The Impact of Strategic Leadership on the Advancement of SMEs in Rwanda

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Abstract
Small and medium-sized enterprises commonly referred to as SMEs are important in the 21st century research since they have stood out as the core players in ensuring economic growth, innovation and job creation in the 21st century's rapidly evolving global economy. The study was carried with the general aim of examining the impact of strategic leadership on the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda. The specific objectives of the study were: to examine the extent to which strategy formulation and planning influences the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda; to establish how strategic communication influences the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda; and to find out the influence of strategy evaluation of the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda. The study adopted a descriptive research design. A total of 500 headers of the SMEs in Kigali Rwanda classified as manufacturing, processing and service SMEs were chosen and a sample size of 150 used with a response rate from the questions used in data collection being 135 translating to 90% return rate. Results indicated that as the per the regression model, it is indicated that 25.8% (R2 =0.568) advancement on SMEs in Rwanda can be explained by a combined effect of the three variables of strategic leadership including strategic formulation/planning, strategic communication and strategic evaluations. This is clear indication of a strong predictive power of the independent variables of the dependent variable SMEs advancement. More narrowly, Strategy Formulation and Planning (B = 0.285, p < 0.001) significantly influenced SME development when controlling for a co-efficient of R2 =.306, suggesting that by optimizing their planning practices an increase in such operations is causally related to greater performance of SME. This factor explained 30.6% of the total variance in SME progression. SME Advancement was likewise influenced significantly by Strategic Communication (B = 0.337, p < 0.001) having the highest Beta borrowed value of 0.353 as summarized in Table 9. Better communication practices (defined as clear, consistent messaging and stakeholder engagement) explain 35.3% of the variation in SME growth and development. SME: Strategy Evaluation (B = 0.391, p < 0.001) had the highest effect in SME advancement with Beta value of 0.376 This means that being continually evaluated and corrected according to performance indicators are one of the significant factors in SME success. It was the most powerful predictor of SME advancement, explaining 37.6% of variance in SME advancement. When the hypotheses were tested, the conclusions were made that: H1: There is a significant relationship between strategy formulation and planning and the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda. Result: Accepted (B = 0.285, p < 0.001). Also, as per H2: There is a significant relationship between strategic communication and the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda. Result: Accepted (B = 0.337, p < 0.001). Finally, H3: There is a significant relationship between strategy evaluation and the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda. Result: Accepted (B = 0.391, p < 0.001). Based on these research findings, the study recommends that SMEs in Rwanda should invest in comprehensive strategy formulation processes, implement effective communication systems, continuously evaluate their strategic initiatives, and adopt innovative technologies to enhance their competitiveness and ensure sustainable growth in a rapidly evolving business environment.

Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises commonly referred to as SMEs have stood out as the core players in ensuring economic growth, innovation and job creation in the 21st century's rapidly evolving global economy. From the global perspective, India and Brazil are perfect examples that have understood the importance of SMEs and have adopted very concrete strategies to ensure their advancement and performance. For example, Sebrae (2022) used transformational leadership that was also used in the current study to study leadership as a strategic practice influencing the performance of SMEs and found out that SMEs account for over 98% of all businesses and contribute approximately 27% to the country's GDP. utilizing another theory (RBV theory) that was also used to inform the current study is the Palavalasa, Abdulraheem & Ruksana (2023) examined the Strategic Management Practice for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises in Tamil Nadu India. the study found out that SMEs contribute around 30% to the national GDP and employs over 110 million people in India; a reason as to why strategic leadership is always enforced in order to steer this sector.

From the continental perspective, there are documented information that can give a solid background to this study by integrating strategic leadership to the advancement and sustainability of SMEs. For example, in Nigeria, Akpoviroro, Adewale, Owotutu (2023) conducted a study that looked at Strategic Leadership and Corporate Objectives of Indigenous Small and Medium Enterprises. The study found out that there is a significant relationship between strategic leadership and social responsibility and that effective strategic implementation has significant effects on corporate objectives of the indigenous small and medium enterprise. The findings in this study show that if managers can manage plans as they should, the corporate objective will be successfully attained. Further, the National Bureau of Statistics (2023) in Nigeria has a report indicating that strategic leadership has been instrumental in ensuring that SMEs in Nigeria have not only created employment for the high numbers of the unemployed youth but this type of leadership has been instrumental in ensuring that these SMEs have been sustainable. However, it is worth noting that Nigeria's SMEs account for about 48% of the nation's GDP and are seen as vital for economic diversification, yet they grapple with infrastructural deficits and regulatory challenges (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023).The Small and Medium Enterprise Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) reports for 2008 that most small and medium scale businesses in Nigeria die before their fifth anniversary (Alajmi, 2024). This is blamed on poor strategic management practices among them being the issue of poor strategic leadership; a need for the current study.

Across East Africa, SMEs perform crucial role in ensuring that they are contributing up to 33% of the GDP in countries like Kenya and Tanzania; although a good number of these businesses fail to reach their fifth year of operation, blamed on the poor strategic leadership. This makes the background under which the current study is conducted. In Kenya's two cities (Nairobi City and Mombasa City) for example, Otundo (2024) examined the influence of strategic leadership on the performance of SMEs. 0, p < 0.05). Strategic leadership accounted for 18.5% of performance variance, indicating a substantial impact (F (1,181) = 41.174, p < 0.05). Moreover, the intercept between strategic leadership and performance showed a notable improvement (β = 0.230, p < 0.01), suggesting a 23% performance enhancement with effective strategic leadership implementation. In conclusion, the majority of SMEs in Nairobi County demonstrated strong strategic leadership, fostering absorptive and adaptive capacities crucial for navigating turbulent business environments. Equally, Musyoka & Ouma (2024) did a study on the Effect of Strategic Leadership on Performance of SMEs during Covid-19 Pandemic in Nairobi County, Kenya and used the RBV theory confirming that strategic leadership influences the success or failure of SMEs in Kenya. Components of strategic leadership in this study that were looked into that have also been borrowed by the current study include: strategic vision creation, strategic thinking, decision-making, strategic communication, strategic emotional intelligence, strategic adaptability, and strategic collaboration. Some of these strategic practices of strategic leadership were adopted for the current study; forming a solid background that can said to have guided this study.

