DOES BRANDING DRIVE SUSTAINABILITY? INSIGHTS FROM SMALL FOOD ENTERPRISES IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

This study looks at how branding helps both small and heritage food businesses in Bangladesh in the long term. This study uses five case studies, one from a century-old restaurant to a fast-growing burger chain of the present. It shows how owners, often without formal training, built strong brand identities through authenticity and consistency, while focusing on customers. Despite having limited resources, these businesses created trusted brands, attracting loyal customers and, in some cases, expanding across regions. The cases demonstrate that sustainability is not only about profit but also about longevity, employment, and the preservation of heritage. By linking branding with sustainability, the study offers new insight. It shows how small businesses in developing economies can thrive across generations. The findings also challenge the idea that branding is only for large firms. It shows that small enterprises can achieve success and growth through simple and effective branding practices.

Keywords: Sustainability, Small food business, Longevity, Branding, Heritage

Introduction

The restaurant culture in Bangladesh became increasingly popular in the 1990s. Over time, restaurant culture in Bangladesh became an important part of the service industry. The restaurant and food service market in Bangladesh is worth about USD 3.79 billion. The restaurant and food service market in Bangladesh is expected to be worth USD 7.47 billion by 2029. This means the restaurant and food service market in Bangladesh will grow at a rate of 14.5% every year. This significant growth in the restaurant and food service market in Bangladesh shows that many changes are happening in Dhaka, affecting people socially and economically, as well as the city. It also shows that changes in lifestyles, rising incomes, and global cultural influences continue to restructure the restaurant landscape.

Meanwhile, certain restaurants have survived for decades, positioning themselves not only as food businesses but also as cultural benchmarks. A restaurant that has been open for more than 50 years is really something special. It shows that the restaurant is strong and able to adapt to changes. This is important for the economy and for people in the community. Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, has a lot of restaurants. For example, Star

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Star Kabab is a household name, and people of all classes love it. Fakhruddin Biryani, established in the same year, has turned a secret recipe into a brand of signature biryani, attracting customers from home and abroad. Kasturi, founded in 1980, symbolizes a name for traditional Bangladeshi cuisine, targeting especially middle-class families who are big fans of authenticity instead of fast food. Going outside the perimeters of Dhaka, heritage establishments such as the Bose Cabin of Narayanganj, founded in 1921, not only sustained as a business but also retained its prestige as a social and political meeting point.

The broad objective of this case study is to examine how brand identity supports the long-term economic sustainability of food businesses in Bangladesh. To identify this, this paper explores five such cases of longevity in the Bangladeshi food business landscape, each representing survival, growth, and brand identity in unique ways. These include the 114-year-old Akbaria Grand Hotel in Bogra, the 79-year-old Rahmania Hotel in Rajshahi, the 73-year-old Batar Morher Jilapi of Rajshahi, the 65-year-old Singara House in Rangpur, and the relatively young yet fast-growing Chillox, a Dhaka-based burger brand founded only nine years ago.

Literature Review

The sustainability of small family-owned businesses relies primarily on family members, especially founders (Ramadani & Hoy, 2015). In such a context, what matters more is the process of survival and long-term success, not the market dynamics, but family values and internal priorities. (Habbershon et al., 2003; Randerson et al., 2016). This consequently tells why many family-run small businesses often operate through non-economic goals, such as family cohesion, preservation of family legacy, or heritage, rather than financial goals. (Feranita et al., 2017; Stanley et al., 2019). Because family and business are deeply intertwined, this overlap produces distinctive organizational dynamics that influence nearly every aspect of the enterprise, including its capacity to sustain operations over time (Sharma & Salvato, 2013).

Longevity, on the other hand, remains one of the greatest challenges for family businesses. A proper successor is critical to survival, yet many businesses fall apart during generational transitions (Kotter, 1996). Only one-third of the businesses successfully progress to the third generation (Poza, 2010). Family involvement, maintained through continuity through ownership and demonstrated dedication and commitment to improvement, may provide both strengths and vulnerabilities (Debicki et al., 2016; Mahto et al., 2020; Sharma & Salvato, 2013). Innovation is important for long-term competitiveness, but unsuccessful innovation may hinder survival (Cefis & Orietta, 2019). To withstand these issues, family firms often rely on “survivability capital”, which is the pool of personal resources that family members are willing to provide or share for the benefit of the business (Sirmon & Hitt, 2003).

