

Organisational Culture, Innovation and Performance in SMEs: A Systematic Literature Review of Emerging Research Trends

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Abstract: In the contemporary business environment, characterised by rapid technological change and intense competition, innovation has emerged as a critical determinant of organisational success and long-term sustainability. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), in particular, rely on innovation to enhance competitiveness and respond effectively to dynamic market conditions. Organisational culture plays a fundamental role in shaping firms' internal environments and influencing their innovation capabilities and overall performance. This study presents a systematic literature review examining the relationship between organisational culture, innovation, and SME performance. A structured search of the Scopus database was conducted in March 2026, focusing on English-language peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2026. Following the screening process, 38 studies were included and analysed using thematic synthesis. The findings indicate that organisational cultures characterised by collaboration, adaptability, knowledge sharing, and employee empowerment are more likely to foster product, process, marketing, and organisational innovation, ultimately contributing to improved organisational performance. However, the review also suggests that the relationship between organisational culture and performance is influenced by contextual and organisational factors. The study contributes to the literature by synthesising current evidence, identifying key research gaps, and proposing directions for future research. The review is limited to English-language journal articles indexed in Scopus, which may have excluded relevant studies published in other databases or languages.

Keywords: Organisational Culture; SMES; Innovation; Organisational Performance; Systematic Literature Review; Scopus.

1. Introduction

Because it influences employee behavior, encourages information exchange, and makes it easier for employees to participate in decision-making processes, organizational culture is a key factor in determining an organization's performance (Obeidat et al. 2018). Given their limited resources and heavy dependence on internal competencies to maintain competitiveness, small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) place an even greater emphasis on culture. A strong corporate culture encourages teamwork, improves information sharing, and develops employees' abilities and experiences, all of which eventually stimulate the creation of fresh concepts and cutting-edge procedures. SMEs must embrace flexible and adaptable cultural frameworks that foster innovation and continual development in the modern business climate, which is marked by quick technical breakthroughs and heightened global competitiveness (Papakonstantinou et al. 2025; Xanthopoulou and Sahinidis 2025). Organizational culture affects a company's capacity to adapt to external changes as well as its internal dynamics. Product, process, marketing, and organizational innovation are just a few of the kinds of innovation that may be helped or hindered by distinct cultural elements in this environment. The link between organizational culture, innovation, and company success in SMEs is thoroughly reviewed in this paper. In order to investigate how cultural traits support the growth of innovative capacities and how these in turn impact organizational performance, it synthesizes previous studies. The significance of innovation as a mediating element between culture and performance is given considerable attention, with evidence that inventive activity—particularly product innovation—serves as a critical driver of SME success highlighted. Despite the growing body of research on organisational culture, innovation and SME performance, the existing literature remains dispersed across different theoretical perspectives, innovation types and organisational contexts. Consequently, there is still limited understanding of how these relationships have evolved and which research themes have received the greatest scholarly attention. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: RQ: How does organisational culture influence innovation and organisational performance in SMEs, and what are the dominant research trends emerging from the literature? This review contributes to the literature by synthesising recent evidence, identifying the principal research streams, highlighting convergent and divergent findings, and proposing directions for future research. Unlike previous reviews that have focused

primarily on organisational culture or innovation separately, this review integrates organisational culture, innovation, organisational performance and complementary organisational mechanisms within the SME context. It also highlights emerging research trends and identifies gaps requiring further investigation. For scholars, practitioners, and legislators looking to improve SME competitiveness through culture-driven innovation initiatives, the results should provide insightful information.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Organizational Culture

While opinions on the definition and meaning of organizational culture vary, most of them relate to a set of values and guiding principles that will impact every activity, behavior, and working relationship (Massaras et al. 2014). Since organizational culture is derived from a variety of scientific disciplines, its definition is a topic of extensive debate. As a result, the phrase is used interchangeably with ideas like an organization's ideals and environment or with behavioral norms and shared beliefs among a group of individuals. Organizational culture is defined by Serpa (2016) as "the shared way of being, thinking, and acting in a collective of coordinated people with reciprocal expectations" (p. 51). According to Schein (1985), all of these are only facets of culture, or more accurately, the many facets of culture, not the culture itself. According to Schein (1985), culture comprises the underlying presumptions and ideas that members of an organization share and that function on an unconscious level. According to Parent and Lovelace (2018), organizational culture is also linked to trust, loyalty, and involvement via cooperation, which enables managers to be kind and motivates staff to follow the rules and customs. Because of this, cultural factors have a significant impact on individual performance, which in turn helps employees meet organizational goals for productivity and efficiency (Adeoye and Hope 2020). Additionally, corporate culture is thought to be one of the most important success elements for the execution and accomplishment of quality improvement initiatives (Carvalho et al. 2019). It is challenging to analyze contemporary firms without taking their organizational cultures into account. There is no widely recognized definition of culture in the literature, which makes it clear that culture is a complicated idea (Tian et al. 2018).

