

Innovation Strategies And Business Performance Of SMEs In Wakiso District, Uganda

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between innovation strategies and the business performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Wakiso District, Uganda. Innovation had been widely recognized as a fundamental driver of business competitiveness and long-term performance, yet its adoption patterns and performance effects among Ugandan SMEs remained poorly documented. The study investigated four innovation strategy dimensions: product/service innovation, process innovation, market innovation, and organizational innovation. A cross-sectional survey of 284 SME owners, managers, and employees in Wakiso District was conducted between February and May 2023. Multiple regression analysis revealed that innovation strategies collectively explained 54.9% of the variance in SME business performance ($R^2 = 0.549$), with product/service innovation and market innovation emerging as the most powerful predictors. The study contributed to the innovation-performance literature in the SME context of sub-Saharan Africa and provided practical recommendations for SME operators, policymakers, and business development support organizations in Uganda.

Keywords: Innovation Strategies, SME Performance, Wakiso District, Uganda, Product Innovation, Market Innovation

Introduction

Innovation had emerged as one of the most critical strategic imperatives for businesses seeking to maintain competitiveness in an increasingly dynamic and globalized marketplace (Paul & Kazaara, 2023). For SMEs in developing economies like Uganda, innovation was not merely a luxury or an aspiration it had become a survival necessity in the face of intensifying competition from imports, the entry of multinational retail chains, changing consumer preferences, and the disruptive effects of digital technologies (Julius & Matovu, 2025). In Wakiso District, Uganda's second most economically active district after Kampala, SMEs had been exposed to competitive pressures from multiple directions, creating both challenges and opportunities for those willing and able to innovate (Alex et al., 2024).

Innovation, in the context of SMEs, encompassed a broad range of activities beyond the stereotypical image of high-technology research and development (Frank et al., 2023). The Oslo Manual (OECD, 2018), the globally recognized framework for measuring innovation, identified four types of innovation: product or service innovation (introducing new or improved goods and services), process innovation (implementing new or improved production or delivery processes), market innovation (entering new markets or adopting new marketing approaches), and organizational innovation (introducing new business models, structures, or management practices) (Winny et al., 2023). Each of these innovation types offered distinct pathways through which SMEs could improve their performance and competitive position (Ntirandekura, Ainebyoona, et al., 2022).

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In Uganda, the discourse on SME innovation had gained momentum following the government's launch of the National Science, Technology and Innovation Policy and various innovation-focused programs under the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST). However, the actual innovation behaviors of Ugandan SMEs, the enablers and barriers to innovation, and the performance effects of different innovation strategies had not been systematically studied, particularly in the Wakiso District context (Ntirandekura, Ainebyoona, et al., 2022). This research gap provided the primary motivation for the present study.

The study was grounded in the Schumpeterian Theory of Innovation, which posited that innovation was the fundamental driver of long-term economic growth and competitive advantage, and the Innovation Systems Approach, which highlighted the importance of the ecosystem in which innovation occurred, including the role of networks, knowledge institutions, and supportive policies (Winny et al., 2023). Together, these frameworks provided a comprehensive theoretical foundation for examining innovation-performance dynamics among Wakiso District SMEs (Ramadhan, Alex, Kazaara, et al., 2023).

Problem Statement

Evidence from Uganda's private sector development landscape suggested that the majority of SMEs in Wakiso District remained locked in low-productivity, imitative business models, with limited engagement in systematic innovation activities (Winny et al., 2023). The Uganda Investment Authority's 2021 SME survey found that fewer than 20% of surveyed SMEs had introduced new products or services in the preceding year, fewer than 10% had made significant process improvements, and fewer than 5% had explored new market segments (Alex & Moses, 2024). These low levels of innovation activity had been linked to the district's relatively high rate of SME stagnation, with many businesses maintaining stable revenues but failing to grow or capture new value (Alex et al., 2024).

The barriers to SME innovation in Wakiso District had been identified in qualitative studies as including inadequate access to finance for research and development, limited technical skills and innovation capabilities among SME operators, weak linkages with knowledge institutions such as universities and research institutes, and the absence of formal innovation support structures (Nancy & Prudence, 2024). Against this backdrop, understanding the relationship between innovation strategies and business performance had both theoretical significance and urgent practical implications for Uganda's SME development agenda (Ntirandekura, Friday, et al., 2022).

