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The impact of charismatic leadership on team performance: A study of sustainability of small and micro enterprises in China

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ABSTRACT

Small and micro enterprises (SMEs), serving as a major catalyst for economic and social advancement, play an irreplaceable role in promoting employment, technological innovation, and stimulating market vitality. Team performance is a key indicator for measuring the sustainable development level of SMEs, and the effectiveness of internal teams has a significant influence on determining their competitive standing and long-term development path. Charismatic leadership, as an important leadership style, is considered to have a unique role in motivating employees, promoting innovation, and facilitating team development through personal charm, influence, and appeal. This research centers on SMEs in China and explores how charismatic leadership affects team performance, particularly emphasizing the role played by team learning and team cohesion as intermediaries in this connection. The study gathered data via responses to a structured questionnaire completed by managers and employees within SMEs in Guangdong Province. The analysis shows that: (1) Charismatic leadership clearly enhances team performance in SMEs; (2) Team learning and team cohesion act as intermediaries through which charismatic leadership positively impacts team performance. The study clarifies the process through which charismatic leadership enhances team performance by fostering team learning and improving team cohesion, thereby not only enriching the theoretical framework regarding leadership behaviors and team effectiveness but also offering practical insights for SMEs to improve team performance and achieve sustainable development by cultivating charismatic leaders.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature on organizational behavior by applying charismatic leadership theory to the underexplored context of small and micro enterprises (SMEs) in China, which often face resource constraints and operational vulnerabilities. This research originates from the understanding of how leadership behavior can influence internal team effectiveness and organizational resilience.

1. INTRODUCTION

China currently holds the position of the second-largest economy globally. Its economic development relies not only on large state-owned enterprises and leading private enterprises but also on a vast network of small and micro enterprises (SMEs) distributed throughout the country. Data published by China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology in 2022 reveal that SMEs exceed 52 million in number, making up nearly 98.4% of all enterprises registered across the nation (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). These enterprises account for over half of the national tax income, generate close to 60 percent of GDP, and roughly seven out of every ten technological advancements, while also creating four out of five jobs in urban areas (Xu, 2023). With their flexible market

responsiveness and innovative potential, SMEs not only sustain the virtuous cycle of the economic system but also play an irreplaceable strategic role in stabilizing employment, promoting balanced regional development, and stimulating grassroots entrepreneurial vitality (You, 2022).

However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, SMEs suffered severe setbacks, often experiencing production halts, layoffs, and financial shortages, which in turn delayed economic recovery. Information from the National Bureau of Statistics reveals that enterprise closures in China reached 3.491 million, while deregistered individual businesses surged to 9.619 million (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The large-scale collapse of enterprises not only led to a massive wave of unemployment but also triggered social instability. Challenges to the survival and development of SMEs demand urgent attention from the Chinese government because these challenges significantly impact the stability of the national economy and social harmony (Jin, Zhang, Yu, & Huang, 2024).

With the intensification of global economic fluctuations, SMEs face increasing uncertainty in their survival and development. Compared to large enterprises, they often have limited resources and weaker risk resilience. To achieve more stable and sustainable growth, they must focus on internal improvements, enhancing management efficiency, boosting innovation capabilities, and optimizing team collaboration methods.

In numerous studies on the sustainable development of SMEs, internal leadership styles and team effectiveness are regarded as core factors influencing enterprise resilience and innovation vitality. Some business leaders with charismatic leadership styles have significantly enhanced organizational survival capabilities through their informal influence. Empirical research shows that the survival rates of such enterprises can reach two to three times the industry average (Sandybayev, 2019). These leaders, through vision-building, emotional resonance, and non-authoritative influence, inspire their teams to achieve extraordinary performance despite resource constraints. The traditional Chinese cultural emphasis on collectivism and authority has led to a relative lack of research on charismatic leadership. Studies suggest that strong personal charisma is crucial during the start-up phase, promoting enterprise growth and even success (Rowland, 2021) while leadership style is a key factor in determining whether an enterprise can achieve sustained competitive advantage and long-term success (Razzaque, Lee, & Mangalaraj, 2023). SMEs teams typically operate with close collaboration, flexibility, and a focus on innovation. However, as team size expands, ensuring the team's sustainable development has become a focal point. Faced with increasingly young team members and educational diversity, charismatic leaders can mediate internal team conflicts and foster trust among members through their personal charisma and motivational mechanisms (Van Der Voet & Steijn, 2021).

Prior scholarly work has primarily addressed the influence exerted by charismatic leadership on organizational outcomes in state-owned and large private sector organizations. In contrast, research targeting SMEs, particularly their internal team mechanisms, remains relatively limited. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of how charismatic leadership affects team performance in small and micro enterprises will help expand the applicability of this theory across different organizational forms, holding significant theoretical value and practical implications.

