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ENTREPRENEURIAL LEADERSHIP AND ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE OF SMEs IN KUWAIT: THE INTERMEDIATE MECHANISMS OF INNOVATION MANAGEMENT AND LEARNING ORIENTATION

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This study aimed to investigate the impact of innovation management and learning orientation as the mechanisms playing the role of an intermediate relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Kuwait.
Background	SMEs are currently among the principal economic instruments in most industrialised and developing countries. The contribution of SMEs can be viewed from various perspectives primarily related to the crucial role they play in developing entrepreneurial activities, employment generation, and improving innovativeness. Developing countries, including Kuwait and other countries, in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), have recognised the key role played by SMEs as a strong pillar of growth. Consequently, many governments have formulated policies and programmes to facilitate the growth and success of SMEs. Unfortunately, the organisational performance of SMEs in developing countries, particularly in Kuwait, remains below expectations. The lagged growth could be due to a lack of good managerial practices and increasing competition that negatively impact their performance. Numerous researchers discovered the positive effect of entrepreneurial leadership on SMEs' performance. However, a lack of clarity remains regarding the direct impact of entrepreneurial leadership on SMEs' performance, especially in developing countries. Therefore, the nexus

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between entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance is still indecisive and requires further studies.

Methodology	This study adopted a quantitative approach based on a cross-sectional survey and descriptive design to gather data within a specific period. The data were collected by distributing a survey questionnaire to Kuwaiti SMEs' owners and Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) via online and on-hand instruments. A total of 384 useable questionnaires were obtained. Moreover, the partial least square-structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) analysis was performed to test the hypotheses.
Contribution	The current study contributed to the existing literature by developing a moderated mediation model integrating entrepreneurial leadership, innovation management, and learning orientation. The study also investigated their effect on the organisational performance of SMEs. The study findings also bridged the existing significant literature gap regarding the role of these variables on SMEs' performance in developing countries, particularly in Kuwait, due to the dearth of studies linking these variables in this context. Furthermore, this study empirically confirmed the significant effect of innovation management and learning orientation as intermediate variables in strengthening the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance in the settings of Kuwait SMEs, which has not been verified previously.
Findings	The study findings showed the beneficial and significant impact of entrepreneurial leadership and innovation management on SME's organisational performance. The relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and SMEs' organisational performance is fundamentally mediated by innovation management and moderated by learning orientation.
Recommendations for Practitioners	The present study provides valuable insights and information regarding the factors considered by the government, policymakers, SMEs' stakeholders, and other authorities in the effort to increase the organisational performance level and facilitate the growth of SMEs in Kuwait. SMEs' owners or CEOs should improve their awareness and knowledge of the importance of entrepreneurial leadership, innovation management, and learning orientation. These variables will have beneficial effects on the performance and assets to achieve success and sustainability if adopted and managed systematically. This study also recommends that SMEs' entrepreneurs and top management should facilitate supportive culture by creating and maintaining an organisational climate and structure that encourages learning behaviour and innovation mindset among individuals. The initiative will motivate them towards acquiring, sharing, and utilising knowledge and increasing their ability to manage innovation systemically in all production processes to adapt to new technologies, practices, methods, and different circumstances.
Recommendations for Researchers	The study findings highlighted the mediating effect of innovation management on the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership (the independent variable) and SMEs' organisational performance (the dependent variable) and the moderating effect of learning orientation in the same nexus. These relationships were not extensively addressed in SMEs of developing countries and require further validation.
Impact on Society	This study aims to influence the management strategies and practices adopted by entrepreneurs and policymakers who work in SMEs in developing countries.

The effect will be reflected in the development of their firms and the national economy in general.

Future Research	Future research should investigate the conceptual research framework against the backdrop of other developing economies and in other business settings to generalise the results. Future investigation should seek to establish the effect of entrepreneurial leadership style on other mechanisms, such as knowledge management processes, which could function with entrepreneurial leadership to improve SMEs' performance efficiently. In addition, future studies may include middle and lower-level managers and employees, leading to more positive outcomes.
Keywords	small and medium enterprises, entrepreneurial leadership, innovation management, learning orientation, organisational performance, Resource-Based View, Kuwait

INTRODUCTION

The contribution of SMEs towards economic growth is critical and has been demonstrated to be the most effective way to achieve faster economic and social development. SMEs provide an enabling environment for training and developing labour force skills. They offer valuable opportunities and enhance productivity, besides helping economic diversification (Ng & Kee, 2017). The simplicity of SMEs' establishment and administrative structure makes them particularly attractive, as only a small amount of capital is required for their establishment and operation (Ramadhan & Girgis, 2018).

The oil industry and public sector, are major contributors to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including Kuwait. Thus, the role of SMEs in these countries' economies has been modest over the past few decades (Dana et al., 2021). Developing countries, especially Kuwait, were late in discovering the role that SMEs could play in their economies (Ramadhan & Girgis, 2018).

Kuwait is one of the developing countries that aims to rely on SMEs as a vital instrument for diversifying its national income (Al Duwailah et al., 2019). Approximately 25,000 companies are registered in Kuwait under SMEs' category (Alzougool, 2019). SMEs in Kuwait contribute 23% to the country's total employment, a small percentage compared to several other Gulf countries (Abukumail, 2016). For example, the SMEs in Saudi Arabia contribute about 60% to total employment (Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2016). Similarly, SMEs' contribution to GDP is very low (3%) compared to other countries in the same category. For instance, SMEs in Saudi Arabia contribute about 33% to GDP, 14% in Oman, and 28% in Bahrain (Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2016). The contradiction is particularly worrisome to policymakers considering that SMEs in high-income countries contribute more than 50% to GDP (Haroon & Shariff, 2016). The Kuwaiti government has been organising social and economic empowerment programmes targeting SMEs and making continuous efforts to promote the SMEs' role in enhancing their performance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State of Kuwait, 2017). Nevertheless, the SMEs are still struggling to deal with the problems, such as incompetent managers without the required leadership skills and lack of good managerial practices (SME Advisor Arabia, 2015).

SMEs are currently faced with intense competitive pressure. Hence, SMEs should crucially improve their capacity and competitive ability to survive and assure long-term development. Different strategies, resources, and tools are available to help SMEs deal with changes and counteract their vulnerabilities to develop their performance and competitive advantage (Yang, 2018). Regrettably, the progress of SMEs in Kuwait to date has not been encouraging. Hence, the present research seeks to re-

emphasise the need to study the effectiveness of Kuwait SMEs' performance and factors contributing to increasing their level to identify multifaceted theoretical and practical solutions.

Organisations have to be more entrepreneurial in their endeavour to improve their adaptive capacity, performance, and survival (V. Gupta et al., 2004). Entrepreneurial leadership behaviour with a combination of flexibility, capability to enhance creativity, and the ability to deal with vulnerable market situations to maintain the organisation's competitive advantage, is one of the crucial factors determining the SMEs' performance level (Imran & Aldaas, 2020). Therefore, SME managers need to understand better how organisational performance is influenced by entrepreneurial leadership style (Paudel, 2019; Wahab & Tyasari, 2019). Entrepreneurial leadership involves the way organisations are structured to enable them to take advantage of new possibilities and enhance their ability to invent the requisite variety, allowing them to keep pace with very complex situations (Huang et al., 2014). Entrepreneurial leaders achieve organisational objectives by guiding, managing, and motivating individuals to discover entrepreneurial opportunities. They focus on a proactive approach in identifying opportunities and focus on their abilities and skills to exploit them innovatively (Iqbal et al., 2020; Renko et al., 2015; Soomro et al., 2018).

Entrepreneurial leadership is an emerging leadership style in its initial theoretical and empirical development stages (Mehmood et al., 2021). Leitch and Volery (2017) indicated that the definition of entrepreneurial leadership phenomenon remains immature despite increasing attention. Consequently, the understanding of how entrepreneurial leaders influence their firms' organisational performance is limited (Bagheri & Harrison, 2020). The research on the association between entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance remains in the exploration phase. Previous research indicates that entrepreneurial leadership significantly impacts different outputs within an organisation, including its performance (Cai et al., 2018; V. Gupta et al., 2004; Harrison et al., 2018; Iqbal et al., 2020; Paudel, 2019). Limited studies have been conducted in SMEs confirming the positive influence of entrepreneurial leadership on organisational performance (Imran & Aldaas, 2020; Soomro et al., 2018), particularly in Kuwait (Al Duwailah et al., 2019). Kuwait is one of the developing countries aiming to create a vibrant environment for SMEs to diversify income sources and develop the national economy (Abukumail, 2016). Thus, the first study's purpose is to analyse the potential of entrepreneurial leadership as a distinctive leadership approach that boosts the Kuwait SMEs' organisational performance.