Focusing on Rwanda, SMEs represent a significant segment of the economy, contributing approximately 58% to the GDP and providing jobs for a substantial portion of the population (Rwanda Development Board, 2023). The Rwandan government has recognized the importance of SMEs in achieving national development goals, implementing policies aimed at creating a conducive environment for their growth. The strategic leadership within these enterprises has been highlighted as a key factor in navigating challenges and leveraging opportunities in the competitive market. Recent studies have shown that strategic leadership—characterized by vision, adaptability, and stakeholder engagement—can significantly enhance the performance and sustainability of SMEs in Rwanda. For instance, a case study by Nkubito (2023) reveals that SMEs led by strategic leaders are more likely to adopt innovative practices and successfully enter new markets. Additionally, research by Niyonsaba (2023) emphasizes that strategic leadership fosters a culture of collaboration and resilience, enabling SMEs to thrive even in adverse conditions. In complete conclusion, the study herein has gathered a number of evidences from the global perspective, continental perspective, regional perspective and the local cases in Rwanda which made the background of this study.

Statement of the Problem

Being the engines and drivers of economic development and growth of countries across the globe, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have gained popularity in the recent past; although majority of them don't live to see the fifth year (Otundo, 2023). According to Otundo and Nduthu (2023), Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are widely recognized as engines of economic growth, innovation, and job creation, particularly in developing countries; although they face massive challenges of failure due to unknown reasons. In Rwanda for example, despite the fact that the SMEs contribute 58% to the GDP and employ over 3.7 million people, they face various challenges that totally hinder their growth and sustainability. For example, inadequate infrastructure, limited access to finances, regulatory barriers and lack of innovation have been cited as berried. However, a closer look into this will give a wide gap that hasn't been addressed more specifically the problem of strategic leadership that has been found to be missing among most SMEs (Ruzindana & Irechukwu, 2023).

Accordingly, strategic leadership is one of the important but sometimes disregarded elements affecting the prosperity of SMEs in Rwanda. Shaping the vision, direction, and operational effectiveness of their companies depends mostly on strategic leaders. Still, there is a knowledge vacuum about how different leadership philosophies and strategic approaches especially affect the performance of SMEs in the Rwandan setting. Although some studies have looked at the overall difficulties SMEs face, less studies have looked at the complex part leadership plays in overcoming obstacles and grabbing possibilities. Furthermore, even if strategic leadership is acknowledged as a key component in improving organizational performance, its actual implementation inside the framework of Rwandan SMEs is still under investigation. There are questions about which leadership approaches best help SMEs in this particular context to be innovative, resilient, and flexible. Moreover, the interaction between leadership styles and the particular difficulties experienced by SMEs in Rwanda calls for careful research to find best practices that might be copied in the whole industry.

Objectives of the Study
General Objective of the Study
The study was carried with the general aim of examining the impact of strategic leadership on the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda.

Specific Objectives
1. To examine the extent to which strategy formulation and planning influences the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda.

2. To establish how strategic communication influences the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda.

3. To find out the influence of strategy evaluation of the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda.

Empirical Review

It is worth noting that a study that examines the impact of strategic leadership on small and medium-enterprises (SMEs) more specifically in Rwanda requires a detailed understanding understanding of key elements of strategic leadership or practices of strategic leadership like strategy formulation, strategic planning, strategic communication, and strategy evaluation (Otundo, 2024). This empirical review synthesizes relevant literature, focusing on studies that align with these objectives and highlight the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Rwandan SMEs.

In relation to the first objective on strategy formulation and its influence on the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda, a number of studies have registered positive relationship. For example, Mugisha (2022) looked at how strategy development might improve SMEs' performance in Rwanda. Combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with SMEs, the study applied the Resource- Based View (RBV) theory and a mixed-methods approach. The results showed that by matching resources with market possibilities, good strategy development greatly affected corporate growth. SMEs who conducted extensive strategic analysis and set well defined goals were more suited to negotiate obstacles and grab market possibilities. This study underlined the knowledge vacuum about the particular tactics SMEs could use to improve their competitiveness in a fast changing economic environment.

To show how strategic formulation is crucial in SMEs' performance, Niyigaba & Njenga (2023) did a study on the Effect of strategy formulation practice on performance of public institutions in Rwanda case study of ministry of local government Rwanda. Just like the current study, this study employed descriptive research design which was a survey that allowed a systematically quantitative data collection. The study employed a methodology known as stratified sampling. The participants were instructed to complete questionnaires and participate in planned interviews in order to provide the majority of the data for the study. The aforementioned sources constituted the primary information reservoirs for the conducted study. Additionally, this study utilized secondary data, notably sourced from annual reports published by MINALOC. The analysis of the acquired data was conducted using SPSS. Percentages, rates, and counts are illustrative instances of descriptive statistical tests, while inferential statistical tests encompass the utilization of multiple regression. Once the qualitative data has been analyzed using a thematic framework, relevant quotations from respondents were incorporated into the narratives. The results of the study indicated that there was a strong positive correlation between the Strategy planning practice ($\beta=0.559$, t=1.558, p value = 0.000) emerged as the most notable and favorable factor impacting the performance of public institutions in Rwanda. In conclusion, this study's findings have important implications for our understanding of how strategic planning affects Rwanda's public institutions. The results of the regression analysis showed a strong and positive relationship between the strategic planning approaches implemented by the aforementioned public institutions and their performance outcomes. Strong correlation was found by correlation analysis, adding weight to the positive connection. Consistent evidence from a variety of analytic approaches shows that strategic planning is positively correlated with the success of Rwanda's public institutions. This indicates that businesses can significantly and measurable increase their overall performance if they make conscious efforts to improve their strategy planning methods, concentrating on variables such as external orientation, internal orientation, and functional integration. Further research in the area of strategy planning practice and its impact on organizational performance could take several directions. Investigating the moderating variables that might influence the relationship between strategy planning practice and performance could provide a deeper understanding. Factors such as organizational culture, leadership styles, and external environmental factors might play a significant role in shaping this relationship and warrant more in-depth exploration. In conclusion, literatures indicate that the indicators of Strategy formulation component of strategic leadership is indicated by External orientation, Internal orientation, and Functional integration.

