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Original Research Article

The Impact of Entrepreneurial Leadership on Innovative Work Behavior in SMEs Of Zhejiang Province, China: The Mediating Role of Firm's Innovative Environment and Creative Self-Efficacy

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of entrepreneurial leadership on innovative work behavior (IWB) within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Zhejiang Province, China, with a specific focus on the mediating roles of the firm's innovative environment and creative self-efficacy. Employing a quantitative research design, data were collected from 400 SME owners and managers using a purposive sampling technique. The data were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS software to examine the relationships between variables and test the proposed mediation model. The findings reveal a significant and positive relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and IWB. Additionally, the firm's innovative environment and creative self-efficacy both serve as significant mediators in this relationship. These results suggest that entrepreneurial leadership alone does not solely influence innovative behaviors; rather, its impact is amplified when supported by a conducive innovative environment and high levels of employee creative self-efficacy.

The study contributes to the understanding of how entrepreneurial leadership drives innovation in SMEs by highlighting the importance of internal organizational factors. It emphasizes the need for SME leaders to cultivate an innovative culture and enhance employee confidence in their creative abilities to maximize innovative outcomes. These insights provide practical implications for fostering a supportive ecosystem that encourages innovation and sustains competitive advantage in the dynamic SME sector.

Introduction

China's remarkable economic transformation over recent decades has been significantly driven by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These firms account for approximately 97% of all businesses in the country and play a crucial role in employment generation, innovation, and regional development (Liu et al., 2022). SMEs are recognized not only for their contribution to GDP but also for their agility in responding to market shifts and consumer demands (Zhang, 2021). Their ability to act quickly and innovatively has made them vital players in China's strategy for sustainable and balanced growth. In acknowledgment of their importance, the Chinese government has implemented several supportive initiatives, including access to capital, reduced regulatory procedures, and financial incentives (Lam & Liu, 2020).

Amidst the complex and competitive environment that characterizes SMEs, leadership particularly entrepreneurial leadership has emerged as a pivotal determinant of firm performance. Entrepreneurial leadership is defined by a forward-looking vision, a proactive and risk-taking orientation, and an emphasis on innovation (Weaven et al., 2021). These leadership qualities are especially pertinent in SMEs, which often face unique constraints such as limited resources and uncertain market conditions. Entrepreneurial leaders not only guide their firms through challenges but also cultivate organizational cultures that support innovation and adaptability.

A key outcome associated with entrepreneurial leadership is innovative work behavior (IWB) employees' intentional efforts to generate, promote, and implement novel ideas within their roles (Hoang et al., 2022). Entrepreneurial leaders often establish a psychological climate that encourages experimentation, tolerates failure, and values creative problem-solving. Such environments empower employees to contribute meaningfully and creatively to organizational goals (Herrera, 2022). However, despite the theoretical recognition of the link between entrepreneurial leadership and innovative behavior, empirical research remains limited. There is a lack of clarity regarding the specific mechanisms through which entrepreneurial leadership impacts innovative work behavior, particularly within the context of Chinese SMEs (Nguyen et al., 2021). The need to unpack the distinct components of entrepreneurial leadership such as risk-taking and visionary decision-making and understand their direct influence on employee creativity is critical.

Additionally, the mediating role of the organizational innovative environment is an underexplored area. While existing literature acknowledges the importance of organizational context for fostering innovation, few studies have examined how specific internal conditions such as resource availability, supportive structures, and cultural norms mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and innovative work behavior (Bratianu et al., 2023). This oversight limits both theoretical development and practical guidance for SME leaders.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate how entrepreneurial leadership affects innovative work behavior in SMEs located in Zhejiang Province, China. It focuses on identifying and empirically validating the causal mechanisms by which entrepreneurial traits—namely risk-taking and visionary leadership promote innovation among employees. Moreover, it examines the mediating role of the firm's internal innovative environment to determine which organizational factors strengthen or weaken this relationship. By addressing these gaps, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how SMEs can cultivate innovation through effective leadership and supportive internal conditions.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Innovative work behaviour is greatly influenced by entrepreneurial leadership, which also shapes organisational cultures that value innovation, flexibility, and proactive problem-solving. A visionary approach is demonstrated by leaders that have an entrepreneurial mindset, encouraging staff members to welcome change and see obstacles as opportunities (Sibeko & Barnard, 2020). These leaders create a culture where learning from both failures and accomplishments is valued by encouraging their staff to try out new ideas and creating a risk-tolerant atmosphere. Employees have the authority to think outside the box, take calculated chances, and provide creative solutions to organisational problems, which is why this mentality shift is essential for fostering innovative work behaviour. An organization's innovative culture is greatly shaped and influenced by entrepreneurial leadership, which cultivates a mindset that values innovation, flexibility, and forward-thinking (Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024). The ability of the leader to provide staff members a feeling of direction and purpose is one of the main effects. Leading entrepreneurs paint a vivid picture of the organization's future, motivating people to pool their resources and work towards shared objectives. This common vision acts as a catalyst, inspiring staff members to investigate novel concepts and methods that advance the achievement of the main entrepreneurial objectives.

