The Impact of Strategic Knowledge Management on Business Performance in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

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ABSTRACT

Strategic knowledge management is recognized as a fundamental pillar of organizational success in today's knowledge-driven era. This approach surpasses traditional information management by positioning knowledge as a strategic asset central to organizational decision-making. The primary objective of this study is to examine the effect of strategic knowledge management on business performance in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) located in Ilam City. In terms of purpose, the research is applied, and methodologically, it adopts a descriptive-survey design. The statistical population of the study comprises 320 managers and experts from active SMEs in Ilam City. Based on Morgan's table and using a simple random sampling technique, a sample of 175 participants was selected. Standardized questionnaires were employed for data collection. The strategic knowledge management variable was measured using the instrument developed by Shaik et al. (2024), while business performance was assessed using the questionnaire developed by Depino-Besada et al. (2025). Content validity of the instruments was confirmed through expert evaluation, and reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and LISREL software. The findings revealed that strategic knowledge management has a positive and statistically significant impact on the business performance of SMEs in Ilam. Moreover, it was found to have a significant positive influence on exports, innovation, and the expected growth of these enterprises.

KEYWORDS

Business Performance, Expected Growth, Exports, Innovation, Small and Medium Enterprises, Strategic Knowledge Management.

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Introduction

In the new era, knowledge plays a fundamental role as the driving force of individual and social progress and development. With the expansion of digital technologies and the explosion of information, access to knowledge has become unprecedentedly universal; however, the ability to analyze, synthesize, and apply it has become a determining factor in success (Zhang et al., 2025). Societies that prioritize investment in education, research, and innovation are not only pioneers in solving global challenges such as climate change and inequality but also they create greater economic welfare and social resilience. At the individual level, lifelong learning and cognitive flexibility are the keys to adaptation in today's dynamic and complex labor market. Therefore, knowledge in the twenty-first century is not only power but also a necessity for survival and growth in a highly interconnected world (Lim et al., 2025).

The identification of knowledge as a key factor, knowledge management activities, and the subjective nature of organizational knowledge assets, along with the long-term requirements of organizations, necessitate a different approach to knowledge management (Basit et al., 2024). Current thinking considers strategic knowledge management as an effective competitive tool to support organizational performance. Despite the existence of various knowledge management tools, organizational managers compete with each other to rapidly transform approaches to apply knowledge in the field of innovation. Therefore, focusing on strategic management has become essential because the emergence of knowledge innovation never stops and changes with competitive environments and new market conditions, depending on human data, decision-making, collaboration, creative reactions, strategy formulation, strategic knowledge, and knowledge-sharing structure (AlQershi et al., 2023).

Strategic knowledge management refers to the systematic process of identifying, storing, distributing, and applying knowledge in an organization to achieve long-term goals. In today's knowledge-based era, successful organizations are those that can effectively manage and transform the tacit and explicit knowledge of employees, customers, and partners into competitive advantage (Venkitachalam et al., 2022). The importance of this approach lies in preventing resource waste, enhancing efforts, and losing opportunities, helping organizations to act more intelligently in dynamic and complex environments (Hayaeian et al., 2022). Key applications of strategic knowledge management include improved decision-making, continuous innovation, and increased productivity (Lai et al., 2021).

In today's economy, where knowledge is considered as the most important intangible asset of organizations, strategic knowledge management is not a choice but a necessity for survival. Companies like Amazon and Tesla continuously update themselves by analyzing customer data and sharing knowledge between different departments. On the other hand, organizations that neglect the strategic knowledge management increase the risk of obsolescence, reduced flexibility, and loss of specialized personnel. Therefore, integrating knowledge management into organizational strategy is a way to ensure sustainable growth and competitiveness in the long term (Taghizadeh et al., 2021).

When properly and successfully implemented, strategic knowledge management strengthens business performance by optimizing organizational processes, enhancing innovation, and improving decision-making, directly impacting business performance. Organizations that systematically collect, analyze, and apply knowledge typically have higher productivity, lower operational costs, and faster response times (Ferreira et al., 2020). Additionally, strategic knowledge management facilitates organizational learning, prevents the repetition of past mistakes, and helps companies be more flexible when facing crises (Vătămănescu et al., 2020).