Many researchers have recognised that entrepreneurial leadership is a relatively emerging paradigm. Determining the direct impact of entrepreneurial leadership on performance is a researchable issue, especially in developing countries. Therefore, further research is required to measure the direct impact of entrepreneurial leadership on performance and the mechanisms that enhance the role of this type of leadership on SMEs' performance (Miao et al., 2019; Renko et al., 2015). Recent studies have suggested that organisational culture and characteristics are the key drivers of SMEs' performance (Asemokha et al., 2019; Buccieri et al., 2019). Issues related to organisational learning, managerial activities, innovation culture, and other drivers that affect SMEs' sustainability and growth remain unresolved (Asemokha et al., 2019). Hence, the elements increasing SMEs' performance at all firm levels remain primarily unexplored (Kafetzopoulos, 2020). Therefore, the study's second purpose is to identify the impact of intermediate mechanisms (innovation management and learning orientation) through which entrepreneurial leaders could enhance the SMEs' performance.

Entrepreneurial leadership is an effective leadership style to build teams to accomplish organisational innovation (Renko et al., 2015). Entrepreneurial leadership enhances organisational performance by reinforcing an innovation culture by seeking and exploiting creative opportunities (Rae, 2017). Entrepreneurial leaders adopt philosophy and management practices leading to systemic innovation management to integrate knowledge in the new methods, processes, and products (Fontana & Musa, 2017; V. K. Gupta & Batra, 2016). Innovation management improves an organisation's ability to es-

establish different business models that encourage the conception of creative ideas and activities (Fontana & Musa, 2017). These practices became the most practical management philosophy to enhance SMEs' performance (Albors-Garrigos et al., 2018).

Entrepreneurial leadership is an effective leadership style based on exceptional abilities linked with learning orientation (Bagheri & Harrison, 2020; Mehmood et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2020). Learning orientation helps organisational leaders establish an environment for continuous learning, provide the best solution to the challenges organisations face, and be innovative in translating ideas and challenges into opportunities (Wahab & Tyasari, 2019). Entrepreneurial leadership and learning orientations have a significant implication on SMEs' performance. Most previous research is concerned with how individual entrepreneurs learn from their experiences in creating internal and external processes, which facilitate business ventures and growth. Recently, attention has been shifted to organisations as collective entities, and the need for a better understanding and low perception on SMEs could learn and take part in entrepreneurial activities that ensure long-lasting entrepreneurship and sustain competitive advantage (Ebrahimi et al., 2018; Hernández-Linares et al., 2018; Mantok et al., 2019). Experts have emphasised the need to comprehend better entrepreneurial actions and learning processes within SMEs in developing countries (Allameh & Khalilakbar, 2018; Pratono et al., 2019). Entrepreneurial leadership, learning orientation, and organisational performance can be integrated with a management philosophy based on innovative practices to realise the organisation's aspirations (Pérez-Campdesuñer et al., 2019). Thus, the challenge is to achieve organisational growth by fostering an innovation culture (V. Gupta et al., 2004).

Although many previous studies focused on measuring the impact of crucial factors and their role in enhancing the SMEs' organisational performance, a review of prior literature has revealed an apparent gap in the studies conducted in the Kuwait SMEs context. Few studies investigated the effect of more than one variable as SMEs' performance predictors. Limited empirical research investigated the relationship between different variables, such as entrepreneurial leadership, innovation management, and learning orientation, in order to develop a single model aimed at improving SMEs' organisational performance in developing countries, particularly Kuwait.

Previous studies investigating the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and SMEs' performance have produced conflicting and mixed results (Bagheri & Harrison, 2020). Several studies demonstrated that entrepreneurial leadership directly affects organisational performance and effectiveness (Mishra & Misra, 2017; Quaye & Mensah, 2019). Conversely, other studies (e.g., Fontana & Musa, 2017; Huang et al., 2014; Sethibe & Steyn, 2015) found that entrepreneurial leadership influences performance via intermediate mechanisms. Fontana and Musa (2017) proposed for more studies to be undertaken concerning entrepreneurial leadership, innovation management, and organisational performance by considering innovation management as a mediating variable that strengthens the link between entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance. In addition, Khalil and Durra (2019) indicated that entrepreneurial leadership and innovation constructs had not been extensively tested in the Arab region. Thus, more studies are required as SMEs' owners, and managers in the Arab region still lack understanding of the crucial role of integrating the entrepreneurial leadership and innovation management concepts in continuously developing SMEs' performance and achieving sustainability.

In addition, a survey of the literature reveals contradictory findings regarding the role of learning orientation. Some studies found that learning orientation directly impacts performance (Lestari et al., 2018; Mantok et al., 2019; Nikraftar & Momeni, 2017). Other studies considered learning orientations a conditional construct and should be tested as an intermediate variable on the relationship between different strategic orientations and SMEs' performance (Pratono et al., 2019; Ratnawati et al., 2018). However, few studies were unable to find any direct or indirect effect of learning orientation on performance (Beneke et al., 2016; Ebrahimi et al., 2018). Thus, no conclusive proof exists concerning the association between learning orientation and SMEs' organisational performance (Beneke

et al., 2016). This shortcoming underscores the urgent need for more investigations to be undertaken in the SMEs context (Shariff et al., 2017).

Based on the emphasised gaps in existing literature, the aim of this study is twofold. First, this study intends to contribute to current knowledge by examining the direct effect of entrepreneurial leadership on SMEs' performance, which requires further investigation. The second purpose of the study is to understand better the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance by investigating the intermediate mechanisms in which entrepreneurial leadership can improve the SME's performance level. Therefore, the following research questions were used as a study guide:

- RQ1. What is the impact of entrepreneurial leadership on the organisational performance of SMEs?
- RQ2. What is the impact of entrepreneurial leadership on innovation management in SMEs?
- RQ3. What is the impact of innovation management on the organisational performance of SMEs?
- RQ4. How could innovation management as a mediator strengthen the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance in SMEs?
- RQ5. How could learning orientation as a moderator strengthen the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance in SMEs?

The primary motivation for undertaking this study is the urgent need to develop the performance of the SME sector in Kuwait due to the importance of this sector in diversifying income sources and strengthening the national economy (Al Duwailah et al., 2019; Dana et al., 2021). The unique combination of entrepreneurial leadership, learning orientation, innovation management, and performance in the Kuwait SME sector marks the novelty of the current research. The paper is organised into three main sections. First, the theoretical background to develop the research hypotheses is developed. Second, the paper details the methodology employed in this research and presents the results. Finally, a discussion of the research findings and theoretical and practical implications for entrepreneurial leadership development and future research directions are presented.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This research is supported by Resource-Based Views (RBV). The early work on RBV recognised that the entrepreneurship phenomenon is a complicated part of the resource-based framework (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2003). The RBV asserts that organisations can achieve superior performance and a sustainable competitive advantage by exploiting their internal strengths, including capabilities, skills, and assets, to implement strategies in response to profitable opportunities. Therefore, the conceptual model of the current study aims to investigate the effect of three internal variables and their impact on SMEs' performance in Kuwait.

RBV is considered a theoretical foundation linking the entrepreneurial leaders' behaviour and activities with long-term organisational success through opportunities identification and discovering internal resources. Allocating, distributing, and exploiting these resources help achieve superior performance and the organisation's objectives in different and difficult circumstances. This study suggests that organisations must have the best organisational practices and strong leadership to perform effectively. The complex interactions between the internal resources (entrepreneurial leadership, innovation management, and learning orientation) in organisations could help ensure the attainment of greater performance.

ENTREPRENEURIAL LEADERSHIP AND ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE

The beginning of the 21st century marked the opening of the world economy and challenges that have caused businesses to emphasise entrepreneurial leadership (Mishra & Misra, 2017). SMEs'

founders and managers have to be mindful of the transformation in the international business climate. Organisations that fail to establish a clear vision and support the vision with entrepreneurial actions would not be able to survive and succeed (V. Gupta et al., 2004). According to the entrepreneurship theory, the leaders of enterprises can visualise a future of their organisations' prosperity by putting forth forward-thinking visions, identifying opportunities, and acting creatively through their abilities (Cai et al., 2018; Kuratko, 2007; Surie & Ashley, 2008; Ximenes et al., 2019). Unlike other leadership styles, an entrepreneurial leader aims to discover entrepreneurial opportunities and exploit them optimally to achieve competitive advantage and superiority in the uncertain and turbulent business environment context (V. Gupta et al., 2004; Renko et al., 2015). The entrepreneurial leader enacts future scenarios for the organisation and forms the right team to efficiently implement these scenarios to continuously develop business performance (V. Gupta et al., 2004; Mehmood et al., 2021).

The entrepreneurial leaders' functional competencies enhance their capability to motivate and influence their followers to relinquish their customary performance to achieve their aims and broaden their efforts to implement innovative and entrepreneurial actions (Miao et al., 2019). Changing individuals' perception of their capabilities and competencies and optimising their personal efficacy through participation in development, learning, and apprenticeship programmes can be undertaken (Bagheri, 2017; Cai et al., 2018). Entrepreneurial leadership inspires organisations and makes it possible to implement the mechanisms that promote an organisational innovation climate by identifying and exploiting potentials that enhance organisational achievement, addressing challenges through newly discovered approaches, and using the organisational resources effectively and efficiently (Rae, 2017).