Equally, there are studies linking strategic planning practice of strategic management to its influence and on the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda. For example, Using the Transformational Leadership Theory,

Niyonsaba (2023) concentrated on how strategic planning affects SMEs' performance in Rwanda. Using a quantitative approach, the study sent 150 SMEs from several industries surveys. Results showed that companies who followed organized planning procedures reported better growth rates; strategic planning clearly affected operational efficiency and market responsiveness. The research underlined the need of including strategic planning into daily activities in order to promote a proactive attitude to market dynamics. It also revealed, though, a discrepancy in the application of strategic planning tools catered to Rwanda's particular cultural and economic setting. Also, Ruzindana & Irechukwu (2023) looked at Strategic Management Practices and Sustainability of Small and Medium Sized Enterprises in Processing and Manufacturing Sector in Rwanda: A Case of 7 Selected Small and Medium Sized Enterprises in Rwanda. The study employed a descriptive research design, focusing on seven SMEs in Rwanda's processing and manufacturing sector. The results on the effect of strategic formulation on SME sustainability in the processing and manufacturing sector in Rwanda was evident, with a strong mean of 4.1 and standard deviation of 0.82, demonstrating the importance of effective strategy formulation.

To summarize, in response to the first objective strategy formulation or planning component of strategic leaders, Ntaganda et al. (2020) investigated the influence of strategic planning on the performance of manufacturing SMEs. The study discovered that strategic planning improved SME performance, including profitability, productivity, and customer happiness. This demonstrates the strategic formulation's potential for improving the sustainability of SMEs in Rwanda's manufacturing sector. Furthermore, Ngaruko et al. (2024) investigated the association between strategic planning and financial performance among SMEs in Rwanda's manufacturing sector. The study discovered that strategic planning improved financial performance, including revenue growth and profitability. This demonstrates that SMEs who use good strategic formulation processes are more likely to achieve sustainable growth in the manufacturing sector in Rwanda.

In relation to the role played by strategic communication component of strategic leadership that influences the sustainability, performance and advancement of firms, there is documented literature. In China, Men, Ji, Grace & Chen (2024) looked at Strategic Communication component of strategic leadership for Startups and Entrepreneurs in China and found out that communication from the CEOs, the managers and the other employees is a significant practice that affects the performance startups. Elements and indicators of strategic communication include: communication planning by the strategic leader, message development, stakeholder's engagement, and measurement of communication outcomes. In Malaysia, other scholars have confirmed that there is a central role played by communication as a leadership practice on the performance of SMEs. In their work, Spickett-Jones & Eng, Teck-Yong (2023) looked at SMEs and the Strategic Context for Communication and did find out that SME communication activities have received limited research attention and their potential may be misunderstood if conventional communication activities appear more intuitive than strategically planned. Case data suggests structure and strategy may be closely bound when SME characteristics facilitate cross-enterprise communication exchanging market insights. This may shape competitive configuration with implications for managing networks as part of SME strategy.

A detailed research by Men, Ji & Chen (2023) has shown that, strategic communication in the context of strategic leadership within the SME sector focuses on aligning communication with organizational goals to drive business growth and sustainability. Here are the key elements of strategic communication practices in SMEs. According to this study that was conducted in 129 SMEs with Philippines, China, Indonesia finding their way in the list, various elements of strategic communication were outlined to include: two-way communication, clear vision and goals, targeted stakeholders engagement, use of technology and digital platforms, cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, performance monitoring and feedback, employees training and development, and crisis communication. Similarly, Ekon & Bemnet (2022) did a study on the factors impacting Strategic Management Practices among SMEs in Nigeria. The study employed a descriptive survey research approach, with a questionnaire distributed to 150 SMEs in 30 randomly selected enumeration districts in Lagos state, Nigeria. The study found that strategic management methods such as

scanning the environment for possibilities, strategic communication, strategy creation, strategy execution, and strategy assessment had a substantial influence on organizational performance throughout the sampling period. The survey also indicated that while most SMEs in Nigeria have adopted strategic management methods, they are incorrectly executed and assessed, which explains why strategic management practices have not resulted in increased competitive advantages for Nigerian SMEs on a worldwide scale.

Further, Adamma (2023) conducted a comparative study of SMEs in Nigeria and Kenya whereby secondary desktop data was relied on and found out that strategic leadership plays a role in ensuring that the SMEs are sustainable and stay afloat. Some of the indicators of strategic leadership in the study include: setting the direction, vision and culture of the organization, proper communication among others. Therefore, for SMEs to be successful, the study argues that the strategic leaders must also be able to develop and execute plans to achieve the organization's objectives. Leaders in Nigeria and Kenya therefore must be able to anticipate, plan, lead, communicate, motivate and manage change. They must be able to develop strategies that are aligned with the organization's objectives, and that will enable the organization to achieve a competitive advantage by properly communicating them. They must also be able to effectively manage risk, create an environment of performance and excellence, and create a culture of trust and collaboration through proper communications.