Given the importance of strategic knowledge management in organizations, and considering that improving business performance in small and medium enterprises is the main factor for survival and competitiveness of these companies, small and medium enterprises in Ilam city, due to their proximity to the international border with Iraq and their export opportunities, can improve their business performance. In this regard, the role of knowledge and innovation in these companies is of paramount importance. Considering that strategic knowledge management can improve knowledge and create innovation, this study seeks to investigate the impact of strategic knowledge management on business performance in small and medium enterprises in Ilam city.

Most studies on strategic knowledge management have focused on large companies, while SMEs, due to their specific characteristics (high agility, decentralized structure), and need different models in this area. The present research study has been conducted among small and medium exporting companies. The export performance of these companies plays a key role in economic growth, business development, and strengthening their competitive position. Small and medium exporting companies face unique challenges in international markets, including competition with larger competitors who have more financial resources and organizational knowledge, as well as dependence on knowledge management. These companies typically have limited resources, and strategic knowledge management can help them use existing knowledge to create a competitive advantage.

Literature Review

Knowledge Management

At a broad level, knowledge management refers to a collection of structured processes aimed at generating, distributing, and applying knowledge effectively (Harlow, 2018). It involves a systematic and integrated approach that combines suitable information technologies with human collaboration to identify, manage, and disseminate the knowledge assets of an organization. According to Najmi et al. (2018), knowledge management encompasses activities such as creation, acquisition, transformation, and application of knowledge. Its primary objective is to enable organizations to continuously respond and adapt to changes in external environments, including market dynamics, social developments, political factors, and evolving customer preferences (Secundo et al., 2019). Abbasi and Musakhani (2024) describe knowledge management as a process that assists organizations in identifying, organizing, and sharing critical information and competencies—often existing in a fragmented form—constituting part of the organizational memory. This process enhances the organization's ability to solve problems, learn, engage in strategic planning, and make informed, adaptive decisions. Furthermore, knowledge management places strong emphasis on codifying and representing knowledge in formats that facilitate formal sharing and repeated use (Claver-Cortés et al., 2018).

Strategic Knowledge Management

Since knowledge is considered as the most strategic organizational resource, organizations face the fundamental question of how they can efficiently and effectively manage organizational knowledge to benefit from its advantages in advancing organizational strategic objectives. Thus, establishing an efficient and effective knowledge management system as a key organizational competency in the new era, which can create sustainable competitive advantages, is essential (Laihonen & Mäntylä, 2018). A very fundamental and noteworthy point that leads to the emergence of a strategic approach in knowledge management is that knowledge management should serve the strategic movement of the organization and its strategic interaction with the turbulent and changing business environment. Knowledge and its management alone and independent of the organization's strategic objectives will be completely meaningless and worthless. Therefore, the organizational knowledge management should be aligned and coordinated with the organization's strategic actions at the macro level. Accordingly, the concept of strategic knowledge management (knowledge management with a strategic perspective) can be defined as knowledge management aligned with the strategic direction of the organization (Ngah & Wong, 2020). Based on Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) view, strategic knowledge management is the process of creating, transferring, and converting tacit and explicit knowledge in the organization. From Davenport and Prusak's (1998) perspective, this concept includes the processes of collecting, distributing, and using organizational knowledge effectively (Fernández-López et al., 2018). Strategic knowledge management enhances business productivity through strategic renewal (Sharafi & Hoseini, 2024). The concept of strategic knowledge management is based on several fundamental principles:

1. Knowledge as a strategic asset: In this view, knowledge is considered as the most important organizational asset that can create a sustainable competitive advantage.
2. Alignment of knowledge with organizational strategy: Knowledge management should not be separated from business objectives but should directly serve the fulfillment of the organization's mission.
3. Integrated knowledge processes: Including knowledge creation, acquisition, organization, storage, sharing, and application in a systematic manner.
4. Knowledge-oriented culture: Creating an environment in which continuous learning, innovation, and knowledge sharing are institutionalized as organizational values.

5. Knowledge-based technologies: Intelligent use of information systems as the technical foundation for knowledge management.
6. Measurement and evaluation: Assessing the impact of knowledge management on organizational performance through quantitative and qualitative indicators (Rasheed et al., 2025).

