



The Role of Knowledge Creation to Improve SMEs Performance in COVID-19 Era based on Knowledge Oriented Leadership and Value of Knowledge Congruence

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of Knowledge Creation (KC) through the SECI process in enhancing SMEs' performance, especially during the shift to online business activities amid the COVID-19 pandemic. SMEs need adequate knowledge and adaptability to survive and contribute to economic growth. This research proposes a model where KC, facilitated by digital technology, operates through the SECI process with support from Knowledge-Oriented Leadership (KOL). Effective knowledge sharing between leaders and members fosters the Value of Knowledge Congruence (VOKC), aligning organizational goals and improving performance. Using an explanatory quantitative approach, data were collected from 100 SMEs in Central Java (Semarang, Pekalongan, Rembang, and Jepara) through questionnaires. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Square (PLS). Results show that KOL significantly influences KC in the SECI process. Externalization and internalization positively and significantly affect VOKC, while socialization and combination have positive but insignificant effects. VOKC significantly enhances SMEs' performance, highlighting the importance of KC through the SECI process and leadership in driving SMEs' success in dynamic environments.

Keywords: COVID-19, knowledge-oriented leadership, knowledge creation, value of knowledge congruence, SMES performance.

1. Introduction

In late 2019, a global health crisis emerged with the emergence of a novel virus, designated as Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) (Erawan, Zaid, Pratondo, & Lestari, 2021; Shinta, Zaid, & Pratondo, 2022; Zaid & Pratondo, 2021; Zaid, Hernowo, & Prasetyoningsih, 2022; Zaid, Indrianto, & Adityaningrat, 2021; Zaid, Shinta, Afa, & Pratondo, 2021). The current situation remains that of a pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus, which has had a profound impact on all aspects of human activity. The implementation of health protocols and provisions designed to reduce activities outside the home has had a significant effect on all sectors (Pratondo & Zaid, 2021; Rafi'i & Zaid, 2021).

In the context of the ongoing pandemic, it is imperative that economic activities continue to function in order to maintain essential life functions and fulfill basic

needs. According to data from the Ministry of Cooperatives and Small and Medium Enterprises (Kemenkop-UKM), the business sector in Indonesia is primarily comprised of micro, small, and medium enterprises (99%), collectively representing a source of income for 97% of the workforce in Indonesia. However, the advent of the pandemic led to a decline in sales of over 75% for 40% of small businesses and 45.83% of medium-sized businesses. Consequently, the competitive advantage of SMEs is largely contingent upon their capacity to anticipate globalization (Rosli, 2012).

The ongoing global pandemic has prompted business leaders to implement novel strategies and reorganize their companies, a process commonly referred to as the "reset for the rebound." This strategy aims to equip SMEs with the agility to capitalize on emerging opportunities. Furthermore, Indonesian SMEs must adapt to technological advancements that transform traditional business models into online business models. Technology plays a pivotal role in the growth and development of SMEs (Carr, 2005). This digital transformation necessitates that SMEs conduct all their business activities online through digitalization to ensure the continuity of economic activities and maintain competitiveness.

In order to survive and flourish, SMEs must embrace innovation and transformation. SAP applications can be enhanced through the integration of intelligent technologies, artificial intelligence, and machine learning. These technologies can be applied in two principal ways (www.indotelko.com). As stated by the Assistant Deputy for Entrepreneurship Development at Kemenkop UKM, in order for SMEs to be able to upgrade, the Ministry of BUMN and LKPP have launched the Digital Market (PaDi), Procurement Shopping and SME Page. This has resulted in the necessity for SMEs, regardless of their preferences, to utilize marketplaces or social media in order to market their products (<http://www.depkop.go.id/>). Training for SMEs is also conducted to facilitate the acquisition of new knowledge that will assist in comprehending the transition to an online business model. The training encompasses SME management, digital business media workshops, SME partnerships and existing brands through branch marking patterns, and ongoing coaching-mentoring (jawapos.com).