Literature Review

Schumpeterian Innovation Theory

Joseph Schumpeter's theory of innovation and creative destruction, articulated in his seminal works *Theory of Economic Development* (1911) and *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942), positioned innovation as the primary engine of economic dynamism. Schumpeter identified five types of innovation: new products, new production methods, new markets, new sources of supply, and new organizational structures a taxonomy strikingly consistent with the Oslo Manual's contemporary framework (Christopher et al., 2023). For SMEs, Schumpeterian theory predicted that those engaging in innovation would achieve superior economic performance, but also recognized that

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smaller firms might face greater challenges in financing and implementing innovation due to their resource constraints(Alex & Moses, 2024).

Innovation and SME Performance: Empirical Evidence

Empirical studies had consistently found positive relationships between innovation activities and SME performance across diverse contexts. Cainelli et al. (2006) found in Italian manufacturing SMEs that innovation investment was positively associated with productivity growth, with product innovation generating the largest performance improvements. Freel and Robson (2004) in the UK context found that innovative SMEs grew significantly faster than non-innovators in terms of both employment and sales(Faridah et al., 2023). In Africa, Robson and Obeng (2008) found in a Ghana study that product and process innovation were positively associated with SME growth, though the effects were moderated by firm size and access to resources(Julius & Matovu, 2025).

In East Africa, Otieno and Lumumba (2015) found in Kenya that SMEs with higher levels of innovation activity outperformed competitors on revenue growth and customer acquisition. In Uganda, Balunywa et al. (2014) found in a GEM-based study that innovative entrepreneurs in Uganda tended to achieve higher business growth rates, though the study noted that innovation among Ugandan entrepreneurs was predominantly imitative rather than novel(Paul & Kazaara, 2023). Market innovation, including the adoption of new marketing channels and the penetration of new geographic markets, had been identified as particularly important for SME performance in developing country contexts where domestic markets were often small and fragmented(Wegulo et al., 2023).

Methodology

Research Design

A cross-sectional survey research design was employed. The study adopted a quantitative approach, supplemented by qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 20 purposively selected SME operators representing high, medium, and low levels of innovation activity(Turyatemba et al., 2022). The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods enabled a comprehensive understanding of innovation-performance dynamics that neither method alone could provide.

Population and Sampling

The study population comprised all SMEs operating in Wakiso District's major trading and business centers, including Nansana, Kira, Entebbe, Makindye Ssabagabo, and Kasangati. A stratified random sampling approach was used, with strata defined by business sector (manufacturing, services, and trade) and geographic sub-county(Julius & Matovu, 2025). The final sample comprised 284 SMEs, selected from a target sample of 340 after accounting for non-response. The achieved response rate of 83.5% was considered adequate for statistical analysis. SMEs were defined using the MSME Policy criteria: businesses with 5-49 employees and annual turnover between UGX 10 million and UGX 360 million.

Measurement and Analysis

Innovation strategies were measured using adapted items from the Oslo Manual (OECD, 2018) and prior SME innovation studies, rated on a five-point Likert scale. Business performance was measured using a multi-item scale capturing sales growth, profitability growth, customer growth, and market share expansion over the preceding 24 months. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26, with reliability analysis, factor analysis, descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and hierarchical regression analysis employed (Nelson et al., 2022).

Findings And Discussion

Innovation Activity Levels among Wakiso District SMEs

Table 1: Innovation Activity Levels – Descriptive Statistics

Innovation Dimension	Statement	Mean	Std Dev	Level
Product/Service	Introduced new or modified products in last 2 years	3.21	1.17	Moderate
Product/Service	Improved existing products based on customer feedback	3.54	1.08	High
Product/Service	Offers products not available from competitors	2.87	1.24	Moderate
Process	Introduced new production/delivery methods	2.74	1.21	Moderate
Process	Uses technology to improve operational efficiency	3.12	1.18	Moderate
Process	Standardized core business processes formally	2.41	1.27	Low-Moderate
Market	Entered new geographic markets in last 2 years	2.98	1.23	Moderate

Market	Adopted new marketing channels (e.g., digital)	3.34	1.11	Moderate
Market	Developed new customer segments deliberately	3.08	1.19	Moderate
Organizational	Changed business model significantly	2.31	1.29	Low
Organizational	Introduced new management practices	2.68	1.24	Moderate
Organizational	Formed strategic partnerships for business growth	2.54	1.28	Low-Moderate

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The innovation activity levels presented in Table 1 revealed that product/service innovation, particularly the improvement of existing products based on customer feedback (mean = 3.54), was the most actively practiced form of innovation among Wakiso District SMEs(Ahumuza et al., 2025). This finding was consistent with the general pattern observed in developing country SME research, where product adaptation and improvement tended to dominate over more radical forms of innovation, which were constrained by resource limitations and risk aversion(Ramadhan, Alex, Ariyo, et al., 2023). The relatively high mean for adoption of new marketing channels (3.34) reflected the growing uptake of social media and mobile money as marketing and sales channels, which represented a significant form of market innovation for many businesses(Christopher & Nelson, 2024).