2.2 Innovativeness and Organizational Culture

According to Sahinidis (2010), an organization's ability to develop, integrate, and assimilate innovations is what makes it innovative. Similar to culture, there are several definitions of innovation in the literature, which results in the absence of a precise and official definition. Several scholars have defined innovation as the creation, acceptance, and use of novel concepts, procedures, goods, or services. The research consistently concludes that innovation is essential to a business's continued growth. Strong cultures are often more effective. Employee commitment increases with the strength of the organization's culture. Employees are motivated and controlled by strong cultures, which improves performance. Strong organizational cultures are more effective than weak ones in achieving organizational objectives, according to Thokozani and Maseko's (2017) research. Nonetheless, a sizable portion of experts believe that, under specific circumstances, such as the kind of setting, culture has a good relationship with company success. However, a number of studies show that businesses with strong cultures perform better than those with weak cultures and hinder internal innovation. They conclude that cultures that prioritize flexibility foster innovation since it is linked to creativity, independence, and a willingness to take risks, whereas cultures that prioritize stability and control may stifle innovation. However, the intense socialization and the strict adherence to the prevailing norms can generate individual views and ideas strikingly similar, since both the information perception and interpretation processes have been influenced in a specific direction, by the overpowering organizational culture. Such controlling cultures stifle novel thinking and creativity and limit innovation stimuli perception, to those existing within the boundaries of the organizational members' perceived environment. Employees at a company with a poor culture simply follow policies and procedures out of fear of the repercussions of their inaction rather than because they like their work. Morality, customer relations, innovation, performance, collaboration, service, and loyalty are all negatively impacted by a business with a poor culture since it is difficult to properly convey expectations to employees.

3. Methodology

To ensure that only relevant and up-to-date studies were included, the literature search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2015 and 2026. The Scopus database was selected as the primary source because of its extensive coverage of high-quality academic publications. The search was conducted on March 2026 using predefined keywords related to organisational culture, innovation, SMEs, and

performance. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were applied to improve the precision and comprehensiveness of the search. The complete search query is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Boolean operators

TITLE-ABS-KEY (("organizational culture" OR "corporate culture") AND innovation AND (SMEs OR "small and medium enterprises") AND performance) AND PUBYEAR > 2014 AND PUBYEAR < 2027 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English"))

A multi-stage screening procedure was applied to ensure the quality and relevance of the final dataset. As illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1), the initial Scopus search identified 104 records. After applying the predefined eligibility criteria (English language and journal articles), 15 records were removed before screening, resulting in 89 records eligible for title and abstract screening. During this stage, 51 records were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Specifically, studies were excluded if they did not focus on SMEs, did not examine organisational culture, innovation or organisational performance, or were outside the scope of the review. Consequently, 38 studies met the eligibility criteria and were included in the final qualitative synthesis. The screening and study selection process was undertaken collaboratively by the authors using the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Any differences in study selection were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. For each included study, information was extracted on the authors, publication year, country, research context, study design, organisational culture framework, innovation type, performance outcomes, and principal findings. The extracted evidence was analysed using thematic synthesis, whereby studies addressing similar concepts were grouped to identify recurring themes, convergent and divergent findings, and emerging research trends. Given the objective of this review, no formal methodological quality appraisal tool was applied, which is acknowledged as a limitation of the study.