In Rwanda, a study by Niyigena & Warren (2024) that looked at the Effect of Strategic Leadership on the Performance of SMEs in Rwanda: A Case Study of Imirasire Basket Weaving Cooperative of Mayange did find that strategic leadership issues like strategic communication affect the performance of SMEs. The target population for the study was 92 people in two categories. 10 people were interviewed using the purposive driven technique and 82 using random sampling technique and a total of 92 questionnaires collected using the drop and pick method. Data was treated and validated and resulting Data was analyzed for descriptive statistics using SPSS with specific attention to central tendencies. The significance of relationship between strategic leadership and the performance of SMEs was found at 0.01 following a correlation between driving knowledge management and performance of .523 (**), with a significance value of .000, correlation between leading and managing change and performance of .326 (**) with a significance value of .003. In conclusion the study argues that strategic leadership technique involving more leadership at all staff levels is directly proportional to the performance of the SMEs.

Kirabo (2023) did a study on the Strategic Management Practices and Organisational Performance of Firms in the Telecommunication Industry in Rwanda. This study applied correlational and descriptive design and utilized both qualitative and quantitative data. Questionnaires were distributed to MTN and Airtel's upper middle management teams as an effective data collection tool that assisted the researcher in reaching solid conclusions. The research population consisted of 133 top and middle-level managers from Rwandan mobile phone operator businesses, including MTN and Airtel headquarters and various offices in Kigali City, from which a sample size of 100 respondents was estimated using the Slovene methodology. Notably, the correlation results demonstrated a favorable and substantial association between strategic planning and telecommunications industry performance. Strategic communication is favorably correlated with the performance of the telecommunication business. Furthermore, the data show that a Strategic Alliance has a favorable impact on the performance of the telecommunications business.

Bonnyventure, Bwonya, Owouri, Mudany & Ogutu (2022) did a study on the nexus between strategic decision-making, strategic communication and organizational performance with SMEs in Kenya and Rwanda making to the list of interviewed respondents. The paper adopted a qualitative research design and used secondary data. A critique on previous studies done by scholars. A significant relationship between strategic decision-makings, strategic communication, strategic leadership, and planning and organization performance was established. The paper revealed that strategic decision-makings, communication and organization performance will be incorporated as such decision support system these factors will be the catalyst between strategic decision-makings and organization performance.

Elsewhere, Scholars have argued the importance of strategic communication in organisation development. Managers are increasingly expected to be communicative leaders (Heide & Simonsson, 2023), which entails being strategic communicators of visions, values, and objectives, as well as facilitators of organizational transformation. Furthermore, developing effective information and communication systems between management and employees, as well as between organizations and their stakeholders, has become critical to efficiency. Furthermore, the ability to learn from criticism has elevated management communication to the status of a critical asset in today's organizations. Organizational leaders rely on communication strategists to improve their communication skills. Managers employ strategic communication because it improves organisational performance, trust, legitimacy, and efficiency. Strategic communication is used to reinforce, enhance, or change an organization's identity among its personnel and culture. Strategic communication refers to the necessity of maintaining, changing, or improving an organization's image among stakeholders (Falkheimer, 2021; Falkheimer & Heide, 2022) and communicators.

Okuneye, Lasisi, Omoniyi, and Shodiya (2024) studied internal communication strategy and performance using a case study from Nigeria's service and manufacturing industries. It was stated that a comprehensive communication strategy is believed to be critical to an organization's performance, and that a successful communication strategy aids in the establishment of goals for improvement initiatives. According to the study, well-aligned communication techniques improve organizational performance. These tactics are thought to impact energy levels in order to increase performance. Clear communication, along with feedback on achievement, keeps managers focused on their goals and priorities. Effective communication strategies, processes, and procedures have a significant and direct influence on organizational learning and creativity (Okuneye et al., 2024). Otieno, Waiganjo, and Njeru (2019) explored how employee communication affects organizational performance in Kenya's horticulture business. The survey included all flower farms in Naivasha. This study used a cross-sectional survey approach. The study's respondents were selected from the target demographic using a stratified random sampling procedure. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected. Inferential analysis, including correlation and regression analysis, were used to examine the connection between the variables.

In relation to the objective on strategy evaluation, most studies have shown that there is a strong relationship between the strategic leader's ability to ensure that SMEs achieve advancement and see their operations being successful. For example, Otundo (2024) has a research in the SMEs in Kenya linking the various elements of strategic evaluation component to the sustainability and performance of SMEs in Mombasa County and the larger coastal region of Kenya. In Asia for example, studies have linked strategy evaluation to the sustainability of SMEs that any other country. Makhija and Ganesh (2020), for instance, studied the sustainability of SMEs in the manufacturing sector and strategy evaluation: Evidence from India. Makhija and Ganesh (2020) discovered that the sustainability of SMEs in India's manufacturing sector was positively impacted by strategy assessment. According to the survey, SMEs who conducted frequent strategy evaluations outperformed their peers in terms of profitability and growth rates. A second research by Ojong and Agyapong (2021) in Ghana discovered a favorable relationship between strategy assessment and the long-term viability of SMEs in the manufacturing industry. According to the study, SMEs with frequent strategy assessments outperformed those without in terms of their financial success.

Another study done in Pakistan by Ahmed et al. (2020) indicated that strategy review had a favorable impact on the performance of SMEs in the manufacturing sector. The study used a sample of 150 SMEs and collected data using a survey questionnaire. The findings revealed that SMEs that regularly evaluate their strategies have higher profitability, productivity, and growth rates than those that do not. Similarly, a study conducted in Russia by Mukhlishin et al. (2020) discovered that strategy evaluation positively influences the sustainability of SMEs in the manufacturing sector. The study sampled 83 SMEs and employed a mixed-methodologies approach, collecting data using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The study discovered that SMEs who routinely analyze their strategies are more likely to detect their deficiencies and take remedial steps, which improves their overall performance and sustainability.