The advent of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has compelled small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to rapidly acquire new competencies in various technological domains, including the ability to utilize digital tools and to adapt their marketing and sales strategies. The behavior of SMEs in the context of the current pandemic is contingent upon technological advancement. However, it is imperative to recognize that technology alone is insufficient for the stabilization of SMEs. The integration of knowledge management practices, including knowledge creation, is a crucial element in facilitating more effective changes within these organizations.

The role of knowledge management is of particular significance in this regard, as it is essential to ensure the effective development of knowledge management systems that can support knowledge creation in SMEs (Sołek-Borowska, 2017). The incorporation of active learning to comprehend pivotal conditions necessitates the acquisition of knowledge by SMEs. This, in turn, influences the generation of novel insights and the enhanced comprehension of the process of creating new knowledge by SMEs will have a significant impact on the performance of SMEs that can advance their organization. In order for SMEs to compete, superior SME performance is necessary. This is because SME performance is highly recommended for improving the process of achieving business goals, as well as for evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of individual business actions (Ismail, 2009). A number of studies have demonstrated that the creation of knowledge and the utilisation of human resources remain relatively low. However, the implementation of knowledge creation strategies has the potential to enhance the competitiveness and performance of SMEs (Cerchione, Esposito, & Spadaro, 2015). Consequently, the performance of SMEs can be expected to improve if they adopt a role of knowledge creation.

In this study, knowledge creation practices are assessed through the lens of the SECI process, which encompasses socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization. The rationale for employing the SECI process in Nonaka (1994) theory is that it posits that novel knowledge is fundamentally constituted through the transformation between tacit and explicit forms of knowledge. Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) posit that the SECI process serves as a conduit for knowledge creation, with numerous organizations employing this process to generate novel organizational knowledge. The SECI process plays a role in improving the performance of SMEs, as the performance of SMEs is a significant factor in achieving organizational goals. However, the success of a goal is largely determined by the quality of leadership (Yukl, 2010). Therefore, in order to produce good SME performance, a quality organizational leader is also a necessary component.

In essence, the objective of leadership theory is to elucidate the mechanisms through which organizations can ensure enhanced performance (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Zaid & N.R, 2024). Therefore, the leadership in this study is knowledge-oriented leadership. Enhancing the performance of SMEs through the SECI process based on knowledge-oriented leadership is deemed less effective in the absence of value congruence between leaders and their members. As the compatibility of knowledge values between leaders and members increases, it will have a positive impact on the long-term sustainability of the organization, leading to improved performance in SMEs.

This study builds upon the research conducted by (Fachrunnisa, Adhiatma, & Tjahjono, 2020) which examined the relationship between knowledge-based practices

(HRD, KOL, KM Practices) and innovation performance in organizations. The study recommended an examination of the characteristics associated with the creation, transfer, storage, and application of knowledge management (KM) practices. Accordingly, this study will undertake a more thorough examination of one of the knowledge management practices, namely knowledge creation through the lens of the SECI process, with the objective of enhancing the performance of SMEs. Additionally, research from Rehman & Iqbal (2020) examines the impact of knowledge-oriented leadership (KOL) on organizational performance in higher education institutions (HEIs). This study also considers the overlooked mediating role of knowledge management processes and innovation. Leadership is widely recognized as a key factor in enhancing organizational effectiveness and performance (Zaid & N.R, 2024). The study also recommended that future research should aim to select a diverse sample across industries in order to facilitate the generalization of results.

Consequently, this study is interested in further research that discusses one of the knowledge management practices, namely knowledge creation using the SECI process based on KOL, with a view to improving higher performance. The selected sample is SMEs. Moreover, this study builds upon the research conducted by (Zia, 2020), which examined the correlation between KOL, KM behavior, and innovation performance in SMEs. In the aforementioned study, the topic of knowledge management (KM) was addressed, including the processes of knowledge acquisition, transfer, documentation, and application. This demonstrates that the topic of knowledge creation has not been addressed in a study that has been influenced by knowledge-oriented leadership (KOL) with the objective of improving the performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Consequently, researchers are interested in examining one of the KM practices in greater depth, namely knowledge creation using the SECI process. Based on previous studies, it can be concluded that there are limitations and a need for further research. Therefore, this study aims to build upon previous research that raises the concept of the role of knowledge creation in the SECI process to improve the performance of SMEs based on knowledge-oriented leadership and supported by the value of knowledge congruence.