The literature review scrutinises various research types, including meta-analysis, empirical, and conceptual approaches to understand how entrepreneurial leadership style is linked with organisational performance (Bagheri & Harrison, 2020). This research, particularly empirical studies, has shown that the two variables are directly related (Abubakar et al., 2018; Imran & Aldaas, 2020; Vidal et al., 2019). Al Mamun et al. (2018) investigated the association between entrepreneurial leadership, performance, and sustainability of micro-enterprises in Malaysia. The researchers found that entrepreneurial leadership is positively related to performance. This result is congruent with the previous study findings (Paudel, 2019), which examined the same relationship in Nepali SMEs.

In addition, Quaye and Mensah (2019) have discovered that female entrepreneurial leadership behaviour considerably affects SMEs' performance in Ghana. Furthermore, Imran and Aldaas (2020) demonstrated that entrepreneurial leadership style is directly associated with the performance of Oman SMEs. The researchers concluded that the underperformance of Oman SMEs is due to the absence of entrepreneurial leadership capabilities. Studies investigating firm performance have shown that firms that have achieved superior performance are characterised by entrepreneurial leadership behaviours, such as risk-taking and the ability to act autonomously and innovatively (Al Mamun et al., 2018; Bagheri & Harrison, 2020; Paudel, 2019).

Previous research has found that influential entrepreneurial leaders are more likely to succeed in improving performance (Wahab & Tyasari, 2019; Widayani et al., 2020) of SMEs (Koryak et al., 2015), developing an inspiring entrepreneurial vision for the business (M. Chen, 2007), and putting forward new ideas to address challenges through creative methods (Rae, 2017). Thus, organisational performance can be enhanced (Fontana & Musa, 2017; V. Gupta et al., 2004) and ensure survival and sustainability (Al Mamun et al., 2018). Moghaddam et al. (2015) emphasised the need for organisations to be innovative and farsighted in their quest to realise their mission and goals. In a nutshell, organisations have to implement organisational entrepreneurship. Based on the above discussion, entrepreneurial leadership is associated with organisational performance. Hence, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H1: Entrepreneurial leadership positively impact SMEs' organisational performance.

ENTREPRENEURIAL LEADERSHIP AND INNOVATION MANAGEMENT

Entrepreneurial leaders take a leading role in stimulating and facilitating innovation and in identifying potential opportunities. They establish the conducive environment, climate, frameworks, and processes needed to ensure long-term innovation orientations in their organisation (L. Chen et al., 2016; Fontana & Musa, 2017; Leitch & Volery, 2017; Newman et al., 2018), especially in SMEs (Akbari et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2014; Koryak et al., 2015; Paudel, 2019). Innovation is considered as one of the most current management practices and orientations, which is essentially the organisational capability to establish and expand innovative ideas and translate the ideas into products, services, and processes (Al Suwaidi et al., 2021; Martínez-Costa et al., 2018; Pérez-Campdesuñer et al., 2019). Innovation does not occur spontaneously. Innovation is a difficult and unpredictable task for leaders at all organisational levels. It requires the formulation of viable strategies and guidelines that boost and promote the generation of new insights and their implementation (Bagheri, 2017; Fontana & Musa, 2017; Martínez-Costa et al., 2018). Innovation is a rigorous cross-functional oversight function. Besides, innovation requires organising teams and delegating tasks, functions, and powers as a part of the innovation challenge. Hence, organisations must have an appropriate organisational structure and management practices besides a strong commitment to innovation to increase their ability to carry out innovations (Adams et al., 2006; Nagano et al., 2014).

Innovation management is a systematic process used by organisations to improve existing products, services, methods, and marketing strategies and develop new ones. The process includes the development of a networked environment and focusing on managing talented employees to encourage individuals to generate creative ideas within the organisation (Kadar et al., 2014; Pérez-Campdesuñer et al., 2019). Many scholars and practitioners believe that innovation management is a critical approach that all organisations must adopt in the contemporary business environment. It is viewed as a multi-dimensional model that includes vision, leadership, culture, knowledge, individuals, technology, organisational structure, and others (Martínez-Costa et al., 2018; Pérez-Campdesuñer et al., 2019). To capitalise on innovation opportunities, these dimensions must be managed with appropriate practices and strategies (Adams et al., 2006; Albors-Garrigos et al., 2018; Fontana & Musa, 2017; Nagano et al., 2014).

Entrepreneurial leadership is critical in creativity, innovation, and opportunity recognition in all businesses (Lee et al., 2019; Leitch & Volery, 2017; Renko et al., 2015). It is expected to have a positive impact on SMEs' innovation management. Hence, this relationship has to be explored (Fontana & Musa, 2017; Lee et al., 2019). Exploratory and exploitative innovations are considered to be the primary entrepreneurial leadership characteristics (Huang et al., 2014; Strobl et al., 2018; Wu & Peng, 2020). Entrepreneurial leadership focuses more decisively than transformational leadership on developing employees' behaviour to generate creative ideas and practices and directing them towards innovative activities (Xie et al., 2018), which has a well-established positive effect on organisational innovation (L. Chen et al., 2016; Paudel, 2019). In addition to assembling resources, entrepreneurial leaders have developed innovation strategies, processes, and skills to take advantage of innovative opportunities and structure organisations to ensure that they are ready to implement innovation strategies (Huang et al., 2014). Thus, entrepreneurial leadership exposes a more critical behaviour than other leadership styles in fostering organisational innovation in changing environments (Fontana & Musa, 2017; Lee et al., 2019).

Limited studies attempted to examine how entrepreneurial leadership impacts innovation management. For example, Fontana and Musa (2017) demonstrated the positive effect of entrepreneurial leadership on innovation management represented by an innovation process that includes ideas generation, selection, development, and diffusion. Therefore, the authors suggested that organisations should critically formulate their leadership programme as a component of the organisation's endeavour to foster entrepreneurial leadership at all organisational levels to ensure that innovation is effectively and systematically managed. In other words, firms with a high entrepreneurial leadership level have an effective innovation process that improves performance (Bagheri & Harrison, 2020; Lee et

al., 2019). Previous research examined the effect of entrepreneurial leadership with specific innovation management aspects, such as exploratory and exploitative innovation (Huang et al., 2014), innovation work behaviour of individuals (Bagheri, 2017), and organisational innovation (Paudel, 2019). The research provides limited insight into the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and innovation management.

Therefore, additional research must be undertaken on the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and innovation management in SMEs. Previous literature has suggested that SMEs with high entrepreneurial leadership practices often possess a comprehensive framework for innovation management. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed.

H2: Entrepreneurial leadership positively impacts innovation management.

INNOVATION MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE

In the strategic management literature, innovation management has been acknowledged to contribute to developing organisational performance (Abdallah et al., 2021; Al Suwaidi et al., 2021; Mir et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019). Innovation management depends on an organisation's ability to establish and expand new insights and transform them into processes, products, and services (Kadar et al., 2014; Pérez-Campdesuñer et al., 2019). Firms with a high innovation process have the resources to retain their market position. In turn, this advantage would give the firms competitive benefits and exceptional achievement (Antunes et al., 2017; Kadar et al., 2014). Organisations with high innovation activities have a high level of strategic planning, technological process development, marketing intelligence, and quality management. Consequently, organisations have the ability to improve and develop new products and marketing strategies (Kadar et al., 2014; Pérez-Campdesuñer et al., 2019). Hence, innovation management is an effective firm strategy that can improve resource utilisation efficiency and transform creative ideas into goods capable of meeting the changing market requirements and ensuring competitive advantage (Dereli, 2015; Izadi et al., 2020).

SMEs will be more successful by innovating in response to the environment and developing their ability to improve financial standing and operating efficiency (Herman et al., 2016). This notion is congruent with the previous empirical research findings, which showed that SMEs implementing innovation processes were could enhance the financial and operating aspects of business performance (Antunes et al., 2017).

Thus, previous literature has established that innovation management is pertinent to SMEs' performance (Al Suwaidi et al., 2021; Izadi et al., 2020). Likar et al. (2014) concluded that innovation management and organisational performance are strongly connected. They also contended that firms could enhance their performance when their leaders precisely evaluate innovation efforts. In addition, Mir et al. (2016) confirmed that standardised innovation management positively impacts business performance. Similarly, Rajapathirana and Hui (2018) discovered a significant and strong correlation between innovation capabilities, innovation efforts, and firm performance. On this basis, the following hypothesis was suggested.

H3: Innovation management positively impacts the organisational performance of SMEs.

ENTREPRENEURIAL LEADERSHIP, INNOVATION MANAGEMENT, AND ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE

Issues related to SMEs' performance, entrepreneurship activities, and innovation practices are growing exponentially in the current business environment (Ng & Kee, 2017). Entrepreneurial leadership drives innovation management through the prism of strategic, communicative, motivational, personal, and organisational approaches (Fontana & Musa, 2017; Huang et al., 2014; Izadi et al., 2020). Leaders who practice entrepreneurial behaviours can guide employees to recognise and take advantage of opportunities (Lee et al., 2019; Mehmood et al., 2019). They also have a higher tendency

to encourage employees' innovative behaviour with a greater degree of personal efficacy (Akbari et al., 2021; Bagheri, 2017; L. Chen et al., 2016; Iqbal et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2018).

