

HUMAN CAPITAL, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT AS DRIVERS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT AND ITS IMPACT ON SME PERFORMANCE: INTEGRATED RBV-TOE HIGHER-ORDER MODEL IN THE UAE

LEILA HIMEUR¹, DR. ABBOD NASEB AL-TAMIMI²

¹ COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES, UNIVERSITI TENAGA NASIONAL (UNITEN), PUTRAJAYA CAMPUS, MALAYSIA, EMAIL: Leila.himeur.u@gmail.com

² SENIOR LECTURER, UNITEN BUSINESS SCHOOL (UBS), UNIVERSITI TENAGA NASIONAL (UNITEN), PUTRAJAYA CAMPUS, MALAYSIA, EMAIL: abbod.naseb@uniten.edu.my

Abstract

This study advances understanding of SME performance in the United Arab States (UAE) by conceptualizing organizational context as a higher-order strategic capability formed by human capital, social capital, and strategic management. Drawing on the resource-Based View (RBV) and the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework, the research positions these intangible resources as formative dimensions that collectively strengthen a firm 's internal conditions through which performance outcomes are achieved. Using stratified random sampling data were collected from 408 SME owners, managers, and CEOs across the UAE. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was employed to validate the higher-order construct and to examine the hypothesized relationships. The results reveal that human capital, social capital, and strategic management significantly enhance the organizational context, which subsequently exerts a positive effect on SME performance. These findings support RBV's assertion that bundles of intangible resources underpin superior performance, while TOE highlights the importance of organizational readiness in enabling firms to translate internal capabilities into meaningful outcomes. By integrating these two theoretical perspectives within an emerging market setting, this study introduces a novel higher-order capability model to SME research and offers practical implications for policymakers and business leaders seeking to strengthen SME resilience, growth, and long-term sustainability in the UAE.

Keywords: SMEs performance, social capital, human capital, strategic management, UAE

1. INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are vital to the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) economic diversification and innovation agenda, representing over 90% of registered businesses and employing approximately 86% of the private sector workforce (Ministry of Economy, UAE, 2023; WAM, 2023). By the end of 2022, approximately 557,000 SMEs were operational, accounting for 63.5% of the UAE's non-oil GDP. These figures highlight the pivotal role SMEs play in driving sustainable economic growth. However, despite their importance, many SMEs continue to face persistent challenges in maintaining competitive performance due to internal resource constraints and the pressures of a volatile external environment (Aljifri & Alzarouni, 2022).

Recent research highlights the crucial role of internal capabilities specifically, human capital, social capital, and strategic management in influencing SME performance (El Shoubaki et al., 2020; Fauzi et al., 2021; Amoah et al., 2023). The Resource-Based View (RBV) conceptualizes these intangible resources as strategic assets capable of delivering sustained competitive advantage when effectively developed and leveraged (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). Complementing this, the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework posits that firm performance emerges from the alignment of internal competencies with external technological and institutional conditions (Tornatzky & Fleischer, 1990; Baker, 2012).

Human capital refers to employees 'skills, knowledge, and experience enhance adaptive capacity, supports innovation, and improves decision-making quality (Aman-Ullah et al., 2022; Samad et al., 2023). Social capital, rooted in trust-based relationships and networks, provides SMEs with access to information, external knowledge, and collaborative opportunities that they often lack internally (Boohene et al., 2020; Shan & Tian, 2022). Strategic management contributes structural coherence and long-term direction, enabling SMEs to align resources, coordinate activities, and respond effectively to environmental turbulence (Sinnaiah et al., 2023; Zsigmond et al., 2021).

Despite clear theoretical support, prior studies often examine these constructs independently rather than as interconnected components of a broader organizational system. RBV scholars emphasize that performance advantages arise from the orchestration of resource bundles rather than isolated capabilities. Similarly, the TOE framework considers organizational context a critical integrative mechanism through which internal resources shape strategic outcomes. Yet limited empirical research investigates how human capital, social capital, and strategic management collectively form a higher-order organizational context capability particularly within the UAE, a multicultural and rapidly transforming economy (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Qalati et al., 2021).

This study addresses this gap by modelling organizational context as a second-order formative construct influenced by human capital, social capital, and strategic management, and examining its effect on SME performance. By integrating RBV and TOE perspectives, the study offers a holistic explanation of how intangible resources interact to shape organisational capabilities and firm outcomes. The finding provides valuable insights for policymakers and business leaders seeking to enhance SME performance, competitiveness, resilience, and strategic readiness in the UAE.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

The literature review develops the theoretical foundations for modelling human capital, social capital, and strategic management as antecedents of organizational context

2.1 Organizational context and SME Performance

Organizational context refers to the internal routines, relational structure, and capability patterns that shape how SMEs utilize resources, coordinate activities, and make strategic decisions. Recent RBV-based SME studies show that internal informational routines, networks, human capital, social capital, and functional capabilities collectively influence how firms structure their strategic actions (Sipos et al., 2024; El Nemar et al., 2022; Oduro, 2023). From an RBV perspective, these elements form a capability configuration in which diverse intangible resources are integrated into coherent systems that enhance SME performance.