This investigation targets SMEs, aiming to understand the underlying processes whereby charismatic leadership shapes team performance, emphasizing the potential mediation by team learning and team cohesion. Based on empirical data, it further explores how charismatic leadership enhances overall performance by promoting team learning and strengthening cohesion among members. To some extent, the research findings address a less-explored area of charismatic leadership in SMEs, and also provide a theoretical basis and practical implications for improving the organizational effectiveness and sustainable development capabilities of such enterprises.

Based on a multidimensional analysis of the charismatic leadership style, this study offers SME leaders and their internal teams or organizations practical insights into leadership behaviors. Additionally, the research provides actionable guidance for enhancing leaders' charismatic management competencies, promoting team learning, and strengthening team cohesion, particularly offering valuable implications for startups in team building and organizational management. The results not only expand the applicability of charismatic leadership theory within SME settings but also offer novel perspectives and methodological pathways for managers to more effectively leverage

this leadership style. This study concentrates on SMEs in Guangdong Province, China, and utilizes survey data gathered from staff and management to examine how charismatic leadership influences team-level outcomes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Charismatic Leadership

Charismatic leadership is characterized by visionary insight, sustained energy, and the empowerment of subordinates (Eatwell, 2014). House (1992) posits that the ability to garner trust, identification, and obedience from subordinates is essential for charismatic leadership. Leaders who serve as role models and exemplars can effectively motivate employees, fostering a sense of self-efficacy key manifestation of their managerial charisma. Through traits such as personal charisma, vision, inspiration, individualized consideration, and risk-taking, charismatic leaders can inspire team members to transcend their limitations and achieve organizational goals (Waldman & Yammarino, 1999).

2.2. Team Learning

The concept of team learning refers to teams improving their collective capabilities in dynamic settings by sharing knowledge, reflecting on experiences, and addressing challenges collaboratively. It is also an activity in which team members acquire, share, refine, or pool task-related knowledge through mutual interaction (Edmondson, 1999). Team learning enhances a team's capacity for flexibility and innovation, while also playing a crucial role in boosting both team performance and the overall effectiveness of the organization. In SMEs, team learning helps enhance team members' ability to handle complex tasks and environmental changes, serving as a crucial pathway for fostering innovation and competitive advantage (Argote & Argote, 2013). Charismatic leaders typically demonstrate personalized care and emotional support towards their subordinates. Such behaviors help enhance the psychological safety of team members, thereby encouraging them to participate more actively in team discussions, express their personal views more readily, and facilitate team reflection and knowledge sharing (Edmondson, 2002).

2.3. Team Cohesion

Team cohesion refers to the centripetal force that makes team members willing to stay within the team, reflecting the emotional bonds among members and manifesting as the unity of goal consistency and behavioral coordination (Carron, 1982). Research indicates that team cohesion helps enhance members' willingness to cooperate and improve collaboration efficiency, thereby promoting the enhancement of overall performance (Beal, Cohen, Burke, & McLendon, 2003). SMEs, characterized by smaller organizational scales and higher interaction frequencies among members, find the role of team cohesion particularly prominent in maintaining organizational stability and improving operational efficiency. In practical operations, SMEs team members often exhibit significant age differences and divergent ways of thinking, which may lead to communication barriers, frequent conflicts, and even increased employee turnover rates, thereby exerting adverse effects on team stability and sustainable development (Zhao et al., 2023).

2.4. Team Performance

Team performance is not merely the simple sum of individual member performances, but rather the overall effectiveness achieved through the interaction and collaboration of team members (Bass, 2014). It reflects the overall effectiveness of team activities, and its formation depends on the interaction process among members. Therefore, team performance often exceeds the linear sum of individual performances, embodying the added value brought by synergy effects. Broadly, performance is typically divided into two categories: organizational performance and individual performance (Kozlowski, Grand, Baard, & Pearce, 2015). Organizational performance indicates how well team members fulfill their assigned tasks and objectives, encompassing various aspects such as the team's overall efficiency in operations, the satisfaction level of its members, the growth of individual professional skills, and the

improvement of the team's collective capabilities.

3. HYPOTHESIS BUILDING

3.1. Charismatic Leadership and Team Performance

Charismatic leadership not only plays a crucial role in large and medium-sized enterprises but also has a profound impact on small and medium-sized enterprises (Dzomonda, Fatoki, & Oni, 2017). SMEs are constrained by limited resources and intense market competition, causing employees to face significant work pressure and environmental uncertainty, which makes team performance highly dependent on the leader's style and behavior. When leaders clearly communicate a vision and reinforce shared values, they often spark motivation and a deeper sense of commitment among team members, factors that are closely tied to better team outcomes (Conger & Kanungo, 1998).