In Rwanda, Ruzindana & Irechukwu (2023) did a study on the Strategic Management Practices and Sustainability of Small and Medium Sized Enterprises in Processing and Manufacturing Sector in Rwanda: A Case of 7 Selected Small and Medium Sized Enterprises in Rwanda. Firstly, the results on the effect of strategic formulation on SME sustainability in the processing and manufacturing sector in Rwanda was evident, with a strong mean of 4.1 and standard deviation of 0.82, demonstrating the importance of effective strategy formulation. Secondly, the contribution of strategy implementation was highlighted, with a significant mean of 4.07 and standard deviation of 0.81, emphasizing the necessity of clearly defined structures and resource allocation. Thirdly, the influence of strategy evaluation on SME sustainability was underscored, with a robust mean of 3.95 and a standard deviation of 0.91, emphasizing the critical role of well-defined key performance indicators and effective feedback mechanisms. Furthermore, the sustainable growth indicators revealed that SMEs in the processing and manufacturing sector in Rwanda are consistently focusing on sustainable practices, evidenced by means ranging from 4.1 to 4.38 and standard deviations from 0.64 to 0.92. Lastly, the strong correlations (0.859, 0.882, and 0.841) and regression coefficients (0.215, 0.222, and 0.207) confirmed the significance of strategic management practices in fostering sustainable growth for SMEs in Rwanda. The study's findings, which rejected all hypotheses, emphasized the significant influence of strategic management practices on SME sustainability.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by two the Contingency Theory. A contingency theory is a theory of organizational behavior that asserts that there is no one optimum method to structure a corporation, run a business, or make decisions. Instead, the ideal path of action is contingent (depending) on internal and external circumstances (Bastian & Andreas, 2012). The theory's key aspects include its behavioral approach, which is concerned with the best fit of the company's structure based on contingency situations. In other words, organizations should not be managed in a one-size-fits-all manner, but rather develop unique managerial strategies based on the specific condition or situation they are facing. According to the idea, leadership success in connection to group effectiveness is determined by two factors: task motivation, or relational motivation, and circumstances. Contingency theory has attempted to develop broad generalizations regarding the formal structures that are often linked with the greatest fit for the usage of various technologies, particularly in the ever-changing telecommunications economy. Scholars such as Morgan (2010) believe that strategic management should be adaptable to meet the changing needs of customers by providing a clear plan of action on the best procedure for strategy execution to take place in terms of duties, as well as establishing a clear reporting relationship between strategic management and their employees.

This Theory suggests that styles should be fixed and cannot simply be updated or accepted (Hitt, Carnes & Xu, 2016). Essentially, a leader is most effective when their traits and leadership style complement the present environment and scenario surrounding them. This idea, as difficult it appears, is nonetheless highly important in matching organizational professionals to their appropriate conditions and determining the optimum job fit persons. A contingency approach to management is founded on the idea that management effectiveness and efficiency are determined by the interaction between management behavior and unique events at a given moment. In essence, management style evolves depending on the situation, and there is no "one size fits all"

The theory provides a solid foundation for the research variable because the contingency approach to management is based on the exigency concept of management effectiveness, which states that leadership effectiveness as it relates to group efficiency is a function of two major factors: task motivation and circumstances. Gallego-Álvarez, Manuel Prado-Lorenzo, & García-Sánchez (2011) suggest that relationship motivation depends on the manager's capacity to influence the group's situational favorability. A manager's actions should represent the whole organization's culture, dedication to employee safety and well-being, brand positioning, profit orientation, and customer attitude. This management style encourages managers to find the best solutions to corporate challenges. It can be concluded that there is 'no one best way' or approach in management or decision making in the telecommunication industry. Different situations call for

different approaches to handle, manage, and solve the arising issues concerned (Friedberg, 2010). Management and Organization is an 'Open system', which embrace anomalies or challenges every now and then, which requires 'adaptable' and 'situational' solution in order to overcome or settle the problem or issue concerned (Jeong, 2012). Other situational or contingency factors are 'changes in customer demand for goods and services, change in Government policy or law, change in environment or climate change, and so on.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is not merely a collection of concepts but, rather, a construct in which each concept plays an integral role. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), a conceptual framework "lays out the key factors, constructs, or variables, and presumes relationships among them" (p. 440). A strong conceptual framework underpins good research. A conceptual framework in research is used to understand a research problem and guide the development and analysis of the research. It serves as a roadmap to conceptualize and structure the work by providing an outline that connects different ideas, concepts, and theories within the field of study. A conceptual framework pictorially or verbally depicts presumed relationships among the study variables. The purpose of a conceptual framework is to serve as a scheme for organizing and categorizing knowledge and thereby help researchers in developing theories and hypotheses and conducting empirical studies.

Independent Variables

Dependent Variable

Strategy Formulation And Planning
- Setting of clear business goals
- Business environment scanning and analysis
- Long-term vs. short term planning
- Identification of strategic options
- Risk Assessment and Mitigation

Strategic Communication
- Clarity of Communication
- Consistency in Messaging
- Communication Channels and Tools
- Feedback Mechanisms
- Stakeholder Engagement
- Crisis Communication

Strategy Evaluation
- Frequency of Strategy Evaluation
- Use of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)
- Alignment Between Goals and Performance
- Corrective Actions Based on Evaluation
- Stakeholder Involvement in Strategy Evaluation
- Impact on Organizational Growth

Advancement of SMEs in Rwanda
- Revenue Growth
- Profitability
- Market share
- Product/service diversification
- Innovation and technology adoption

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Materials and Methods

In this study whose aim was to examine the impact of strategic leadership on the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda adopted a descriptive research design. In social sciences research descriptive is very crucial and it was chosen as it allowed for the systematic collection of the quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide an in-depth understanding of strategic leadership practices within SMEs (Otundo, 2024). In the study, the instrument used in the study was a structured likert rated questionnaire whose aim was meant to capture the participants' perceptions on the various components of strategic leadership in order to gather primary data. As noted by Mgisha (2022), the use of a questionnaire and the adoption of the descriptive research design was suitable in order to allow proper measurement of attitudes, opinions, and behaviors related to strategic formulation, communication, and evaluation.