Furthermore, the development of a risk-tolerant culture is greatly aided by entrepreneurial leaders. Through the acceptance of uncertainty and the promotion of measured risk-taking, these leaders enable their teams to test out creative ideas and solutions (Creely et al., 2021). Because they can explore new ideas without worrying about facing consequences for mistakes, employees in this risk-tolerant workplace are more creative. As a result, people are more inclined to experiment and pursue creative projects in a dynamic environment where they are free to take risks.

Employees' innovative work behaviour is greatly shaped and influenced by the innovative work environment of the company. An approach that prioritises innovation, trial and error, and the search for new ideas is fostered by the organisational environment, culture, and structures taken together. Employees are urged to go beyond the box and given the tools and support they need to realise their creative ideas in an innovative work environment. The development of an atmosphere that appreciates and encourages creativity is one important effect. Employees are more likely to participate in innovative work practices when they believe that their creative efforts are valued and acknowledged (De Clercq & Pereira, 2020). There are many other ways to be recognised, such as by leadership, through professional growth opportunities, or even with material prizes. This loop of positive reinforcement encourages staff members to regularly come up with and execute novel ideas.

Entrepreneurial leadership is essential for molding and boosting creative self-efficacy, which affects people's confidence in their capacity to come up with novel and unique ideas (Irshad et al., 2023). Since entrepreneurial leadership cultivates a climate that encourages independence, taking calculated risks, and having a purpose, it has a significant effect on creative self-efficacy. Entrepreneurs, identified for their innovative and daring methods, encourage and enable their groups to think creatively, fostering an attitude that welcomes trial and error and questions the status quo (Hamdan, 2023). Partaking entrepreneurial leadership is essential to a company's ability to be innovative (Razzaque et al., 2023). This kind of leadership is defined by a bold and daring approach, a focus on creativity, and the cultivation

of an atmosphere that encourages innovation. Entrepreneurial leaders push their staff to think creatively, take calculated chances, and explore new ideas.

The belief that one can effectively produce and carry out creative ideas is known as creative self-efficacy. Creative self-efficacy has a significant influence on innovative work behaviour, influencing how people approach and respond to their work surroundings (Sarwoko, 2020). Employees are more likely to take innovative actions that promote good change inside an organization when they have a high degree of creative self-efficacy. People who have a high level of creative self-efficacy are driven to innovate by taking chances, trying new things, and overcoming obstacles (Mehmood et al., 2020). Employees that possess this self-belief are more likely to approach problem-solving pro-actively and to think creatively. They are more inclined to try out original ideas, adjust to new situations, and bring fresh viewpoints to the process of thinking. Therefore,

H1: There is a positive and significant impact of entrepreneurial leadership on innovative work behavior.

H2: There is a positive and significant impact of entrepreneurial leadership on firm's innovative environment.

H3: There is a positive and significant impact of firm's innovative environment on innovative work behavior.

H4: There is a positive and significant impact of entrepreneurial leadership on creative self-efficacy.

H5: There is a positive and significant impact of creative self-efficacy on innovative work behavior.

H6: There is mediation role of firm's innovative environment between entrepreneurial leadership and innovative work behavior.

H7: There is mediation role of creative self-efficacy between entrepreneurial leadership and innovative work behavior.