Moreover, entrepreneurial leadership is associated with the perception that a highly competitive environment requires innovation management (Fontana & Musa, 2017; Kadar et al., 2014; Paudel, 2019). Concurrently, innovation management is related to changes such as how leaders set their directions, make decisions, coordinate activities, and motivate employees to generate creative ideas within the organisation that would ultimately improve the firm's performance (Dereli, 2015; Kadar et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2019). In this approach, entrepreneurial leadership has been argued to help organisations structure their innovation management to become a crucial way to achieve high performance.

A literature review showed that entrepreneurial leadership and innovation management are crucial performance antecedents (Fontana & Musa, 2017; Huang et al., 2014). Innovation management is the result of entrepreneurial leadership (Akbari et al., 2021; Bagheri, 2017; Newman et al., 2018), which in turn determines performance (Huang et al., 2014; Paudel, 2019). Innovation is considered as the significant organisational performance determinant (Abdallah et al., 2021; Al Suwaidi et al., 2021; Han & Nielsen, 2018; Izadi et al., 2020; Mir et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019) and plays a critical mediating role between entrepreneurial leadership and firm performance (Mehmood et al., 2019; Paudel, 2019). Mokhber et al. (2016) provided strong evidence indicating that entrepreneurial leaders generate new ideas and exploit novel opportunities that help firms implement innovation resulting in better outcomes.

Several researchers have examined the mediating role of organisational innovation between transformational leadership and the manufacturing firms' performance (García-Morales et al., 2012; Noruzi et al., 2013) and the mediating role of innovation (exploratory and exploitative) on the relationship between transformational leadership and financial outcomes of knowledge-intensive firms (Berraies & Bchini, 2019). The researchers also examined the role of innovation (exploratory and exploitative) as a mediator between entrepreneurial leadership and new enterprises' performance in the SMEs context (Huang et al., 2014). However, the mechanism through which entrepreneurial leadership positively correlates with the SMEs' performance remains imprecise (Huang et al., 2014; Paudel, 2019). Fontana and Musa (2017) empirically demonstrated the significant mediating roles of the innovation process between entrepreneurial leadership and performance. Several researchers (e.g., Bagheri & Harrison, 2020; Fontana & Musa, 2017; Huang et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2019; Paudel, 2019) recommended that future investigations explore the association between entrepreneurial leadership, innovation, and performance in various settings. In a systemic review, Sethibe and Steyn (2015) proposed that empirical research should focus on demonstrating the mediating role of the nature of incremental and radical innovation on the leadership and organisational performance relationship.

Furthermore, Khalil and Durra (2019) pointed out that entrepreneurial leadership and innovation constructs have not been examined in the Middle East and are considered formative. Hardly any existing study can be used as a reference by organisational leaders in this part of the world. Previous researchers have made repeated calls to examine the impact of entrepreneurial leadership on SMEs' performance through mediation mechanisms (Akbari et al., 2021; Miao et al., 2019; Paudel, 2019). In response to the proposal for comprehensive empirical research to investigate entrepreneurial leadership in SMEs (Bagheri & Harrison, 2020; Leitch & Volery, 2017; Mehmood et al., 2021), the present research attempted to bridge the vital gap in the current literature. The research identified the conclusive effect of entrepreneurial leadership style adopted by organisational leaders based on their focus on innovation management to develop their performance, which remains unclear in developing countries (Fontana & Musa, 2017). The above discussion has shown that earlier investigations have proven the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership, innovation management, and organisational performance. Thus, the present research suggested the following mediating hypothesis.

H4: Innovation management mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and the organisational performance of SMEs.

ENTREPRENEURIAL LEADERSHIP, LEARNING ORIENTATION, AND ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE

Entrepreneurial leadership is critical in ensuring SMEs' success and survival (Abubakar et al., 2018; Imran & Aldaas, 2020; Vidal et al., 2019). However, solely examining the direct consequence of entrepreneurial leadership on performance is insufficient (Al Mamun et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2014; Paudel, 2019; Ximenes et al., 2019). Previous studies examined the various antecedents influencing the association between entrepreneurial leadership and SMEs' performance. The missing element in the examination of the relationship is learning orientation.

Performance is not only influenced by the entrepreneurial leaders' qualities and actions (Abubakar et al., 2018; Renko et al., 2015) or environmental dynamism (Ensley et al., 2006; Huang et al., 2014; Paudel, 2019), but also by organisational culture and characteristics (Aboramadan et al., 2019; Bucciari et al., 2019). Thus, learning orientation may significantly enhance organisational performance (Amin, 2015; Lafuente et al., 2019; Tajeddini, 2016). In essence, learning orientation is embracing the process of knowledge acquisition and transformation to gain and apply knowledge across the organisation. According to Sinkula et al. (1997), learning orientation is the convention of an organisation that shapes the organisation's inclination to generate and apply knowledge. Hence, short-term organisational training and development and learning orientation necessitate creating new organisational conventions, consisting of new philosophies, standards, perspectives, assumptions, and codes of conduct, to be nurtured within the organisation (Baba, 2015). Learning orientation is the group of values that determine the extent that an organisation is satisfied with the implemented strategies and practices. The degree of satisfaction is established through continuous evaluation of the currently adopted principles and practices that influence their performance (Sinkula et al., 1997).

Due to the profound effect of learning orientation on organisations, numerous studies have investigated it in-depth to gain a better understanding of its role. Tajeddini (2016) contended that a greater degree of learning orientation had enabled organisations to achieve a better performance in terms of cost improvement, delivery speed, and confidence in future performance. Mahmoud et al. (2016) pointed out that business performance is strongly influenced by learning orientation, learning commitment, common vision, open-mindedness, and knowledge sharing with other organisations. In addition, Baba (2015) pointed out that considering the significant empirical association of learning orientation with economic performance in the for-profit sector in the United States. A critical need exists to determine the suitability of learning constructs in other cultures. Regrettably, only limited studies were undertaken in this field.

Research has shown that entrepreneurial leadership (M. Chen, 2007) and learning orientation (Abidemi et al., 2018) are significant determinants of SMEs' business performance. The present research proposed that learning orientation plays a moderating role between entrepreneurial leadership and SMEs' performance. Learning orientation helps firms to develop more suitable mental models and make better decisions since the firms can gather the required information and gain new insights (Tong, 2020). The outcomes enable the firms to identify opportunities, focus and break into new markets (Harvey et al., 2019). Thus, the firms will be unable to fulfil unmet customer requirements and outperform their competitors in finding opportunities, proactive attitude, and innovative capability (Kiyabo & Isaga, 2019).

This study assumes that learning orientation, as a moderator, specifies the conditions in which the relationship between SMEs' entrepreneurial leadership and business performance occurs and provides the extra stimulus to the anticipated positive relationship between the two variables. As a culture, learning orientation provides the critical support required by entrepreneurial leadership by developing employees' learning behaviour, emphasising free information sharing, and encouraging individuals to propose new creative ideas.

Besides, it also ensures the spread of knowledge would help individuals understand the implemented entrepreneurial initiatives seeking to enhance performance. Entrepreneurial leaders delegate responsibilities and use their experiences and in-depth knowledge to develop their followers (Bagheri & Harrison, 2020; Mehmood et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2020). Leaders can help their followers enhance their innovativeness by regulating the organisational learning culture (Tong, 2020).

Thus, entrepreneurial leaders broaden innovation by leveraging learning orientation to establish a learning-oriented environment through inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation (V. Gupta et al., 2004). Organisation members will be motivated to strive to make remarkable achievements and enjoy dealing with daunting and complex tasks, which would generate innovative activities. Therefore, learning orientation supplements entrepreneurial leaders' commitment to provide access to learning opportunities and encourage employees' creativity.

Studies attempting to understand the moderating role of learning orientation are scarce. Jyoti and Dev (2015) and Ning et al. (2017) have established the critical role of learning orientation and recommended for in-depth studies to be conducted in this regard. The present research used RBV as a basis to provide a greater understanding of learning orientation and establish the moderating mechanisms, elucidating how and when entrepreneurial leadership enhances SMEs' performance. This research also contributes to the learning orientation literature because numerous studies have focused on the direct and mediating effects of learning orientation (Amin, 2015; Keskin, 2006; Tajeddini, 2016) and ignored the role of learning orientation as a moderator. Thus, the present study recommends the following hypothesis.

H5: Learning orientation moderates the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance of SMEs.