The target population for the study was picked from the various managers of SMEs and owners of various firms classified under the manufacturing sector, services providence and processing firms operating in Kigali Rwanda only. To be specific and clear, only SMEs registered with the Rwanda's GDP (Rwanda Development Board, 2023). Based on the sector and firm size, the population was stratified across different SME segments and a target population of 500 SMEs segments were considered as shown in table 1 below:

Table 1: Target Population

Sector	Number of SMEs	Percentage
Manufacturing	150	30%
Processing	120	24%
Services	230	46%
Total	500	100%

In relation to sample size calculation and sampling procedure, a sample size of 150 SMEs was calculated by use of the Yamane Formula of 1967 with the margin error being 5% while the confidence level being 95%. In relation to sampling procedure, a Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure each SME sector was proportionally represented. The sample size for each sector was determined by applying proportional allocation to the total sample size.

Table 2: Sample Distribution

Sector	Number of SMEs	Sample size
Manufacturing	150	45
Processing	120	36
Services	230	69
Total	500	150

In order to ensure equal and better participation of the respondents, the respondents who were from the SMEs were selected by use of simple random sampling. This was a sure procedure that allowed the study to bring onboard a diverse range of perspective on strategic leadership practices.

A likert rated questionnaire was the instrument picked for the collection of primary data comprising of both open-ended and closed ended questions. The questionnaire had four sections with the background information making the section A and the section B having the questions in relation to strategy formulation, strategic communication and strategy evaluation. The Likert-scale ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) to capture respondents' attitudes on strategic leadership practices. The questionnaire was validated by a pilot study conducted with 10 SMEs, and necessary adjustments were made based on feedback (Niyigaba & Njenga, 2023).descriptive and inferential methods of statistical data analysis were used to analyze data in this study. As supported by Otundo (2024), the components of descriptive statistics like the mean, standard deviations, and frequencies were adopted for data summarization while in relation to

inferential statistics, regression analysis and correlation coefficients were used in testing the relationship between the various variables i.e the independent and dependent variables. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used to conduct the analysis. The results were presented in tables and figures to ensure clarity and ease of interpretation. Furthermore, thematic analysis was employed to analyze qualitative responses from open-ended questions, enabling the extraction of key insights regarding strategic leadership practices (Ruzindana & Irechukwu, 2023).

Results
Descriptive Statistics
In the study, a total of 150 questionnaires were distributed to the selected SMEs. The study achieved a 90% return rate with 135 questionnaires being filled and return.

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage %
Gender	Male	80	59.3
	Female	55	40.7
Age	18-25 yrs	15	11.1
	26-35 yrs	40	29.6
	36-45 yrs	45	33.3
	46-55 yrs	25	28.5
	Above 56 yrs	10	7.4
Highest level of education	Secondary	20	14.8
	Diploma	30	22.2
	Bachelor's degree	55	40.7
	Master's degree	25	18.5
	Doctorate	5	3.7
Years of operations	Less than 1 year	10	7.4
	1-3 years	35	25.9
	3-5 years	45	33.3
	Over 5 years	45	33.3
Sector	Manufacturing	40	29.6
	Processing	35	25.9
	Services	60	44.5
Number of employees	1-10	20	14.8
	11-50	50	37.0
	51-100	30	22.2
	0ver 100	35	25.9

From table 3 above, a higher percentage of the respondents were male who made 59.3% showing that the strategic leadership representation among the SMEs in Rwanda is majority made by the male gender. The results having shown that majority of the respondents were of about 36-45 years of age translating to 33.3% meaning that the strategic leadership in the country's handling the SMEs is somewhat experienced. Majority of the respondents in the study had a Bachelor's degree (40.7%) indicating that the people handling SMEs in the country were well educated. In relation to the years of operation, 33.3% score means that majority of the respondents had an operation period of over five years indicating a mix of both new and established businesses participating in the study. The service sector had the highest representation (44.4%), followed by manufacturing (29.6%) and processing (25.9%), reflecting the diversity of SMEs included in the study. Finally, the majority of SMEs (37.0%) employed between 11 and 50 individuals, showcasing a range of small to medium enterprises represented in the research.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics on Strategy formulation and Planning

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
1. Our SME has clearly defined business goals.	4.13	0.91	5.2	8.9	12.6	45.2	28.1
2. We regularly scan the business environment to identify opportunities.	3.98	1.02	6.7	10.4	18.5	41.5	22.9
3. Long-term and short-term planning are effectively integrated in our SME.	4.01	0.87	4.4	7.4	14.8	47.4	26.0
4. Our SME conducts risk assessments as part of the planning process.	3.85	1.05	8.1	12.6	20.0	38.5	20.7
5. Strategic options are carefully identified and considered in decision-making.	4.09	0.90	5.9	8.9	15.6	46.7	22.9
6. Resource allocation is planned based on strategic priorities.	4.15	0.85	4.4	6.7	13.3	44.4	31.1

In relation to strategy formulation and planning, a mean score of 4.13 and mean score of 0.91 clearly indicated that majority of the respondents agreed that their SMEs have clearly defined business goals. This is similar a situation where a mean score of 4.15 an SD of 0.85 did indicate that resources allocation planning scored the highest with majority of the respondents agreeing that resources allocation is aligned with strategic policies.