With this foundation, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H_1: Charismatic leadership has a positive effect on the team performance of small and micro enterprises.

3.2. Charismatic Leadership and Team Learning

Charismatic leaders often significantly contribute to encouraging their team's learning. By creating a calm and supportive environment and making space for team members to share their experiences openly, they help build a setting where learning feels natural. This not only supports personal growth but also contributes to stronger overall performance (Lestari, Heryadi, Pranawukir, Anantadjaya, & Alfiyanto, 2023). When leaders clearly communicate the team's vision and goals, it helps people feel more connected to the group and what it stands for an important foundation for meaningful team learning (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). Building on this, Vargas (2015) looked into how leadership style influences learning and performance, and found that under charismatic leadership, team learning tends to boost innovation.

With these insights in mind, we propose this hypothesis:

H_2: Charismatic leadership has a positive effect on team learning in small and micro enterprise teams.

3.3. Charismatic Leadership and Team Cohesion

Some studies indicate that charismatic leadership can effectively enhance team cohesion. By articulating clear visions and specific goals, charismatic leaders inspire a sense of collective mission among team members, encouraging consensus on shared objectives (Eman, Hernández, & González-Romá, 2024). Concurrently, by providing personalized care and emotional support, charismatic leaders strengthen members' psychological safety and mutual trust, thereby reinforcing the emotional bonds within the team (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Furthermore, by leading through example, they motivate team members to actively engage in team activities and decision-making processes, fostering behavioral consistency and elevating the overall teamwork spirit (Yukl, Mahsud, Prussia, & Hassan, 2019).

Drawing on these points, the next hypothesis is formed:

H3: Charismatic leadership has a positive effect on team cohesion of small and micro-enterprise teams.

3.4. Team Learning and Team Performance

In workplace interactions, team members have the ability to influence each other, and individual knowledge and skills can be shared within the group through activities like communication, observation, and joint efforts (Widmann, Messmann, & Mulder, 2016). By combining and leveraging the accumulated knowledge and experiences of the team, individuals can continuously develop their competencies. This leads to improved personal work effectiveness and contributes to the overall performance of the team. As a result, the combined output of a team is typically greater than the mere sum of each member's separate contributions (Sessa & London, 2008).

Some research on how charismatic leadership enhances team performance indicates that leadership style does not always directly affect team performance but may indirectly influence it through mediating variables such as team

learning (Lin, Baruch, & Shih, 2012).

Based on these insights, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H_4: Team learning has a positive effect on the team performance of small and micro enterprises.

H_5: Team learning mediates the positive effect of charismatic leadership on the team performance of small and micro enterprises.

3.5. Team Cohesion and Team Performance

Team cohesion helps to strengthen members' identification with organizational goals, enhance their sense of personal work responsibility, and effectively reduce common "free-riding" behaviors, thereby significantly improving the team's work efficiency and overall performance (Hackman, 2002). The stronger the team cohesion, the more inclined members are to support each other, integrate resources, and take initiative in assuming responsibilities, which in turn enhances the quality and efficiency of work (Tekleab, Quigley, & Tesluk, 2009). Furthermore, team cohesion facilitates the establishment of mutual trust among members, promotes closer collaboration, and strengthens the team's resilience when facing challenges, ultimately exerting a positive impact on both individual work performance and overall team performance (Mathieu, Kukenberger, D'Innocenzo, & Reilly, 2015).

Based on these insights, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H_6: Team cohesion has a positive effect on team performance of small and micro enterprises.

H_7: Team cohesion mediates the positive effect of charismatic leadership on team performance of small and micro enterprises.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework from the related theories and hypotheses development.