Based on the above discussion, the primary study contribution is because it is one of the limited studies attempting to fill the existing significant gap in the literature by measuring the mediation role of innovation management and the moderation role of learning orientation on the association of entrepreneurial leadership with SMEs' organisational performance. The study considers the strong effect of entrepreneurial leadership as an independent variable that generally requires further investigation in developing countries (Bagheri & Harrison, 2020; Leitch & Volery, 2017; Mehmood et al., 2021) and particularly in Kuwait (Al Duwailah et al., 2019). Moreover, this study is one of the few that examined the effect of entrepreneurial leadership as the leadership style adopted by CEOs in the successful practical application of innovation management in SMEs (Fontana & Musa, 2017). The research outcomes can be beneficial in providing insights into the interaction between these variables and their effect on the Kuwait SMEs sector.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework is categorised as independent variable (entrepreneurial leadership), dependent variable (organisational performance), mediating variable (innovation management), and moderating variable (learning orientation), as shown in Figure 1. The present study is one of the few studies which investigated the effect of innovation management as a mediating variable and the moderating variable of learning orientation on the association between entrepreneurial leadership and SMEs' organisational performance to gain a better insight into this relationship.

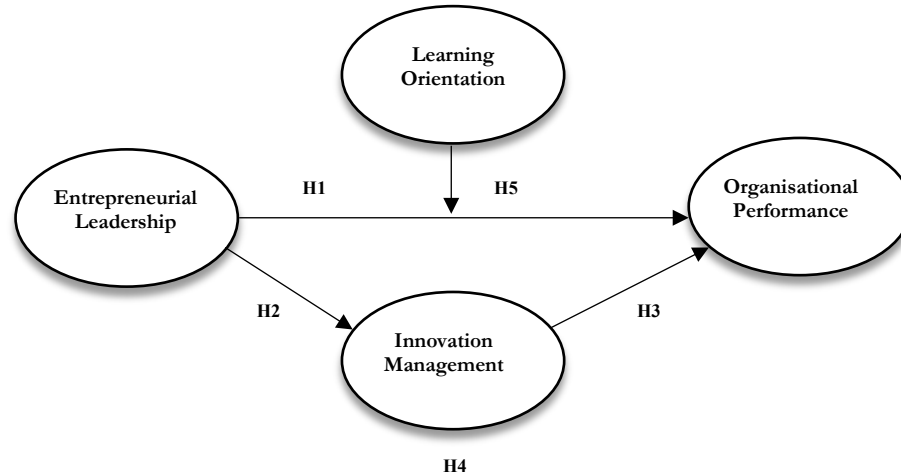


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative method with an exploratory and descriptive design. A survey questionnaire was employed to collect the data to confirm the conceptual research model and investigate the research hypotheses. The conceptual study framework combined three important constructs (entrepreneurial leadership, innovation management, and learning orientation) of SMEs' organisational performance. The study questionnaire comprising different sections was designed based on the literature review. Section A queries the respondents' demographic characteristics and the study background. Sections B, C, D, and E, are designed to collect information about the variables (entrepreneurial leadership, innovation management, learning orientation, and organisational performance). The SMEs were selected from government entities emphasising fostering entrepreneurs' socio-economic development and growth in Kuwait (Ministry of Commerce and Industry and Kuwait National Fund for Small and Medium Enterprise Development). This study surveyed SMEs. The Kuwait National Fund defined SMEs as those which employ not more than 50 employees and have an asset not exceeding 250,000 Kuwaiti Dinar (KD) and revenues not exceeding 750,000 KD. Medium-sized businesses employ not less than 51 employees, but not more than 150, and have an asset not exceeding 500,000 KD and revenues not exceeding 1,500,000 KD.

The targeted population of this research was the SMEs' owners and CEOs in Kuwait. The respondents were selected through a simple random sampling method. All variables were measured using a five-point Likert Scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The study researchers collected data from the respondents through a cross-sectional approach by self-administered questionnaire (face to face and online platforms). The questionnaire was administered to 500 SME owners and CEOs in Kuwait. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the researchers distributed most questionnaires through online platforms, as shown in Table 1. A total of 392 questionnaires were returned.

Table 1. Sample study response rate

Questionnaire response	Frequency	Collected	Missing	Valid	Rate
Number of questionnaires distributed by face to face	120	74	46	69	57.5%
Number of questionnaires distributed by online platforms	380	318	62	315	82.9%
Total Number of questionnaires distributed	500	392	108	384	76.8%

After data cleaning, 384 questionnaires were found to be useable. Preliminary data analysis was undertaken using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) to address the problems of missing values, outliers, and non-normality in the data. Smart PLS was used to perform the primary analysis. The measurement model was evaluated by considering the reliability and validity values. The hypotheses testing was done through bootstrapping method to assess the significance of the assumed relationships.

SCALES DEVELOPMENT

The measurement scales of this study were adapted based on scales used in earlier studies to ensure content validity. In addition, the researchers amended a part of the phrases and vocabulary of several extracted items from previous studies. Minor modifications were made in required sections to make it appropriate with the study objectives and hypotheses and suitable with the context of SMEs in Kuwait to help respondents better understand the questions.

The eight-item scale created by Renko et al. (2015) was adopted in the present study and used to measure entrepreneurial leadership. The scale for innovation management was adapted from Cormican and O’Sullivan (2004). The measures for learning orientation were adapted from Sinkula et al. (1997), while items that measure organisational performance were adapted from Fang et al. (2014) and Flynn et al. (2010).

RESULTS

This research paper used Smart PLS 3.0 to test the hypotheses. Two steps were undertaken in performing SEM. First, the measurement model was assessed. Secondly, the structural model was run using bootstrapping to evaluate the significance of the path coefficient of the hypothetical relationships presented in the conceptual framework.

MEASUREMENT MODEL

The reliability and validity of the constructs were determined. Table 2 shows the loadings satisfy the benchmark of >0.07 recommended by Hair et al. (2013). The average variance extracted (AVE) was assessed to ensure that the convergent validity of all values is greater than the threshold value of 0.5 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). The composite reliability (CR) was also examined, and all values were found to be greater than 0.7 (Hair et al., 2013). Hence, the convergent validity of the model is assured. The item loadings are presented in Figure 2. The discriminant validity presented in Table 3 is in accordance with Fornell and Larcker (1981).

Table 2. Construct measurement summary

Construct	Item	Entrepreneurial Leadership	Loading	AVE	CR
Entrepreneurial leadership (EL)	EL1	As a leader I always demonstrate passion of my work.	0.780	0.72	0.95
	EL2	Our firm has the ability to communicate a clear vision of the future of our business.	0.859		
	EL3	Our firm has ability create a spirit of challenge among employees and motivate them to act in a more innovative way.	0.794		
	EL4	Our firm is ready to come up with radical improvement ideas for the products/services we are selling.	0.876		
	EL5	Our firm has the ability to formulate creative solutions to problems.	0.836		

Construct	Item	Entrepreneurial Leadership	Loading	AVE	CR
	EL6	Our firm is ready to formulate ideas for completely new products/services that we could sell.	0.903		
	EL7	Our firm is ready to take risks.	0.871		
	EL8	When dealing with competition, we are usually the first to launch products/services, technologies, etc. in the market.	0.883		
Innovation Management (IM)	IM1	Our firm allows the emergence of entrepreneurs or product/services champions.	0.892	0.79	0.96
	IM2	The innovation strategy is clearly stated and communicated to all departments and employees.	0.859		
	IM3	Our firm actively encourage all employees to contribute in generating innovative and new ideas.	0.894		
	IM4	Customer's feedback is included in all product/service innovations.	0.921		
	IM5	Our firm lends support with respect to autonomy, time and rewards.	0.900		
	IM6	Failures and mistakes are tolerated and not punished.	0.866		
	IM7	We constantly implement effective innovation process.	0.904		
	IM8	We encourage and reward sharing of knowledge.	0.904		
Learning Orientation (LO)	LO1	I affirm that the ability of our firm to learn is the major factor in our competitive advantage.	0.749	0.75	0.96
	LO2	The sense around here is that employee learning is an investment, not an expense.	0.838		
	LO3	Our firm has special arrangements for sharing the lessons learned in firm's activities between departments, units and teams.	0.802		
	LO4	There is a common purpose in our firm.	0.935		
	LO5	There is complete agreement regarding our organisational vision across all levels, functions and divisions.	0.838		
	LO6	We are not afraid to reflect critically on the mutual presumptions we have made about our customers.	0.943		
	LO7	We constantly assess the quality of our decisions and the activities carried out over time.	0.874		
	LO8	Our firm encourages employees to continuously learn new information that are related to their work in the firm.	0.952		
Organisational Performance (OP)	OP1	Our revenue growth is higher than those of our competitors.	0.855	0.8	0.97

Construct	Item	Entrepreneurial Leadership	Load- ing	AVE	CR
	OP2	Our profit margin is higher than those of our competitors.	0.811		
	OP3	Our market share is larger than those of our competitors.	0.892		
	OP4	Our return on investment is higher than those of our competitors.	0.901		
	OP5	We are constantly introducing new methods to improve production processes.	0.922		
	OP6	Our firm has the ability to rapidly amend products/services to meet the customers' major requirements.	0.909		
	OP7	Our firm has an excellent track record for on-time delivery to customers.	0.939		
	OP8	Our firm has the ability to swiftly respond to changing market demand.	0.919		