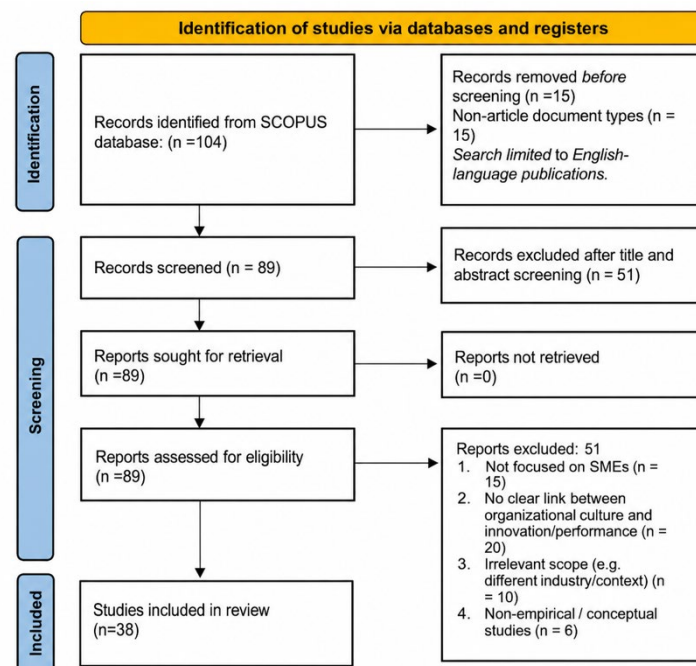


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of the study selection process.

4. Results

The analysis of the retrieved articles reveals a growing research interest in recent years (Figure 2), with the highest number of publications observed in 2025. Geographically, the majority of studies originate from countries such as China, Indonesia, and Malaysia, while contributions from European and Western countries are comparatively limited. Additionally, only a small number of authors have multiple publications in this field, indicating a relatively fragmented research landscape.

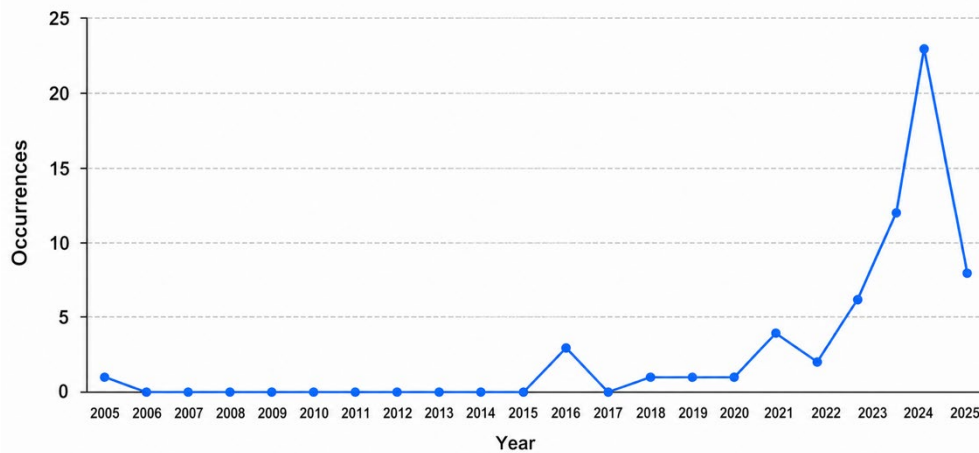


Figure 2: Distribution of retrieved records by publication year (Scopus database)

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of publications by country or geographic region, highlighting the key centers of knowledge production in the field under consideration. It is observed that China, Indonesia, and Malaysia occupy the top positions, with the highest number of publications, a fact that indicates intense research activity in these countries. The dominance of these Asian economies can be linked to the growing importance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in developing markets, as well as to the emphasis placed on innovation as a driver of economic growth. Next is the United Kingdom, which also makes a significant contribution, confirming the enduring role of developed European economies in the production of academic knowledge. Next, countries such as Vietnam, Hungary, and Spain exhibit moderate levels of publications, indicating that interest in this field is widespread but not uniformly developed. Finally, countries such as France, Morocco, and Pakistan show a lower number of publications, which may reflect either less research focus on the subject or limited resources and infrastructure for conducting relevant research. Overall, the graph demonstrates a geographical concentration of research primarily in Asia, while also highlighting the existence of international interest, with participation from both developed and emerging economies.

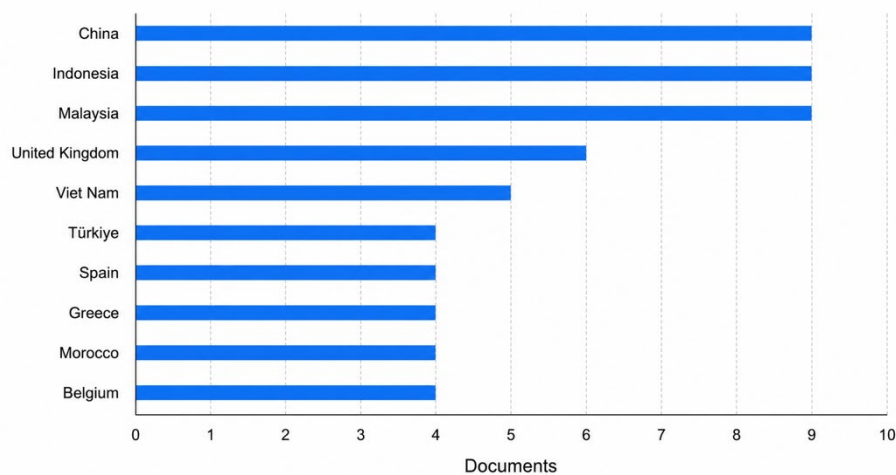


Figure 3. Documents by country or territory (Scopus database)