2. Method

This quantitative study employed a combining primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were gathered through structured questionnaires with open and closed-ended questions to investigate knowledge-oriented leadership, the SECI process, knowledge congruence, and SME performance. Responses were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).

Secondary data were sourced from the Office of Cooperatives and SMEs in Central Java, specifically covering the 2018 reporting period, to provide contextual insights and support primary data collection.

The study targeted fashion SMEs in Central Java, a region known for its economic activity and concentration of SMEs. The population included 422 SMEs, emphasizing their development potential. A non-probability purposive sampling method was used (Rahi, 2017), selecting 100 SMEs that met predefined criteria. These criteria required businesses to operate in the fashion sector, adopt digital technologies, have at least five years of operation, employ a minimum of 20 workers, and generate a monthly turnover of at least Rp. 25,000,000. Samples were drawn from key cities, including Semarang, Pekalongan, Rembang, and Jepara.

Key constructs were measured using validated frameworks. Knowledge-oriented leadership was assessed based on Donate & Sánchez de Pablo (2015), focusing on promoting responsibility (Rosenbloom, 2000), knowledge sharing (I Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), and creation (Roth, 2003). Knowledge creation was evaluated through the SECI process (I Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) involving socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization. Knowledge congruence was measured using dimensions such as trust, respect, and socialization (Cable & Edwards, 2004). SME performance was analyzed following Holsapple & Wu (2011) and Zahra & Bogner (2000), emphasizing process quality, innovation, and product development. Data analysis utilized SmartPLS 3.0 for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to examine variable relationships and ensure reliability and validity.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Outer Model

The objective of the outer model test is to ascertain the validity and reliability of an indicator and variable within the context of the research. As illustrated in the three categories, namely (1) convergent validity, which encompasses outer loading values exceeding 0.7 and AVE values exceeding 0.5. (2) Internal consistency is determined by the Cronbach's alpha value exceeding 0.7 and the composite reliability exceeding 0.7 criteria. (3) Discriminant validity is determined by the Fornell-Lacker value, which is the root of the AVE square (diagonal) value and is greater than all other variable values (Hair, Joseph, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2019).

Additionally, the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) is less than 1, aligning with the established statistical threshold for discriminant validity evaluation. Consequently, by these criteria, it can be concluded that the indicators and variables utilized in this research meet the necessary standards of validity and reliability, ensuring their appropriateness for the study's analytical framework and objectives.

Table 1. Measurement Evaluation Model

Variable	Indicators	Convergent Validity		Internal Consistency Reliability		Discriminant Validity
		Loadings	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach Alpha	HTMT
		>0.40	>0.50	>0.70	>0.70	<1
KOL	KOL.1	0.825				
	KOL.2	0.860				
	KOL.3	0.789	0.616	0.906	0.875	YES
	KOL.4	0.732				
	KOL.5	0.766				
	KOL.6	0.730				
KS	KS.1	0.863				
	KS.2	0.837	0.715	0.882	0.800	YES
	KS.3	0.837				
KE	KE.1	0.828				
	KE.2	0.848	0.655	0.850	0.734	YES
	KE.3	0.748				
KCO	KCO.1	0.922	0.868	0.929	0.848	YES
	KCO.2	0.941				
KI	KI.1	0.898	0.796	0.886	0.744	YES
	KI.2	0.886				
VoKC	VoKC.1	0.810				
	VoKC.2	0.903				
	VoKC.3	0.852	0.703	0.934	0.914	YES
	VoKC.4	0.874				
	VoKC.5	0.859				
	VoKC.6	0.718				
SP	SP.1	0.720				
	SP.2	0.773	0.670	0.890	0.833	YES
	SP.3	0.895				
	SP.4	0.873				

Table 2. Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	KCO	KE	KI	KOL	KS	SP	VOCK
KCO	0.932						
KE	0.759	0.809					
KI	0.696	0.743	0.892				
KOL	0.665	0.700	0.786	0.785			
KS	0.798	0.767	0.748	0.739	0.845		
SP	0.707	0.803	0.678	0.769	0.680	0.819	
VOCK	0.727	0.787	0.813	0.776	0.759	0.818	0.838

3.2 Inner Model

Inner model testing was conducted to ascertain the interrelationships between the variables posited in the five hypotheses of this study. The results of the inner model test can be observed based on the path coefficient with p-values less than 0.05 and t-statistics greater than 1.96. This allows for the visualization of the influence exerted by the variables, as indicated by the Original Sample (O) value.