*Note: AVE = Average Variance Extracted, CR = Composite Reliability

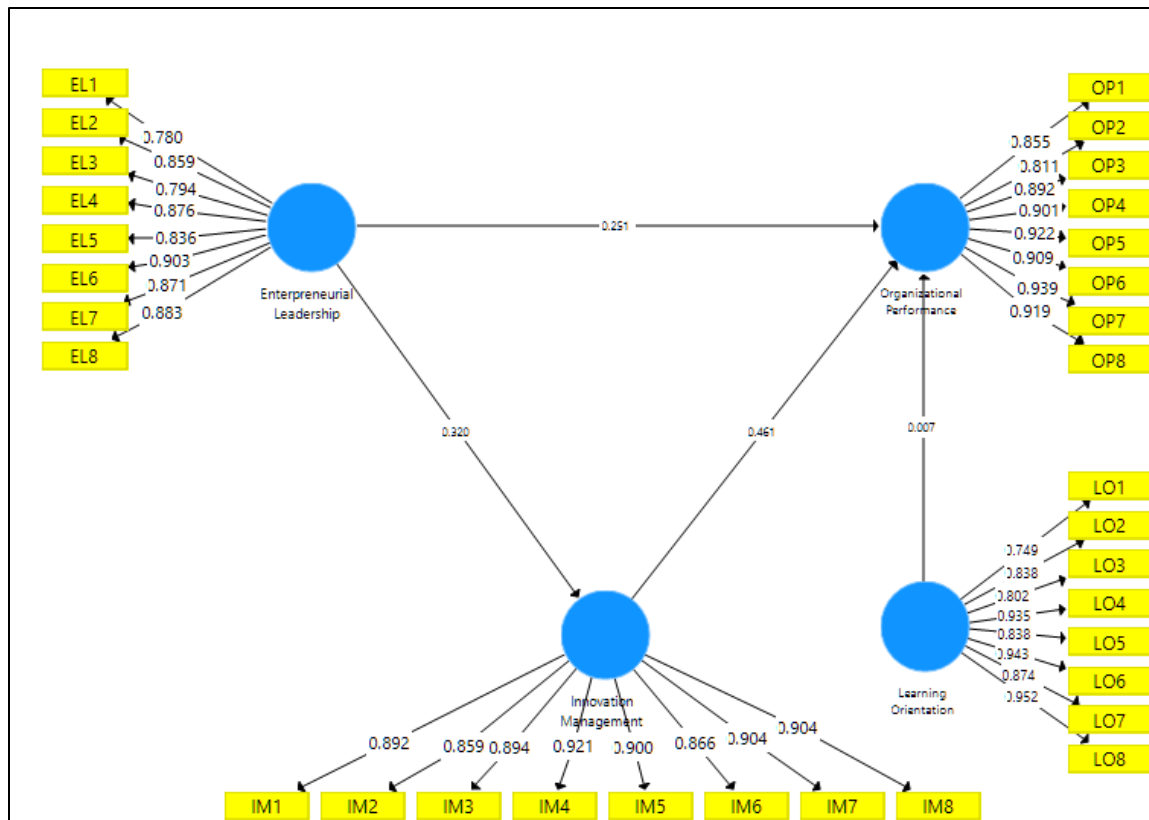


Figure 2. Measurement model showing all constructs and their loadings

The square root of AVE for each construct must be larger than the correlation coefficient of the constructs presented in the model. This condition was satisfied and is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Discriminant validity

	Entrepreneurial Leadership	Innovation Management	Learning Orientation	Organisational Performance
Entrepreneurial Leadership	0.851			
Innovation Management	0.32	0.893		
Learning Orientation	-0.135	-0.088	0.869	
Organisational Performance	0.397	0.541	-0.068	0.894

***Note:** The diagonal values are the square root of AVEs, and the off-diagonal values are the correlation for the latent variable.

STRUCTURAL MODEL

Bootstrapping was undertaken to obtain the t-values. The structural model is shown in Figure 3, while Table 4 presents the outcomes of the hypotheses predicting the direct relationships. The path coefficient and the p-values of the direct relationships are shown in the figure below. The results show that entrepreneurial leadership is directly related to organisational performance ($\beta = 0.250$, $p < 0.05$). Innovation management is also directly linked to organisational performance ($\beta = 0.461$, $p < 0.05$), while entrepreneurial leadership is directly related to innovation management ($\beta = 0.320$, $p < 0.05$). Hence, Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were supported. Moreover, the mediated relationship in Table 4 shows that entrepreneurial leadership is significantly related to organisational performance through the mediation of innovation management ($\beta = 0.147$, $p < 0.05$).

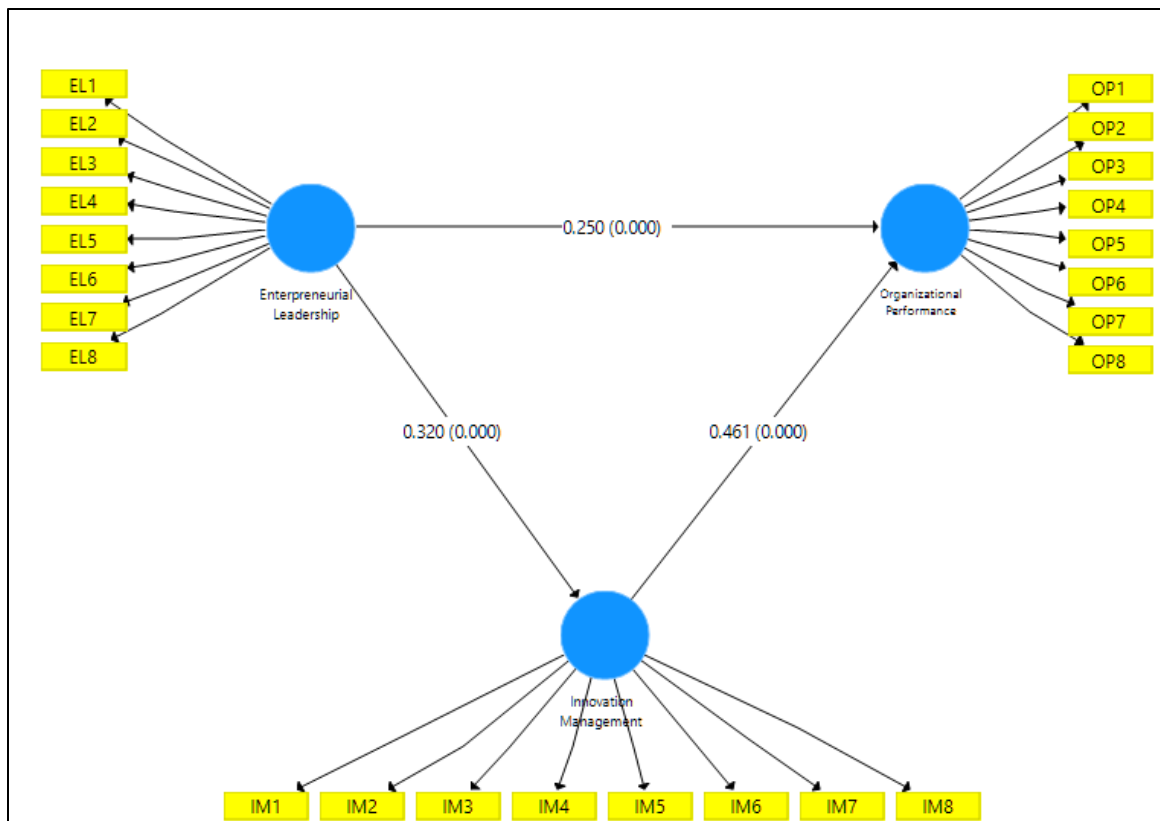
**Figure 3. Structural model**

Table 4. Results of hypotheses testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	SE	T Statistics	P-Value	Decision
H1	EL \rightarrow OP	0.250	0.058	4.299	0.00	Supported
H2	EL \rightarrow IM	0.320	0.050	6.362	0.00	Supported
H3	IM \rightarrow OP	0.461	0.062	7.462	0.00	Supported
H4	EL \rightarrow IM \rightarrow OP	0.147	0.030	4.841	0.00	Supported

*Note: EL – Entrepreneurial Leadership/ IM – Innovation Management/ OP – Organisational Performance

RESULT FOR MODERATION

The moderating effect was also tested using the bootstrapping technique. Hypothesis 5 suggests the moderating effect of learning orientation in the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance. The result presented in Table 5 shows that the moderation effect is significant with $p < 0.05$. Hence, the hypothesis is supported.

Table 5. Results of hypothesis testing (moderation)

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	SE	T Statistics	P-Value	Decision
H5	EL \rightarrow OP (Moderator LO)	0.175	0.050	3.477	0.00	Supported

*Note: EL – Entrepreneurial Leadership/ OP – Organisational Performance/ LO – Learning Orientation

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This study identifies the effect of entrepreneurial leadership on SMEs’ organisational performance in Kuwait while examining the underlying, intermediate mechanisms in this relationship. The findings are discussed in the context of academic literature. For this, a suitable discussion was written for each hypothesis. The research findings explicitly supported the conceptual framework and all five hypotheses developed in the current study.

