

Leadership Styles and Entrepreneurial Orientation of Selected Fast-Food Enterprises in Owerri, Imo State

Kalu-okoro, U. A(2026)

Department of Entrepreneurship Studies, University of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences,
Umuagwo, Imo State

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between leadership styles and entrepreneurial orientation of selected fast-food enterprises in Owerri, Imo State. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design. The accessible population was 235 employees of ten (10) selected fast-food enterprises in Owerri. The sample size of 148 was determined using Taro Yamane formula. Purposive sampling technique was utilized. The primary data was generated through structured questionnaire based on the 5-point Likert scale. 136 copies of questionnaires were retrieved and used for analysis. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data. The reliability of the instrument was attained using the Cronbach Alpha coefficient with all the items scored above the threshold of 0.70. The hypotheses were tested using the Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficient with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 23.0. The tests were carried out at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed a significant and positive relationship between the dimensions of leadership styles and entrepreneurial orientation of fast-food enterprises in Owerri, Imo State. The study recommends among others that business owners and managers of fast-food businesses should mostly adopt transformational and servant leadership styles which fosters creative and innovative climate which aids employees to contribute their ideas, take calculated risks, enhances their motivation and engagement. Moreover, government agencies should design leadership focused capacity-building initiatives while policy makers introduce innovation-supportive policies that will help fast-food enterprises remain competitive and resilient in a rapidly changing business environment.

Keywords: Leadership Styles, Transformational Leadership, Transactional leadership, Servant Leadership, Entrepreneurial Orientation.

INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic business environment, leadership remains a central determinant of organizational success, survival and sustainability (Northouse, 2021). The ability of a leader to influence, motivate and guide subordinates toward achieving common goals determines how effectively an organisation adapts to environmental changes and market competition (Bass & Avolio, 1994). In the fast-food industry characterized by rapid shifts in consumer preferences, intense competition, and frequent innovation demands leadership style which plays a critical role in shaping how organisations respond to opportunities and threats (Onwuegbule & Onuoha, 2022). Effective leadership stimulates creativity, risk-taking and market responsiveness elements that are foundational to entrepreneurial orientation (Rauch et al., 2009). Entrepreneurial orientation (EO) represents a firm's strategic posture toward innovativeness, proactiveness and competitive aggressiveness, reflecting its willingness to pursue new ideas, anticipate market changes and aggressively secure market share (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Akpan & Okwudu, 2022). In highly competitive industries such as fast-food, entrepreneurial orientation enhances a firm's ability to differentiate its products, improve service delivery and sustain customer loyalty (Nuhu et al., 2023). However, many fast-food enterprises in Nigeria, particularly in Owerri, appear to adopt incremental business models rather than radical innovation, thereby limiting their adaptability and competitive edge (Chikere, 2025). Moreover, it has been observed that many fast-food enterprises in Owerri appear to exhibit low levels of innovativeness and proactiveness despite the growing market opportunities. Leadership practices in these firms are often routine, control-oriented, and reactive rather than visionary and empowering. Consequently, the ability of employees to act entrepreneurially is constrained. The problem,

therefore, is the unclear and underexplored influence of leadership styles: transformational, transactional, and servant on the measures of entrepreneurial orientation (innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness) of fast-food businesses in Owerri, Imo State. Leadership style is widely recognized as a key antecedent of entrepreneurial orientation: transformational leaders inspire vision, creativity and change; transactional leaders emphasize structure, rewards and monitoring; while servant leaders focus on empowerment, service and ethical conduct. Each of these styles influences how employees perceive opportunities, take initiative and engage in strategic entrepreneurship (Greenleaf, 1977). While international and sectoral studies in manufacturing, SMEs, startups (Hashmi et al., 2020; Piros & Charyesh, 2022; Chen & Wu, 2020) broadly support positive links between leadership styles and EO. There is scant empirical research focusing specifically on fast-food businesses in Owerri, that compares transformational, transactional, and servant leadership together against the measures of EO (innovativeness, proactiveness, competitive aggressiveness). Therefore, this study fills this contextual gap by providing sector-specific evidence from Owerri, enabling more precise managerial recommendations for fast-food operators in the state. The aim is to determine how leadership behaviours contribute to the entrepreneurial posture of these firms and to offer practical insights for managers seeking to enhance innovation and competitiveness in the fast-food sector.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the critical role of leadership in shaping organizational behaviour, it has been observed that many fast-food enterprises in Owerri, Imo State continue to experience challenges in sustaining entrepreneurial behaviours necessary for competitiveness and growth. Entrepreneurial orientation has been widely recognized as a key driver of firm performance and adaptability in dynamic environments (Miller, 1983; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). However, the extent to which different leadership styles influence such entrepreneurial tendencies within the fast-food sector remains unclear, particularly in the context of Owerri, Imo State. This gap in empirical knowledge necessitates the present study.