SME performance is commonly understood as the measurable evaluation of key organizational outcomes, including efficiency, financial results, production levels, and customer retention (Cicea et al., 2019). It also broadly reflects the degree to which a firm achieves its strategic goals related to profitability, productivity, and customer satisfaction (Ibro Mohammed, 2020). This multifaceted understanding of performance aligns with the current study's focus on the role of social capital, human capital, and strategic management in enhancing SME outcomes in the UAE.

Several studies suggest that a strong organizational context enhances adaptability, innovation, and performance, particularly in SMEs that operate under resource constraints. Coherent internal processes, effective communication, and supportive cultures are associated with higher levels of employee commitment, better decision-making, and superior firm outcomes (Aman-Ullah et al., 2022; Samad et al., 2023; Sinnaiah et al., 2023; Zsigmond et al., 2021). In the UAE, where SMEs navigate a dynamic, multicultural, and globally integrated environment, robust organizational structures and processes appear especially important for maintaining competitiveness (Zarrouk et al., 2020).

However, the literature also reports conditional and context-dependent evidence. Recent SME studies grounded in RBV show that internal strengths alone do not automatically translate into improved performance, their impact depends on environmental conditions and how firms mobilize these resources. For example, El Nemar et al. (2022) find that human and social capital enhance SME competitive advantage particularly during uncertain periods, indicating that resource value is context-specific. Similarly, Sipos et al. (2024) show that SMEs' use of information for decision-making is influenced by external competition, networks, innovation activity, and internal compensation structures, suggesting that capabilities interact with broader organizational conditions. Oduro and Mensah-Williams (2023) further demonstrate that different capabilities contribute to different dimensions of SME performance, underscoring that capability performance relationships are selective rather than automatic. Collectively, these findings highlight that the effectiveness of internal routines and capabilities depends on fit with environmental and organizational contexts.

Within the TOE framework, organizational context can be viewed as a component of organizational readiness, which reflects a firm's internal ability to support technological and strategic initiatives. The performance effects of such readiness depend on how well internal capabilities align with technological and environmental conditions (Tornatzky & Fleischer, 1990; Scuotto et al., 2020; Nasiri et al., 2020). When organizational context is supported by strong internal resources and is aligned with external demands, it enhances a firm's ability to coordinate activities, respond to change, and improve performance. Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Organizational context has a positive effect on SME performance in the UAE.

2.3 Social Capital and organizational context

Social capital refers to the networks, relationships, and social interactions that facilitate access to resources, information, and opportunities within and beyond the organization (Boohene et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2021). From the

Resource-Based View (RBV) perspective, social capital is an intangible resource that strengthens trust-based exchanges, facilitates information sharing, and enhances coordination, which collectively support the development of more effective organizational processes and internal structures.

Empirical evidence confirms that social capital enhances internal organizational capabilities. Sarwar et al. (2021) demonstrate that social capital strengthens SMEs' network capability and contributes to higher innovation outcomes, showing how external relational ties feed into improved internal processes. Similarly, Lee and Hallak (2020) find that both offline and online social capital positively influence SME performance by improving collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and communication, key determinants of organizational functioning. Their results also show that offline (in-person) social capital often has a stronger impact, emphasizing the continued importance of trust-based face-to-face relationships in shaping internal cohesion.

Recent literature also shows that different types of social capital play distinct roles. Lee and Hallak (2020) conceptually argue that bonding and bridging social capital each influence firm outcomes differently, particularly in the context of internationalization, where openness and diversity of networks shape the kinds of advantages firms obtain. Kopren (2021) demonstrates how bridging social capital, especially cross-ethnic relationships among entrepreneurs in post-conflict societies, help build trust and cohesion across groups, creating social benefits that extend beyond economic outcomes. These studies collectively show that the effects of social capital depend on the nature and diversity of the network ties through which it is formed.

From the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) perspective, the influence of social capital on organizational conditions depends on environmental factors. Tornatzky and Fleischer (1990) emphasize that organizational resources, such as social networks, operate within broader technological and environmental pressures. Supporting this view, Muafi et al. (2025) find that online and offline social capital both positively affect SMEs' social and business performance through the mediating role of digital innovation, illustrating how the benefits of social capital increase when firms possess technological readiness. This highlights that in digitally connected and multicultural environments such as the UAE, social capital can reinforce the organizational context by enabling learning, adaptability, and digital transformation. Overall, verified research shows that social capital enhances organizational context by improving communication, collaboration, and internal learning processes. However, the degree of impact depends on the type of social capital (bridging vs. bonding), network diversity, and the technological and environmental conditions under which SMEs operate. When effectively leveraged, social capital strengthens organizational cohesion and adaptability, contributing to a more supportive and dynamic organizational context. Therefore,

H1a: Social capital has a positive effect on organizational context

2.4 Human Capital and organizational context

Human capital refers to the collective skills, knowledge, experience, and capabilities of employees, and is widely acknowledged as a key determinant of organizational success (Simić, Slavković, & Stojanović Aleksić, 2020). From the Resource-Based-View (RBV), human capital represents a valuable, rare, and difficult-to-imitate resource that can create sustained competitive advantage when effectively developed and integrated into organizational processes (Barney, 1991). In SMEs, these human resources are essential for fostering adaptability. Creativity, and innovation factors that directly shape the internal organizational context.

