Its efficacy in improving financial performance, operational efficiency, or strategic agility in real-world settings remains to be tested.

Further studies could also explore implementation barriers and enablers, including leadership commitment, organisational culture, and technological readiness, as well as comparative analysis across sub-sectors (e.g., fresh produce vs. processed foods) to assess the adaptability of KPIs, integration with digital technologies, such as AI and blockchain, for real-time traceability, predictive analytics, and automated control systems, and longitudinal evaluation to understand how the framework supports continuous improvement and resilience over time. Such research would not only validate but also enrich the framework, contributing to both scholarly theory-building and applied managerial knowledge.

D. Conclusion

This study develops a tailored BSC framework for food SMEs, addressing a critical gap in strategic management control research. By contextualising the BSC's universal principles within the operational, financial, and digital realities of food SMEs, the framework provides a structured pathway for enhancing strategic alignment, decision-making, and long-term competitiveness.

The integration of a dynamic control cycle transforms performance management from a static reporting tool into a continuous learning system, ensuring that SMEs can adapt and thrive in an increasingly complex environment. The framework thus serves as both a theoretical contribution—expanding the scope of the BSC—and a practical guide for managers seeking to navigate the intersecting challenges of efficiency, sustainability, and digital transformation.

In sum, strategic control in the food SME sector must evolve from periodic evaluation to continuous adaptation. The proposed framework offers a foundation for this transformation, inviting future empirical research to refine, validate, and expand its utility across industries and contexts.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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