Theoretical Framework

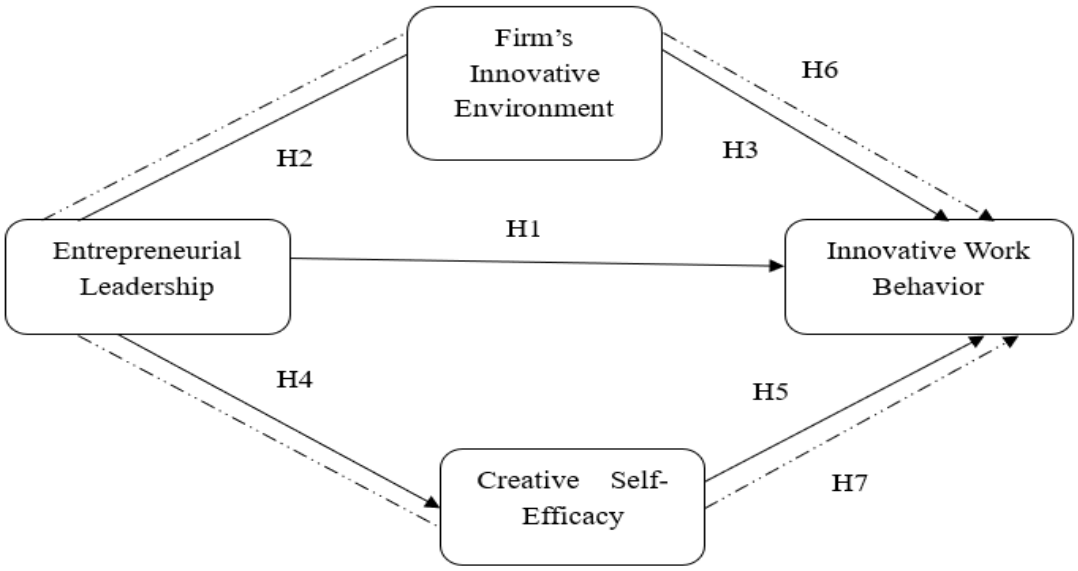

Figure 1 Theoretical Framework

Research Objectives

1. What does the relationship among entrepreneurial leadership, innovative work behaviour, firm's innovative environment and creative self-efficacy?
2. How does the mediation role of firm's innovative environment in the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and innovative work behaviour?
3. How does the mediation role of creative self-efficacy in the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and innovative work behaviour?

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research approach to examine the impact of entrepreneurial leadership on innovative work behavior (IWB) in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Zhejiang Province, China. The research further explores the mediating roles of the firm's innovative environment and creative self-efficacy. The target population consists of owners and managers of SMEs operating in Zhejiang Province. These individuals are directly involved in strategic decision-making and innovation implementation, making them suitable respondents for the study. A total of 400 respondents were selected using a purposive sampling technique, which ensured the inclusion of participants with relevant knowledge and experience in entrepreneurial leadership and innovation practices. The online questionnaire is done through question star and the data were collected through QQ and we chat for quantitative analysis. The AMOS and SPSS software is used for the analysis of data. The reliability and validity of data is done by using Cronbach alpha and confirmatory factor analysis. In the study Cronbach alpha of Entrepreneurial Leadership was 0.829, Innovative Work Behavior was 0.870, Firm's Innovative Environment was 0.929, Creative Self-efficacy was 0.941 which is higher than 0.7 (Shemwell et al., 2015) so it is accepted. The model fit should have a RMSEA between 0.05 and 0.08 or below, a chisq/df less than 5.0, and GFI, CFI, and IFI greater than 0.9 (Burkhalter et al., 2010).