Strategic management of human capital, including training, retention, and reward practices, is crucial for enabling employees to contribute effectively to organizational development. Dash (2020) and Alshammari (2020) emphasize that organizations that invest in talent development are more likely to build strong internal systems and structures. Skafi et al. (2020) further demonstrate that employees' prior IT experience significantly enhances cloud technology adoption in SMEs, highlighting how human capital directly shapes technological readiness and internal capability building.

The broader literature supports the positive influence of human capital, although findings indicate that its effects are sometimes indirect rather than direct. El Shoubaki et al. (2020) show that human capital significantly enhances SME growth through the mediating role of entrepreneur' motivations, meaning that human capital contributes to performance when aligned with entrepreneurial intentions. Similarly, Elrehail et al. (2020) argue that without strong human resource management practices, the presence of skilled employees alone may not translate into improved performance or organizational improvement. This suggests that human capital must be supported by strategic organizational practices to fully contribute to internal organizational structure and capability.

From the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework, technological readiness and organizational factors can influence how effectively human capital contributes to firm outcomes (Baker, 2012). In dynamic environments such as the UAE, where SMEs face rapid technological and market changes, human capital becomes even more important for strengthening the organizational context through enhanced learning, adaptability, and digital competence. Overall, the literature consistently supports the idea that human capital enhances organizational context by improving internal capabilities, learning systems, employee competence, and technological readiness. However, its impact is strongest when supported by appropriate organizational practices and environmental readiness. Therefore,

H1b: Human capital has a positive effect on organizational context

2.5 Strategic Management and organizational context

Strategic management involves the formulation and implementation of organizational goals through the effective allocation of resources and continuous assessment of internal and external environments (Schühly, 2022). It enables firms to align internal capabilities with external conditions, supporting sustained performance and competitive advantage. From a Resource-Based-view (RBV), strategic management enhances the value of internal resources such as human capital, knowledge, and operational capabilities by ensuring they are coordinated and deployed efficiently (Wernerfelt, 1984). Recent evidence indicates that decision-making styles significantly influence the effectiveness of strategic management process, for example, rational and flexible decision-making behaviours have been found to enhance organizational performance, particularly within SMEs (Sinniah, Adam, & Mahadi, 2023).

Despite its recognized importance, the adoption of formal strategic management practices among SMEs remains inconsistent. Some SMEs lack structured planning systems, which can reduce the effectiveness of strategic initiatives and limit organizational adaptability. Scholars argue that traditional formal planning may be less effective or even unnecessary for SMEs operating in environments characterized by high uncertainty, rapid technological change, or resource constraints (Honig & Samuelsson, 2021). In such cases, improvisation, experimentation, and adaptive strategy formation may be more beneficial than rigid planning frameworks.

The Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework further highlights that strategic management outcomes are shaped by external environmental factors, including technological readiness, regulatory pressures, and market volatility (Tornatzky & Fleischer, 1990). This is particularly relevant for SMEs in dynamic markets such as the UAE, where geopolitical conditions, innovation-driven competition, and digital transformation demand flexible and responsive strategic practices. Accordingly, UAE SMEs must balance formal strategy with adaptive capabilities to align their internal processes with changing external demands.

Research also demonstrates that effective communication of strategic goals and organizational values improves employee alignment, service quality, and overall firm performance (Zsigmond, Machová, & Zsigmondová, 2021). Strategic clarity and employee engagement strengthen an SMEs' internal organizational context by improving coordination, shared understanding, and commitment to objectives. Similarly, strategic planning contributes positively to SME success by promoting goal alignment, resource prioritization, and proactive decision-making (Zsigmond, Somosi, & Peto, 2021).

Collectively, these studies suggest that while the impact of strategic management varies depending on environmental conditions and organizational characteristics, well-executed strategic practices significantly strengthen the organizational context of SMEs by enhancing adaptability, communication, and resource integration. The study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1c: Strategic management has a positive effect on organizational context.

This study aims to investigate the factors influencing SME business performance, focusing on three key independent variables: social capital, human capital, and strategic management shaped the organizational context. These variables are grounded in existing literature as critical drivers of performance in small and medium-sized enterprises. Grounded in the Resource-Based-View (RBV) and the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework. The conceptual model illustrates the proposed relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable, SME business performance, as shown in Figure 1.