4.1 Organizational Culture as a Driver of Innovation

A substantial body of the reviewed literature identifies organizational culture as a critical determinant of innovation within SMEs. In particular, cultural characteristics that emphasize flexibility, adaptability, and openness to change are consistently associated with higher levels of innovativeness. Empirical studies demonstrate that specific cultural types, such as adhocracy, developmental, and externally oriented cultures, foster innovation by encouraging proactiveness, risk-taking, and knowledge sharing (Shuaib and He 2021; Shahin et al. 2025; Laforet 2016; Kuhn and Bhatiasevi 2024; Le et al. 2020; Zhang et al. 2025). Furthermore, organizational culture shapes the internal environment that supports knowledge creation and dissemination.

Studies indicate that firms characterized by collaborative and learning-oriented cultures are better equipped to generate innovative ideas and adapt to dynamic market conditions (Pudjiarti and Hutomo 2020; Gorondutse et al. 2021; Saleh et al. 2025). In addition, the role of culture extends to influencing innovation-related behaviors, including entrepreneurial orientation, communication effectiveness, and organizational learning processes (Rahman et al. 2021; Pizar and Mazo 2020; Manalu et al. 2025). However, the relationship between culture and innovation is not universally positive. Certain cultural configurations, particularly hierarchical or control-oriented cultures, may hinder innovation by limiting flexibility and restricting employee autonomy (Wang and Huang 2022; Albarracín and García-Pérez-de-Lema 2011). Similarly, some studies suggest that organizational culture alone is not sufficient to drive innovation unless it is supported by complementary organizational capabilities (Kassa and Kegne 2025). Overall, although most studies agree that organisational culture positively influences innovation, the reviewed evidence suggests that its impact depends on organisational context and complementary managerial capabilities.

4.2 Innovation as a Mediating Mechanism between Culture and Performance

A key finding across the reviewed studies is the mediating role of innovation in the relationship between organizational culture and firm performance (Setyawati et al. 2026; Zhang et al. 2025; Le et al. 2020; Kareem et al. 2024; Almeida and Okon 2026). This mediating mechanism is particularly evident in studies examining the role of innovation capability as a strategic resource. Organizational culture contributes to the development of innovation capabilities, which subsequently translate into higher levels of organizational performance (Srisathan et al. 2020; Altassan 2023; Al-Hakimi et al. 2022). In this context, innovation acts as a conduit through which cultural values are transformed into measurable business outcomes. Moreover, the findings indicate that different types of innovation have varying effects on performance. Product innovation is consistently identified as the most significant driver of firm performance, followed by process and organizational innovation (Amoa-Gyarteng and Dhliwayo 2024; Lita et al. 2020). In contrast, some studies report weak or insignificant relationships between certain innovation types and performance, suggesting that the effectiveness of innovation depends on contextual and strategic factors (Krobbuaban et al. 2021). Importantly, several studies highlight that organizational culture may not directly influence performance but exerts its impact entirely through innovation and related capabilities. This underscores the importance of innovation as a critical mediating mechanism linking internal organizational factors to external performance outcomes (Setyawati et al. 2026; Zhang et al. 2025). These findings indicate that innovation does not always fully mediate the relationship between organisational culture and performance, as contextual factors may influence this relationship.

4.3 Role of Organizational and Managerial Mechanisms

The analysis further reveals that the relationship between organizational culture, innovation, and performance is influenced by the interaction of multiple internal organizational mechanisms. In particular, human resource management (HRM) practices, knowledge management, total quality management (TQM), and leadership emerge as key complementary factors. HRM practices contribute to the development of innovation capability by enhancing employee skills, motivation, and engagement, thereby strengthening the link between culture and performance (Setyawati et al. 2026; Phi Nga and Thanh Tam 2025; Papakonstantinou et al., 2025). Similarly, knowledge management practices facilitate the exchange and integration of knowledge, which is essential for innovation processes (Zhang et al. 2025). In addition, TQM practices are found to positively influence innovation outcomes when aligned with a supportive organizational culture. Studies indicate that culture plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of TQM, as it shapes employees' attitudes toward quality, learning, and continuous improvement (Saleh et al. 2025; Gorondutse et al. 2021; Shuaib and He 2021). Leadership also emerges as an important factor, as it influences both organizational culture and innovation through the promotion of values, vision, and strategic direction (Fajar et al. 2024; Tariq et al. 2025). Overall, these findings suggest that innovation is the result of a complex interplay between organizational culture and multiple managerial practices. Culture provides the foundation, while these mechanisms enable the effective implementation and exploitation of innovation.

