

The Mediating Role of Innovation on the Relationship Between Knowledge Management, Organizational Learning, and SME Performance

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Abstract

In today's business landscape, innovation has become a critical determinant for organizational survival and competitiveness in an increasingly volatile industrial environment. Companies must strategically manage their knowledge and organizational learning while fostering an innovation-driven culture to optimize performance outcomes. Based on this rationale, the present study investigates how innovation mediates the influence of knowledge management and organizational learning on SME's performance. The research gathered data from 89 SME entrepreneurs in South Sulawesi through a structured questionnaire. Data analysis was performed using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) method. Findings reveal that both knowledge management and organizational learning exert direct, positive, and significant impacts on performance. Furthermore, both also positively influence innovation, which in turn significantly boosts performance. Notably, innovation also acts as a significant mediating mechanism between knowledge management, organizational learning, and performance in SMEs."

Keywords: The Mediating Role of Innovation, Relationship Between Knowledge Management, Organizational Learning, SME Performance

1. Introduction

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) are widely recognized as crucial contributors to global economic growth. According to the Asian Development Bank (2001) as cited by Brattberg (2017), SMEs play a significant role in industrial transformation and serve as engines for economic expansion, particularly in developing economies. SMEs help stimulate economic activity and provide substantial employment opportunities. A clear example of their resilience was during the 1998 financial crisis in Indonesia, where SMEs managed to survive despite the broader economic downturn. Nevertheless, their development continues to face several persistent obstacles.

Statistics indicate that despite their widespread presence, SME growth in Indonesia has been relatively stagnant. In 2018, around 60 million SMEs operated across the country, contributing approximately 8,573 trillion rupiahs to the economy, equivalent to 57.8% of the national GDP, and employing about 91% of the workforce. This number slightly increased to 63 million in 2019, with a GDP contribution of 60.3% and employment absorption rising to 96%. However, by 2020, the number of active SMEs plummeted dramatically to 34 million due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Panjaitan, Timur, & Sumiyana, 2021).

Several factors have been identified as barriers to SME growth, including insufficient knowledge, limited innovation, and weak managerial competencies. A lack of skilled human resources further compounds the issue, making it difficult for entrepreneurs to manage and expand their businesses effectively. As Govori (2013) highlighted, SME performance is often volatile and lacks sustainability, which inhibits long-term growth.

Haroon, Hafeez, and Lazim (2012) emphasized that SMEs face multiple challenges, such as inadequate marketing knowledge, low bargaining power, capital shortages, and limited technological understanding. Similar challenges are evident in SMEs operating in Makassar, South Sulawesi, where poor human resource quality and minimal entrepreneurial orientation have resulted in low productivity and performance (Mazla, Tufail, Yakim, & Zainal, 2020).

Knowledge has become a vital foundation for fostering creativity and innovation within businesses. Managing knowledge systematically—known as knowledge management—can significantly boost employee innovation, adaptability, and job satisfaction (Nonaka, Toyama, & Konno, 2002; Becerra-Fernandez & Sabherwal, 2014). Omerzel (2010) also confirmed that SMEs' ability to manage knowledge directly correlates with their growth and profitability. The emergence of a knowledge-based economy demands that SMEs maximize knowledge utilization to enhance innovation capabilities and remain competitive (Grant, 1991). Effective knowledge management encompasses processes such as creating, acquiring, sharing, and applying knowledge, all essential for improving organizational learning and performance (Omotayo, 2015).

Moreover, the successful application of knowledge management depends heavily on strategic alignment with overall business goals (Fahroni & Tjakraatmadja, 2013). Organizations capable of adapting knowledge management to their specific contexts can achieve greater agility and competitiveness (Distanont & Khongmalai, 2020). As Hassan and Raziq (2019) demonstrated, knowledge management substantially improves SME performance by optimizing resource usage and fostering innovation.

2. Literature Review

1) Knowledge-Based View (KBV)

The Knowledge-Based View (KBV) emphasizes the critical role of knowledge in developing human capital and enhancing organizational performance (Barney, 1991). This perspective posits that effective knowledge management empowers organizations to navigate challenges more efficiently, leading to a more structured and strategic development of human resources. In today's competitive environment, particularly for SMEs, the ability to generate and leverage new knowledge is vital for survival and success.