Table 5: Strategic Communication

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
1. Communication within the SME is clear and consistent.	4.10	0.88	5.2	7.4	12.6	45.2	29.6
2.Strategic messages from leadership are effectively communicated to all employees.	4.02	0.91	4.4	8.9	15.6	42.2	29.6
3.We use appropriate communication channels (emails, meetings, etc.) to reach stakeholders.	4.05	0.84	4.4	6.7	14.8	46.7	27.4

Statement	Mean	SD	SD(%)	D(%)	N(%)	A(%)	SA(%)
4. Feedback mechanisms (surveys, meetings, etc.) are in place to assess communication effectiveness.	3.75	1.04	10.4	12.6	25.2	35.6	16.3
5. Stakeholder engagement is prioritized in our communication strategy.	4.08	0.86	6.7	8.1	17.8	42.2	25.2
6. Crisis communication strategies are established to handle unexpected events.	3.85	0.93	8.1	10.4	22.2	39.3	19.3

Strategic communication component of strategic leadership among the SMEs was found to have a significant influence on the advancement of SMEs in the Kigali Rwanda. Individually, majority of the respondents agreed that communication within their SMEs is clear and consistent due to the fact that the clarity and consistency communication statement scored a mean of 4.10 and SD of 0,88. This trend was replicated in the statement of stakeholder's engagement in communication where majority of the respondents (mean 04.08) that stakeholder engagement is prioritized in their communication strategy, with a standard deviation of 0.86 indicating consistent responses.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics on Strategy Evaluation

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
1. Our SME conducts regular strategy evaluations.	3.90	0.92	7.4	9.6	16.3	43.7	23.0
2. Key performance indicators (KPIs) are used to evaluate the success of strategies.	4.00	0.88	5.2	8.1	15.6	46.7	24.4
3. There is alignment between the goals set during planning and the performance results achieved.	4.12	0.86	4.4	5.9	14.1	50.4	25.2
4. Corrective actions are taken based on strategy evaluation outcomes.	3.85	0.97	8.1	10.4	19.3	40.7	21.5
5. Stakeholders are involved in the strategy evaluation process.	3.80	1.02	8.9	11.1	20.7	40.0	19.3
6. The evaluations conducted have contributed to the growth and sustainability of our SME.	4.05	0.90	5.9	7.4	14.1	47.4	25.2

In general, the descriptive statistics reveal that majority of the respondents believe that strategy evaluation is a crucial determinant in advancement of SMEs in Rwanda's Kigali. All the respondents agreed that the various indicators of strategic evaluation variable of strategic evaluation have an impact on SMEs advancement as shown by: regular strategy evaluation, Use of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), Alignment between Goals and Performance, Corrective Actions Based on Evaluation, and Stakeholder Involvement in Strategy Evaluation having scored mean scored and SD of 3.09 and 0.92 to 4.05 and 0.90.

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics on Advancement of SMEs in Rwanda

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
1. Our SME has experienced significant revenue growth in the past 3 years.	3.95	0.95	7.4	9.6	16.3	44.4	22.2
2. Profitability has improved due to the strategies implemented.	4.05	0.87	5.9	8.1	14.8	46.7	24.4
3. Our market share has increased over the past few years.	3.90	0.93	7.4	11.1	17.8	43.7	20.0
4. Product or service diversification has been a key driver of our growth.	4.08	0.85	5.2	8.1	12.6	47.4	26.7
5. Innovation and technology adoption have improved our competitive advantage.	4.12	0.80	4.4	6.7	11.1	48.1	29.6

The results reveal that respondents generally perceive positive advancement in their SMEs. Revenue growth (mean = 3.95) and market share (mean = 3.90) were rated relatively high, indicating that most SMEs experienced growth over the past three years. Profitability improvements (mean = 4.05) and product/service diversification (mean = 4.08) were seen as key contributors to SME success. Innovation and technology adoption received the highest rating (mean = 4.12), suggesting that SMEs view technology as a significant driver of competitive advantage. The consistent standard deviations (ranging from 0.80 to 0.95) indicate that respondents share similar views regarding the advancement of their SMEs.

Inferential Statistics
Correlation Analysis
The research applied Pearson correlation analysis to assess the magnitude and the direction of relationship between independent variables (strategy formulation and planning, strategic communication, strategy evaluation) with dependent variable (advancement of SMEs in Rwanda). The Pearson correlation coefficient — denoted r — essentially represents the strength of a linear relationship between two continuous variables running from −1 to +1. A positive sign tells us that two data sets are directly related while a negative sign tells us that they are inversely related. The value that is closer to +1 or -1 indicates the stronger relationship.

Table 8: Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	Advancement of SMEs	Strategy Formulation	Strategic Communication	Strategy Evaluation
Advancement of SMEs	1.000	0.632**	0.654**	0.692**
Strategy Formulation and Planning	0.632**	1.000	0.598**	0.564**
Strategic Communication	0.654**	0.598**	1.000	0.606**
Strategy Evaluation	0.692**	0.564**	0.606**	1.000

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Strongest association: The correlation of strategy evaluation with the development of SMEs was the highest among the variables (r = 0.692). This finding reveals that of all the strategic leadership practices, monitoring/enhancing strategies account 4.762 percent in the SME growth and sustainability location. The last consideration of success that I give SMEs is the length they go to assessing their performance against key metrics and the involvement of Stakeholders in this process. Strong Relationships: Both with SME advancement -strategy formulation (r = 0.632), strategic communication (r = 0.654). These findings suggest that both the planning-oriented and communication-doing roles of firms are equally important for successful SMEs. Nonetheless, their influence is not as well rounded compared to strategy evaluation, which indicates that although these factors are crucial but they have less direct impact on SME growth as opposed to the progressive evaluation and correction of strategies. The correlation results of our three strategic leadership practices — strategy formulation, strategic communication and strategy evaluation with SMEs advancement are summarized as follows; — Overall Implication These positive associations all suggest the value of an emergent approach to leadership, where planning, communication and review are integrated in a way that is consistent with the growth in business being pursued. Table 8 shows a moderately stronger correlation of strategy evaluation and SME development, suggesting that goal-setting and its effective communication are necessary but reviewing adaptive mechanisms is likely to shape the most significant practice for long-run success.

