



Correlation Between Innovative Leadership Practices and ... Umoru R. S., Et. al. (2025)

Correlation Between Innovative Leadership Practices and Growth of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises in Otukpo Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates the Correlation between Innovative Leadership practices and Growth of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises in Otukpo Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria. The study aimed to identify commonly adopted innovative leadership practices, examine their influence on business growth, and explore the barriers hindering their adoption. It was a quantitative research design which deployed a structured questionnaire that was administered to 120 SME owners and managers via simple random sampling method. Descriptive statistics and inferential analysis was used to analyse data. The results indicated a positive and significant correlation between innovative leadership practices and growth of SMEs, with key practices being strategic decision-making, openness to change and customer oriented innovation. The study recommends targeted training, improved funding mechanisms, and supportive policy frameworks to foster innovation-driven leadership among SMEs. In this study, the literature has been added in terms of the context-specific information about the role of leadership innovation in increasing the performance of SMEs in the semi-urban contexts of Nigeria.

Keywords: Innovative leadership, SME growth, business development, leadership practices

Introduction

Innovation, in the current business environment, has become a crucial ingredient to sustainable growth of any enterprise and specifically in Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SME) cases. Leadership style embraced by SME owners and managers is of great significance to make an organization more innovative, adaptable, and competitive. The use of SMEs to support employment as well as to reduce poverty is well documented in Nigeria, but in the country, the majority of SMEs continue to challenge a sustainable growth because of poor leadership practices, poor innovation capabilities, and a lack of strategic direction (Udoyiu et al., 2024).

Creative leadership, which emphasis on creativity, adaptability, taking risks and innovation thinking characterized by such leadership has come to be associated with better measures of SME performance in terms of profitability, market expansion and customer retention (Ajayi & Adeyeye, 2023; Olubiyi, 2024). It has been indicated that experimental leaders, empowering employees, and utilisation of new technologies place them in a better position to overcome uncertainties and build



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long-term value (Chukwuemeka, 2021; Gonzalez-Varona et al., 2024). SMEs in Otukpo LGA of Benue State have a socio-economic environment with minimal access to capital, infrastructural gaps and variability in demand cycles. The SMEs are still considered as the engine of non-oil sector in Nigeria and they make up more than 90 percent of all businesses in the country contributing to GDP and employment.

Innovative leadership usually encourages free flow of information, group effort, experimentation, and flexibility qualities that are suited to the current business needs. As Joel and Oguanobi (2023) highlighted, entrepreneurial leadership in the form of proactive thinking and managing risk is inseparable in the resilience of startups and SMEs. Likewise, Okafor and Oluka (2025) supported that firm performance is directly influenced by strategic innovation management in various situations of SMEs in Nigeria. These results should be further investigated within the local context of Otukpo with the aim of answering the question of whether these trends are relevant or not and to what degree leadership-based innovation can become a driver of growth within environments that are poorly researched SMEs. The paper, therefore, will analyze the particular aspects of innovative leadership that is evident among the operators of SME in Otukpo LGA, evaluate their relationships with indicators of business growth and propose pertinent policy and practical measures that may enhance the development of the local businesses.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is impact of innovative leadership on the growth of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in Otukpo Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria

The specific objective of this study is:

1. Identify the forms of innovative leadership practices adopted by SME owners and managers in Otukpo LGA.
2. Examine the relationship between innovative leadership and business growth in SMEs.
3. Evaluate the challenges hindering the adoption of innovative leadership among SMEs in Otukpo LGA.

Research Questions

The study will provide answers to the following research questions so as to achieve the research objectives;

1. What innovative leadership practices are commonly adopted by SME owners and managers in Otukpo LGA?
2. How does innovative leadership influence business growth in SMEs within Otukpo LGA?
3. What are the major barriers to adopting innovative leadership practices among SMEs in the study area?

Null Hypothesis

The study will test this hypothesis in other to achieve the research objective;

Ho: There is no significant relationship between innovative leadership and business growth in SMEs

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The choice of this design was appropriate since it enabled the researcher to attain responses of a large sample of SME operators in their natural settings, hence, gaining a proper reflection of their leadership experience and growth experience in businesses. The survey method also leads to quantitative management of the correlation of innovative leadership and growth of SMEs.