Conceptual Framework

This study presents an integrated conceptual framework that illustrates the relationship between leadership styles and entrepreneurial orientation in selected fast-food businesses in Owerri, Imo State. The framework identifies leadership styles as the independent variable, comprising transformational, transactional, and servant leadership, while entrepreneurial orientation represents the dependent construct, operationalized through innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness. The model suggests that transformational leadership is associated with innovativeness, transactional leadership is associated with competitive aggressiveness, and servant leadership is associated with proactiveness. The relationships are represented using arrows, indicating a correlational association rather than causality, consistent with the Spearman Rank Order Correlation method adopted in the study. The framework therefore provides an integrated view of how different leadership styles are related to specific dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation within fast-food enterprises.

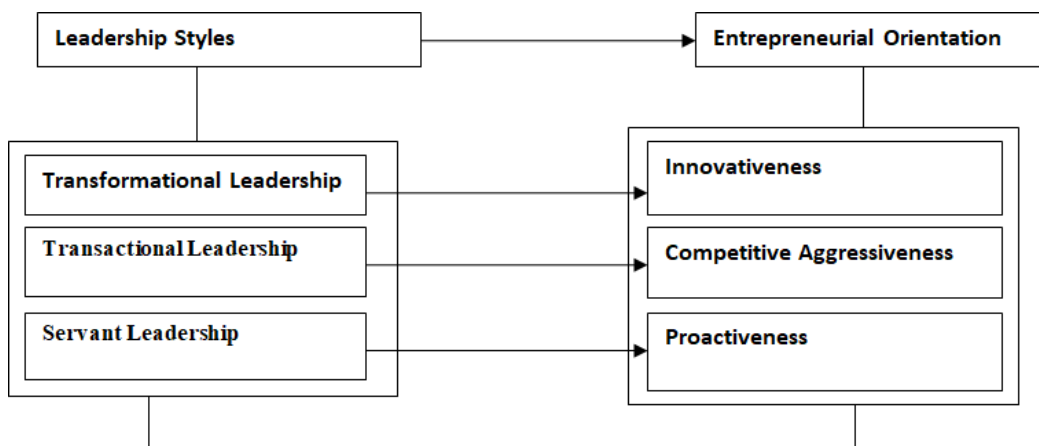


Fig 1: Conceptual Framework of Leadership Styles and Entrepreneurial Orientation of Fast-food Enterprises in Owerri, Imo State.

Source: Conceptualization by the Author. Adapted from: Dimensions of Leadership Styles were adapted from Burns (1978); Bass & Avolio (1994); Greenleaf (1977); while the measures of Entrepreneurial Orientation were adapted from Miller (1983); Lumpkin & Dess (1996).

Research Hypotheses

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between transformational leadership and innovativeness of selected fast-food enterprises in Owerri, Imo State.

H₀₂: There is no significant link between transformational leadership and proactiveness of selected fast-food enterprises in Owerri, Imo State.

H₀₃: There is no significant association between transformational leadership and competitive aggressiveness of selected fast-food enterprises in Owerri, Imo State.

H₀₄: There is no significant relationship between transactional leadership and innovativeness of selected fast-food enterprises in Owerri, Imo State.

H₀₅: There is no significant link between transactional leadership and proactiveness of selected fast-food enterprises in Owerri, Imo State.

H₀₆: There is no significant association between transactional leadership and competitive aggressiveness of selected fast-food enterprises in Owerri, Imo State.

H₀₇: There is no significant relationship between servant leadership and innovativeness of selected fast-food enterprises in Owerri, Imo State.

H₀₈: There is no significant link between servant leadership and proactiveness of selected fast-food enterprises in Owerri, Imo State.

H₀₉: There is no significant association between servant leadership and competitive aggressiveness of selected fast-food enterprises in Owerri, Imo State.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

This study is anchored on transformational, transactional, and servant leadership theories which collectively explain how leadership behaviour influences the entrepreneurial orientation of fast-food businesses.