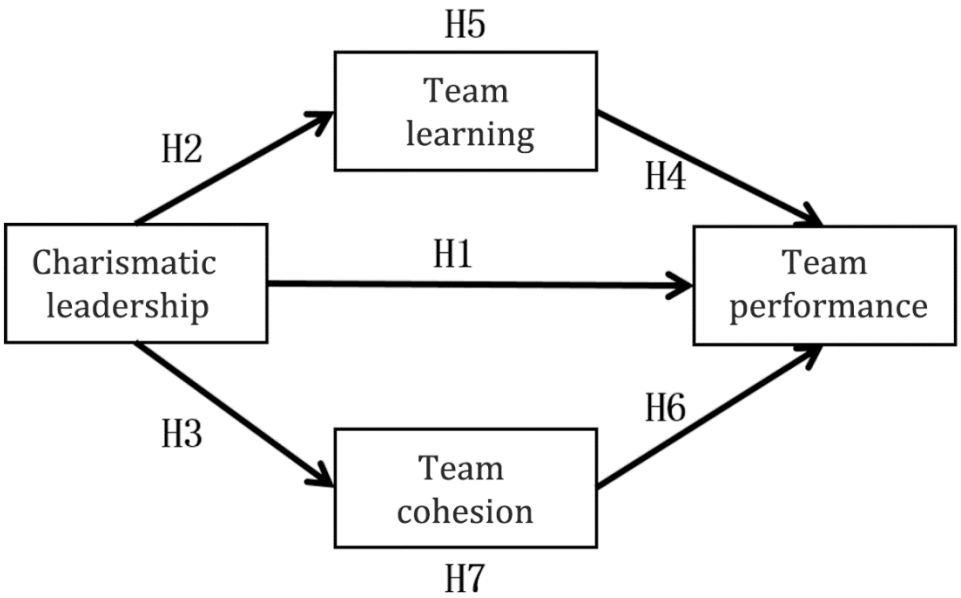

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

4. METHODS

4.1. Sample Selection

This study selected Guangdong Province, China, as the sampling region, with the survey subjects being managers and core team members of SMEs. As China's largest economic province, Guangdong is home to a large number of SMEs, with a broad industrial distribution and abundant corporate resources, providing a substantial source of samples and a solid data foundation for this research (Gong, Jian, Chen, Liu, & Hu, 2022). Due to the difficulty in obtaining a complete list of SMEs and the inability to ensure that randomly selected enterprises would fully cooperate with the survey, this study adopted a convenience sampling method for sample collection.

Considering that this study focuses on SMEs, which typically feature simple organizational structures and relatively small employee numbers, it was assumed that each enterprise had only one core work team. The sample size was estimated based on the Yamane formula (Yamane, 1967). Given that about 30 million people work in SMEs in Guangdong Province (Guangdong Provincial Bureau of Statistics, 2023) the required number of valid questionnaires for this study was ultimately determined to be 400.

4.2. Sampling Method

This study, with the assistance of the Guangdong Small and Medium-sized Enterprises Promotion Association, invited 100 SMEs each employing more than 10 staff members to participate in the questionnaire survey. Association staff distributed electronic questionnaire links to enterprise leaders, who then forwarded them to core team members for completion. The questionnaires distributed to team members incorporated measurement scales evaluating charismatic leadership, team learning, and team cohesion, whereas the questionnaires for enterprise managers contained a measurement scale for team performance.

If the number of valid responses collected in the first round did not reach the predetermined target of 400, the study would proceed to invite additional enterprises for a second round of data collection to ensure that the final sample size met the research requirements.

Given that the number of enterprise management personnel is typically smaller than that of ordinary employees, and to achieve data matching between employee and management responses, each questionnaire was assigned a unique enterprise ID field. This unique identifier effectively linked employee and management questionnaires from the same enterprise. During the data analysis process, if an enterprise submitted more employee questionnaires than management questionnaires, the management questionnaire (e.g., one completed by the CEO) would be duplicated to match the number of employee responses, thereby ensuring consistency in the analytical units.

4.3. Measurements

As the variables target both employees and management personnel, the survey used in this study is divided into two parts. The employee questionnaire is designed to measure variables such as charismatic leadership, team learning, and team cohesion, comprising a total of 39 items. The manager questionnaire is used to assess team performance, consisting of 4 items. This dual-questionnaire approach ensures that the data collected is comprehensive and accurately reflects the perspectives of both employees and management; hence, the overall reliability and empirical validity of the research conclusions are substantially improved.

Charismatic leadership was measured using a scale based on the C-K scale (Conger & Kanungo, 1987) combined with the scale proposed by Wang, Chou, and Jiang (2005). Charismatic leadership is typically conceptualized through four dimensions: leadership charisma, motivational care, visionary inspiration, and risk-taking propensity.

Team learning was measured using a scale based on Edmondson's (1999) assessment of team learning behaviors, combined with the scale by Schippers, Den Hartog, and Koopman (2007). The integration of these two scales leveraged their strengths, forming the final team learning scale for this study. Team learning includes two dimensions: thinking about work and reflecting on work.

Team cohesion was measured using scales developed by Henry, Arrow, and Carini (1999); Carron, Widmeyer and Brawley (1985), and Chang and Bordia (2001). It comprises three dimensions: affective consistency, goal consistency, and behavioral consistency.

Finally, team performance was measured using the four-item task performance scale developed by Zellmer-Bruhn and Gibson (2006).

Questionnaires were filled out directly by the participants, and all questions used a 5-point Likert scale.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Data

In this study, 87 SMEs participated in the survey, with responses collected from both management and employees. A total of 738 valid questionnaires were obtained, including 433 completed by employees and 305 by senior management. The 305 questionnaires from management were matched with the corresponding 433 employee questionnaires using enterprise codes.