Beyond surviving, growth has been a central theme for the study of small and family-owned enterprises (Gupta et al., 2013). Competing against larger firms poses many challenges, as many small businesses struggle to expand their business (Davidsson et al., 2010; Doern, 2009). Some firms even intentionally pursue slow or no growth, while aiming to sustain profitability comparable to that of large businesses (Brush et al., 2009). Family firms have to deal with goals and non-economic family goals at the same time, which is what makes them unique.

Market orientation is really important for small businesses to stay around for a long time when they are competing with other companies. For businesses and old companies, market orientation is not just about doing marketing things. It is a way for these businesses to build trust and make people believe in their brand over time (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; McNamara, 1972). Market orientation helps businesses and old companies create a very good reputation. It makes customers think they are authentic. Market orientation is key for these businesses to keep going. It also makes sure that people keep believing in their brand. Small businesses can do well by focusing on what their customers want. This helps them stay in business. It also keeps what makes them special, which is often based on their history and tradition (Narver & Slater, 1990; Simpson & Taylor, 2002). By doing this business is able to build a brand that people recognize and trust. This is because it shows customers that the business is still the same and has not changed over time, which is what customers have come to expect from them. Market orientation is valuable for businesses because it helps them understand what people want. (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Shapiro, 1988).

From an operational lens, market orientation backs up longevity in small and heritage businesses through three interrelated processes: market intelligence generation, intelligence dissemination, and organizational responsiveness (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). Small businesses, particularly those with long-standing brand heritage, operate through these stages rarely formally; these steps are embedded inherently in the form of everyday practices, such as close interaction with customers, observation of consumption patterns, and gradual product adaptation. Commonly, it is the founder whose business knowledge and insights connect heritage values with customers and thus not only adapts but also attunes to the changing customers' perception. It is often the practice of knowledge sharing between the founder and his close-knit family members that helps transcend knowledge across generations and ultimately succeed in keeping brand promises. (Lewis et al., 2001; Kara et al., 2005; Spillan & Parnell, 2006). As a consequence, market-oriented practices enable small heritage firms to elicit customer insights into a sustainable brand, ensuring both long-term survival and customer loyalty (Day, 1994; Armario et al., 2008).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to explore how brand identity supports the long-term sustainability of heritage restaurants in Bangladesh. Case studies are particularly effective for addressing "how" and "why" questions (Yin, 1994) and for generating insights in underexplored domains (Eisenhardt, 1989). To enhance validity and allow comparative analysis, multiple cases were examined rather than a single instance. Data from several long-standing restaurants were analyzed to identify recurring patterns, cross-case variations, and strategies for sustaining brand identity across generations.

Data for this study were gathered through in-depth interviews with the owner–managers of five long-standing food businesses, representing different stages of generational ownership: two third-generation family firms (Akbaria Grand Hotel, Rahmania Hotel), two second-generation enterprises (Batar Morher Jilapi, Singara House), and one founder-led startup (Chillox).

Each face-to-face interview took 60 to 90 minutes to complete. Each interview was recorded on audio because the people spoken to said it was okay. To make sure the things that were found out were correct, interview results were compared with brand identity and other things. These things include direct observations, business records, and secondary materials such as newspaper articles, menus, and customer reviews. Data are presented in a narrative style, lastly interpreted through the lenses of family business and market orientation theories.

Discussion and Analysis

Case 1: Batar Morher Jilapi: A Sweet, Crispy Story

Every Ramadan evening in Rajshahi, the time when most shops close, when the traffic is slow, crowds gather in front of a small sweet shop for one thing: Batar Morher Jilapi. For locals, it has become inseparable from iftar for them. A loyal customer, Syed Sabiar Rahman shared that:*"Now, I am 60 years old. I have been eating this Jilapi since I was 20. Without this, I feel that the iftar remains incomplete."*

On average, the shop sells 80–90 kg of jilapi daily. But in Ramadan, it rises to nearly 200 kg in Ramadan. The demand often disappoints many customers, as Merajul Islam said: *"Today, I will have to do iftar without this Jilapi. But surely, I will come tomorrow lot earlier to not miss it again."* This loyalty is built because of the quality of the food and the care that the owner puts into it not because of sales promotions. The owner thinks that trust is more important than making a lot of money. The owner wants people to be happy with the food. This is what some people call "satisficing behavior" (Greenbank, 2001).