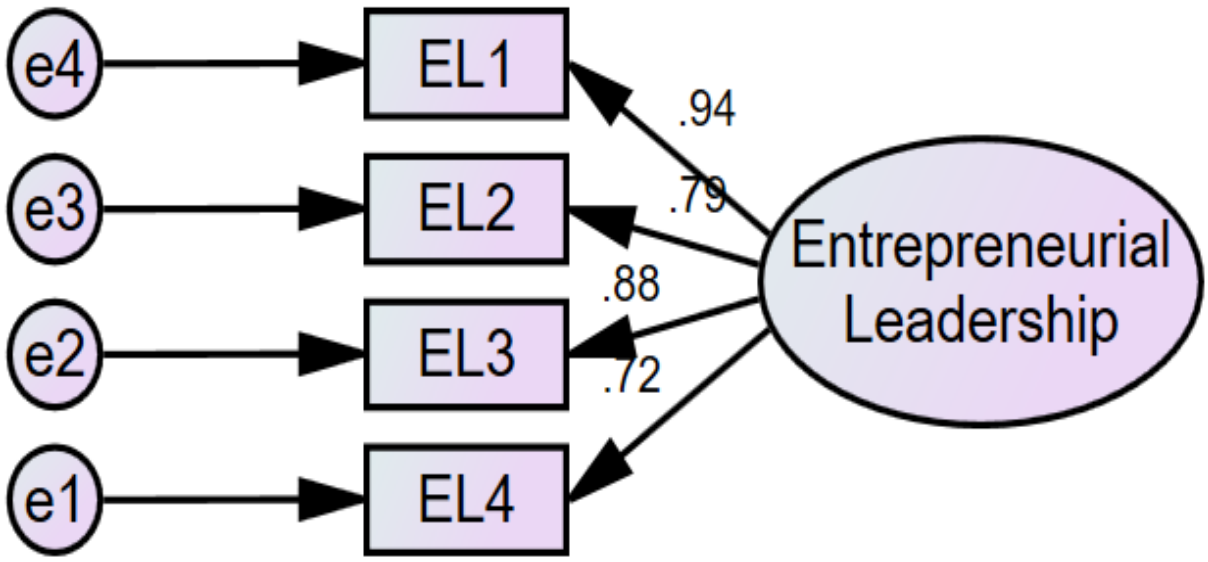

Figure 2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Entrepreneurial Leadership

In confirmatory factor analysis of entrepreneurial leadership RMSEA was 0.072, a Chisq/df was 3.076, and GFI, CFI, and IFI was 0.993, 0.996 and 0.996 so the model is fit.

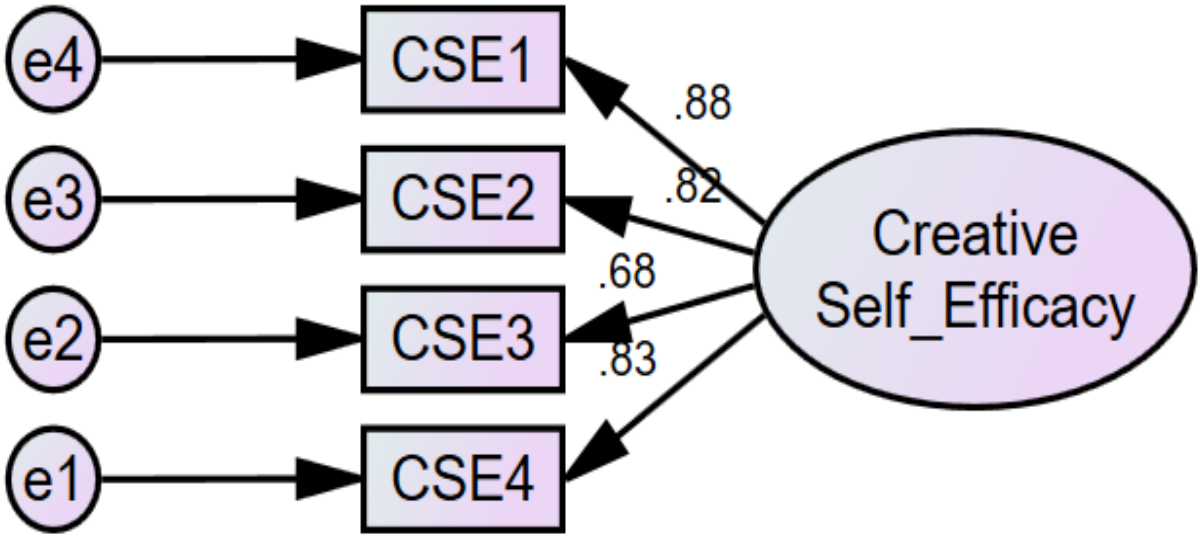

Figure 3 Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Creative Self-efficacy

In confirmatory factor analysis of creative self-efficacy RMSEA was 0.019, a Chisq/df was 1.140, and GFI, CFI, and IFI was 0.997, 1.000 and 1.000 so the model is fit.