Process innovation was at moderate levels, with technology adoption for operational efficiency recording a mean of 3.12 but formal process standardization scoring only 2.41. This pattern suggested that while some SMEs had adopted technology tools for efficiency improvement, the systematic formalization of business processes remained uncommon(Alex & Julius, 2024). Organizational innovation was the weakest dimension, with business model changes recording a mean of only 2.31 and strategic partnerships at 2.54, indicating that deep organizational transformation remained limited among Wakiso SMEs(Alex et al., 2023).

Barriers to Innovation

Table 2: Perceived Barriers to Innovation among Wakiso District SMEs

Barrier	Rated as Major Barrier (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean Rating (1-5)
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Lack of finance for innovation	198	69.7	4.12
Inadequate technical skills	167	58.8	3.87
Fear of failure/risk aversion	154	54.2	3.74
Limited market information	141	49.6	3.62
Weak linkages with knowledge institutions	118	41.5	3.41
Regulatory constraints	97	34.2	3.18
Inadequate infrastructure (power, internet)	134	47.2	3.58
Competition and copying by competitors	124	43.7	3.47

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The innovation barriers data presented in Table 2 confirmed that financial constraints were the most widely recognized barrier to innovation among Wakiso District SMEs, with 69.7% of respondents rating lack of finance as a major barrier and a mean rating of 4.12 out of 5. This finding aligned with the broader SME innovation literature, which had consistently identified financial constraints as the primary obstacle to innovation in resource-constrained business environments. Inadequate technical skills (58.8%) and fear of failure (54.2%) were the second and third most prevalent barriers, highlighting the importance of both human capital development and risk management support for SME innovation.

Limited market information (49.6%) and inadequate infrastructure (47.2%) also emerged as significant barriers, underscoring the systemic nature of innovation constraints in Wakiso District. Weak linkages with knowledge institutions (41.5%) highlighted the disconnect between Uganda's university and research system and the SME sector, a gap that had been identified in policy documents but not yet adequately addressed through institutional mechanisms. Competitor copying (43.7%) was another important barrier, with many SMEs expressing reluctance to invest in innovation if competitors could quickly imitate their innovations without incurring development costs, a problem rooted in weak intellectual property protection(Alex et al., 2024).

Correlation Analysis

Table 3: Correlation Matrix – Innovation Strategies and Business Performance

Variable	Business Perf.	Product/Service Innov.	Process Innov.	Market Innov.	Org. Innov.
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Business Performance	1.000				
Product/Service Innovation	0.624**	1.000			
Process Innovation	0.548**	0.487**	1.000		
Market Innovation	0.612**	0.521**	0.463**	1.000	
Organizational Innovation	0.489**	0.412**	0.398**	0.441**	1.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The Pearson correlation matrix in Table 3 revealed that all four innovation dimensions had statistically significant positive correlations with SME business performance. Product/service innovation recorded the strongest correlation ($r = 0.624, p < 0.01$), confirming that SMEs that actively introduced new or improved products and services experienced significantly better business outcomes(Winny et al., 2023). Market innovation was the second strongest correlate ($r = 0.612, p < 0.01$), reflecting the performance benefits of new market development and channel innovation. Process innovation showed a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.548, p < 0.01$), while organizational innovation had the weakest but still significant correlation ($r = 0.489, p < 0.01$)(Ivan et al., 2023). The positive inter-correlations among innovation dimensions suggested that innovation activities were complementary, with SMEs engaged in one type of innovation also tending to be more innovative across other dimensions(Alex et al., 2024).

Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 4: Hierarchical Regression Results – Innovation Strategies on SME Performance

Variable	Beta (β)	Std Error	t-value	p-value	Significant?
Constant	0.724	0.201	3.602	0.000	
Product/Service Innovation	0.287	0.052	5.519	0.000	Yes
Process Innovation	0.201	0.054	3.722	0.000	Yes
Market Innovation	0.268	0.053	5.057	0.000	Yes
Organizational Innovation	0.172	0.050	3.440	0.001	Yes

R ²	0.549				
Adjusted R ²	0.543				
F-statistic	84.72			0.000	

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The hierarchical regression results in Table 4 confirmed that innovation strategies collectively explained 54.9% of the variance in SME business performance in Wakiso District ($R^2 = 0.549$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.543$, $F = 84.72$, $p < 0.001$). Product/service innovation was the strongest individual predictor ($\beta = 0.287$, $t = 5.519$, $p < 0.001$), confirming the primacy of new product development and improvement in driving SME performance outcomes (Nelson et al., 2023). Market innovation was the second strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.268$, $t = 5.057$, $p < 0.001$), followed by process innovation ($\beta = 0.201$, $t = 3.722$, $p < 0.001$) and organizational innovation ($\beta = 0.172$, $t = 3.440$, $p = 0.001$) (Paul & Kazaara, 2023).

The strong effect of product/service innovation was attributable to the direct revenue-generating impact of new and improved products, which attracted new customers, enabled premium pricing, and differentiated SMEs from competitors (Faridah et al., 2023). The significant effect of market innovation highlighted the performance benefits of proactive market development including entry into new geographic areas and adoption of digital marketing channels which extended SMEs' revenue bases beyond their immediate local markets. Process innovation contributed to performance primarily through cost reduction and efficiency improvements that enhanced profitability without necessarily increasing revenues.

Sector-Specific Innovation Patterns

Table 5: Innovation Activity and Performance by Business Sector

Sector	n	Innovation Index (avg)	Performance Score (avg)	Dominant Innovation Type
Manufacturing	78	3.42	3.61	Product & Process
Food Processing	54	3.58	3.74	Product & Market
Retail Trade	67	3.12	3.28	Market & Organizational
Services (Professional)	41	3.67	3.82	Service & Organizational
Agriculture-linked	44	2.87	3.04	Process & Market

The sector-specific analysis in Table 5 revealed that professional services SMEs had the highest innovation index (3.67) and business performance scores (3.82), followed closely by food processing SMEs (innovation = 3.58, performance = 3.74) (Julius, 2025). Manufacturing SMEs also showed relatively high innovation and performance levels. Agriculture-linked SMEs had the lowest innovation index (2.87) and performance scores (3.04), reflecting the greater innovation barriers in Uganda's agricultural value chain, including limited market access, weak extension

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services, and post-harvest challenges (Julius, 2024). The dominant innovation types varied meaningfully across sectors, with manufacturing and food processing SMEs focused primarily on product and process innovation, while retail and services SMEs prioritized market and organizational innovation.

Conclusions and recommendations

The study concluded that innovation strategies had a significant and positive effect on the business performance of SMEs in Wakiso District, Uganda. All four innovation dimensions product/service innovation, process innovation, market innovation, and organizational innovation made statistically significant positive contributions to business performance, explaining 54.9% of the total performance variance (Ntirandekura, Friday, et al., 2022). Product/service innovation and market innovation were the most powerful performance drivers, confirming the primacy of customer-facing innovation in generating business growth (Edgar & Moses, 2023).

Innovation activity among Wakiso District SMEs remained predominantly incremental and imitative, with few businesses engaging in radical or novel innovation. This pattern was understandable given the resource constraints facing most SMEs, but also pointed to the limited exploitation of innovation's full potential as a performance driver. The study recommended several interventions. The Uganda National Council for Science and Technology was recommended to establish an SME Innovation Fund specifically targeted at Wakiso District businesses, providing matching grants for product development, process improvement, and market innovation activities. Second, innovation-focused incubators and accelerators were recommended for establishment in Wakiso District, providing co-working spaces, mentorship, and networking opportunities that could reduce the innovation barriers associated with isolation and limited networks (Brian et al., 2024).

Third, universities and technical institutions in and around Wakiso District, including Ndejje University and Kampala International University, were recommended to establish formal innovation linkage programs with local SMEs, enabling knowledge transfer, joint research, and applied technology development. Fourth, the Wakiso District Commercial Office was recommended to organize annual Innovation Showcases that provided Wakiso SMEs with opportunities to display innovations, connect with investors and buyers, and receive recognition that reduced the fear-of-failure barrier to innovation. Fifth, further research was recommended to examine the moderating effects of firm size, owner education, and access to finance on the innovation-performance relationship in the Ugandan context.

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