

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT READINESS IN UAE SERVICE SMES: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

This study investigates the performance of service sector SMEs in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), focusing on the roles of social capital, crisis management readiness, and leadership behavior. Addressing significant gaps in the existing literature, we propose a novel framework for empirical analysis. During crises, both social capital and crisis management readiness are critical for SME performance. However, previous research reveals inconsistent findings, suggesting the need for an intervening variable. This study suggests that leadership behavior moderates the impact of social capital and crisis management readiness on SME performance. The proposed framework is grounded in the resource-based view and contingency theory, with social capital and crisis management readiness corresponding to the former, and leadership behavior to the latter. This research aims to enhance understanding of the dynamic interplay between these variables and provide practical insights for improving SME resilience in crisis contexts.

Keywords: Crisis management readiness, social capital, service sector, SMEs performance.

Introduction

In the UAE, service sector SMEs have faced substantial performance challenges, particularly in the wake of COVID-19, largely due to inadequate crisis management. Globally, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are acknowledged for their success, with both external and internal factors significantly influencing business decision-making outcomes. Leadership in SMEs encompasses the processes and technologies needed for managing crises (Asif, Asad, Bhutta, & Khan, 2021).

SMEs are pivotal, accounting for 94% of establishments, with 73% in wholesale and retail, 16% in services, and 11% in industry. SMEs employ 86% of the labor force and contribute 60% to the GDP, underscoring their importance. However, the sector has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 crisis (Gerth, Ramiah, Toufaily, & Muschert, 2021; Zakaria, Sehgal, Watson, & Kamarudin, 2022). Identifying crucial elements for survival and growth during crises is imperative.

Government measures to combat COVID-19 have significantly affected SMEs, with 60% experiencing profit declines, 30% reporting no change, and 10% seeing profit growth (Mansoori, Alsaud, & Yas, 2021; Sindakis & Aggarwal, 2022; TradeArabia, 2023). The global economic upheaval between 2020 and 2022 has left many SMEs uncertain about their future (Asad, Asif, Allam, & Sheikh, 2021; Fadhel, Aljalalma, Almuhanadi, Asad, & Sheikh, 2022).

The UAE's expatriate concentration presents social capital challenges for SME owners (Zahoor & Gerged, 2021). Organizational synergy in reputation and reliability can drive growth through social capital (Salehi, Fahimi, Zimon, & Homayoun, 2022). However, unequal power dynamics can lead to the exclusion of weaker stakeholders, resulting in negative impacts (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Social capital can also foster nepotism, injustice, and corruption (Sen & Cowley, 2013). These controversial findings justify further investigation (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Chmura Kraemer, Kiernan, Essex, & Kupfer, 2008; Zhao, John G. Lynch, & Chen, 2010).

Moderators should consider leadership behavior (Asad, et al., 2021). Effective use of social capital can drive sustainable growth in SMEs, but few studies examine this in emerging economies during crises, highlighting the need for research on leadership behavior's role in maintaining employee motivation during crises (Abdullahi, Anarfo, & Anyigba, 2020). The role of leadership behavior in SMEs is crucial, especially in crisis situations (Engelen, Gupta, Strenger, & Brettel, 2015). Walumbwa, Luthans, Avey, and Oke (2011) identified a research gap linking leadership behavior and social capital, and Fadhel et al. (2022) emphasized the need for empirical research on leadership during crises like COVID-19.

Intense competition over the past two decades has driven enterprises to elevate standards, enhance capabilities, and improve competencies (Khan A. A., Asad, Khan, Asif, & Aftab, 2021). Social capital provides critical resources for service sector SMEs, especially during crises (Aragón, Narvaiza, & Altuna, 2016; Alkhuzai, et al., 2024). SME leaders can adopt crisis management methods to generate valuable insights for business resilience and growth during crises (Asad & Kashif, 2021). Effective leadership enables SMEs to anticipate and navigate supplier, customer, competitor, and environmental dynamics with greater certainty, leading to better decision-making (Asad, Haider, & Fatima, 2018; Riphah, Ali, Danish, & Sulaiman, 2022).

Literature Review

The research in this study is framed within the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Contingency Theory, which provide valuable insights into organizational performance dynamics.