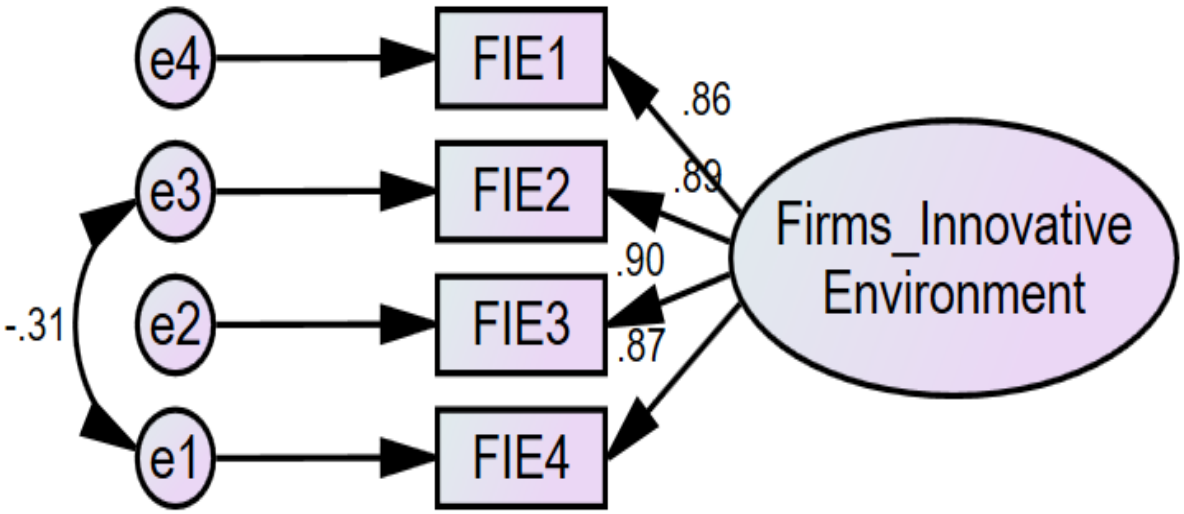

Figure 4 Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Firm's Innovative Environment

In confirmatory factor analysis of firm's innovative environment RMSEA was 0.036, a Chisq/df was 1.517, and GFI, CFI, and IFI was 0.998, 1.000 and 1.000 so the model is fit.

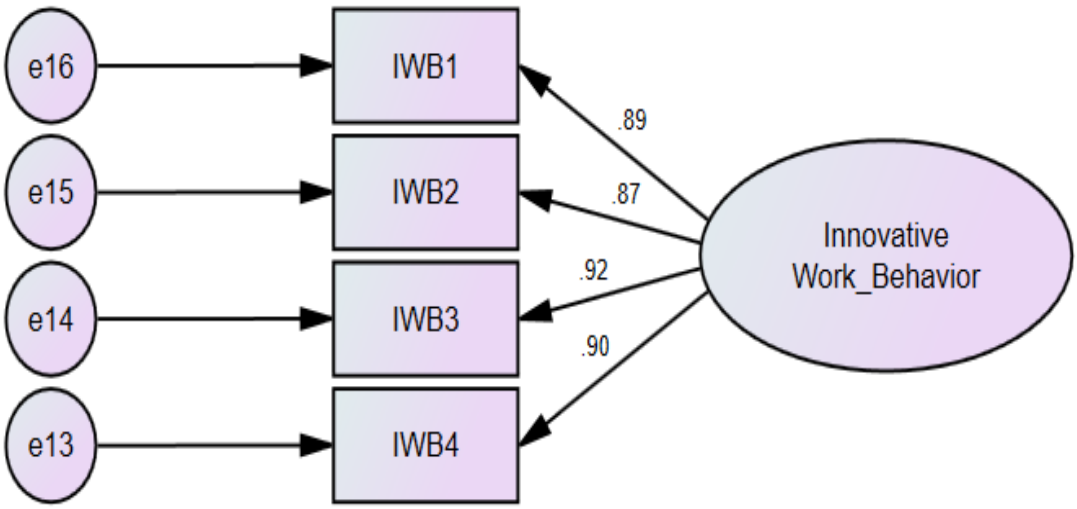

Figure 5 Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Innovative Work Behavior

In confirmatory factor analysis of innovative work behavior RMSEA was 0.064, a Chisq/df was 2.656, and GFI, CFI, and IFI was 0.993, 0.998 and 0.998 so the model is fit.

Research Tools

A structured questionnaire was developed based on validated scales from previous literature. The questionnaire included Likert-scale items measuring entrepreneurial leadership, innovative work behavior, firm's innovative environment, and creative self-efficacy.

Procedures and Data Collection

Data were collected through self-administered surveys, either distributed in person or electronically via email and online platforms. Prior to the main study, a pilot test was conducted with 30 respondents to ensure the reliability and clarity of the instrument.

Data analysis

Collected data were coded and analyzed using SPSS for descriptive statistics, reliability tests, and correlation analysis. AMOS software was used to conduct structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesized relationships and mediating effects between variables.

The demographic information of the respondents consists of gender, age, marital status, education, position, types of enterprises and years of operation. The higher number of respondents gender is male (61.25%) followed by female (38.75%) respectively. The higher number of respondents age is 26-35 years (38.75%) followed by 36-45 years (30%), 46 years and above (17.5%) and below 25 years (13.75%) respectively. The higher number of respondents marital status is married (68.5%) followed by single (31.5%) respectively. The higher number of respondents education is undergraduate (41.75%) followed by graduate (28%), higher school (21.5%) and doctoral (8.75%) respectively. The higher number of respondents is owner (63.25%) followed by manager (36.75%) respectively. The higher number of respondents is small enterprises (52%) followed by medium enterprises (48%) respectively. The higher number of

respondents is 11-15 years (33%) followed by 6-10 years (31.75%), up to 5 years (18.5%) and above 15 years (16.75%) respectively.