According to both the Resource-Based View (RBV) and KBV, intellectual capital serves as a unique, value-creating resource that differentiates organizations and drives superior performance. Garanina (2009) noted a paradigm shift where intangible assets, particularly knowledge, have become more significant than physical assets in shaping strategic decisions. Knowledge is now widely acknowledged as a critical driver of value creation and sustainable competitive advantage (Nonaka & Lewin, 1994).

Within organizations, knowledge underpins manufacturing strategies and capability development, ultimately enhancing product value (Garanina, 2009). Effective knowledge management—the systematic process of converting data and information into actionable knowledge—has become a cornerstone for many leading firms. It involves creating, acquiring, storing, sharing, and utilizing knowledge to achieve organizational objectives.

Mohajan (2017) pointed out that the organization's ability to manage knowledge greatly influences decision quality and innovation outcomes. Similarly, Ng, Goh, and Eze (2011) demonstrated that both innovation performance and knowledge management significantly contribute to new product development and organizational success. Given its close connection with human resources, strategic knowledge management planning is essential for driving organizational performance.

2) Knowledge Management

Knowledge management refers to the deliberate coordination of people, processes, technology, and organizational structures to enhance value through knowledge reuse and innovation (Chinowsky & Carrillo, 2007). This involves capturing, sharing, and applying organizational experiences to facilitate continuous learning and operational improvements.

There is ongoing debate regarding the precise definition of "knowledge," but many scholars view it as more than just information. Marr and Spender (2004) describe knowledge as a blend of experience, values, expert insights, and intuitive understanding that forms the framework for evaluating and integrating new experiences. Accordingly, organizations increasingly recognize knowledge as a strategic asset that supports the development of innovative products and services, leading to sustainable competitive advantages (Wiklund & Shepherd, 2003).

3) Organizational Learning

The concept of organizational learning gained prominence as organizations recognized the need to adapt to rapidly changing environments and continuously improve their capabilities (Argyris & Schön, 1978). In the late 1990s, research expanded the idea by emphasizing the importance of systematically capturing knowledge, sharing insights, and developing strategies to foster continuous improvement. Organizational learning is not limited to individual development—it also involves building systems and cultures that promote collective knowledge and adaptability.

Effective organizational learning enables organizations to achieve better outcomes in areas such as innovation, customer satisfaction, operational efficiency, and long-term growth. It requires identifying, creating, retaining, and transferring knowledge within the organization, ensuring that experiences are leveraged for future decision-making. Organizations that implement strong learning practices can more effectively respond to changes, enhance their capabilities, and maintain a competitive edge. Ultimately, organizational learning reflects a strategic commitment to continuous improvement and knowledge sharing, directly contributing to sustained organizational performance and resilience.

4) Company Innovation

Innovation within organizations hinges upon deep and well-managed knowledge. It represents more than just new ideas—it involves creating value through improved methods, products, or processes that respond to evolving market demands. The innovation process is inherently knowledge-driven, relying on subjective interpretations and foundational assumptions that guide organizational learning.

In the context of a dynamic market, having a sound business strategy is insufficient without continuous innovation. Firms must adapt to environmental shifts and seek sustainable competitive advantages through the development of innovative capabilities (Hilmi & Ramayah, 2009). As markets become more saturated and consumers demand higher levels of information and personalization, innovation becomes crucial for success.

Khan et al. (2012) distinguish between internal innovations, which depend on a firm's own resources and competencies, and external innovations. Measuring innovation involves assessing technological advances, marketing improvements, managerial adjustments, and product development. Innovation is thus defined as the successful implementation of creative ideas, leading to new products, improved market penetration, and increased market share.

Hilmi and Ramayah (2009) further describe innovation as either a reactive response to environmental changes or a proactive effort to shape those changes. For SMEs, especially in today's tech-driven era, technological mastery is essential for strengthening resilience and achieving growth (Hidayat et al., 2021).

Based on these discussions, it is evident that knowledge management and organizational learning are central to fostering a culture of innovation, which, in turn, enhances SME performance.