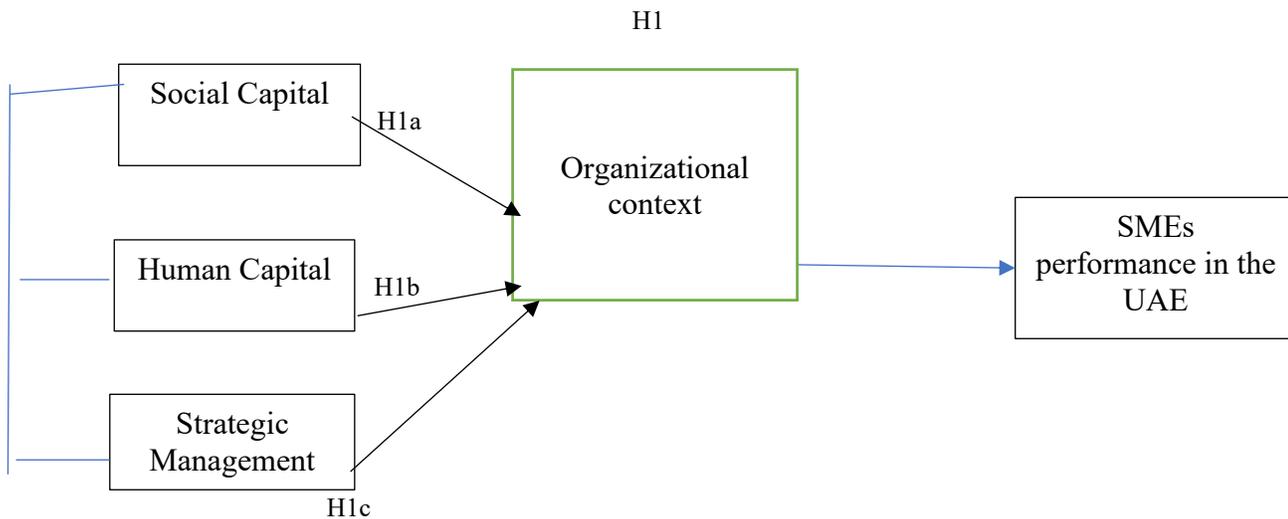


Figure 1 Research Framework

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine how human capital, social capital, and strategic management shape the organizational context and subsequently influence SME performance in the UAE. A quantitative approach was appropriate as it enables hypothesis testing, objective measurement of latent constructs, and analysis of complex structural relationships using SEM (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

3.2 Population, Sampling, and Data Collection

The target population comprised SME owners, managers, and CEOs across the UAE. A systematic stratified random sampling technique ensured proportional representation across emirates, industry sectors, and firm sizes. Data were collected via an online survey distributed through Google forms. A total of 408 valid responses were obtained, exceeding the recommended sample size for PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2019). Respondents held strategic and supervisory roles, strengthening the credibility of the data collected.

3.3 Measurement Instrument

The survey consisted of five sections: (1) demographic characteristics, (2) human capital (5 items), (3) social capital (6 items), (4) strategic management (5 items), and SME business performance (7 items). All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree). The measurement items were adopted from established and validated scales in prior studies to ensure relevance, reliability, and content validity.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS24.0 and Smart pls3.0. SPSS was used to generate descriptive statistics, while SmartPLS was used for the measurement and structural model assessment. The measurement model was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability ($CR > 0.70$), and average variance extracted ($AVE > 0.50$). Convergent validity was confirmed through AVE values above 0.50 and factor loading greater than 0.70 (Carrión et al., 2017; Hair et al., 2019). Discriminant validity was established using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT ratios (< 0.90) (Sarstedt et al., 2021).

The structural model evaluation included analysis of path coefficients (β), bootstrapping for significance testing (t-values and p-values < 0.05), and collinearity diagnostics ($VIF < 5$). PLS-SEM was selected due to its suitability for predictive modelling, its robustness with small-to-medium sample sizes, and its ability to handle complex relationships among constructs.

3.5 Addressing Common Method Bias

To reduce common method bias (CMB), procedural and statistical controls were applied (Podsakoff & Organ, 2003). Anonymity was ensured, predictor and criterion items were separated, and varied scale anchors were used. Harman's single-factor test showed that the first factor accounted for 52.83% of the variance, while multiple factors explained 72.11% indicating no single-factor dominance. Full collinearity VIF values were below 3.3 confirming that CMB does not threaten the validity of the results.

Table 1. Reliability and Validity Analysis

Variable	α	CR	AVE
HC	0.830	0.880	0.770
SC	0.847	0.891	0.775
SM	0.776	0.855	0.749
BP	0.900	0.938	0.926

Note: HC = Human Capital; SC = Social Capital; SM = Strategic Management; BP = Business Performance.