RBV, as conceptualized by Wernerfelt (1984), defines resources as encompassing all organizational assets, capabilities, processes, knowledge, and attributes utilized to formulate and execute strategic plans for enhanced efficiency and effectiveness. Social capital and crisis management readiness are viewed as critical resources for SMEs, essential for developing competitive advantages and achieving performance (Sulaiman & Asad, 2023). RBV emphasizes internal assets, enabling SMEs to swiftly reconfigure resources to respond effectively to disruptive events (Darcy et al., 2014). However, there's a balance to strike between acquiring external assets, which may impact internal resources, and seizing available opportunities (Tsai & Liao, 2016; Ba-Awain & Daud, 2018). Internal processes and routines play a pivotal role in enabling SMEs to renew their organizational capabilities, especially in challenging environments (Ramon-Jeronimo et al., 2019; Awain, Jantan, & Sukati, 2022). Crisis management readiness, as an internal capability, aligns with RBV principles, emphasizing the value of homogeneous resource possession for developing value-creating strategies (Ullah et al., 2021).

Contingency Theory complements RBV by recognizing the situational nature of organizational management and decision-making. Leadership behavior, highlighted by Asad et al. (2021), is crucial for shaping business actions and decisions. Contingency Theory underscores the need for adaptive responses to leadership behavior, particularly during crises (Fadhel et al., 2022). SMEs must adjust to leadership behavior to seize potential opportunities, especially in times of crisis (Alharthi & Khalifa, 2019). This theory emphasizes the interdependence within organizations and between leadership and organizational subsystems (Shirokova et al., 2016). Hence, Contingency Theory supports the idea of leadership behavior moderating the relationship between resources and performance, aligning with the study's focus on understanding the role of leadership behavior amidst crisis management.

By integrating RBV and Contingency Theory, this study aims to deepen the understanding of how social capital, crisis management readiness, and leadership behavior interact to influence SME performance during crises. This framework provides a comprehensive approach to navigating turbulent business environments, contributing to both theoretical advancement and practical insights for SME management.

Organization Performance

Organizational performance has been extensively studied, identifying critical factors and theoretical underpinnings that influence it. This review synthesizes prior knowledge and discusses the key elements of social capital, crisis management readiness, and leadership behavior, providing a foundation for the proposed theoretical framework. Problem-solving techniques and performance reviews show that an effective organizational structure is in place. Even poorly performing companies start to improve their performance by implementing the best practices or

those used by profitable companies (Majali, Alkaraki, Asad, Aladwan, & Aledeinat, 2022). This simultaneous, instantaneous procedure results in efficiency and growth.

Asad and colleagues (2022) made a distinction between the approach used for measurement and what is being measured. In measuring organizational performance, both subjective and objective methods are used to evaluate both internal and external perspectives. Objective measures typically involve accounting-based reports, such as productivity and sales revenue, which unimportant for researching SMEs. These objective measures are suitable for monitoring public organizations. However, only a limited number of public organizations that possess a developed culture and robust management systems can rely on their results by internal inspections.

Economic success also demonstrates how effectively an organization uses its resources to generate revenue or profits. Prior to the 1980s, financial goals were general performance dealings, but since then, many researchers have thought carefully about using more comprehensive and comprehensive measures to study performance (Asad, Altaf, Israr, & Khan, 2020). The majority of the forthcoming ample measures are inapplicable to SMEs.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation among organizations. It encompasses both structural and cognitive dimensions. Structurally, social capital is the pattern of connections within networks, crucial for sustaining business operations (Rouziès & Hulland, 2014). Cognitively, it involves shared values and beliefs that enhance communication and resource exchange (Clopton, 2011).

Social capital's dual role as a public and private good has significant implications. As a public good, it integrates into the social system, enhancing overall community welfare (Newman, Schwarz, & Borgia, 2014). As a private good, it fosters trust and stable relationships among cluster members, contributing to individual organizational success (Liu & Lee, 2015). However, the exploitation of relationships can undermine cooperation and shared values within SMEs.

Social capital also promotes creativity and innovation by facilitating knowledge exchange and reducing transaction costs (Rass et al., 2013; Menike, 2020). It improves market understanding and decision-making, though excessive connectivity can lead to congestion and inefficiency (Jansen et al., 2011). In the UAE, networking and structural aspects of social capital are particularly vital due to cultural preferences for personal connections in business dealings (Ta'Amnha et al., 2023).