4.4 Contextual and External Influencing Factors

The reviewed studies also emphasize the importance of external and contextual factors in shaping innovation and performance in SMEs. These factors are particularly relevant in developing and emerging economies, where firms often operate under resource constraints and institutional limitations. Key external factors identified in the literature include access to finance, government support, technological capability, and market conditions.

Limited access to financial resources and weak institutional support are frequently reported as major barriers to innovation (Kassa and Kegne 2025). In addition, technological limitations and lack of skilled personnel further constrain SMEs' innovation capacity. At the same time, several studies highlight the growing importance of digital transformation and sustainability-oriented practices. The integration of digital technologies, green innovation, and knowledge sharing is increasingly recognized as a key driver of competitiveness and performance in SMEs (Almeida and Okon 2026; Altassan 2023; Tariq et al. 2025). These emerging trends indicate that the relationship between organizational culture, innovation, and performance is evolving in response to broader environmental changes. Despite these challenges, organizational culture is found to play a mitigating role by enhancing firms' adaptability and resilience. A strong, innovation-oriented culture enables SMEs to respond more effectively to environmental uncertainty and to exploit emerging opportunities, thereby improving their long-term performance.

5. Conclusions

The present study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between organizational culture, innovation, and firm performance in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through a systematic literature review. A key conclusion emerging from this study is that organizational culture significantly influences the development of innovation within SMEs. Cultural characteristics that promote flexibility, openness, collaboration, and learning orientation are consistently associated with enhanced innovation capability. In contrast, rigid and hierarchical cultures tend to inhibit innovation by restricting employee autonomy and limiting knowledge exchange. This finding underscores the importance of cultivating an adaptive and innovation-oriented organizational culture in order to sustain competitiveness in dynamic business environments. Furthermore, the study confirms that innovation acts as a central mediating mechanism linking organizational culture to firm performance. Rather than exerting a direct influence, organizational culture primarily contributes to performance through its impact on innovation processes. Among the different types of innovation, product innovation appears to have the strongest effect on performance outcomes, highlighting its strategic importance for SMEs. This emphasizes that firms must not only foster a supportive culture but also actively invest in innovation activities to translate cultural values into tangible results. In addition, the findings reveal that the relationship between culture, innovation, and performance is influenced by a range of internal organizational mechanisms, including human resource management practices, knowledge management, leadership, and total quality management. These factors enhance innovation capability when aligned with an appropriate cultural context, suggesting that organizational effectiveness is the result of a synergistic interaction between multiple dimensions rather than a single determinant. The study also highlights the role of external and contextual factors, particularly in developing and emerging economies. Constraints such as limited access to finance, weak institutional support, and technological challenges can hinder innovation efforts. However, a strong organizational culture can partially mitigate these limitations by enhancing adaptability and resilience. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the existing literature by providing an integrated framework that links organizational culture, innovation, and performance in SMEs. It identifies key themes and relationships while highlighting the mediating role of innovation and the importance of contextual factors. From a practical standpoint, the findings offer valuable insights for managers and policymakers, suggesting that fostering an innovation-oriented culture, investing in employee development, and supporting knowledge-sharing practices are essential for enhancing SME performance.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. The analysis was restricted to articles published in English and indexed in the Scopus database, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the study focused exclusively on peer-reviewed journal articles, excluding other sources such as conference papers and reports. Future research could expand the scope by incorporating multiple databases and exploring longitudinal or empirical approaches to further validate the identified relationships.

In conclusion, the findings of this study emphasize that organizational culture is a key enabler of innovation, which in turn acts as a critical driver of firm performance in SMEs. Strengthening the alignment between cultural values, innovation strategies, and organizational practices is essential for achieving sustainable competitive advantage in an increasingly complex and dynamic business environment. Future research should further explore these relationships using longitudinal and cross-country studies.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical clearance was not required for the research

AI Declaration

No AI tools were used for the research

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