5) Conceptual Framework

From the explanations above, it can be concluded that SME performance is strongly influenced by the effective management of knowledge and talent. These two elements form the foundation of an

innovative organizational culture, which further drives performance improvement. The conceptual framework for this study is visually illustrated as follows:

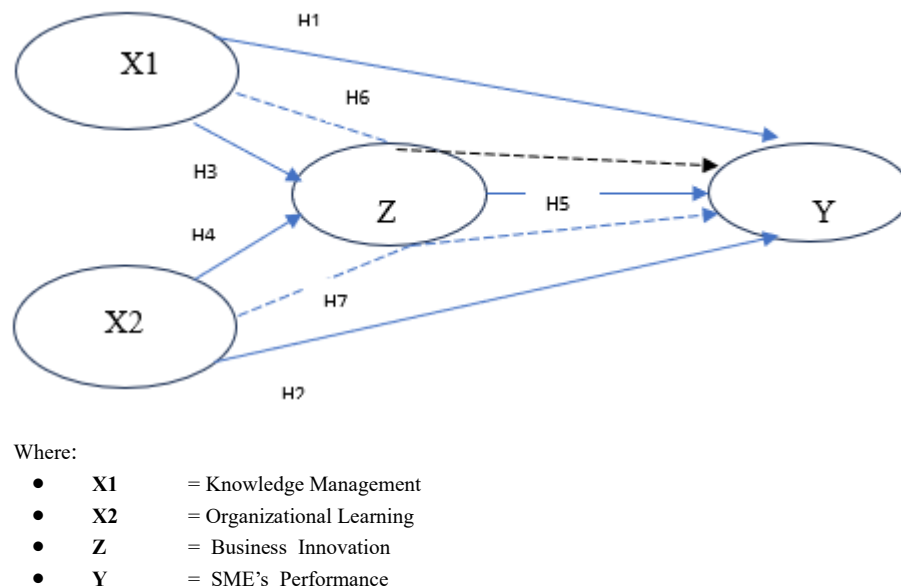


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Hypotheses Development

Based on the conceptual model, the research hypotheses are formulated as follows:

- **H1: Knowledge Management Positively Affects SME Performance** Knowledge management has been identified as a crucial source of sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Sirinaga, Khatibi, & Azam, 2020; Hassan & Raziq, 2019; Xu et al., 2018). Prior studies confirm that well-managed knowledge enhances both innovation and organizational performance. Thus, it is hypothesized that knowledge management positively influences SME performance.
- **H2: Organizational Learning Positively Affects SME Performance** According to Horvathova and Durdova (2010), effective organizational learning—capturing, sharing, and applying knowledge across the organization—directly contributes to achieving high organizational performance. Hence, this study proposes that organizational learning has a significant positive effect on SME performance.
- **H3: Knowledge Management Positively Influences Business Innovation** Research by Valdez-Juárez et al. (2016) and Mardani et al. (2018) supports the argument that knowledge acquisition, dissemination, and responsiveness are key drivers of innovation. Consequently, it is hypothesized that effective knowledge management enhances business innovation.
- **H4: Organizational Learning Positively Influences Business Innovation** Building upon the work of Al-Hakim and Hassan (2013), Collings, Mellahi, and Cascio (2019), and Payambarpour and Hooi (2015), organizational learning practices directly support innovation by leveraging the collective knowledge and capabilities of the organization. Therefore, it is hypothesized that organizational learning positively impacts business innovation.
- **H5: Business Innovation Positively Affects SME Performance** Prior studies (Damanpour, 1991; Ma'atoofi & Tajeddini, 2010; Al-Ansari, Pervan, & Xu, 2013; Byukusenge & Munene, 2017) affirm that innovation significantly boosts business

outcomes. Based on these findings, this research posits that innovation positively influences SME performance.

- **H6:** Knowledge Management Positively Affects Performance Through Innovation Nonaka, Toyama, and Konno (2002) emphasized that knowledge management nurtures innovation, which ultimately improves organizational performance. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that innovation mediates the relationship between knowledge management and SME performance.
- **H7:** Organizational Learning Positively Affects Performance Through Innovation As Axelrod et al. (2001) and Lyria (2014) indicated, organizations with strong learning cultures are better positioned to innovate, leading to enhanced performance. Consequently, this study hypothesizes that organizational learning influences SME performance indirectly through business innovation.