5.2. Demographic Characteristics

Regarding team size, as shown in Table 1, the teams ranged in size from 5 to 20, with an average number of 10.94 members. This reflects the typical pattern of Chinese startups beginning with small teams and gradually expanding as their business grows.

In terms of employee work experience, the surveyed team members had experience ranging from a minimum of 0.5 years (with less than one year counted as 0.5) to a maximum of 5 years, with an average of 2.286 years. This suggests that, due to limitations in salary competitiveness and technical capacity, Chinese startups often struggle to attract highly experienced employees. As a result, they tend to hire recent graduates or individuals with limited work experience, contributing to the relatively low average level of work experience among employees in SMEs.

With regard to the departments to which the teams belong, as presented in Table 2, 6.5% of respondents were from management and decision-making departments, 7.9% from finance and compliance, 31.4% from marketing and sales, 30.7% from product and research and development (R&D), and 23.5% from operations and support. The largest proportion, marketing and sales, may be attributed to the critical role these functions play in the survival and growth of SMEs. Since sales performance directly impacts cash flow and profitability, key sources of revenue, these enterprises must allocate significant resources to ensure the effective operation of this function (Chatterjee, Chaudhuri, & Vrontis, 2022).

Table 1. Team size and employee experience description.

Variables	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Total team size	5	20	10.94	3.981
Employee work experience	0.5	5	2.286	1.41

Table 2. Team department description.

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percent (%)
Team department	Management and decision-making departments	28	6.5
	Finance and Compliance Department	34	7.9
	Marketing and sales department	136	31.4
	Product and R&D department	133	30.7
	Total	433	100

5.3. Measurement Model Analysis

Following the analytical framework outlined by Hair et al. (2021), this study conducts model analysis in two stages. The first step is to assess whether the part of the model responsible for measurement captures the intended variables accurately. In the second stage, attention is given to the structural model to check if the hypothesized relationships are supported and to assess the direction and strength of the effects among variables. Because the data were self-reported, it was also necessary to test for common method bias to ensure the reliability of the data.

The analysis of the measurement model includes examining whether reliability, validity, and multicollinearity concerns are present. These analyses are conducted to ensure that the data collected in this study possess high credibility and validity, and to identify potential multicollinearity issues among the variables (Chin, 1998; Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019).

Cronbach's α coefficient (CA) and composite reliability (CR) are used to measure the internal consistency of the scales during reliability testing. Concurrently, indicator reliability is employed to examine the stability and consistency of each observed variable. For the issue of multicollinearity, the variance inflation factor (VIF) is utilized to assess whether there is high correlation among the predictor variables.

Convergent and discriminant validity are assessed using AVE, the Fornell-Larcker criterion, and the HTMT.

Table 3. The standardized factor loading.

HOC	LOC	Items	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Charismatic leadership	Leadership charisma	B1	0.865	0.886	0.888	0.687
		B2	0.842			
		B3	0.791			
		B4	0.829			
		B5	0.818			
	Motivational caring	B6	0.813	0.795	0.797	0.709
		B7	0.847			
		B8	0.866			
	Visionary inspiration	B9	0.907	0.900	0.901	0.769
		B10	0.885			
		B11	0.864			
		B12	0.851			
	Dare to take risks	B13	0.826	0.818	0.836	0.733
		B14	0.905			
		B15	0.836			
Team learning	Thinking about work	C1	0.855	0.876	0.878	0.669
		C2	0.840			
		C3	0.818			
		C4	0.781			
		C5	0.793			
	Reflecting on work	C6	0.873	0.873	0.873	0.725
		C7	0.828			
		C8	0.846			
		C9	0.857			
Team cohesion	Affective consistency	D1	0.855	0.852	0.853	0.693
		D2	0.830			
		D3	0.829			
		D4	0.816			
	Goal consistency	D5	0.802	0.826	0.826	0.658
		D6	0.805			
		D7	0.827			
		D8	0.810			
	Behavioral consistency	D9	0.899	0.902	0.902	0.773
		D10	0.894			
		D11	0.857			
		D12	0.866			
Team performance	Team performance	E1	0.833	0.869	0.872	0.717
		E2	0.858			
		E3	0.850			
		E4	0.847			

Table 3 displays the relevant data; all item loadings in this study exceeded 0.7, meeting the minimum threshold recommended by Vinzi, Trinchera, and Amato (2010). This indicates that all measurement items effectively reflect their corresponding latent variables, and therefore, all items should be retained. The CA and CR values for all variable dimensions exceeded 0.7 (Chin, 1998; Cronbach, 1951), indicating good internal consistency reliability for the questionnaire items. Additionally, the AVE values for all items were greater than 0.5, demonstrating strong convergent validity for the model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

As shown in Table 4, the bolded diagonal values show the square root of the AVE for each latent variable, while the off-diagonal cells display the correlation coefficients between variables. The AVE square root of all latent variables exceeds their coefficient of correlation with the other latent variables, meaning that each latent variable effectively represents its own unique concept and is not confused with the other latent variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The HTMT values among all latent variables are lower than 0.85 (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015), indicating that the HTMT values among all latent variables in this study meet the criteria and therefore have good discriminant validity.