Trust

Establishing a stable social order relies heavily on trust, a crucial component of social capital. Researchers have proposed a hierarchy of social order, starting with reliance and progressing through reciprocity, responsibility, and anticipation (Allam, Asad, Ali, & Ali, 2021). This

hierarchy fosters precise connections that develop trust and dependability, which are essential for shared information and harmonious relationships among SMEs (Li, Cai, Zhu, Huang, & Shi, 2012)

A key question in the literature is whether trust precedes social capital or vice versa (Qalati, Ostic, Sulaiman, Gopang, & Khan, 2022). The prevailing view suggests that an increase in social capital corresponds to higher levels of trust within the organization. Trust-based relationships form when one member perceives another as non-threatening or when the associated risk is acceptable (Chen, Liu, Wei, & Gu, 2018). As social capital grows, it necessitates trust from stakeholders, founded on social agreements (Purwati, Budiyo, Suhermin, & Hamzah, 2021).

However, there are potential drawbacks to relying on social capital. While it can facilitate decision-making and improve efficiency, there is a risk of bias that can negatively impact decision-making within the organization (Tasavori, Zaefarian, & Eng, 2018). Therefore, while fostering social capital is beneficial, it is crucial to remain vigilant about its potential adverse effects on organizational decisions.

Crisis Management Readiness

Crisis management readiness is an organization's preparedness to respond effectively to unforeseen events that pose significant risks. Crises, whether economic, financial, or otherwise, create ambiguity and apprehension among stakeholders (Krishnan et al., 2022). SMEs, operating in competitive markets, must prioritize crisis management to ensure survival and maintain legitimacy (Asad & Abid, 2018).

Effective crisis management involves proactive planning and preparation, recognizing that the cost of crisis survival is high but necessary (Bhaduri, 2019). While the immediate effects of crises are often detrimental, there can be positive outcomes, such as improved organizational resilience and stakeholder trust (Vasilev, 2020). Research on crisis management in SMEs, particularly in the UAE, is limited, with many relying on international consultants for crisis handling. Thus, there is a need for localized studies to develop effective crisis management strategies tailored to the specific context of UAE SMEs (Beliaeva et al., 2020).

Leadership Behavior

Leadership behavior significantly influences organizational performance, particularly in planning, coordination, communication, and collaboration across cultural boundaries. Effective leadership in SMEs involves integrating diverse information, navigating complex environments, and fostering cross-cultural collaboration (Engelen et al., 2015; Asad et al., 2021).

In multicultural economies like the UAE, leaders must adapt to political, economic, and cultural differences, motivating employees through incentives and building trust among diverse teams (Bilal & Sulaiman, 2021). Leadership in the Gulf region tends to be more autocratic, requiring a balance between authority and cultural sensitivity to achieve organizational goals (Satar et al., 2023).

Leadership behavior can strengthen or weaken the relationship between social capital and organizational performance. Leaders who inspire and appreciate cultural differences enhance social cohesion and organizational resilience (Engelen et al., 2015). Therefore, understanding the impact of leadership behavior on social capital and crisis management readiness is crucial for developing effective strategies to enhance SME performance.

This review highlights the intricate relationships between social capital, crisis management readiness, and leadership behavior in influencing organizational performance. The proposed theoretical framework integrates these elements, providing a comprehensive approach to understanding and enhancing SME performance. Further research is necessary to explore these dynamics in different cultural contexts, particularly in the UAE, to develop tailored strategies for crisis management and organizational success.

Future Directions

This study proposes a new research framework that integrates Resource-Based Theory (RBT) and Contingency Theory (CT) to enhance the analysis of organizational performance. By incorporating leadership behavior as a moderating variable, the framework aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay between social capital, crisis management readiness, and leadership behavior in enhancing SME performance. This proposal underscores the importance of adapting to contingency situations, such as the COVID-19 crisis, and leveraging social capital and effective leadership to achieve organizational resilience and success.