Business Performance

Business performance refers to the extent of an organization's success in achieving its strategic and operational objectives through the effective use of resources (human, financial, technological, and knowledge). This concept is a comprehensive criterion for measuring the effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of organizational activities in the long term (Masrizal et al., 2025). According to the traditional (financially-oriented) perspective, business performance is measured solely by financial indicators such as profitability, return on investment (ROI), market share, and cash flow (Depino-Besada et al., 2025). From a multidimensional perspective, performance includes non-financial dimensions such as customer satisfaction, product quality, innovation, employee satisfaction, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Trivedi et al., 2021). From a stakeholder perspective, successful performance creates a balance between the demands of shareholders, customers, employees, society, and the environment. From a process perspective, it focuses on the efficiency of internal processes (such as production, supply chain, and after-sales services) (Guerrero et al., 2019).

Strategic Knowledge Management and Business Performance

Knowledge, as the primary capital of organizations, has captured the management's attention and influenced the way operations are conducted. If knowledge management is established in organizations in a strategic and forward-looking manner, it will improve organizational performance at a faster rate (Cheng, 2020). With the expansion of strategic knowledge management, the risk of future unknown activities can be reduced. Having strategic knowledge management can provide organizations with a competitive advantage (Mehdikhani et al., 2019). The importance of strategic knowledge management is that it transforms knowledge from a passive asset into an active competitive advantage. In today's economy, where technological changes and market transformations occur at an unprecedented speed, successful organizations are those that can convert knowledge into practical solutions faster than competitors. Strategic knowledge management not only increases operational efficiency but also enables market leadership by encouraging innovation and creating new knowledge (Rialti et al., 2020). The impact of strategic knowledge management on business performance goes beyond short-term improvements and ensures the long-term sustainability of organizations. Businesses that integrate knowledge management into their strategy not only reduce the risk of losing specialized personnel and organizational knowledge but also gain the agility necessary to adapt to market changes (Hughes et al., 2021). In a world where knowledge is power, organizations lacking efficient knowledge management systems will gradually be eliminated from competition. Therefore, investing in strategic knowledge management today is not a choice but a necessary condition for survival and growth in digital age (Mata et al., 2024).

Hypothesis Development and Conceptual Framework

Strategic Knowledge Management and Business Performance

Strategic knowledge management today is not a choice but a necessity for survival in the turbulent business environments. Organizations that ignore this approach will quickly be eliminated from competition by knowledge-oriented competitors (Vătămănescu et al., 2020). Strategic knowledge management improves the organizational efficiency and effectiveness by reducing operational costs through documenting knowledge and optimizing organizational processes (Laihonen & Mäntylä, 2018). Organizations that pursue the implementation of strategic knowledge management and have coherent and precise planning in this regard have higher competitive power and more successful operational mechanisms compared to organizations that neglect this key issue (Rasheed et al., 2025). Harlow (2018) stated in his study that strategic knowledge management enhances the quality and effectiveness of organizations, creating a competitive advantage for organizations. It also improves performance at both individual and organizational levels. Najmi et al. (2018) stated that strategic knowledge management has a positive and significant impact on organizational performance responsiveness through dynamic capabilities. Secundo et al. (2019) argued that knowledge-based organizations improve their performance by integrating knowledge management and strategic management. Based on the above information, the following hypothesis is formed to be explored in the present research study:

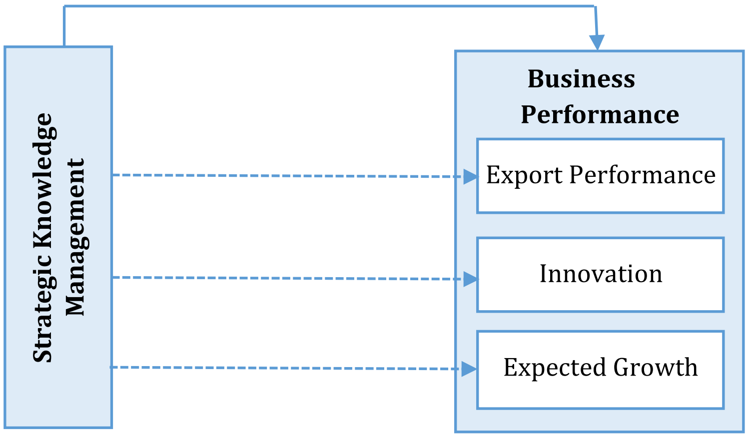
H1: Strategic knowledge management has a significant impact on business performance.