Table 4. Criteria for discriminant validity.

Fornell-Larcker criterion										
	AC	**BC**	**GC**	**RW**	**TP**	**TW**	**DT**	**LC**	**MC**	**VI**
AC	**0.832**									
BC	0.549	**0.879**								
GC	0.551	0.593	**0.811**							
RW	0.363	0.356	0.330	**0.851**						
TP	0.526	0.543	0.512	0.518	**0.847**					
TW	0.361	0.345	0.362	0.577	0.548	**0.818**				
DT	0.413	0.457	0.395	0.448	0.455	0.358	**0.856**			
LC	0.448	0.474	0.397	0.488	0.566	0.499	0.608	**0.829**		
MC	0.378	0.373	0.443	0.414	0.420	0.456	0.528	0.561	**0.842**	
VI	0.575	0.588	0.588	0.500	0.564	0.538	0.548	0.592	0.540	**0.877**
Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio										
AC										
BC	0.626									
GC	0.656	0.687								
RW	0.421	0.401	0.389							
TP	0.610	0.613	0.602	0.593						
TW	0.419	0.389	0.425	0.658	0.626					
DT	0.491	0.523	0.473	0.526	0.534	0.416				
LC	0.516	0.530	0.463	0.553	0.643	0.567	0.707			
MC	0.459	0.440	0.546	0.497	0.502	0.544	0.645	0.666		
VI	0.657	0.653	0.683	0.565	0.636	0.606	0.623	0.662	0.637	

Note: AC=Affective consistency, BC=Behavioral consistency, GC=Goal consistency, RW=Reflecting on work, TP=Team Performance, TW=Thinking about work, DT=Dare to take risks, LC=Leadership charisma, MC=Motivational caring, VI=Visionary inspiration.

5.4. Structural Model Analysis

Bootstrapping analysis with 5,000 resamples was conducted in SmartPLS 4.0 to assess the proposed hypotheses through two-tailed t-tests.

According to Table 5, team performance in SMEs is positively influenced by charismatic leadership ($\beta = 0.166$, $p = 0.004$), indicating that charismatic leadership can effectively enhance team performance, thus supporting H1. Simultaneously, the influence of charismatic leadership on team learning in SMEs is also significant, showing a strong positive relationship ($\beta = 0.638$, $p < 0.001$), which suggests that charismatic leadership plays an important role in promoting team learning, thereby confirming H2. Charismatic leadership also has a robust and meaningful positive impact on team cohesion ($\beta = 0.672$, $p < 0.001$), further validating its positive role in enhancing team cohesion, promoting member collaboration and unity, and thus providing empirical support for H3.

It was found that team learning positively and significantly impacts team performance in SMEs ($\beta = 0.322$, $p = 0.000$). This suggests that as team members' capacity for collaborative learning improves, overall team performance increases accordingly, thereby supporting H4. Similarly, team cohesion shows a significant positive correlation with team performance ($\beta = 0.363$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that enhanced cohesion among team members significantly contributes to improved team performance. H6 is thus validated.

Evidence from the findings supports team learning as a partial mediator in the link between charismatic leadership and team performance in SMEs ($\beta=0.206$, $p=0.000$), supporting H5. This indicates that team learning serves as a crucial mediating pathway through which charismatic leadership influences team performance. Likewise,

team cohesion partially mediates the influence of charismatic leadership on team performance in SMEs (β=0.244, p=0.000), with H7 being validated as well. These findings illustrate that charismatic leadership enhances team performance both directly and indirectly, primarily by promoting team learning and reinforcing cohesion among team members.

5.5. Common Method Bias (CMB) Assessment and Multicollinearity

The variance inflation factor (VIF) values for the model paths in this study range from 1 to 2.401, which falls within the recommended range of 0.2 to 5 suggested by Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2011). Therefore, there is no significant multicollinearity issue in this study. Based on the standards set by Kock and Lynn (2012) the maximum VIF value for any path in this study is 2.401, which is well below the threshold of 3.3, further confirming that there is no CMB in this study (See Table 5).

Table 5. The Test Results of Direct Hypotheses.