The current chef, Shofiqul said: *"In fact, the chef is not the main man behind the secret recipe. It is rather the owner who focuses on quality over profit. He always insists on using good quality ingredients, that's where the secret lies. However, it also demands hard work from my part."*

The recipe is meticulously maintained. All the ingredients are marinated for 6–8 hours, followed by careful mixing, so every jilapi tastes the same. It's been going on for decades. Despite heavy demand, the owner refuses to raise prices: "*We do not want to increase price. Especially, increasing price exploiting the peak season of demand during Ramadan is the last thing we can think of,*" the owner said. This approach has created a strong brand identity. In reality, many shops sell special jilapi only in Ramadan. There is other local restaurant like Shameem Sweets, which offer it year-round without specialization. But Batar Morher Jilapi remains unmatched. Founder Mohammad Shoeb Uddin's strategy is a textbook example of blue ocean positioning. Yet, the brand faces a dilemma; it remains confined to Rajshahi. Despite its huge popularity, it has never tried to expand beyond the city.

Case 2: Rahmania Hotel: Tradition Served with Adaptation

Anisur Rahman founded Rahmania Hotel in Rajshahi in 1946, after he migrated from Bihar. It all started as a small family eatery offering phirni, roti, and meat. Now, it has survived three generations became a city landmark. As discussed before, Longevity in family businesses is rare; only one-third last beyond the third generation (Poza, 2010). Rahmania is still around. It is doing really well after all these years. Rahmania has not only been able to survive, but Rahmania has actually thrived.

The success of Rahmania is because of its focus on the customer and the quality of the food it serves. From the beginning, Rahmania has provided good meals at prices that people consider fair, which is why it has a lot of loyal customers. Rahmania still makes its dishes, such as phirni and rumali roti, with a lot of care. These dishes were very popular with the customers back in the 1950s. They are still very popular with the customers today. All of these things show that Rahmania is responsive to what its customers want, and it does this by serving high-quality food all the time(Kohli and Jaworski, 1990).

Rahmania is a place that knows how to change with the times. They see what their customers like. They make food that people want to eat. A lot of people in Rajshahi are young, and they crave foods that are a bit different. To address this, rahmania did not just copy what other restaurants are doing. They did their thing and stayed true to what they wanted to do in the first place. Rahmania ended up with a new restaurant called Rahmania Plus. Rahmania Plus has a lot of Mughlai dishes like biryani and kabab. The family opened this place because they know a lot, about the food business. This shows how businesses can make things that new customers want while still using the things that made them strong in the past (Narver and Slater,1990).

At the original location of Rahmania, they are keeping all the dishes that people love. Also, they are offering new items at Rahmania Plus. This way the hotel is now able to balance out new things. Long time customers can still get classic phirni during Ramadan. Meanwhile, younger people can try their favorite biryani combos and kabab platters at Rahmania Plus. The hotel is doing a great job of understanding what customers want. They are using this information to design products and come up with a strategy that's working. Rahmania Plus is an example of this. The hotel is able to keep its heritage, and they are being innovative (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Kara et al., 2005).

Case 3: Akbaria Grand Hotel: A Century of Taste and Adaptation

In Bogura almost everyone knows Akbaria. This place was started in 1911 by Akbar Ali. He came from Murshidabad. Akbaria is a family business. Akbaria hote; has been around for more than 100 years. Lots of restaurants do not make it that long. In fact, almost all fail after one year (Parsa et al., 2011). So, it is a great achievement. Akbaria began as a small shop. It was 8 feet by 7 feet. The shop sold rice, lentils, and meat to the people. Now Akbaria has grown a lot. It has over 50 locations in Bogura. There are also Akbaria restaurants in Pabna and Dhaka.

Akbar Ali thought that it was important to have quality, making sure people could afford it. He was a kind person. In 1912, he did something nice; he gave leftover meals to people who did not have enough food. Then, in 1922, when many people were hungry because of a famine, Akbar Ali made sure they had food to eat. This way of caring about people has been passed down through three generations of Akbar Ali's family. It shows that Akbar Ali's business was focused on what the customers and the community needed. This is what market orientation is about it means that a business is paying attention to what the customers and the community want (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990).

Like many other businesses, Akbaria changed over time. They started with Bengali food. Now Akbaria has more than 100 items on the menu. Akbaria has food, fast food, a bakery and sweets. Akbaria increased the number of items on the menu because they listened to what the customers wanted. This shows that Akbaria pays attention to what people want. This reflects the three dimensions of market orientation. These are 1-generating intelligence, 2- sharing it within the family business, and 3- responding through menu innovation (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993).

Akbaria combines economic and non-economic goals. Their profitability enabled their expansion. On the other hand, their brand authenticity, quality, and community reputation strengthened their legacy (Lewis et al., 2001; Kara et al., 2005). Today, as the franchises grow in Dhaka and beyond, their main challenge is balancing their heritage with scale.