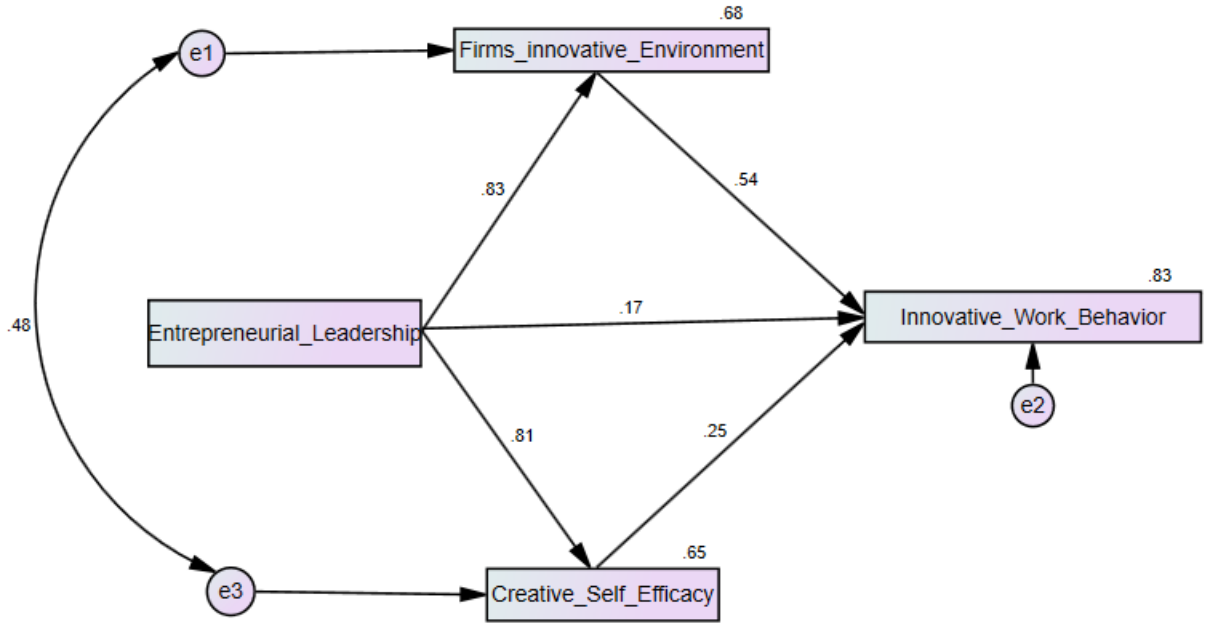

Figure 6 Path Analysis

In path analysis GFI, CFI, and IFI was 1.000, 1.000 and 1.000 so the model is fit.

This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between entrepreneurial leadership and innovative work behavior, along with the mediating influence of organizational and psychological factors.

Results

Table 1 *Direct Effect*

Direc Direct Path	Standardized Path Coefficient	S. E	C.R	P
Entrepreneurial Leadership –> Innovative Work Behavior	0.172	0.043	4.312	***
Entrepreneurial Leadership –> Firm's Innovative Environment	0.826	0.031	29.221	***
Firm's Innovative Environment –> Innovative Work Behavior	0.539	0.041	12.923	***
Entrepreneurial Leadership –> Creative Self-Efficacy	0.807	0.030	27.297	***
Creative Self-Efficacy –> Innovative Work Behavior	0.250	0.041	6.276	***

Note: ***p<0.001 *Source*: Data and Information from Research

In table 1 shows that the standard path coefficient and p-value are (0.172 and p<0.001) in the path from Entrepreneurial Leadership to Innovative Work Behavior which shows that the hypothesis (H1) is accepted. Similarly standard path coefficient and p-value are (0.826 and p<0.001) in the path from Entrepreneurial Leadership to Firm's Innovative Environment which shows that the hypothesis (H2) is accepted. Likewise, standard path coefficient and p-value are

(0.539 and p<0.001) in the path from Firm's Innovative Environment to Innovative Work Behavior which shows that the hypothesis (H3) is accepted. Also, standard path coefficient and p-value are (0.807 and p<0.001) in the path from Entrepreneurial Leadership to Creative Self-Efficacy which shows that the hypothesis (H4) is accepted. Similarly, standard path coefficient and p-value are (0.250 and p<0.001) in the path from Creative Self-Efficacy to Innovative Work Behavior which shows that the hypothesis (H5) is accepted.