Table 2. Measurement Items and Factor Loadings

Variable	Code	Item	Loading	Source
Human Capital	HC1	Employees possess specialized skills	0.72	Dar & Mishra (2019)
	HC2	Employees excel in roles	0.763	
	HC3	Employees interpret problems from multiple perspectives	0.823	
	HC4	Employees adapt and learn	0.778	
	HC5	Employee education enhances business understanding	0.766	
Social Capital	SC1	Teams have common goals	0.71	Khan et al. (2020)
	SC2	Inter-team partnership	0.776	
	SC3	Clear and defined goals	0.781	
	SC4	Willing information sharing	0.818	
	SC5	Confidence in team members	0.821	
	SC6	Investment in relationships	0.741	
Strategic Management	SM1	Long-term strategy defined	0.73	Belas (2020)
	SM2	Regular goal evaluation	0.74	
	SM3	Technology integrated	0.79	
	SM4	Communication is crucial	0.702	
	SM5	Adaptation to market changes	0.783	
Business Performance	BP1	Market share improved	0.812	AlSharji et al. (2018)
	BP2	Sales efficiency improved	0.901	
	BP3	Sales volume increased	0.949	
	BP4	Customer engagement improved	0.962	
	BP5	Customer base growth	0.961	
	BP6	Organizational goals supported	0.94	
	BP7	Total revenue increased	0.954	

4. RESULTS

Cronbach's alpha (α), Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were used to assess the reliability and convergent validity of the constructs. According to Carrión et al. (2017), an AVE above 0.5 or a CR above 0.7 indicates a reliable measurement of the latent variable. As shown in Table 1, human capital, social capital,

strategic management, and SME performance all have AVE values exceeding 0.5, confirming their reliability. Additionally, standardized item loadings extracted from Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) (Table 2) were all above 0.7, indicating strong relationships between the observed variables and their corresponding constructs, and supporting convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019, 2021).

4.1 Measurement Model Assessment

Discriminant validity was established using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. Diagonal values (square roots of AVE) were greater than-construct correlations.

Table 1. Discriminant Validity Using the Fornell–Larcker Criterion

	SC	HC	SM	BP
SC	0.880			
HC	0.554	0.877		
SM	0.507	0.532	0.865	
BP	0.299	0.339	0.525	0.962

4.3 Structural Model Assessment

The structural model examines the relationships between the endogenous and exogenous constructs, estimated through PLS-SEM. Key criteria for hypothesis testing include path coefficients (β), significance (p-values), and T-statistics (with a threshold > 1.96 at $\alpha = 0.05$) (Hair et al., 2011). VIF values were all below 5, indicating no multicollinearity. All paths were significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating that Human Capital, Social Capital, and Strategic Management have a positive impact on Organizational Context, which in turn affects Business Performance. These results support the study’s hypotheses and theoretical model.

Table 4 summarizes the path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values for the core variables. Human Capital (HC), Social Capital (SC), and Strategic Management (SM) were evaluated for their impact on Organizational Context, which in turn affects Business Performance (BP).

Table 2. Table Results of Structural Model: Multicollinearity Analysis

Direct Relationship	Hypothesis	Beta	T-Statistic	p-value	Result
HC → Organizational Context	H1b	0.309	7.433	0.000	Supported
SC → Organizational Context	H1a	0.101	2.055	0.040	Supported
SM → Organizational Context	H1c	0.426	11.731	0.000	Supported
Org Context → Business Performance	H1	0.093	2.883	0.004	Supported

The sample ($n = 408$) was predominantly male (79.4%) and aged 31–50 (70.8%). Most held at least a bachelor’s degree (92%), primarily a bachelor’s degree (62.3%) or professional qualifications (29.9%). Participants included business owners (51.5%), CEOs (31.4%), and senior managers (17.2%). Most firms were based in Dubai (62%), operated in the service sector (62.3%), employed 6–50 people (73.3%), and reported annual revenues below AED 21 million (97.8%), classifying them as small enterprises. Table 4 shows the demographic frequencies.

Table 5 Demographics of survey participants

Construct	Group	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	324	79.4
	Female	84	20.6
	Total	408	100.0
Age	21–30	22	5.4
	31–40	133	32.6
	41–50	156	38.2
	>50	97	23.8
	Total	408	100.0

Education	Diploma	1	0.2
Professional	122	29.9	
Bachelor	254	62.3	
Master/PhD	31	7.6	
Total	408	100.0	

Position	Owners	210	51.5
CEOs	128	31.4	
Directors/Managers	70	17.2	
Total	408	100.0	

Industry	Trading/Wholesale	110	27.0
Manufacturing	44	10.8	
Services	254	62.3	
Total	408	100.0	

Employees	Below 5	18	4.4
6–50	299	73.3	
51–100	47	11.5	
101–250	44	10.8	
Total	408	100.0	