The results of hypothesis testing are presented in Table 3, which demonstrates that nine of the hypotheses in this study are statistically significant. The influence of knowledge-oriented leadership on the SECI process is positive and statistically significant. The effect on knowledge socialization is indicated by a path coefficient (O = 0.739) and a t-value of 17.361, which is greater than 1.96. The p-value is 0.000, which is less than 0.05, indicating a statistically significant result. The effect on knowledge externalization is indicated by a path coefficient (O = 0.700).

Furthermore, the results indicate a significant positive influence of knowledge-oriented leadership on knowledge combination, with a path coefficient (O = 0.665) and t-values of 13.999 > 1.96. The p-values indicate a statistically significant result at the 0.05 level, with values less than 0.05. This is also the case for knowledge internalization, with a path coefficient (O = 0.786), t-values (18.860), and p-values (0.000) that meet the aforementioned criteria.

The SECI process, which is responsible for the generation of new knowledge, has a positive and significant effect on the value of knowledge congruence. This is evidenced by the positive effects of knowledge externalization and knowledge internalization. In regard to knowledge externalization, the path coefficient (O = 0.285) and t-values (3.039 > 1.96) indicate a statistically significant correlation, while the p-values (0.002 < 0.05) demonstrate a p-value less than 0.05.

In the case of knowledge internalization, the path coefficient (O = 0.424) and t-values (3.628 > 1.96) indicate a significant positive effect, while the p-values (0.000 < 0.05) confirm the statistical significance of this effect. In contrast, SECI processes that exert a positive but statistically insignificant influence on the value of knowledge congruence are knowledge socialization and knowledge combination. In regard to knowledge socialization, a path coefficient (O = 0.140) and t-values (1.237 < 1.96) with p-values (0.217 > 0.05) were observed. The path coefficient (O = 0.104) and t-values (1.062 < 1.96) for knowledge combination are both insignificant.

Table 3. Path Coefficient

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values
KOL → KS	0.739	0.747	0.043	17.361	0.000
KOL → KE	0.700	0.706	0.044	15.742	0.000

KOL → KCO	0.665	0.672	0.047	13.999	0.000
KOL → KI	0.786	0.788	0.042	18.860	0.000
KS → VOKC	0.140	0.149	0.113	1.237	0.217
KE → VOKC	0.285	0.281	0.094	3.039	0.002
KCO → VOKC	0.104	0.105	0.098	1.062	0.289
KI → VOKC	0.424	0.418	0.117	3.628	0.000
VOKC → SP	0.818	0.820	0.039	21.175	0.000

The analysis reveals that Knowledge-Oriented Leadership (KOL) significantly influences all components of the SECI process, including Knowledge Socialization (KS) ($\beta = 0.739$, $p < 0.001$), Knowledge Externalization (KE) ($\beta = 0.700$, $p < 0.001$), Knowledge Combination (KCO) ($\beta = 0.665$, $p < 0.001$), and Knowledge Internalization (KI) ($\beta = 0.786$, $p < 0.001$). These findings emphasize that leadership plays a crucial role in promoting knowledge creation within SMEs. Among the SECI dimensions, Knowledge Internalization (KI) exhibits the strongest relationship with KOL, highlighting the importance of applying and integrating new knowledge into organizational practices.