Table 1: Growth Chart of Selected Restaurants

Brand	Akbaria Grand Hotel (114 yrs)	Rahmania Hotel (79 yrs)	Batar Morher Jilapi (73 yrs)	Singara House (65 yrs)	Chillox (9 yrs)
Founder / Owner	Akbar Ali	Anisur Rahman Khan	Mohammad Shoeb Uddin	Kanai Lal Sarker	Maruf Hasan Nirzhor, Pranto Phowmick, Ahmed Faiz
Owner Lifetime	1890–1975	1910–1991	1930–2005	1940–2010	Early 30s
Current Manager / Generation	3rd generation	3rd generation	2nd generation	2nd generation	Managed by the ‘trinity’
Education of Owner	No formal education	No formal education	No formal education	No formal education	Business graduates
Year Established	1911	1946	1952	1960	2016
Business Age (2025)	114 years	79 years	73 years	65 years	9 years
Location	Bogura	Rajshahi	Rajshahi	Rangpur	Dhaka
Number of Branches (2025)	50 (2 in Pabna, 7 in Dhaka, rest in Bogura)	Rahmania Plus branch added	1	1	14 (11 in Dhaka, 2 Chattogram, 1 Mymensingh)
Initial Offerings	Rice, lentils, vegetables	Phirni, rumali roti, meat	Jilapi	Singara	Burger
Offerings (2025)	100+ items; diversified into Chinese, fast food, bakery, confectionery	Diversified menu; Mughlai cuisine	No diversification	Expanded to lassi and sweets	Increased variety and customization
Peak Sales / Notes	-	-	Peak sales: 200 kg/month ≈ $9,000	Peak sales: 5,000 pcs/ month ≈ $5,000	Selling 5,000+ burgers daily

Case 4: Singara House: Sixty Years of Crisp Tradition

In Rangpur, Bangladesh's Handi Patti Road, Singara House has been a local legend since 1960. It was founded by Kanai Lal Sarkar. It basically earned its fame for its crispy singaras served with a distinctive sweet chutney. It started as four pieces for one taka. But now it has become a tradition among local people to eat them.

This little restaurant has been attracting people back for a long time. The family has always been in charge. That is why it has lasted so long. Kanai Lal started it. When he passed away, his oldest son, Bhavatosh, took over the restaurant. Bhavatosh chose to run the restaurant rather than pursue a legal career. Now the second generation is getting older. People are wondering who will take over next. The restaurant has been lucky so far because not many family businesses make it to the third generation (Poza, 2010; Ward, 2011; Sharma & Salvato, 2013). So it is a massive challenge for the business.

Singara House is similar to case studies. Singara House's success shows that it is focused on the market. The company has not grown much. They added lassi to their menu in 1987. A few sweets after that. The people at Singara House knew what they wanted to do. They always wanted to give customers what they like, not follow what is popular. The way they serve singara with chutney is an example of how they listen to what customers need (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990).

The business also tries to balance making money and doing what is right. The money they make helps them keep running. The business is also about things like history, how they treat their customers, and making their family proud, and these things help them decide what to do next (Feranita et al., 2017; Stanley et al., 2019). The business sells a lot of singaras at around 5,000 singaras every day. Even though they sell a lot of singaras, the business is still small, and it is only in one place. The family works hard to keep it going. One thing that the business is not very good at is planning for the future, which is called foresight. It may limit their long-term growth (Knight, 2000; Laforet, 2008), leaving the next generation's leadership uncertain.

Case 5: Chillox: From Roadside Cart to Burger Brand

In 2016, three friends started a food cart in Mohakhali, Dhaka. They did not have a lot of money. They did not know much about selling food either. The friends just wanted to make burgers that people could buy without spending much money. Now Chillox is selling more than 5,000 burgers every day at many places.

From the beginning, Chillox really cared about what their customers wanted. They paid attention to what customers were saying and made sure their products and services were what customers needed (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). When customers were happy, they told their friends and family about Chillox. That is how the company got more loyal customers. Chillox customers became like a team, helping to spread the word about how great Chillox was.

The company changed the way it worked in 2017. The company started to use information to make decisions about the company. The company also listened to what its customers of the company had to say. The company opened 14 places in Dhaka, Chattogram, and Mymensingh. These places were for people who lived in the city and wanted things to be easy and the same every time they visited the company. The burger customization at the company is a cool thing. It lets the customers of the company choose what sauce they want, how spicy they want it, and what kind of bun they want. What toppings do they want at the company? This shows that the company is good at listening to the customers. The company has products that are different from those of other companies. This is something that the company does well, which is listening to the customers and having products (Narver & Slater, 1990).