The first hypothesis, H1, tested the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance. This relationship was deemed to be significant at the 0.05 significance level ($\beta = 0.250$, $t = 4.299$, $p < 0.00$), and is supported. This finding aligns with the previous research findings. Empirical studies demonstrated the direct relationship between the two variables (e.g., Abubakar et al., 2018; Al Mamun et al., 2018; Sarabi et al., 2020). Al Mamun et al. (2018) investigated the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership, performance, and sustainability of micro-enterprises in Malaysia. Their findings were similar to Paudel (2019), who examined the same relationship in Nepali SMEs. Both studies found that entrepreneurial leadership positively affected organisational performance.

In addition, Quaye and Mensah (2019) demonstrated that female entrepreneurial leadership style is directly related to SMEs’ performance in Ghana. Previous literature findings signify that entrepreneurial leaders are highly capable of achieving innovative integration. This quality will assist them in merging individuals’ interests and abilities and deploying the energy and resources towards shared goals to accomplish organisational effectiveness and increase performance levels (Lin & Yi, 2021; Mishra & Misra, 2017; Renko et al., 2015). Based on the results of H1, SMEs leaders capable of setting clear visions and goals and creating effective entrepreneurial efforts will attain greater performance as sales increase, consumer needs fulfilment, product launching or product improvement, and development of other performance indicators.

Kuwait is one of the emerging countries in entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, this study found that the SME leaders in Kuwait have an in-depth understanding and high awareness of entrepreneurial leadership behaviour, enabling them to succeed and gain profitability in businesses. Their business environment could be considered challenging due to a large number of capital and businesses involved and intense competition that requires flexibility and insistence to survive. These results explain the benefits obtained by the Kuwaiti business community from the recent effective efforts by the government that focused on new legislation, laws, policies, and procedures.

The second hypothesis, H2, tested the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and innovation management. The analysis found this relation significant and positive at the 0.05 significance level ($\beta = 0.320$, $t = 6.362$, $p < 0.00$). This result is similar to the findings reported in the literature. For instance, Fontana and Musa (2017) showed that entrepreneurial leadership positively affects innovation management, represented by an innovation process that includes the generation, selection, development, and diffusion of ideas. Firms with high entrepreneurial leadership levels own an effective innovation process that produces better performance (Bagheri, 2017; Huang et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2019). The study outcomes are consistent with prior studies and showed that entrepreneurial leadership has an active and vital role in stimulating practices that lead to innovation management. Therefore, SMEs in Kuwait and developing countries aiming to enhance innovation management processes should focus on developing their leaders' skills. These leaders should adopt the entrepreneurial leadership style and provide the necessary training programmes on an ongoing basis.

The third hypothesis, H3, is concerned with the relationship between innovation management and organisational performance. The study findings revealed that innovation management positively influences SMEs' organisational performance at the 0.05 significance level ($\beta = 0.461$, $t = 7.462$, $p < 0.00$). Previous literature has established that innovation management is associated with SMEs' performance (Abdallah et al., 2021; Al Suwaidi et al., 2021; Han & Nielsen, 2018; Mir et al., 2016; Izadi et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2019). Likar et al. (2014) concluded that innovation management and organisational performance are strongly connected. They stated that SMEs' performance could be enhanced when leaders make a precise evaluation of innovation efforts. In addition, Mir et al. (2016) have confirmed the positive association between standardised innovation management and business performance. Additionally, the study conducted by Rajapathirana and Hui (2018) revealed a meaningful and strong relationship between innovation capabilities, innovation efforts, and firm performance. Based on the results of H3, Kuwait is heading towards the correct direction in strengthening the innovation and entrepreneurship concept to achieve its vision in 2035. However, it had been given a relatively medium rank in innovation according to the Global Innovation Index (Dutta et al., 2019).

Despite this fact, other researchers urged for comprehensive research to gain better insights into the association of entrepreneurial leadership with performance, especially in developing countries, by introducing strong mediation mechanisms that enhance the relationship (Bagheri & Harrison, 2020; Huang et al., 2014; Miao et al., 2019; Paudel, 2019). In this context, the current study combined the role of innovation management with the link between entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance to understand the mechanism behind the role of entrepreneurial leadership in strengthening SMEs' organisational performance. The current study outcomes indicated that innovation management significantly mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and SMEs' organisational performance at the 0.05 significance level ($\beta = 0.147$, $t = 4.841$, $p < 0.00$). Therefore, H4 is accepted. This result aligned with earlier studies. For instance, Huang et al. (2014) has empirically shown the mediating role of innovation (exploratory and exploitative) on the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and performance. Paudel (2019) demonstrated that the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and SMEs' performance is mediated by organisational innovation. In their systemic review, Sethibe and Steyn (2015) recommended that empirical research be undertaken by focusing on the mediating effect of the nature of innovation processes on the relationship between leadership and organisational performance.

Hence, this study examined the role of innovation management as a mediation variable to determine the mechanism through which entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance could positively have related. Innovation management will usually be denoted as an organisation's capability of renewing itself through the creation of new processes, procedures, practices as well as developing employees' behaviour toward innovation to achieve incremental or drastic change (Adams et al. 2006; Fontana & Musa 2017; Mir et al. 2016). This will consequently lead to continuous performance enhancement and ensure long-run survival. Innovation management was integrated with the entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance relationship to increase our awareness about the efficient predictors and antecedents of organisational performance.

This study's findings exposed that, owners and CEOs who adopt entrepreneurial leadership style in Kuwaiti SMEs can enhance organisational performance significantly if entrepreneurial leaders' behaviour is integrated with successful organisational management systems, such as innovation management practices. There is no doubt that innovation management is an efficacious firm strategy that can improve the efficiency of resource utilisation and transform creative ideas into goods to meet the changing market requirements and ensure a competitive edge (Al Suwaidi et al., 2021; Derehi, 2015). SMEs that adopt innovation are more successful in responding to the environment and are able to develop their ability to improve their financial and operational performance (Herman et al. 2016). Thus, innovation management could be the driver that forms the strategies and ideas of the entrepreneurial leader and transform them into real activities and practices, which are positively reflected in organisational performance. The only way for SMEs in developing countries such as Kuwait to improve and maintain their business activities is through innovative products and services. Hence, mechanisms could be established where the SMEs in Kuwait will be able to maintain a more proactive approach alongside appropriate training for individuals and improve the uniqueness of new products and services that exceed consumers' expectations. In a nutshell, strong entrepreneurial leadership together with innovation management allow SMEs to discover various business patterns, growth opportunities and forecast the future. Thus, SMEs will also be able to induce new strategic efforts leading them towards competitive advantage and better market position relative to competitors.

Consequently, the findings of H4 exhibited that innovation management is not only an independent standard or practice but also an integral mechanism that leverages the role of entrepreneurial leadership on the business performance of Kuwait SMEs. Entrepreneurial leadership is not only a reflection of entrepreneurial behaviour. It is also the process and capability that focuses on fulfilling its responsibilities, including its ability to create an environment and system that build the employees' commitment towards achieving shared goals, encouraging creativity and innovation to promote the SMEs' performance level (Bagheri & Harrison, 2020; V. Gupta et al., 2004).

The current study findings also confirmed the significant moderating effect of learning orientation on the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and performance at the 0.05 significance level ($\beta = 0.175$, $t = 3.477$, $p < 0.00$) and is supported by previous research. Jyoti and Dev (2015) found that learning orientation can play a significant moderating role. They also called for further studies in this area.

Based on the findings of this study we concluded that organisations with a high degree of entrepreneurial leadership attitude still require a learning orientation mechanism to build an environment and create an effective organisational culture that enables employees to understand and adopt the ideas of the entrepreneurial leaders and implement them in an optimal manner. So, learning orientation may make an organisation innovate effectively.

The result of H5 could clarify why some organisations might manifest a low organisational performance while their managers show clear entrepreneurial leadership behaviour. Specifically, our study describes this relationship by an indirect effect through learning orientation, whose magnitude is even

greater than the direct effect. Accordingly, other intermediate variables more sensitive to the link between entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance should be proposed and some contingent variables should be considered in order to understand the entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance relationship. Organisations with a strong ability of entrepreneurial leadership will be more active in searching for fruitful opportunities, enter new markets aggressively, and incur greater risks. This will require them to cope with more multifaceted and changing environments. Thus, they will require learning orientation.

Learning orientation is a basic approach towards learning. This exogenous variable synthesises the crucial components of learning organisations. Learning orientation is a prescriptive approach concerned with the question ‘how should organisations learn to achieve their goals?’ (Sinkula et al., 1997). Our study views learning orientation as a set of organisational values which influence the firm’s propensity to create and utilise knowledge (Kiyabo & Isaga, 2019). Baker and Sinkula (1999) state that one of these values is the commitment to learning. This closely relates to the top management’s commitment to support an organisational culture that promotes learning orientation as one of its main values in order to develop performance continuously.