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Population of The Study

The population of this study comprises all registered small and medium-scale enterprise (SME) owners and managers in Otukpo Local Government Area of Benue State. Based on the information provided by the Benue State Ministry of Commerce and Industry (2024), it is possible to state that the number of all located SMEs operating in the LGA amounts to about 450 currently registered enterprises. These are companies in the retail, hospitality, agro-processing, manufacturing and service industries.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

A sample size of 120 SME owners and managers was drawn from the population using a purposive sampling technique. Such sampling technique was correct due to the fact it allowed selecting respondents who are directly linked to the process of leadership within their businesses and therefore able to provide the most common information about the leadership practices and business development.

The selection was guided by criteria such as:

1. The business must have been in operation for at least two years.
2. The respondent must be an owner, co-owner, or in a managerial leadership role.

This approach ensures that only informed and experienced participants contributed to the data set, improving the study’s reliability.

Validity of Instrument

The expert review involved the questionnaire with three academic researchers with any different backgrounds of business administration, entrepreneurship, and educational research in order to guarantee both the content and the face validity. Items which were ambiguous or leading or double-barreled were revised based on the feedback of the experts. Prefacing of the instrument was also carried out on 10 SME owners who were not included in the final sample and were found in a nearby LGA of Makurdi. The concept was established by this pilot test as regards the clarity, suitability, and relevance of items.

Method of Data Collection

The researcher personally administered the questionnaires to selected SME owners and managers in Otukpo LGA. The collection of data took two weeks to get adequate coverage. Respondents were briefed on the purpose of the study and assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before administering the questionnaires.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, and mean scores were used to summarize the demographic characteristics and responses to each questionnaire item. Inferential statistics, particularly the Pearson Correlation, were used to test the hypotheses and determine the strength and direction of the relationship between innovative leadership and SME growth. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was employed for data analysis, with significance level set at 0.05.

Presentation of Data And Results

Distribution of Respondents

Table 1: Sex of Respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	65	56.5%
Female	50	43.5%



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Total	115	100.0%
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Source: Author’s Compilation of Questionnaire, 2025

The demographic distribution of respondents reflects a relatively balanced representation across gender, age, education, and occupation. In terms of sex, male respondents constituted the majority at 56.5%, while females made up 43.5%, indicating a moderate male dominance in the sample.

Table 2: Age of Respondents

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
18–25	20	17.4%
26–35	30	26.1%
36–45	35	30.4%
46–55	20	17.4%
56 and above	10	8.7%
Total	115	100.0%

Source: Author’s Compilation of Questionnaire, 2025

The age distribution reveals that the majority of respondents fall within the 36–45 age group (30.4%), followed by 26–35 (26.1%) and 18–25 and 46–55 age brackets, both at 17.4%, while only 8.7% were aged 56 and above. This suggests a concentration of respondents within the economically active and working-age population.

Table 3: Educational Qualification of Respondents

Educational Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Primary	10	8.7%
Secondary	25	21.7%
OND/NCE	30	26.1%
HND/B.Sc.	35	30.4%
Postgraduate	15	13.0%
Total	115	100.0%

Source: Author’s Compilation of Questionnaire, 2025

The educational qualifications of respondents show a fairly educated sample, with the highest number holding HND/B.Sc. degrees (30.4%), followed closely by OND/NCE holders (26.1%). Secondary school graduates accounted for 21.7%, while 13.0% had postgraduate qualifications, and 8.7% had only primary education. This distribution suggests that the majority of respondents possess at least some form of tertiary education, which may influence their understanding and perception of financial or institutional systems

Table 4: Occupation of Respondents

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Farmer	20	17.4%
Civil Servant	25	21.7%
Trader	30	26.1%
Student	20	17.4%
Unemployed	20	17.4%
Total	115	100.0%

Source: Author’s Compilation of Questionnaire, 2025

Regarding occupation, the distribution is relatively even across categories, with traders forming the largest group at 26.1%, followed by civil servants at 21.7%. Farmers, students, and the unemployed each represented 17.4% of the total sample.