Hypothesis	Path	β coefficient	Standard deviation	T-values	P-values	VIF	Result
H1	CL→ TP	0.166	0.058	2.849	0.004	2.401	Support
H2	CL→ TL	0.638	0.033	19.539	0.000	1	Support
H3	CL→ TC	0.672	0.033	20.354	0.000	1	Support
H4	TL→ TP	0.322	0.046	7.026	0.000	1.698	Support
H5	TC → TP	0.363	0.059	6.133	0.000	1.835	Support
H6	CL→TL→TP	0.206	0.030	6.869	0.000	\	Partial
H7	CL→TC → TP	0.244	0.041	5.914	0.000	\	Partial

Note: CL= Charismatic leadership, TP= Team performance, TL= Team learning, TC= Team cohesion.

5.6. Model Fit

The coefficient of determination (R^2) is a key indicator of model fit in regression analysis. In PLS-SEM, R^2 is used to assess the model's explanatory power for endogenous latent variables (Ringle, 2004). In this study, R^2 values for team performance (R^2=0.523), team learning (R^2=0.408), and team cohesion (R^2=0.452) suggest that the model has moderate explanatory power for these three variables, although some unexplained variance may be attributed to other unaccounted factors. According to Cohen (2013) an f^2 value greater than 0.35 is considered to indicate a large effect. The analysis indicates that charismatic leadership exerts a substantial effect on both team cohesion (f^2 = 0.823) and team learning (f^2 = 0.688), demonstrating strong explanatory power for these relationships. Additionally, the predictive relevance of the model was assessed using the Q^2 statistic, which evaluates its capability to forecast endogenous constructs (Chin, 2010). Values of Q^2 greater than zero suggest adequate predictive accuracy. In this study, team cohesion exhibited the highest predictive relevance with a Q^2 value of 0.448. Similarly, the Q^2 values for team learning (0.405) and team performance (0.374) were noteworthy, indicating the model's solid ability to predict these variables.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that charismatic leadership plays an important role in improving team performance. For SME leaders, charismatic leadership manages people's attention through their influence based on inspirational motivation, an optimistic and challenging outlook, and role modeling, promoting the trust and loyalty of followers. This dynamic encourages greater cooperation and personal accountability and focuses team effort on common goals, resulting in improved team performance. This finding helps enrich the theoretical development regarding charismatic leadership, especially in the case of SMEs (Le Blanc, González-Romá, & Wang, 2021; Rafiq & Khan, 2023).

There is a positive connection between charismatic leadership and team learning. When charismatic leaders articulate the company's vision, they motivate employees to reach their full potential and align their professional

ambitions with the organizational goals they set (Al Harbi, Alarifi, & Mosbah, 2019). Charismatic leaders also foster the team's sense of belonging. They act as role models by strengthening the team and fostering team spirit through their self-confidence, commitment, and sense of responsibility. Additionally, they inspire passion and loyalty while building a system of interpersonal relationships and mutual trust (Yelamanchili, 2019).

Team learning shows a clear positive link with team performance. During everyday work, reflection helps them improve their innovative capabilities, encouraging them to explore better solutions or creative results despite constrained resources. Besides, reflecting on historical lessons improves their ability to learn from successes and failures, thus promoting their further growth. Both these modes of learning provide a stable foundation for an SME's effective functioning and facilitate a consistent improvement in team performance (Boon, Vangrieken, & Dochy, 2016).

Besides, team cohesion contributes positively to better team performance. Greater team cohesion leads to higher mutual trust among team members, which can effectively alleviate internal friction and contradictions, improve the smoothness and quality of team coordination (Shang & Ku, 2018), encourage team members to help and support each other, improving collaboration efficiency and better team performance (Leo, Sánchez-Oliva, Amado, & García-Calvo, 2016).

Team learning acts as a bridge between charismatic leadership and team performance, showing a meaningful indirect effect. This suggests that leaders of SMEs motivate team members to engage in learning behaviors, then keep the team in an improvement mechanism and nurture an innovative team culture, with this positive circle to improve team performance indirectly. This conclusion further deepens the practical notion of team learning as a significant mediating process.

Likewise, group cohesion positively mediates the effect of charismatic leadership on team performance to offer an important indirect effect. Indeed, charismatic leaders contribute to improving the team cohesion of the team members, which, in turn, will increase their commitment and sense of belonging to the organization. This condition would reduce internal conflict and employee resignations. In addition, a positive team environment and strong relational trust between members will also boost the work efficiency of individuals and, thus, team effectiveness (Van Der Voet & Steijn, 2021).