Table 2 *Indirect Effect*

Indirect Path	Estimate	Lower	Upper	P
Entrepreneurial Leadership –> Firm's Innovative Environment –> Innovative Work Behavior	0.445	0.368	0.584	***
Entrepreneurial Leadership –> Creative Self-Efficacy –> Innovative Work Behavior	0.202	0.132	0.299	**

Note: ***p<0.001, **p<0.010

Source: Data and Information from Research

In table 4.2 shows that the standard path coefficient and p-value are (0.445 and p<0.001) in the path from Entrepreneurial Leadership to Firm's Innovative Environment to Innovative Work Behavior which shows that the hypothesis (H6) is accepted. Similarly, the standard path coefficient and p-value are (0.202 and p<0.010) in the path from Entrepreneurial Leadership to Creative Self-Efficacy to Innovative Work Behavior which shows that the hypothesis (H7) is accepted.

Table 3 *Summary of Hypothesis*

Hypothesis	Result
H1: There is a positive and significant impact of entrepreneurial leadership on innovative work behavior.	Accepted
H2: There is a positive and significant impact of entrepreneurial leadership on firm's innovative environment.	Accepted
H3: There is a positive and significant impact of firm's innovative environment on innovative work behavior.	Accepted
H4: There is a positive and significant impact of entrepreneurial leadership on creative self-efficacy.	Accepted
H5: There is a positive and significant impact of creative self-efficacy on innovative work behavior.	Accepted
H6: There is mediation role of firm's innovative environment between entrepreneurial leadership and innovative work behavior.	Accepted
H7: There is mediation role of creative self-efficacy between entrepreneurial leadership and innovative work behavior.	Accepted

Source: Data and Information from Research

According to (Chin, 1998) R2 < 0.19 is regarded as very weak; 0.19 <= R2 < 0.33 is seen as weak; 0.33 <= R2 < 0.67 is regarded as moderate; and R2 >= 67 is regarded as substantial. The study shows that the value of R^2 of firm's innovative environment is 0.68, creative self-efficacy

is 0.65 and innovative work behavior is 0.83 which is substantial, moderate and substantial. This indicates that the independent variable has a 68% variance in firm's innovative environment, 65% variance in creative self-efficacy and 83% variance in innovative work behavior.

Discussion

This section discusses the research findings in relation to the stated objectives and situates the results within the broader context of existing literature.

To study the relationship among entrepreneurial leadership, innovative work behaviour, firm's innovative environment, and creative self-efficacy

The findings reveal a multifaceted relationship between entrepreneurial leadership, innovative work behaviour (IWB), the firm's innovative environment, and creative self-efficacy (CSE). The study supports the notion that entrepreneurial leadership plays a foundational role in shaping an organisation's innovative capacity. Entrepreneurial leaders, by promoting autonomy, vision, and risk-taking (Gupta et al., 2004), create an environment conducive to innovation and creative expression. The positive association between entrepreneurial leadership and IWB aligns with previous studies (Renko et al., 2015; Bagheri & Pihie, 2011), which suggest that such leadership fosters a proactive, opportunity-seeking, and creative workforce. Moreover, the findings reinforce the concept that CSE an individual's belief in their ability to produce creative outcomes is a key psychological mechanism that enables IWB (Tierney & Farmer, 2002). Employees with high CSE are more likely to engage in innovative actions when their environment encourages experimentation and tolerates failure. Additionally, the firm's innovative environment emerged as a significant contextual factor. When entrepreneurial leadership is embedded within a supportive innovative environment, a synergistic effect occurs, enhancing both CSE and IWB. This supports the social cognitive theory, which posits that individual behaviour is shaped by both personal factors and environmental influences (Bandura, 1986). Companies that strategically align leadership behaviours with innovation-enabling conditions are better positioned to adapt to complex and dynamic market challenges.