Sales (AED)	Below 2M	197	48.3
3–20M	202	49.5	
21–50M	9	2.2	
Total	408	100.0	

Location	Dubai	253	62.0
Abu Dhabi	68	16.7	
Sharjah	55	13.5	
Ajman	21	5.1	
Ras Al Khaimah	5	1.2	
Umm Al Quwain	4	1.0	
Fujairah	2	0.5	
Total	408	100.0	

The results confirm that the organizational context has a significant and positive influence on SME performance in the UAE ($\beta = 0.093$, $T = 2.883$, $p = 0.004$), supporting H1. Key components human capital ($\beta = 0.309$), social capital ($\beta = 0.101$), and strategic management ($\beta = 0.426$) all significantly contribute to this effect.

Business Performance (BP) was measured using seven items assessing the perceived impact of digital technologies. Respondents generally agreed that digital tools have a positive influence on business performance, with the highest mean score for improved market share ($M = 3.53$) and the lowest for sales process efficiency ($M = 3.02$), indicating moderate overall agreement. Mean scores ranged from 3.02 to 3.53, reflecting a generally positive but varied perception.

Standard deviations were relatively high (1.335 to 1.567), showing considerable variability in responses. The most significant disagreement was seen in perceptions of sales efficiency improvements ($SD = 1.567$), while market share improvements had the most consensus ($SD = 1.335$). Other items, such as sales volume and customer engagement, also showed moderate agreement with notable response variability. In summary, while digital technologies are perceived to enhance SME business performance, particularly in market share, there is less consensus on their impact

on sales process efficiency, suggesting diverse organizational experiences. The overall mean score of 3.23 reflects a moderate positive perception of the effects of digital technology.

Table6. Descriptive statistics for the business performance items

Survey Item Code	Survey Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
BP1	Our performance in market share has improved due to our use of digital technologies, including social media.	3.53	1.335
BP2	Our sales process efficiency has been enhanced by adopting advanced technology solutions.	3.02	1.567
BP3	Our sales volume has increased due to the adoption of innovative technologies.	3.19	1.536
BP4	Our customer engagement, as measured by inquiries, has improved with our use of digital channels.	3.18	1.534
BP5	Our customer base growth is attributed to integrating various digital tools.	3.15	1.543
BP6	Achieving our organizational goals has been supported by the implementation of modern technology solutions.	3.33	1.487
BP7	Our total revenue has been positively impacted by our comprehensive digital strategy.	3.21	1.563

The overall average mean of 4.05 for Social Capital (SC) items suggests a high level of agreement among respondents that their organizations promote internal collaboration, trust, shared goals, and partnership among team members. Items such as SC1 (4.24 – "all teams have a common goal") and SC6 (4.19 – "investment in relationships") received firm agreement, indicating a well-established collaborative culture.

The average standard deviation of 0.82 reflects low to moderate variability in responses, implying that most participants had similar positive views. The lowest variability was observed in SC1 (SD = 0.539), indicating strong consensus, while SC2 exhibited the highest variability (SD = 1.157), suggesting some differences in perceptions regarding inter-team partnerships. Table 7 shows Descriptive statistics for the social capital items.

Table 7 Descriptive statistics for the social capital items.

Survey Item Code	Survey Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
HC1	Our employees possess specialised skills in their specific areas of expertise.	4.35	0.595
HC2	Our employees excel in their designated roles and responsibilities.	3.99	1.075
HC3	Our employees interpret problems and situations from multiple perspectives.	3.67	1.135
HC4	Our employees are adaptable, ready to learn, and utilize new knowledge as needed.	4.06	0.860
HC5	Our employees' education levels significantly contribute to their deep understanding of our business operations.	3.66	1.455

The average mean score of 3.95 across five Human Capital (HC) items indicates strong agreement among respondents about the quality and capabilities of their workforce. Participants especially agreed that employees possess specialized skills (HC1: 4.35) and show adaptability and willingness to learn (HC4: 4.06). The average standard deviation of 1.02 reflects moderate consistency, with the lowest variability for HC1 (SD = 0.595) and HC4 (SD = 0.86), demonstrating strong consensus. However, perceptions varied more regarding the impact of employees' education levels on business understanding (HC5: SD = 1.455). Table 8 presents the descriptive statistics for the human capital items.

Table 8 Descriptive statistics for the human capital items

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HC4	Our employees are adaptable, ready to learn, and utilize new knowledge as needed.	4.06	0.860
HC5	Our employees' education levels significantly contribute to their deep understanding of our business operations.	3.66	1.455

The overall average mean for the strategic management items is 3.80, indicating a high level of agreement among respondents that strategic management practices are well integrated into their organizations. Specifically, strong agreement was noted on items such as having a clearly defined long-term strategy (SM1: 4.20) and the importance of effective communication in strategic management (SM4: 4.27). The average standard deviation is 1.11, which reflects a moderate level of variation in responses. This suggests that, while there is general agreement on the presence and role of strategic management practices, some differences in perception exist, especially for items such as SM2 (mean: 3.26, SD: 1.442) and SM3 (mean: 3.51, SD: 1.534), which exhibit higher variability. Table 9 shows Descriptive statistics for the strategic management items.