In a study by Shaik et al. (2024), strategic knowledge management was presented as a one-dimensional construct affecting the business performance. Additionally, Depino-Besada et al. (2025) stated that the performance of small and medium businesses consists of three components of export performance, innovation, and expected growth. Rasheed et al. (2025) also argued that strategic knowledge management affects the sustainable performance of the organization and its components. Therefore, the secondary research hypotheses, which examine the effect of strategic knowledge management on the components of business performance, are presented:

- **H1-1:** Strategic knowledge management has a significant impact on the export performance of businesses.
- **H1-2:** Strategic knowledge management has a significant impact on business innovation.
- **H1-3:** Strategic knowledge management has a significant impact on the expected growth of businesses.

Based on the mentioned points, the conceptual model of the present study is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1.
The Conceptual Research Model



(Source: Adapted from Shaik et al. (2024) and Depino-Besada et al. (2025))

Methodology

This study is classified as applied research in terms of its objective. Methodologically, it is categorized as a descriptive-survey research study. The statistical population of the study consists of 320 managers and specialists from active small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Ilam city. Using Morgan's sampling table and a simple random sampling technique, 175 individuals were initially selected. After the distribution and collection of the questionnaires, a total of 165 were deemed valid and usable for analysis.

Data collection methods in this study comprised both field and library-based approaches. The field method was employed to gather empirical data necessary for addressing the research questions, while the library method—encompassing the review of books, scholarly articles, journals, prior research studies, and online academic databases—was utilized to construct the theoretical framework and literature review.

The primary instrument for data collection was a standardized questionnaire. The structure of the questionnaire, including the items corresponding to each variable and the researchers from whom the instruments were adopted, is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.
Questionnaire Items

Variable	Dimensions	Number of Questions	Source
Business Performance	Export Performance	4	Depino-Besada et al. (2025)
	Innovation	4	
	Expected Growth	4	
Strategic Knowledge Management	----------	12	Shaik et al. (2024)
Total Questionnaire	----------	24	

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

To evaluate the validity of the questionnaire, expert judgment and input from academic faculty members specializing in the relevant field were employed, confirming the content validity of the questionnaire. To assess the content validity quantitatively, two statistical measures were utilized: the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) and the Content Validity Index (CVI). The CVR score was calculated at 0.84, exceeding the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.62, thereby confirming the content validity of the item. Furthermore, the CVI was determined to be 0.88, which surpasses the standard benchmark of 0.79, providing additional evidence supporting the content validity of the instrument. To determine the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was computed. The resulting alpha value of 0.93 indicates a high level of internal consistency, affirming that the questionnaire possesses strong reliability.

Table 2.
Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient for Research Variables

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient
Strategic Knowledge Management	0.89
Export Performance	0.82
Innovation	0.90
Expected Growth	0.92
Total Questionnaire	0.93

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

Structural Equation Modeling was used with LISREL software to analyze the data.

Findings

In this section, first, the normality of the data is examined by running the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Then, appropriate tests are used to test each hypothesis.

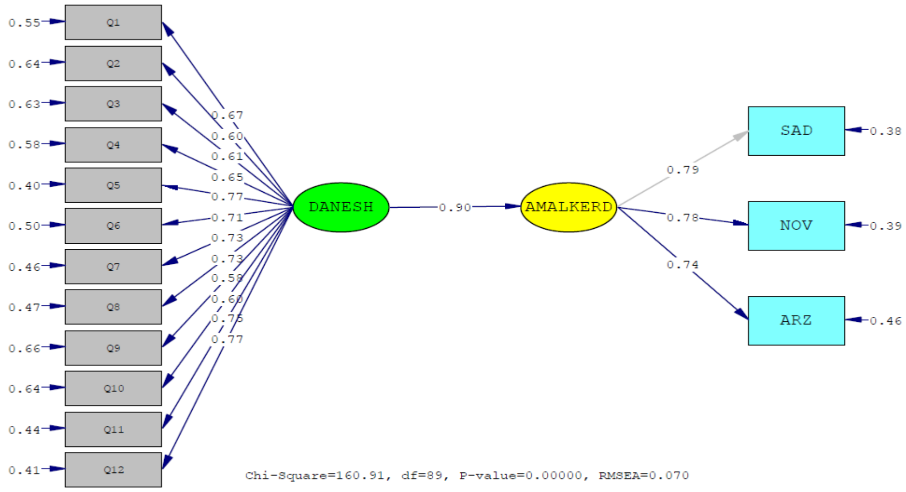
Table 3.
Normality Test of the Research Variables