Chillox really cares about being sustainable. They make sure their meals are affordable and can be customized to what customers like. They also use packaging material that does not harm the environment. This shows that Chillox is a company that values its customers. Chillox works with its customers to create something valuable, and this helps the company grow over a long period of time (Day, 1994).

Table 2: Marketing report card

Akbaria Grand Hotel (114 yrs)	**Rahmania Hotel (79 yrs)**	**Batar Morher Jilapi (73 yrs)**	**Singara House (65 yrs)**	**Chillox (9 yrs)**
Customer orientation through compassion and inclusiveness – feeding both paying customers and the poor since 1912, aligning the brand with community care and trust.	*Consistency in taste and affordability* – built a trusted brand on "decent meals at a fair price," securing loyalty across generations.	*Quality over profit* – insistence on premium ingredients has created a brand identity of authenticity and reliability.	*Listening to customers* – chutney innovation plus continuous customer feedback have reinforced a distinctive brand image.	*Customization and responsiveness* – personalizing burgers gave Chillox a modern brand identity rooted in youthful individuality.

Brand expansion through diversification – from traditional Bengali meals to 100+ items and 50+ outlets, projecting Akbaria as a household name.	*Selective diversification* – Rahmania Plus offers Mughlai cuisine to youth while the main branch sustains a heritage brand for traditional customers.	*Fair pricing strategy* resisting price hikes even in Ramadan peak demand enhanced its brand reputation for fairness and trust.	*Brand extension into sweets and snacks* – gradual diversification preserved authenticity while broadening product recognition.	*Youth-centric branding* – digital presence, affordability, and design appeal created a trendy urban brand aligned with young Dhaka consumers.
Responsiveness to demographics – franchising beyond Bogura (Dhaka, Pabna) strengthened its brand visibility as a regional icon.	*Balancing tradition with adaptation*, Rahmania remains authentic while signaling modernity, preserving brand heritage with relevance.	*Emotional brand loyalty* – customers call it the "iftar essential," embedding jilapi as part of local cultural identity.	*Survivability capital* – family commitment sustained brand continuity even during downturns, including pandemic closure.	*Rapid brand scale-up* – transformed from cart to 11+ outlets in six years, leveraging customer intelligence to establish a household burger brand.

Conclusion

The stories of Akbaria, Rahmania, Batar Morher Jilapi, Singara House, and Chillox show us something. Akbaria, Rahmania, Batar Morher Jilapi, Singara House, and Chillox have something in common. Except Chillox, all of them are able to stay in business for a time. This is because they knew how to sell their products to customers. They established their businesses as brands. The people who started these businesses were very important for their success. They were leaders even though they did not have a lot of formal education. The founders of Akbaria, Rahmania, Batar Morher Jilapi, and Singara house taught their children the importance of taking care of customers. They also taught them to provide good-quality products. Akbaria, Rahmania, Batar Morher Jilapi, Singara House, and Chillox all show that if you do things right, your business can last for a long time.

Akbaria is now 114 years old. It is a great example of large-scale growth. Akbaria is expanding its menu from three items to more than 100 items. Akbaria is operating over 50 branches in Bogura, and Akbaria also has branches in Pabna and Dhaka.

Rahmania is a 79-year-old institution in Rajshahi. Rahmania is carefully balancing tradition with diversification. Rahmania is really careful about keeping things and trying new things at the same time. Rahmania is preserving its signature items like phirni and rumali roti. At the time, Rahmania is introducing Rahmania Plus to introduce a different menu. This shows that Rahmania is responsive to the market and has brand management. Akbaria and Rahmania are doing a great job of managing their brands.

Batar Morher Jilapi is seventy-three years old. Singara House is sixty-five years old. These Batar Morher Jilapi and Singara House places have not changed much in what they do. But every month their monthly sales are extremely high, $9,000 and $5,000, respectively. It means Batar Morher Jilapi and Singara House are doing something right. They have a solid place in the market. Additionally, Chillox is different from Batar Morher Jilapi and Singara House. Chillox was started by three young graduates. They began Chillox with one small cart on the street. Now Chillox has fourteen branches. The people who started Chillox are very good at taking care of their customers, with fourteen Chillox branches to manage.

Together, these cases show that although products and tastes may change, branding built on trust, authenticity, and customer orientation remains important for surviving long-term across generations.

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