Table 9. Descriptive statistics for the strategic management items

Survey Item Code	Survey Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
SM1	Our strategic management includes a clearly defined long-term strategy.	4.20	0.612
SM2	Our strategic management involves regularly establishing and evaluating the organization's goals.	3.26	1.442
SM3	Technology is a key component in our strategic management.	3.51	1.534
SM4	Effective communication is crucial in our strategic management.	4.27	0.679
SM5	Our strategic management adapts to market changes.	3.74	1.282

Table 10 Mean and SD values

Variable	Average Mean	Standard Deviation
Business Performance	3.23	1.51
Social Capital	4.05	0.82
Human Capital	3.95	1.02
Strategic Management	3.80	1.11

In summary, the average mean and standard deviation values for the study variables are presented in Table 10. Social Capital recorded the highest average mean value of 4.050, with a standard deviation (SD) of 0.820, indicating strong and consistent agreement among respondents. On the other hand, Business Performance showed the lowest mean value of 3.230 and the highest SD of 1.510, reflecting more varied perceptions. Human Capital achieved a mean of 3.950 and an SD of 1.020, while Strategic Management had a mean of 3.800 with an SD of 1.110.

5. DISCUSSION

This paper examined how social capital, human capital, and strategic management contribute to the development of organizational context and how this context subsequently affects SME performance in the UAE. Drawing from the Resource-Based-View (RBV) and the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework, the finding

validates all proposed hypotheses and demonstrate that intangible resources shape organizational readiness and overall performance.

5.1 Social Capital and Organizational context (H1a)

The results show that social capital has a significant positive effect on organizational context supporting H1a. This finding aligns with earlier studies suggesting that strong social networks enhance collaboration, facilitate knowledge transfer, and enable resource exchange among SMEs (Boohene et al., 2020; Shan & Tian, 2022; Boateng et al., 2020). In the UAE's highly diverse and globally connected environment, social appears particularly valuable for bridging cross-cultural gaps and facilitating trust among stakeholders (Gerhart & Feng, 2021; Stasa Ouzký & Machek, 2023). However, some studies caution that social capital does not always translate into organizational benefits. For instance, Khan et al. (2021) and Lee and Hallak (2020) found that network strength may vary across industries and can sometimes constrain innovation if relationships are overly rigid or inward-focused. These contradictory views suggest that social capital's effectiveness depends heavily on context, quality of relationships, and the SNE's ability to leverage networks strategically. Nonetheless, the present finding indicates that within the UAE market, characterized by multicultural workforce dynamics and reliance on relationship-based business interactions, social capital plays a fundamental role in shaping organizational context.

5.2 Human Capital and Organizational Context (H1b)

Support for H1b confirms that human capital significantly enhances organizational context. This is consistent with the RBV's assertion that employees' competencies, expertise, and learning abilities constitute valuable and hard-to-imitate resources that drive organizational capability (Barney, 1991; Barney & Hesterly, 2015). Prior research similarly highlights that human capital fosters innovation, problem-solving, and organizational learning (Pasamar et al., 2019; AlQershshi, 2020; Aman-Ullah et al., 2022). Yet contradictory findings in the literature indicate that human capital alone does not always improve organizational outcomes. Muda and Rahman (2016), for example, argue that human capital yields limited impact when organizational structures are weak or when SMEs face high employee turnover. Elrehail et al. (2020) also suggest that human resources require supportive systems, such as training and knowledge-sharing routines, to positively influence performance. This study extends these insights by demonstrating that human capital primarily contributes to performance indirectly through its effect on organizational context. This finding reinforces the importance of aligning employee skills with organizational processes to maximize their strategic value.

5.3 Strategic Management and Organizational Context (H1c)

Strategic management exhibited the strongest positive effect on organizational context, providing robust support for H1c. This aligns with research highlighting the importance of strategic planning, goal alignment, and adaptive leadership in shaping organizational systems and ensuring long-term consistency (Fauzi et al., 2021; Zsigmond et al., 2021; Sinnaiah et al., 2023). Strategic management enhances an SME's ability to coordinate resources effectively, anticipate market changes, and adjust operational processes accordingly (Almeida et al., 2021; Chatterjee et al., 2021). Contradictory evidence, however, suggest that SMEs often struggle with formal strategic planning due to time limitations, lack of expertise, or rapidly changing environments. Honig and Samuelsson (2021) found that some SMEs rely more on improvisation than long-term strategies, and this can sometimes be just as effective. Despite this, the current study's findings show that in the UAE where SMEs operate in a competitive, innovation-oriented landscape strategic management is crucial for building a coherent organizational context capable of responding to uncertainty and leveraging opportunities.