Variables	Number of Items	Significance Level	Z Statistic	Result
Strategic Knowledge Management	12	0.73	0.89	Data distribution is normal
Export Performance	4	0.58	0.76	Data distribution is normal
Innovation	4	0.81	0.93	Data distribution is normal
Expected Growth	4	0.69	0.88	Data distribution is normal

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

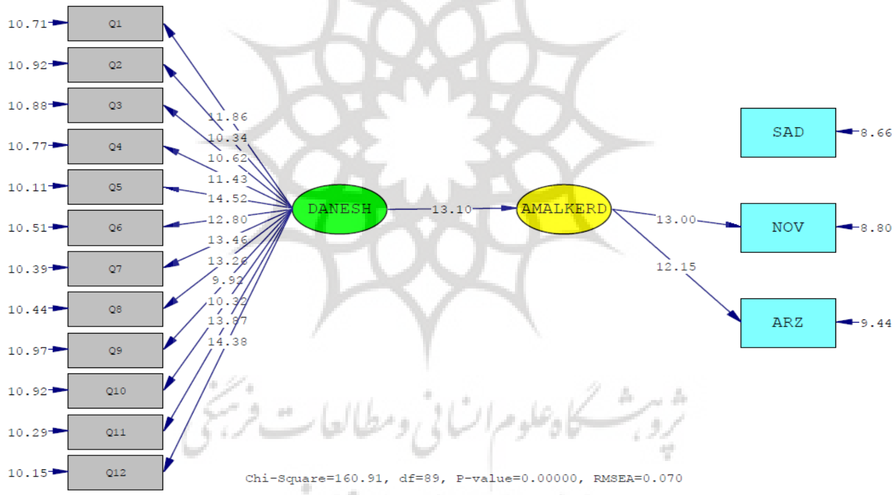
As shown in the above table, the significance levels for all variables exceed the 0.05 threshold, indicating that the data follow a normal distribution. To evaluate the main hypothesis of the study, the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach was employed using LISREL software. Two distinct models were utilized in this research to test both the primary hypothesis and the associated sub-hypotheses.

Figure 2.
The Structural Model of the Main Research Hypothesis in Standard Estimation Mode



(Source: Researcher's Findings)

Figure 3.
The Structural Model of the Main Research Hypothesis in Significance Coefficient Mode



(Source: Researcher's Findings)

To evaluate the model fit, specific indices are used. Table 4 presents the calculated values of these indices compared to their permissible values, with results indicating an optimal fit of the model.

Table 4.
A Comparison of the Fit Indices for the Structural Model of the Main Hypothesis

Indices	Permissible Value	Calculated Coefficients for the Main Research Model	Result
GFI	Above 0.9	0.93	Good fit
AGFI	Above 0.9	0.99	Good fit
RMR	Closer to zero is better	0.03	Good fit
NFI	Above 0.9	0.90	Good fit
IFI	Above 0.9	0.92	Good fit

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

According to widely accepted guidelines, the adequacy of the default (fitted) model is confirmed when the estimated fit indices presented in Table 4 fall within the acceptable thresholds. Conversely, if these coefficients lie outside the defined range, it suggests a poor model fit. Table 4 presents the status of the fit indices for the structural model related to the main hypothesis. A comparison between the column of estimated coefficients and the column indicating acceptable ranges reveals that the model exhibits an acceptable level of fit.