7. CONCLUSION

7.1. Theoretical Implications

This study seeks to explore the impact of charismatic leadership on team performance within SMEs. We explore how charismatic leadership affects team performance in SMEs by examining its relationship with team learning and team cohesion. Finally, we develop a structural equation model with four variables: charismatic leadership, team performance, team learning, and team cohesion. Through the analyses above, this paper illustrates the complex linkages among charismatic leadership, team learning, team cohesion, team performance, and organizational performance; this helps confirm the research hypotheses and supports the theory of charismatic leadership within SMEs.

This study illustrates the influence of charismatic leadership on team performance, which is especially helpful for resource-constrained SMEs where the leader's charismatic style plays a significant role.

This paper demonstrates how team learning is introduced as a mediating variable, whereby charismatic leadership improves team performance by fostering learning behavior. The impact of charismatic leadership on team performance is significantly transmitted via team learning. Team learning can be developed through the leader's vision and charisma, which help form a learning team culture and encourage team members to share experiential knowledge and generate ideas, thereby enhancing team performance (Cherkos, Zegeye, Tilahun, & Avvari, 2018). Team cohesion is also an important mediating variable between charismatic leadership and performance. The leader's behavior increases team members' sense of identity and membership. It indirectly promotes team performance through team cohesion improvement.

Moreover, this research contributes to meeting United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). This study enhances understanding of charismatic leadership in SMEs, which helps create a positive workplace for members, thereby increasing member satisfaction, reducing the turnover ratio, and boosting work efficiency and productivity.

Last but not least, this paper contributes new evidence regarding how leaders' management styles influence team performance in SMEs and its benefits for efforts to attain sustainable development objectives, with great relevance for scholars in the academic field.

7.2. Practical implications

Since SMEs are small in scale and have flexible organizational structures, they are a fertile ground for charismatic leadership. This paper also provides SMEs with specific implementation strategies related to charismatic leadership, team learning, and team cohesion, which help improve team performance and organizational competitiveness.

7.2.1. Enhancing Charismatic Leadership

Leaders should develop good interpersonal relationships with each member of the team and foster greater team cohesion and emotional bonds among members through humanized treatment and inspiring vision. Leaders should pay more attention to enhancing their ability to express a personal vision and to emotionally influence others and emotional infectivity. This can be realized by making clear, quantified goals, receiving training in public speaking, learning methods of empathy, and developing emotional connections with more members to improve personal charisma.

7.2.2. Promoting Team Learning

The leader needs to develop challenging objectives within the team to arouse members' desire for learning and their perception of self-development. Meanwhile, the leader should establish an active learning atmosphere that inspires mutual knowledge transfer, communication, and learning among members. Herein, based on these foundations, the leader should champion an innovative culture and a certain degree of risk-taking, along with the construction of a failure-tolerance mechanism. Members may then try to absorb new things and adopt new practices. Members need immediate and well-intentioned guidance from leaders to identify their learning paths and professional development so as to fully enhance both individual and team competence.

7.2.3. Strengthening Team Cohesion

Managers should set an inspiring and specific common goal, which can arouse the emotional resonance of the staff. At the same time, managers need to create a communication style that can increase interpersonal trust and the feeling of belonging. Companies should pay attention to and meet employees' real needs, provide necessary support and encouragement. In addition, managers should consistently organize a series of team-building activities to strengthen the sense of team spirit. Results and contributions must be acknowledged and appreciated in a timely manner so as to motivate good work spirits.

7.3. Limitations

The research provides some theoretical and policy insights, but there are some limitations as well. One is that the research was constrained by both time and resource limitations to conduct convenience sampling research, and as a result, our findings might be limited in terms of the representativeness of the research sample and the generalizability of the findings across all SMEs in China (Emerson, 2021). Second, the subjects were mostly sourced from small businesses in Guangdong Province, and thus the results mainly indicate the situation in this area rather than SMEs in the entire country.

Additionally, this study utilized cross-sectional data recorded at one specific point in time, thereby limiting the possibility of observing long-term causalities of charismatic leadership and team performance. Furthermore, at present, there is insufficient empirical evidence concerning the permanence of the mediating effects of team learning and team cohesion in this causal chain.

7.4. Future Research

There are a series of important future avenues for this research. To name three, the sample could be extended in the future to include SMEs from different industry sectors, geographical locations, and countries; this will enable more comprehensive analysis of how charismatic leadership influences team performance across multiple locations/organizations, strengthening the generalizability of this study and the external validity of the effects. Second, by using a longitudinal research design and collecting data at different points in time, it would be possible to examine the dynamic relationships between charismatic leadership, team learning, team cohesion, and team performance, to address possible causality and development patterns. Moreover, additional potential mediators/moderators (e.g., team innovation, psychological capital) could further address other possible pathways and perfect the current theoretical model regarding charismatic leadership. Last but not least, in addition to what is presented in the present paper, future work should also study the use of emerging technologies such as AI and big data platforms in organizational management arenas.

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