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Table 5: Years of occupation of Respondents

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1- 3 years	20	17.4%
3-6 years	25	21.7%
7-10 years	30	26.1%
11-14 years	20	17.4%
15+ years	20	17.4%
Total	115	100.0%

Source: Author's Compilation of Questionnaire, 2025

The data presented in Table 5 provides a breakdown of the respondents' years of occupation. A total of 115 respondents participated in this segment of the study. The largest group, comprising 30 respondents or 26.1%, reported having between 7–10 years of occupational experience. This indicates a substantial portion of the sample has mid-level experience, which may imply a relatively mature understanding of business dynamics and leadership practices. The next significant category is the 3–6 years group, which accounts for 25 respondents or 21.7% of the total. Respondents with 1–3 years, 11–14 years, and 15+ years of experience each contributed equally, with 20 respondents in each group, making up 17.4% respectively.

Answering the Research Questions

Research Question 1: What innovative leadership practices are commonly adopted by SME owners and managers in Otukpo LGA ?

Table 7: Mean and standard deviation on the innovative leadership practices are commonly adopted by SME owners and managers

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD
B1	Strategic thinking is regularly applied in guiding the direction of the enterprise.	40	45	20	10	3.00	0.93
B2	New ideas and creative solutions are consistently encouraged and implemented.	35	50	18	12	2.94	0.94
B3	Risk-taking is actively supported as part of leadership decision-making.	30	40	30	15	2.74	0.99
B4	Technology is frequently leveraged to improve business processes and customer engagement.	28	42	35	10	2.77	0.92
B5	Collaboration and open communication are prioritized as leadership practices.	32	50	25	8	2.92	0.88

Source: Author's Compilation of Questionnaire, 2025

The analysis of Table 7 reveals key insights into the innovative leadership practices commonly adopted by SME owners and managers in Otukpo LGA. Strategic thinking appears to be a moderately strong leadership practice, with the highest mean score of 3.00 and a standard deviation of 0.93, indicating a general consensus among respondents on its application. Encouragement and implementation of new ideas also receive high support (mean = 2.94), suggesting a culture that values creativity. Similarly, collaboration and open communication (mean = 2.92) rank closely, implying that interpersonal and team-driven approaches are recognized. Risk-taking, while acknowledged (mean = 2.74), shows slightly more variation in responses, suggesting some hesitancy or inconsistency in its adoption. Technology use, with a mean of 2.77, reflects moderate engagement,



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possibly pointing to resource or capacity limitations. All in all, the innovative leadership seems to exist in conjunction with some inequality in applying it to the essential areas.

Research Question 2: How does innovative leadership influence business growth in SMEs within Otukpo LGA?

Table 8: Mean and standard deviation on how innovative leadership influence business growth in SMEs within Otukpo LGA

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD
C1	Innovative leadership has led to increased profitability and market share.	38	46	22	9	2.98	0.91
C2	Customer satisfaction has improved as a result of leadership-driven innovation.	40	43	25	7	3.01	0.90
C3	Innovative strategies have expanded the range of products or services offered.	36	45	26	8	2.95	0.90
C4	Leadership innovation has contributed to increased employee productivity.	34	42	30	9	2.88	0.92
C5	The enterprise has experienced measurable growth due to the adoption of new business models and practices.	30	48	30	7	2.88	0.87

Source: Author’s Compilation of Questionnaire, 2025

Table 8 evaluates how innovative leadership influences business growth in SMEs. The answers indicate a positive attitude in the majority regarding the influence of what it does to people. Improved customer satisfaction ranks highest (mean = 3.01), highlighting that leadership innovation is visibly tied to enhanced client experience. Profitability and market share (mean = 2.98), alongside product/service diversification (mean = 2.95), also show strong associations with innovative practices, suggesting tangible business benefits. Increased employee productivity (mean = 2.88) and growth through new business models (mean = 2.88) receive slightly lower means, hinting that while leadership innovation contributes to internal efficiency and structural evolution, the effects may not be uniformly realized or are still emerging.

Research Question 3: What are the major barriers to adopting innovative leadership practices among SMEs in the study area?