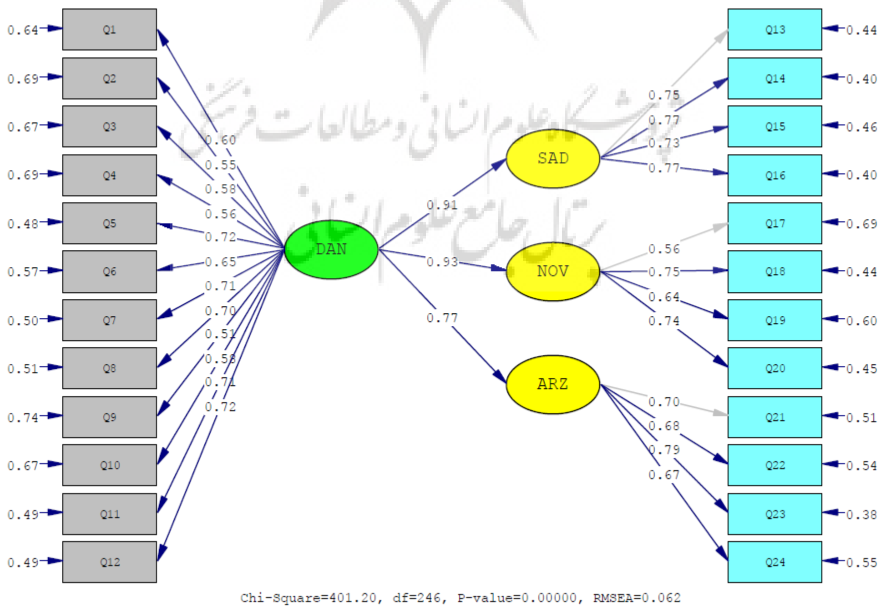
Table 5.
The Results of the Main Research Hypothesis

Standard Coefficient	T-value	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Test Result
0.90	13.10	Strategic Knowledge Management	Business Performance	Confirmed

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

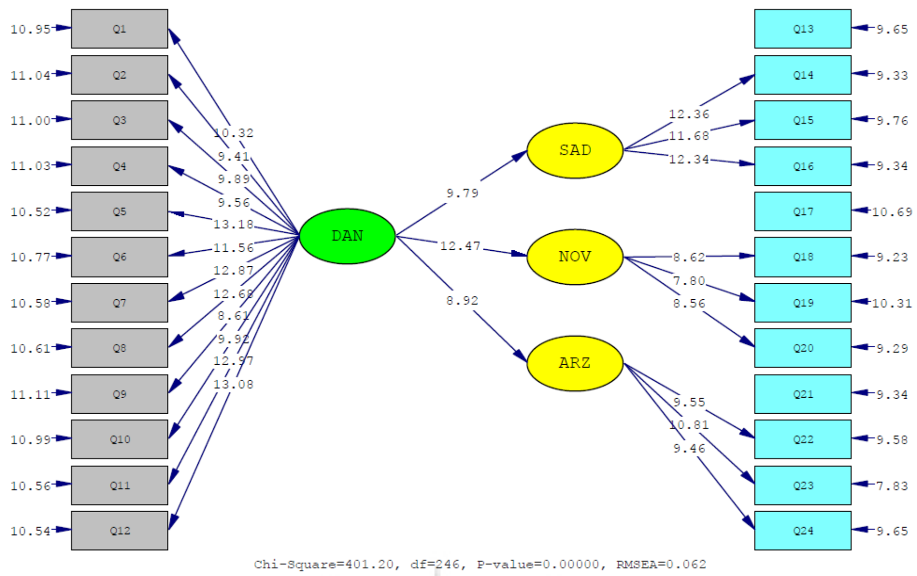
The primary hypothesis posits that strategic knowledge management significantly influences the business performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Ilam city. As shown in Table 5, the standardized path coefficient between strategic knowledge management and business performance is 0.90. Furthermore, the corresponding t-value is 13.10, which exceeds the critical threshold of 1.96, thereby confirming the hypothesis. Consequently, it can be concluded that strategic knowledge management exerts a direct, positive, and statistically significant effect on the business performance of SMEs in Ilam city. Therefore, the main research hypothesis is supported.

Figure 4.
The Structural Model of the Secondary Research Hypotheses in Standard Estimation Mode



(Source: Researcher's Findings)

Figure 5.
The Structural Model of the Secondary Research Hypotheses in Significance Coefficient Mode



(Source: Researcher's Findings)

The results of examining the goodness of fit for the structural model of the secondary research hypotheses are reported in Table 6.