Our findings implied that organisational performance levels could be led positively by entrepreneurial leadership. However, such leading can be driven efficiently by learning orientation, which is provided by the entrepreneurial leader. In nutshell, the influence of entrepreneurial leadership on organisational performance can be extended by integrated with learning orientation that provides the appropriate environment to achieve entrepreneurial goals in the context of SMEs in developing countries. Thus, SMEs should focus more on continuous learning to gain a competitive edge and higher organisational performance for their survival and growth.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Theoretically, the contribution of the current study is in the form of empirical evidence that ratifies and extends our awareness of the adoption of the RBV theory to investigate the effects of entrepreneurial leadership on organisational performance. RBV theory has become a dominant paradigm for strategic orientations research, the interface between RBV and entrepreneurial leadership has amounted to little more than providing a “research setting” for empirical work (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2003). Because of the lack of consideration given to RBV and its connection with entrepreneurship activities by most scholars interested in the entrepreneurial leadership phenomenon, and they focused on the development of entrepreneurial leadership theory in their research (M. Chen, 2007; V. Gupta et al., 2004; Renko et al., 2015). Therefore, one of the most significant contributions to emerge from this study is, extending the boundaries of RBV theory to include the individual abilities of entrepreneurs and their role in enhancing organisational performance in the context of SMEs.

Kesidou and Carter (2014) called to study entrepreneurship within resource-based theory by stating that: “in a resource-based view, discriminating suitable inputs is ultimately a matter of entrepreneurial vision and intuition; the creative act underlying such vision is a subject that so far has not been a central focus of resource-based theory development. Since then, a number of scholars of the entrepreneurship field have studied the impact of entrepreneurial leadership on different types of resources to investigate their specific influence on entrepreneurial endeavours in order to develop the performance of their firm. Further, Pauceanu et al. (2021) indicated that the connection between RBV and entrepreneurial leadership should be more addressed by considering entrepreneurial leadership abilities among the intangible resources that help firms to accomplish a competitive advantage, and maximize the firm’s performance. Therefore, this study responded to the recommendations made by previous studies in order to extend existing knowledge in terms of the connection between RBV and entrepreneurial leadership.

Our study viewed entrepreneurial leadership as one of the resources of the firm. In other words, we include entrepreneurial leaders among the resources of the firm and the range of ideas of the entrepreneurial leader is the core engine to provide an appropriate environment to harness the firm's heterogeneous resources and make them work together to achieve the desired goals. In this vein, the findings of the current study contribute to extending the scope of RBV theory and simultaneously increase our understanding relating to entrepreneurial leadership, performance, and interaction with intermediate mechanisms (innovation management, learning orientation), particularly within the context of SMEs in emerging economies.

There are major theoretical contributions of this study besides its contributions to RBV theory, which is the more specific articulation and empirical examination of relationships between entrepreneurial leadership, innovation management, learning orientation, and organisational performance together in a single model. Thus, the current study offers new theoretical insights in different respects as follows:

The primary study contribution is the response to repeated calls from previous scholars to investigate the possibility of entrepreneurial leadership functioning as a unique leadership style contributing to enhancing the SMEs' performance in developing countries (Akbari et al., 2021; Bagheri & Harrison, 2020; Imran & Aldaas, 2020; Leitch & Volery, 2017). Theoretically, the research is an answer to scholars' calls for discovering the factors that mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and performance (Akbari et al., 2021; Miao et al., 2019; Paudel, 2019) by examining the mediation role of innovation management on the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and performance.

The study outcome strengthens the entrepreneurial leadership theory (M. Chen, 2007; V. Gupta et al., 2004; Renko et al., 2015) by using it to explain how entrepreneurial leaders facilitate innovation management in SMEs to improve performance continuously. The findings can also be used to develop a theory for improving innovation management and identifying opportunities by considering entrepreneurial leadership (Fontana & Musa, 2017). By focusing on SME leaders' entrepreneurial leadership practices in Kuwait, the effectiveness of this leadership style in stimulating innovation process, foster creativity, and opportunity exploitation through individuals and organisations, and establishing a supportive environment that ensures sustainable innovation orientations and processes in their firm has been confirmed (Cai et al., 2018; L. Chen et al., 2016; Harrison et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2019; Leitch & Volery, 2017).

This study is a pioneer that explored the moderating role of learning orientation between entrepreneurial leadership and organisational performance. The study findings showed that the attributes and characteristics of entrepreneurial leadership could be expanded and driven efficiently by the learning orientation provided by the entrepreneurial leader (Jyoti & Dev, 2015; Mehmood et al., 2021). This investigation is significant for researchers in several ways. The moderating role of learning orientation on entrepreneurial leadership and SMEs' performance was tested empirically. The result showed an important interaction effect. When entrepreneurial leaders encourage learning in the organisational environment, individuals tend to respond positively to the encouragement provided by their leader (Jyoti & Dev, 2015; Mehmood et al., 2021). They will be effective in thinking to create innovative solutions to the problems faced in the workplace and how to exploit the opportunities proactively. Learning culture enables individuals to use the alternative learning opportunities provided by the entrepreneurial leader to contribute to organisational performance development and generates sustainable competitive advantages for the organisations.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This research has provided several practical insights. Generally, SMEs in developing countries should understand the effective competencies of entrepreneurial leadership style to improve the current and

future project leaders' awareness of entrepreneurship phenomenon to promote their firms' organisational performance. The research has shown that entrepreneurial leaders strongly influence the increase in SMEs' innovation levels. Entrepreneurial leadership contributes from the earliest phase of the innovation process and creates supportive culture, structure, and practices to facilitate and manage innovation systematically in all production processes. The SMEs' CEOs and leaders should encourage learning by creating and fostering a business environment that motivates individuals to continuously learn to build a strong relationship between entrepreneurial leaders, employee creativity, and performance. The SMEs' management should nurture a climate that allows employees to independently gain new knowledge and share their learning experiences and effective practices across the organisation. An open learning environment enables entrepreneurial leaders to convey and transform their visions and strategies into clear objectives. Thereby, they inspire other employees to pursue and successfully innovatively achieve those goals.

CONCLUSION

Kuwait and other developing countries witness an increase in the regional entrepreneurship orientation. Hence, an urgent need exists to provide support for SMEs. A literature review showed a lack of prior research focused on how entrepreneurial leadership relates to SMEs' performance in the context of developing economies. A gap is present in the conceptual and empirical understanding of how entrepreneurial leadership and performance are related. The present research contributes to the existing regional SMEs literature by determining the factors contributing to entrepreneurial leadership and its implications on organisational performance. The research demonstrated that entrepreneurial leadership and innovation management strongly positively impact organisational performance.

Furthermore, innovation management plays an essential mediating role in this relationship. The research findings demonstrated that entrepreneurial leadership facilitates the development of innovation strategies, processes, and skills, besides structuring resources to streamline them to exploit innovative opportunities. Therefore, SMEs should critically continuously develop their entrepreneurial leadership to ensure that innovation processes are effectively managed.

Entrepreneurial leadership is effective at inspiring generative and exploratory thinking processes that yield more creative ideas and solutions. Thus, innovative employees can be effectively led if leaders embrace an entrepreneurial style and create an environment that facilitates learning, promoting innovation and creative problem-solving. These initiatives would ultimately result in better performance. The research findings provided strong support for the hypothesis that the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and SME performance is moderated by learning orientation. SMEs' owners and CEOs should allocate time and resources to establish and maintain a favourable climate for learning to increase the organisation's ability to learn, acquire knowledge and innovate.

This study has proposed a unique conceptual framework that should interest scholars and practitioners. A new research field is revealed regarding entrepreneurial leadership and performance in the innovation management and learning orientation field. The interrelationship of the variables revealed in this study can help SMEs in developing economies to improve their performance. Moreover, the research findings are beneficial to SMEs' founders and managers in general and particularly in Kuwait in helping them to manage businesses effectively. Consequently, the SMEs would achieve higher sustainability and competitive capability degree. Thus, SME managers are urged to give serious consideration to the development of innovativeness, specifically the current learning practice and entrepreneurial behaviour, to ensure better achievement of the SMEs.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research has formulated a conceptual model for SMEs in Kuwait. Hence, future research should investigate the research framework in other developing economies and business settings to generalise

the results. The research focus examines the role of entrepreneurial leadership style in facilitating innovation management within an organisation to ensure continuous performance improvement. Future investigation should seek to establish the effect of this leadership style on other mechanisms, such as knowledge management processes, which could function with entrepreneurial leadership to improve SMEs' performance efficiently. Future research should also compare entrepreneurial leadership with other leadership styles and determine which styles are most capable of encouraging innovation, particularly in SMEs.

The current study respondents were chosen from SMEs' owners and CEOs to fill out the questionnaires. Hence, the middle and lower-level managers were beyond the study scope. Thus, future studies may include middle and lower-level managers and employees to lead to more positive outcomes.

Concerning future research direction, other moderating variables should be investigated, such as employees' innovation work behaviour or open innovation mindset, to create a close connection between entrepreneurial leadership and SMEs' performance. Finally, a longitudinal study may be able to help in making a better conclusion.

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