5.4 Organizational Context and SME performance (H1)

The confirmation of H1 indicates that organizational context significantly enhances SME performance. This outcome supports the TOE framework's argument that organizational readiness structures, processes, and capabilities play a central role in determining how resources are deployed to achieve performance outcomes (Tornatzky & Fleischer, 1990; Baker, 2012). Recent studies similarly report that organizational capabilities mediate the relationship between internal resources and performance, especially in turbulent environments (Tran & Adomako, 2021; Qalati et al., 2021; Surya et al., 2021). However, some studies highlight that environmental turbulence can weaken the impact of organizational context on performance, especially when firms lack technological or managerial readiness. Nevertheless, this study suggests that in the UAE context where SMEs benefit from government support, digital infrastructure, and an innovation-driven economy, the organizational context plays a pivotal role in transforming internal resources into improved performance.

5.5 Integration with Previous Research and Regional implications

This study reinforces existing research by demonstrating that intangible resources, social capital, human capital, and strategic management are crucial drivers of SMEs competitiveness, particularly in dynamic economies. Research in the GCC underscores similar themes, emphasizing the importance of networks, strategic planning, and capability development for SME success (Dash, 2020; AlQershshi, 2020; Elrehail et al., 2020). The present study extends this work by demonstrating that these resources collectively shape organizational context, which in turn enhances SME performance, offering a more comprehensive explanation than past studies that examined these factors independently.

Regionally, the finding aligns with UAE economic priorities such as Vision 2030, which emphasize digital transformation, innovation, and SME development (Ministry of Economy, 2023; WAM, 2023). The UAE's rapidly evolving business environment demand agility, knowledge-driven leadership, and strong organizational foundations. This study highlights that SMEs must invest in internal capabilities especially employee's development, relational networks, and strategic alignment to thrive amid technological disruption and diversification pressures.

6. Practical Implications

The findings of this study generate several practical implications for SME leaders and policymakers in the UAE. First, the significance role of social capital indicates that SMEs should actively build networks within and beyond their industries. Structured collaboration platforms such as industry associations, cross-sector partnerships, and digital networking forums can enhance information access, trust, and resource sharing. Policymakers can support this by promoting cluster-based initiatives and establishing knowledge hubs to strengthen inter-firm cooperation. Second, the influence of human capital highlights the need for continuous skill development and talent retention. Targeted initiatives, including government-subsidized training, upskilling programs, and digital competency development, can help SMEs overcome resources limitations. SME leaders should also encourage learning, adaptability, and knowledge-sharing practices to build stronger organizational capabilities. Third, the strong effect of strategic management underscores the importance of strategic clarity, formal planning, and adaptive leadership. SMEs should set long-term goals, monitor performance systematically, and communicate strategy effectively. Support institutions can provide mentorship, advisory, and training to enhance managerial decision-making, which is crucial in the UA's dynamic market environment.

Overall, strengthening SMEs networks, human competencies, and strategic capabilities is essential for improving long-term competitiveness, especially amid digitalization and economic diversification.

7. Theoretical Implications

The study offers several theoretical contributions. By integrating RBV and the TOE framework, it shows that internal resources, social and human capital along with strategic management processes, shape the organizational context that ultimately drives firm performance. This provides a more layered understanding of RBV by demonstrating that intangible resources influence performance indirectly through organizational mechanisms that enable resource orchestration. The study also extends the TOE framework by emphasizing that organizational readiness is shaped not only by technological factors but also by human and relational resources. This positions organizational context as a key mediating structure linking internal capabilities with performance outcomes. Furthermore, the finding enriches SME literature in emerging economies by illustrating how resource orchestration operates in environments undergoing rapid digital transformation. Strategic management emerges as a critical mechanism for aligning resources, enhancing adaptability, and navigating uncertainty. Overall, the study reinforces the theoretical argument that intangible, knowledge-based resources are essential for SME competitiveness in dynamic and evolving markets, particularly withing the GCC and middle eastern contexts.

8. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study demonstrates that social capital, human capital, and strategic management significantly shape the organizational context that enhances SME performance in the UAE, showing that internal resources must be effectively aligned with organizational processes to generate strong business outcomes. The results highlight that social networks improve collaboration, human capital fosters innovation, and strategic management strengthens planning and adaptability capabilities that are increasingly vital in the UAE's rapidly evolving, digitally driven economic landscape. While the findings offer meaningful insights, the study's cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation, and its focus on UAE SMEs restricts generalizability. Future research could adopt longitudinal approaches to track changes over time and conduct comparative studies across GCC or other emerging economies to explore contextual differences. Additional work may also examine mediating or moderating factors such as digital transformation, innovation capability. Leadership style, organizational learning or government support, and qualitative studies cloud provide deeper understanding of how SME leaders apply strategic practices in dynamic environments.

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