To examine the mediation role of firm's innovative environment in the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and innovative work behaviour

The results demonstrate that the firm's innovative environment mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and IWB. This finding supports the view that leadership alone is insufficient in driving innovation; instead, the broader organisational climate must be conducive to creative processes. As suggested by Amabile et al. (1996), innovation thrives in environments characterized by psychological safety, resource availability, and encouragement of novel ideas. Entrepreneurial leaders influence this environment by fostering a culture that values experimentation and calculated risk-taking. In turn, this culture supports the development and expression of IWB. This mediation confirms earlier work by Mumford et al. (2002), who argued that leadership contributes to innovation primarily by shaping the conditions under which creativity and innovation can flourish. Therefore,

organisational efforts should not only focus on individual leadership behaviours but also on cultivating a systemic culture that supports innovation. Recognising the mediating role of the firm's innovative environment offers practical implications: firms must ensure that leadership development is coupled with structural and cultural mechanisms that enable innovation at all levels.

To analyse the mediation role of creative self-efficacy in the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and innovative work behaviour

The findings further reveal that creative self-efficacy significantly mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and IWB. This suggests that entrepreneurial leaders contribute to innovation not only by direct influence but also by shaping employees' beliefs in their creative potential. This aligns with research by Tierney and Farmer (2004), which found that leaders who provide intellectual stimulation, encouragement, and feedback enhance employees' CSE, which in turn drives their innovative behaviours. Entrepreneurial leadership promotes self-belief through empowerment, recognition, and the delegation of challenging tasks. These practices build CSE, which acts as a catalyst for IWB by increasing individuals' willingness to take initiative and propose novel solutions. This mediation mechanism supports the self-efficacy theory, which posits that individuals with stronger efficacy beliefs are more motivated to overcome obstacles and perform complex tasks (Bandura, 1997). The implication for organisations is clear: leadership development programs should not only train managers in entrepreneurial thinking but also equip them with strategies to enhance employees' self-efficacy. Fostering belief in one's creative capabilities is a vital lever in unlocking the full innovative potential of the workforce.

Overall, the results underscore the importance of a multi-level approach to innovation, where individual beliefs (CSE), organisational climate (firm's innovative environment), and leadership behaviours (entrepreneurial leadership) interact to shape IWB. The findings provide empirical support for integrated models of innovation and offer actionable insights for leaders aiming to drive creativity in their organisations.

Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of entrepreneurial leadership on innovative work behavior (IWB) within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Zhejiang Province, China, with a specific focus on the mediating roles of the firm's innovative environment and creative self-efficacy. Using a quantitative approach and data collected from 400 SME owners and managers, the findings confirm that entrepreneurial leadership has a significant and positive influence on IWB. More importantly, both the firm's innovative environment and employees' creative self-efficacy were found to significantly mediate this relationship, underscoring their critical roles in facilitating innovation at the individual level.

These results highlight that entrepreneurial leadership alone is not sufficient to drive innovative behavior; rather, its effectiveness is amplified when embedded within a supportive organizational context and when employees possess confidence in their creative abilities. This underscores the importance for SME leaders to not only adopt entrepreneurial leadership practices but also to foster an innovation-oriented culture and actively nurture employee self-efficacy.

By identifying and empirically validating the mediating mechanisms through which entrepreneurial leadership affects IWB, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on innovation in SMEs. It advances theoretical understanding by integrating leadership, environmental, and individual-level factors into a cohesive model. Practically, the findings offer valuable guidance for SME leaders and policymakers aiming to enhance innovation performance and sustain competitive advantage in dynamic business environments.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to advance both practice and research in the field of entrepreneurial leadership and innovation within SMEs

1. For SME Leaders Foster an innovative work environment and actively build employees' creative self-efficacy through training and supportive leadership practices. Entrepreneurial leadership should be embraced to drive innovation effectively.

2. For Policymakers Develop policies and support programs that encourage SMEs to invest in leadership development and innovation culture, including incentives for training and collaborative innovation platforms.

Contributions to the Body of Knowledge

1. This research enriches the understanding of how entrepreneurial leadership influences innovative work behavior through mediating factors such as the innovative environment and creative self-efficacy. It bridges leadership theories with innovation management and organizational behavior in the SME context.

2. The validated mediation model provides a useful framework for future research exploring multi-level influences on innovation outcomes.

Future Research

1. Future studies could explore additional mediating or moderating variables, such as organizational learning, employee motivation, or external environmental factors, to further unpack the complexity of innovation in SMEs.

2. Longitudinal research designs would be valuable to examine the causal relationships and evolution of entrepreneurial leadership and innovation behaviors over time.

3. Comparative studies across different cultural or regional contexts could provide insights into how cultural dimensions impact the relationship between leadership and innovation.

4. Qualitative approaches could complement quantitative findings by offering deeper insights into the processes through which entrepreneurial leadership shapes innovative behaviors.

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