Table 9: Mean and standard deviation on the major barriers to adopting innovative leadership practices among SMEs in the study area

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD
D1	Limited access to capital restricts the implementation of innovative practices.	42	40	22	11	2.98	0.97



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D2	Resistance to change among employees hinders leadership innovation.	40	42	20	13	2.95	0.99
D3	Lack of exposure to modern leadership training limits innovation potential.	35	38	30	12	2.83	0.98
D4	Inadequate infrastructure and technology serve as constraints to innovation.	32	40	28	15	2.77	1.00
D5	Government policies and regulatory issues discourage innovative practices.	33	41	26	15	2.80	1.00

Source: Author’s Compilation of Questionnaire, 2025

Table 9 explores the major barriers to adopting innovative leadership practices. Limited access to capital is identified as the most significant barrier (mean = 2.98), with relatively low variability in responses (SD = 0.97), emphasizing financial constraints as a key limitation. Resistance to change among employees closely follows (mean = 2.95), indicating that internal organizational culture is another substantial hurdle. Lack of exposure to leadership training (mean = 2.83) points to gaps in knowledge and capacity building. Infrastructure and technology constraints (mean = 2.77) as well as unfavorable government policies (mean = 2.80) round out the list, suggesting that external environmental and institutional factors also play non-trivial roles in impeding innovation. The standard deviations close or more than 1.00 of the some of the items indicate different experiences of SMEs on these obstacles. All in all, the evidence reveals a combination of financial, human and systematic barriers to the use of innovative leadership in the region.

Discussion Of Findings

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence regarding the impact of innovative leadership on the growth of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in Otukpo Local Government Area of Benue State. Based on data analysis, it was found that the practice of innovative leadership there is moderately popular among the owners and managers of SMEs in the region. All these practices seemed to be in place like strategic thinking, promoting new ideas, open communication, risk-taking, and adoption of technologies though the extent of its practice differs. Strategic thinking and generation of ideas scored the highest meaning that SME leaders are aware that they have to think ahead and promote creativity to remain in the game. However, comparatively lower mean scores in technology adoption and risk-taking suggest a cautious and resource-constrained approach to innovation, which could be limiting their growth potential. In the analysis of barriers to innovative leadership, the results have shown that SMEs in Otukpo deal with a complex situation. Major setbacks which have been found to hinder it include access to finance, resistance to change. The regression analysis also confirmed the positive correlation of the relationship between innovative leadership and growth of a business which was found to be very strong and statistically significant. The model had an R-squared value of 0.936 and the beta coefficient equaled 0.887 indicating that the degree of innovative leadership manifested explains a major portion of the variance of growth in SMEs.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of innovative leadership on the growth of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in Otukpo Local Government Area of Benue State. The findings revealed that



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while innovative leadership practices such as strategic thinking, openness to new ideas, and customer-centered innovation are moderately embraced by SME owners and managers, challenges such as inadequate access to finance, poor infrastructure, and limited leadership development opportunities hinder the full realization of their growth potential. The statistical analysis further confirmed a strong positive relationship between innovative leadership and SME growth, indicating that firms led by innovation-oriented leaders are more likely to achieve improved performance, customer satisfaction, and adaptability in a competitive business environment. Thus, fostering innovative leadership is not just a strategic necessity but a critical determinant of business success in the SME sector.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered to enhance the practice and impact of innovative leadership among SMEs in Otukpo LGA:

1. SME owners and managers should be encouraged to adopt a more proactive and flexible leadership approach by engaging in continuous learning, leadership training, and exposure to best practices in innovation management.
2. Government agencies and private institutions should support SMEs by creating platforms for leadership development, mentorship, and access to business advisory services.
3. Access to finance should be improved through targeted micro-credit schemes, innovation grants, and low-interest loans that enable SMEs to invest in technology and innovation.
4. SMEs should embrace a culture of experimentation and calculated risk-taking, which are essential attributes of innovative leadership and necessary for long-term sustainability.
5. Collaboration between SMEs and academic institutions should be strengthened to bridge the knowledge-practice gap and foster research-informed leadership development.

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