3. Research Design and Methodology

1) Research Design

This study uses a quantitative approach with the main data is data from the distribution of questionnaires to the respondents. the independent variables of this research are knowledge management and talent management while dependent variable is the performance of SMEs with innovation variable as the intervening variable. The distributed questionnaires were compiled based on the indicators of each variable by taking into account the main references used in this study. The complete structure of the questionnaire used in this study is as presented in table 1 as follows:

Table 1 : Research Questionnaire Structure Guide

Variabel	Item Questionnaire	Major Reference
Knowledge Management	Knowledge Identification	Becerra, Fernandez, Rajiv and Sabberwal (2010)
	Knowledge Creation	
	Knowledge Sharing	
	Knowledge Utilization	
Organizational Learning	Knowledge Acquisition	Jerez-Gomez, P., Céspedes-Lorente, J., & Valle-Cabrera, R. (2005).
	Information Distribution	
	Organizational Memory	
Innovation	Technology Innovation	Han et al(2009), Kuwantoto et al (2009)
	Product Innovation	
	Marketing Innovation	
	Managerial Innovation	
SMEs Performance	Sales Growth	Gunday et al, (2009), Munizu, (2010)
	Capital Growth	
	Employee Growth	
	Market and marketing Growth	

2) Samples

The sample in this study is small and medium business actors who already have professional management in South Sulawesi Province which were selected purposively through the following considerations (1) The company has a clear organizational structure (2) The company has developed the concept of research and development although on a minimum scale (3) The company employs a

minimum of 10 employees (4) The company has been operating for a minimum of 5 years (4) Company assets are included in the small and medium business category. Based on these special criteria, it can be determined as many as 87 company owners who have the expected criteria. The description respondent demography is shown in table 2 as follow:

Tabel 2 : Respondent Demography

Attributes	Item	F	%
Gender	Men	57	64%
	Women	32	36%
Age (years)	25-30 year	47	52%
	31-40 year	23	26%
	>41 year	19	22%
Operational experience	5- 10 Years	66	74%
	11 – 15 Years	13	15%
	16 – 20 Years	6	7%
	>21 Years	4	4%
Income / Per-month	< 100 million	58	65%
	100 –250 million	21	24%
	. >500 million	10	11%

Demographically, the sample of this study was dominated by male respondents as many as 57 people or 64%, respondents by age were dominated by respondents aged 25-30 years as many as 47 people or by 52%, most of the respondents had operated their business within a period of 5 to 10 years, namely as many as 66 people or 74% from the income side of the respondents most of the respondents earn below from 100 million rupiahs per month

3) Measurement

The validity test used in this study is CFA (Confirmatory Factor Analysis) and for reliability testing, this study uses the Cronbach Alpha technique. Evaluation of construct validity, comparison of response patterns, and comparison of competing models are the three main applications of CFA in psychometric evaluation research ([Alavi, Visentin, Thapa, Hunt, Watson, Cleary, 2020](#)). The main criteria in the reliability test are as follows: when the Alpha coefficient is less than 0.60 it indicates a low level of reliability. But when the Alpha coefficient is more than 0.60 or close to 1.00, it can be said to be high reliability. All data analysis was processed by smart partial least square (PLS) software through two calculation stages. The first is an algorithm analysis to measure the feasibility of sizes on dimensions such as; validity and reliability (AVE, Cronbach alpha, and Critical Ratio). The second part; Boostroaping analysis is used to determine the significance of the influences between the variables studied in this study so that the hypotheses used in this study can be answered

4. Result & Discussion

1) Statistics Test Results

Data analysis processed on PLS smart software which produces initial data that is used as a follow-up analysis in this study. As stated, good data is data that meets the required criteria, namely fulfillment of the loading factor standard with a value of (λ):> 0.5. From the results of the algorithm analysis that has been carried out, it proves all the values of loading factors generated are above 0.5 so

that this shows the quality of the data that meets the criteria in further analysis in this study. The result of Algorithm analysis is shown in Figure 2 as follows:

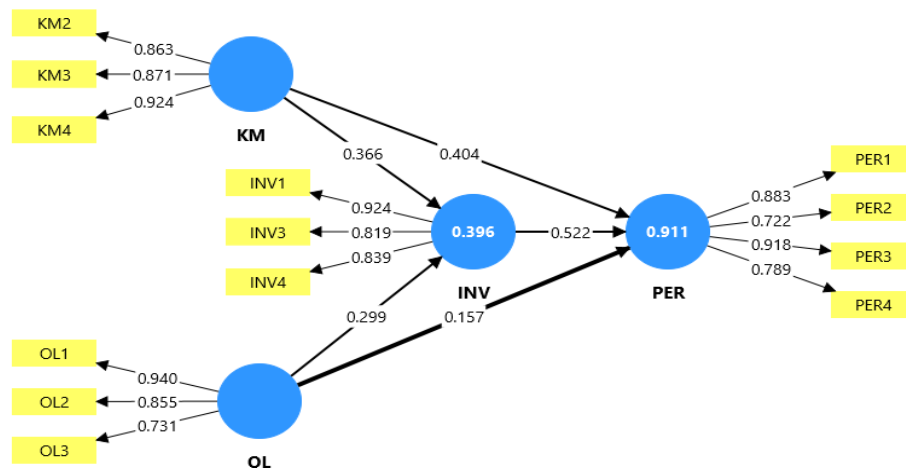


Figure 2: PLS Analysis (Algorithm Analysis Output)

The next analysis is an analysis to determine the criteria with validity standard value is above 0.7 while the AVE good fit of the model, namely by knowing the Validity value is above 0.5 then reliability for both composite reliability the AVE value and the value to determine the reliability and Cronbach alpha with standard values above 0.6. the good of data, where criteria for good data is the fulfillment of fit model for this research data is shown in table 4 as follow :

Table 3 : The Good of Fit Model

Variable	Items	Validity	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach Alfa
Knowledge Management	KM2	0,863	0,633	0,905	0,865
	KM3	0,871			
	KM4	0,924			
Organizational Learning	OL1	0,940	0,717	0,802	0,796
	OL2	0,855			
	OL3	0,731			
Innovation	INV1	0,924	0,743	0,879	0,828
	INV2	0,819			
	INV3	0,839			
SME's Performance	PER1	0,883	0,691	0,872	0,848
	PER2	0,722			
	PER3	0,918			
	PER4	0,789			

2) Hypothesis Result

The results of hypothesis testing for each latent variable relationship, as presented in Table 5, show the following findings. Knowledge management has a positive and significant effect on SME performance (sample mean = 0.404, p-value = 0.000 < 0.05), thus hypothesis H1 is accepted. Organizational learning also has a positive and significant effect on SME performance (sample mean = 0.157, p-value = 0.004 < 0.05), meaning hypothesis H2 is accepted. Furthermore, knowledge management positively and significantly affects innovation (sample mean = 0.366, p-

value = $0.027 < 0.05$), supporting hypothesis H3. Organizational learning likewise has a positive and significant effect on innovation (sample mean = 0.299, p-value = $0.034 < 0.05$), thus hypothesis H4 is accepted.

Innovation itself has a positive and significant effect on SME performance (sample mean = 0.522, p-value = $0.000 < 0.05$), confirming hypothesis H5. Regarding the mediating effects, the PLS output indicates that knowledge management has a positive and significant effect on SME performance through innovation (sample mean = 0.189, p-value = $0.025 < 0.05$), thus hypothesis H6 is accepted. Similarly, organizational learning has a positive and significant effect on SME performance through innovation (sample mean = 0.156, p-value = $0.045 < 0.05$), meaning hypothesis H7 is also accepted.