Table 6.
A Comparison of the Fit Indices for the Structural Model of the Secondary Research Hypotheses

Indices	Permissible Value	Calculated Coefficients for the Secondary Hypotheses Model	Result
GFI	Above 0.9	0.91	Good fit
AGFI	Above 0.9	0.93	Good fit
RMR	Closer to zero is better	0.06	Good fit
NFI	Above 0.9	0.99	Good fit
IFI	Above 0.9	0.94	Good fit

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

As observed, the status of indices for the structural models of the secondary research hypotheses is shown in Table 6. The comparison of the calculated coefficients column with the permissible range column indicates that the model fit indices are appropriate.

Table 7.
The Results of the Secondary Research Hypotheses

Standard Coefficient	T-value	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Test Result
0.91	9.79	Strategic Knowledge Management	Export Performance	Confirmed
0.93	12.47	Strategic Knowledge Management	Innovation	Confirmed
0.77	892	Strategic Knowledge Management	Expected Growth	Confirmed

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

According to Table 7, the significance values for all three secondary research hypotheses are greater than 1.96, and the effect coefficients between all three research variables are positive. Therefore, it can be concluded that strategic knowledge management has a positive and significant impact on exports, innovation, and expected growth.

Discussion and Conclusion

In today's knowledge-driven economy, knowledge serves as the primary catalyst for growth. Organizations that effectively manage knowledge strategically are the ones that maintain their competitive edge. Strategic knowledge management acts as a vital link between "what an organization knows" and "what it is capable of achieving", and failing to prioritize it means missing numerous opportunities for progress. Organizations that successfully implement strategic knowledge management play a pivotal role in gaining a competitive advantage and enhancing the overall organizational performance.

The primary aim of this study was to explore the impact of strategic knowledge management on business performance. Drawing upon theoretical foundations and the proposed conceptual model, four hypotheses (one main hypothesis and three sub-hypotheses) were formulated. After gathering the data using standardized questionnaires and analyzing the results with LISREL software, the findings revealed that strategic knowledge management positively and significantly influences business performance, as well as its key dimensions, including export performance, innovation, and anticipated growth.

The results obtained from the present research study directly and indirectly align with the findings of researchers such as Harlow (2018), Najmi et al. (2018), Secundo et al. (2019), Ngah et al. (2020), Rialti et al. (2020), Trivedi et al. (2021), Hayaeian et al. (2022), Basit et al. (2024), Shaik et al. (2024), and Rasheed et al. (2025), among others.

Given the positive and significant impact of strategic knowledge management on business performance of small and medium enterprises in Ilam city, the following recommendations are suggested:

- It is recommended that small and medium businesses establish an integrated knowledge management system in their company. In this regard, they can implement digital platforms such as organizational wikis, cloud document systems, and intelligent knowledge bases.
- It is recommended that a knowledge-sharing culture be created in companies. In this regard, they can develop incentive programs for knowledge sharing (such as reward systems), hold regular knowledge enhancement meetings between departments, and create internal social networks.
- It is recommended that knowledge management be aligned with business strategies. In this regard, it is suggested that businesses take actions such as creating the role of Chief Knowledge Officer, developing organizational knowledge strategy, and linking the reward system with knowledge objectives.

- It is recommended that managers of small and medium enterprises implement strategic knowledge management, establish a knowledge base to create an atmosphere of trust and create a knowledge creation working group to minimize the role of biases and secondary experiences in profitability results.

Managerial Implications: Managers of small and medium businesses can use the results of this study in a practical and applied manner to improve the performance of their organizations. By establishing and implementing strategic knowledge management, while transforming knowledge into tangible competitive advantage and improving strategic decision-making in the organization, they can achieve sustainable competitive advantages and improve their business performance.

Theoretical Innovation: The general conclusion of the present study indicates that strategic knowledge management, as one of the factors influencing competitive power and creating competitive advantage, and ultimately improving business performance, plays a key role in exporting small and medium enterprises. In previous research on strategic knowledge management, it has mostly been studied in large organizations or companies. The focus of the present study has been on exporting small and medium enterprises.

Limitations: There are some limitations in the present study. Although the data of this study support the proposed model, the first limitation of this research is related to the spatial domain of the research. This study was conducted in Iran among small and medium enterprises in Ilam city. Given the different economic, political, and cultural factors of countries and their major role in the performance of export businesses, to generalize the model, it is recommended that similar studies be conducted to confirm the extracted model in different countries. The second limitation is that these results may change in other industries. Therefore, it is recommended that these relationships be compared across different industries.

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