Table 9: Regression Analysis Results

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t-value	Significance (p-value)
Constant	1.147		5.012	0.000
Strategy Formulation and Planning	0.285	0.306	4.215	0.000
Strategic Communication	0.337	0.353	4.602	0.000
Strategy Evaluation	0.391	0.376	4.812	0.000

R^2 = 0.568, Adjusted R^2 = 0.561, F-statistic = 47.365, p < 0.001

As the per the regression model, it is indicated that 25.8% (R^2 =0.568) advancement on SMEs in Rwanda can be explained by a combined effect of the three variables of strategic leadership including strategic formulation/planning, strategic communication and strategic evaluations. This is clear indication of a strong predictive power of the independent variables of the dependent variable SMEs advancement. More narrowly, Strategy Formulation and Planning (B = 0.285, p < 0.001) significantly influenced SME development when controlling for a co-efficient of R2 =.306, suggesting that by optimizing their planning practices an increase in such operations is causally related to greater performance of SME. This factor explained 30.6% of the total variance in SME progression. SME Advancement was likewise influenced significantly by Strategic Communication (B = 0.337, p < 0.001) having the highest Beta borrowed value of

0.353 as summarized in Table 9. Better communication practices (defined as clear, consistent messaging and stakeholder engagement) explain 35.3% of the variation in SME growth and development. SME: Strategy Evaluation (B = 0.391, p < 0.001) had the highest effect in SME advancement with Beta value of 0.376 This means that being continually evaluated and corrected according to performance indicators are one of the significant factors in SME success. It was the most powerful predictor of SME advancement, explaining 37.6% of variance in SME advancement

ANOVA (Analysis of Variance)
ANOVA was used to test whether the regression model was statistically significant and to determine the overall fit of the model. The results of the ANOVA are summarized in Table 10 below:

Table 10: ANOVA Results

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-statistic	Significance (p-value)
Regression	29.387	3	9.796	47.365	0.000
Residual	22.347	131	0.171		
Total	51.734	134			

Analysis of ANOVA Results:
The F-statistic of 47.365 with a p-value of 0.000 indicates that the regression model is statistically significant. This confirms that the combination of strategy formulation, strategic communication, and strategy evaluation provides a good fit for explaining the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda.

Hypothesis Testing
The following hypotheses were tested based on the regression and correlation results:

H1: There is a significant relationship between strategy formulation and planning and the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda. Result: Accepted (B = 0.285, p < 0.001). Also, as per H2: There is a significant relationship between strategic communication and the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda. Result: Accepted (B = 0.337, p < 0.001). Finally, H3: There is a significant relationship between strategy evaluation and the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda. Result: Accepted (B = 0.391, p < 0.001)

Table 11: Qualitative Data Themes and Responses

Theme	Description	Representative Quote
Challenges in Strategy Formulation	SMEs struggle with insufficient resources and expertise to formulate effective strategies.	"We often lack the necessary data and resources to plan effectively, which hinders the growth of our business."
Importance of Communication	Clear and consistent communication is crucial for team alignment and stakeholder engagement.	"Effective communication has been essential in ensuring that everyone understands the company's goals and vision."
Role of Strategy Evaluation	Continuous evaluation of strategies is vital for adapting to changing market conditions.	"Regular evaluation helps us identify what is working and where we need to make changes, which has improved results."
Stakeholder Involvement in Decision-Making	Engaging stakeholders in strategic decisions enhances buy-in and accountability.	"Involving stakeholders in decision-making has helped us gain their trust and commitment to our business strategies."
Impact of Innovation and Technology	The adoption of innovative practices and technology has significantly boosted competitiveness.	"Innovation and use of technology have allowed us to stay competitive in a rapidly changing business environment."

Conclusion

This study explored the impact of strategic leadership on the advancement of SMEs in Rwanda, focusing on three key leadership practices: strategy formulation and planning, strategic communication, and strategy evaluation. The findings demonstrated that all three leadership components significantly contribute to SME growth and sustainability, with strategy evaluation emerging as the most influential factor. The correlation and regression analyses revealed that SMEs which regularly assess their strategic initiatives through key performance indicators and corrective actions experience higher levels of advancement, particularly in terms of revenue growth, profitability, and market expansion. Additionally, effective communication strategies and well-structured planning processes were found to be strong drivers of SME success.

The qualitative data further enriched the study by shedding light on the practical challenges SMEs face in implementing strategic leadership. A consistent theme was the need for clearer communication, better stakeholder engagement, and continuous evaluations to adapt to the dynamic business environment. While limited resources remain a barrier to effective strategy formulation, the role of innovation and technology adoption was highlighted as a critical element for remaining competitive. Overall, the study concludes that strategic leadership practices are vital for ensuring the long-term sustainability and advancement of SMEs in Rwanda.

Recommendations

The study recommends that SMEs in Rwanda should invest in comprehensive strategy formulation processes, implement effective communication systems, continuously evaluate their strategic initiatives, and adopt innovative technologies to enhance their competitiveness and ensure sustainable growth in a rapidly evolving business environment.

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