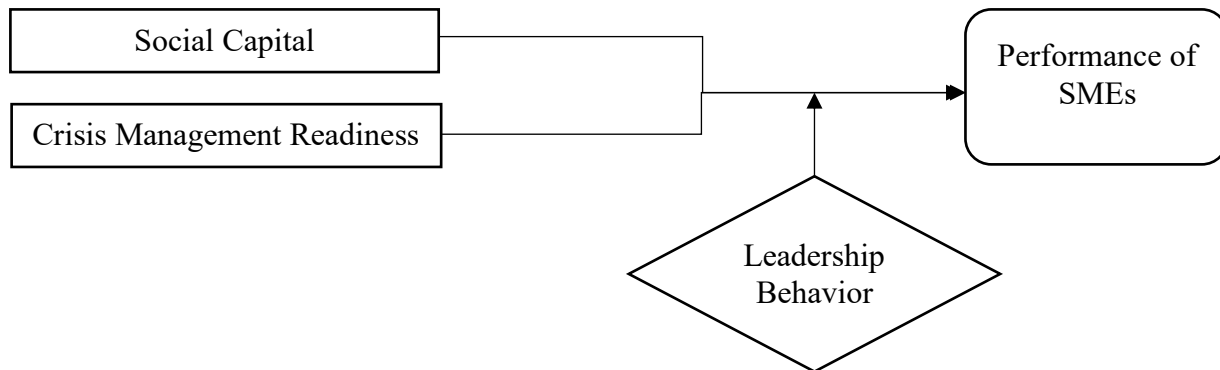


Figure 1 Proposed Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the integration of RBT and CT to enhance SME performance analysis. This integration allows SMEs to reconfigure resources and adapt to changing circumstances, thereby improving performance (Ramon-Jeronimo, Florez-Lopez, & Araujo-Pinzon, 2019). Asad et al. (2018) have tested RBT, acknowledging its limitations. They emphasized that CT views SMEs as open systems with no one-size-fits-all approach, regardless of leadership behavior and mindset (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2008). The novelty of this research lies in extending prior studies by incorporating contingency situations, such as those created by COVID-19, into RBT. In this framework, leadership behavior is added to RBT through CT, serving as a moderating variable

(Asad et al., 2021; Majali et al., 2022). External information and knowledge are also crucial for achieving anticipated performance (Lee & Hallak, 2020; Alharthi & Khalifa, 2019).

The strength of an organization's social capital is linked to its performance, highlighting the importance of social networks and relationships in achieving success (Guerrero, Cayrat, & Cossette, 2022). Social capital can significantly impact organizational performance by facilitating knowledge acquisition and reducing transaction and management costs associated with miscommunication and misinformation (Newman, Schwarz, & Borgia, 2014; Clopton, 2011). Investing in social capital can shape organizational culture and help achieve performance goals (Khaliq et al., 2014). However, strong relationships can sometimes hinder organizational growth, as noted by Pirolo and Presutti (2019). The impact of social capital on performance is complex and multifaceted, with ongoing research exploring its mechanisms (Chen et al., 2018). Jansen et al. (2011) suggest that high connectivity in SMEs can lead to congestion and reduced decision-making efficiency.

Leadership behavior, extensively studied in management literature, significantly impacts performance. It is viewed as a process that modifies the effect of autonomous variables on organizational performance within the context of CT. Leadership behavior can act as an exogenous variable with moderating effects (Purwati et al., 2021; Asif et al., 2021; Majali et al., 2022), while some authors consider it an independent variable (Alharthi & Khalifa, 2019; Ullah et al., 2021). Given the inconsistencies in the literature regarding the relationship between social capital, performance, and crisis management readiness, this study follows Asad et al. (2021) by introducing leadership behavior as a moderator within RBT.

Senior management must cultivate a high-potential culture, encouraging all departments and groups to embrace social capital and collaborate to capitalize on opportunities (Allam et al., 2022; Ullah et al., 2021). Effective partnership demonstrates how to enhance customer communication and activity planning, which are crucial in the digital age. Leadership behavior, as an organization-wide creation, requires contributions from all functional groups (Amir & Asad, 2018; Zahid et al., 2022; Qalati et al., 2022). The relational and social capital approach emphasizes that leadership behavior is an ongoing, socially embedded process involving all management members, regardless of their formal leadership roles (Asad et al., 2021). Emphasis is placed on building and utilizing relationships supported by social awareness and skills.

This study proposes that crisis management readiness and social capital are crucial for achieving performance, while leadership behavior plays a moderating role. By incorporating these elements into the proposed framework, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay between social capital, crisis management readiness, and leadership behavior in enhancing SME performance.

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