In assessing the impact of SECI processes on the value of knowledge congruence (VOKC), Knowledge Externalization (KE) ($\beta = 0.285$, $p = 0.002$) and Knowledge Internalization (KI) ($\beta = 0.424$, $p < 0.001$) demonstrate significant effects, while Knowledge Socialization (KS) ($\beta = 0.140$, $p = 0.217$) and Knowledge Combination (KCO) ($\beta = 0.104$, $p = 0.289$) do not. This suggests that formal documentation and practical application of knowledge are more effective in aligning shared values than informal interactions or database updates. Finally, VOKC strongly influences SME Performance (SP) ($\beta = 0.818$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that shared knowledge values and alignment are critical drivers of performance improvement.

3.3 Discussion

The objective of this study is to examine the role of knowledge creation through the SECI process in improving the performance of SMEs in the context of the ongoing pandemic. The study is based on the premise that knowledge-oriented leadership, supported by the value of knowledge congruence in SMEs, can enhance performance. The research findings show that knowledge-oriented leadership is an effective strategy to improve SME performance, this is as same as research by (Okreglicka, 2023). Furthermore, knowledge-oriented leadership has been demonstrated to enhance knowledge creation via the SECI process. However, the SECI process has only been shown to elevate the value of knowledge congruence in two specific instances. Additionally, the value of knowledge congruence has been identified as a key factor in improving SME performance. Leaders who are committed to fostering a culture of continuous knowledge updating within SMEs can facilitate a high SECI

process, thereby enabling SME to become more active in the creation of new knowledge (Ikujiro Nonaka, Toyama, & Konno, 2000).

In the context of SECI, the impact is primarily observed in externalization and internalization, particularly in relation to the value of knowledge congruence. The externalization process entails the documentation of the results of discussions and the capabilities that exist within the organization. This documentation is then disseminated to the members of the organization. This is regarded as a means of enhancing the knowledge base of SMEs, thereby fostering a unified vision and shared objectives among SME members for the advancement of their organizations in alignment with their collective knowledge. Furthermore, the internalization process entails learning to comprehend alterations in online business modes, which are then executed directly and have been consented to by SME members.

Consequently, the agreed-upon decision SME members believe can enhance their business, so that with a shared understanding of the novel knowledge generated, SMEs can augment the collective value of superior knowledge. In contrast, knowledge socialization and knowledge combination are incapable of significantly influencing the value of knowledge congruence. The socialization process is affected by differences in perceptions regarding changes in business modes from offline to online, which are still being debated between organizational members through discussions. Additionally, the combination process is influenced by the creation of knowledge through database updates with online communication, which is not yet fully understood by organizational members, leading to discrepancies in understanding between them. The creation of knowledge and information through online channels is perceived as less convenient and straightforward for sharing, resulting in a limited number of active participants in the sharing process.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are driven by the knowledge they possess (Grandinetti, 2016), which they actively update in order to maintain an active and competitive position in their respective markets. The knowledge held by SMEs can be optimally leveraged when leaders and members share a common understanding of the need to enhance the performance of SMEs (Jackson, 2020). Thus, when SME members share similar knowledge values, they are better able to collaborate and provide innovative ideas for the advancement of SMEs. The transition to online business activities allows SMEs to adapt swiftly to a learning environment, facilitating knowledge value equations among SME members. When SMEs prioritize learning and knowledge sharing, they enhance their collective knowledge value, which subsequently improves their performance.

4. Conclusion

This study explores the role of knowledge creation through the SECI process in improving SME performance during the pandemic. Knowledge-oriented leadership enhances SME performance by fostering knowledge sharing, responsibility, and innovation. While the SECI process facilitates externalization and internalization, its impact on socialization and combination remains limited due to challenges in online communication and knowledge-sharing practices. Knowledge congruence emerges as a key factor, enabling SMEs to align shared knowledge and promote collaboration, which ultimately boosts performance. Leaders who emphasize continuous learning and digital transformation, coupled with systematic knowledge sharing, can strengthen the SECI process and improve competitiveness.

However, the study has limitations. It focuses on SMEs in Central Java, limiting its generalizability, and relies on online data collection during the pandemic, which may affect clarity. Additionally, respondents' understanding of the SECI process was incomplete, leading to inconsistent results. Future research should broaden geographic coverage, employ direct data collection, and refine SECI indicators to enhance validity. More comprehensive respondent profiles, including turnover and age, are also needed to better evaluate SME performance and address these gaps.

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