Table 4 : Hypothesis Result

	Sample Mean	Std.Deviation	T Statistic	P.Value
Knowledge Management to Performance	0.404	0.055	7.382	0.000
Organizational Learning to Performance to	0.157	0.055	2.857	0.004
Knowledge Management to Innovation	0.366	0.165	2.212	0.027
Organizational Learning to Innovation	0.299	0.141	2.117	0.034
Innovation to SME's Performance	0.522	0.021	24.384	0.000
Knowledge Management to SME's Performance Through Innovation	0.189	0.085	2.241	0.025
Organizational Learning to SME's Performance Through Innovation	0.156	0.078	2.008	0.045

3) Discussion

The rapid expansion of SMEs presents both opportunities and challenges, especially in an environment marked by heightened consumer awareness and technological advances. As this study shows, SMEs must prioritize factors that influence business performance specifically through strengthening innovation.

However, innovation does not arise spontaneously. It is the outcome of strategic knowledge management and organizational learning, particularly in how knowledge is captured, shared, and applied. Intellectual capital and knowledge-based resources are now recognized as primary assets in achieving sustainable competitive advantage (Wiig, 1997; Barney, 1991; Teece, 2000; Rothberg & Erickson, 2005; Nonaka, 2006; Najmi et al., 2018). This study affirms that both knowledge management and organizational learning have direct positive effects on innovation and performance, aligning with previous research findings (Barney, 1991; Teece, 2000; Rothberg & Erickson, 2005; Nonaka, 2006).

Interestingly, the results revealed that while innovation significantly contributes to performance, it does not overshadow the direct impacts of knowledge management and organizational learning. In practice, many SMEs, especially in Makassar, still rely on traditional, less formalized management systems. Innovation often occurs incidentally rather than systematically, reflecting the entrepreneurial instincts of SME owners rather than structured innovation processes.

Additionally, analysis showed that two innovation indicators—technological and managerial innovation—were statistically invalid for the sample, highlighting that many SMEs have yet to fully embrace structured technological and managerial advancements.

Overall, business actors with strong knowledge backgrounds and consistently organizational learning demonstrated better business performance.

5. Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for SME practitioners. Business owners are encouraged to actively implement knowledge management and organizational learning systems to enhance organizational flexibility in an increasingly dynamic environment.

In today's globalized economy, intellectual capital stands as a crucial determinant of business success. Developing strong competencies in knowledge management and organizational learning is fundamental for cultivating innovation and creativity, which ultimately drive improved business performance and competitiveness.

6. Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, this study reinforces existing frameworks surrounding human capital management, particularly the strategic roles of knowledge management and organizational learning. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature that emphasizes how systematically managing organizational knowledge and human capital resources can lead to enhanced performance outcomes.

Moreover, the study highlights that structured knowledge management and organizational learning systems are critical distribution mechanisms for organizational capabilities, resulting in better resource utilization, more effective decision-making, and the strengthening of competitive advantages.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this study affirm that both knowledge management and organizational learning play a critical role in enhancing the performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Effective knowledge management allows SMEs to systematically capture, store, and utilize valuable information, while organizational learning fosters continuous adaptation and improvement. Together, these two capabilities create a strong foundation for building competitive advantage and sustaining business growth in a dynamic environment.

Innovation emerges as a vital strategy in this process, acting as the mechanism through which knowledge and learning are transformed into tangible business improvements. The study demonstrates that innovation significantly contributes to SME performance by enabling the creation of new products, services, and processes that meet evolving market demands. However, it is important to note that, within the SMEs examined, much of the innovation activity remains informal and reactive. Rather than being the result of structured innovation management systems, it tends to be driven by immediate market pressures and competitive challenges.

Despite this informality, innovation proves to be an important intermediary that amplifies the positive effects of knowledge management and organizational learning on performance. Well-managed human resources—equipped with the ability to acquire, share, and apply knowledge—leverage innovation as a channel to realize their full potential. The interplay between intellectual resources and innovation highlights the strategic value of investing in human capital development and fostering a culture of continuous improvement within SMEs.

In conclusion, the entrepreneurial orientation of SME actors, supported by strong knowledge and learning capabilities, consistently translates into superior business outcomes. The results reinforce the notion that intellectual capital—comprised of knowledge, learning ability, and

innovative capacity—is indispensable for the long-term resilience and success of SMEs. As such, SME leaders should prioritize building systems that formalize innovation processes while continuing to strengthen knowledge management and organizational learning initiatives.

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