Transformational leadership theory

This theory was originally developed by Burns (1978) and further developed by Bass (1985). It explains leadership as a process of inspiring and motivating employees to exceed expectations through vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. It is relevant to this study because it provides a foundation for understanding how leaders stimulate creativity and innovation in fast-food businesses. Transformational leaders encourage employees to explore new menu designs, service innovations or process improvements, as well as motivate proactive behaviour by seeking new opportunities before competitors do. Therefore, transformational leadership theory provides a theoretical basis to expect a positive relationship between transformational leadership behaviours and higher levels of entrepreneurial orientation in fast-food firms.

Transactional leadership theory

This theory was developed by Burns (1978) and extended by Bass (1985). Transactional leadership assumes that leadership is based on structured exchanges, rewards for compliance and sanctions for deviation. Within the context of fast-food businesses in Owerri, transactional leadership is relevant due its emphasis on structure,

supervision and performance-based rewards. Given the routine nature of operations, need for efficiency, and competitive intensity, it helps ensure adherence to standards, improves employee productivity, and enhances competitive aggressiveness. Consequently, transactional leadership theory predicts a more modest or selective relationship with entrepreneurial orientation and stronger association perhaps for competitive aggressiveness, weaker for innovativeness and proactiveness.

Servant Leadership Theory

The servant leadership theory was developed by Greenleaf (1977). It emphasizes prioritizing employee needs, empowerment, and ethical leadership behaviour which encourage trust and collaboration (Liden et al., 2014). The theory sees leadership as service, where leaders achieve effectiveness thereby enhancing organizational performance. In the fast-food sector, servant leaders can generate conditions conducive to entrepreneurial orientation. Servant leadership promotes innovativeness and proactiveness by creating a supportive climate where employees are motivated to innovate and act proactively (Ren, 2024). Moreover, ethical stewardship enhances competitive aggressiveness through collective commitment to organizational success. In summary, these theories jointly provide a foundation for understanding how leadership styles influence the entrepreneurial orientation of fast-food firms.

Conceptual Review

Leadership Styles

Leadership styles in this study are conceptualized as behavioural patterns exhibited by leaders in managing employees and organizational resources. Leadership style refers to the consistent pattern of behaviour adopted by a leader to influence and motivate subordinates toward achieving organizational goals (Amah & Nwuche, 2020; Northouse, 2021). They shape how decisions are made, how employees are engaged, and how organizational objectives are accomplished. The nature of a leader's interaction with subordinates determines the level of trust, commitment, and creativity within an organization. Leadership behaviour significantly influences employees' motivation, decision-making, and entrepreneurial tendencies (Jun, 2023). The dimensions of leadership styles adopted in this study are transformational, transactional and servant leadership.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership posits that leaders inspire followers through idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration Bass and Avolio (1994) described transformational leaders as those who articulate a clear vision, provide individualized consideration, and challenge followers to think creatively. Therefore, such leaders create a culture that supports, commitment, experimentation and learning among followers. Transformational leaders stimulate creativity and adaptability, which enhance firms' innovation and market responsiveness. Moreover, transformational leaders foster environments where employees take initiative and act proactively, leading to sustain competitive advantage (Makumbe, 2024). In the context of fast-food businesses, transformational leadership's focus on vision, innovation and empowerment.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership is a leadership style based on exchange relationships between leaders and followers, where compliance is achieved through rewards and corrective actions. It focusses on setting clear goals, monitoring performance, and providing incentives when targets are met, while deviations are corrected through supervision or sanctions. This approach emphasizes structure, efficiency, and adherence to established procedures. Burns (1978) noted that transactional leaders maintain organizational stability through a reward–punishment mechanism. This leadership style supports competitive aggressiveness by setting performance benchmarks and encouraging employees to meet specific goals. However, as Odumeru and Ogbonna (2013) observed, transactional leadership may inhibit creativity if overemphasized, since it focuses more on existing processes than innovation.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership emphasizes serving others, showing empathy, and involvement in community building. The servant leader prioritizes followers' growth, supportive work environment, empowerment and well-being. Thus, the leader believes that motivated and fulfilled employees will contribute meaningfully to organizational success. Liden et al. (2014) stated that servant leaders foster an environment of trust, collaboration, and shared vision, all of which encourage innovativeness and proactive problem-solving. In service-oriented businesses like fast food, servant leadership can enhance employees' sense of responsibility and commitment to quality improvement. This leadership approach nurtures employees' confidence to act proactively and collectively pursue organizational competitiveness (Canavesi et al., 2021).

Entrepreneurial Orientation

Entrepreneurial orientation (EO) is conceptualized as a firm-level strategic posture that reflects the extent to which an organization engages in entrepreneurial behaviours. While Miller (1983) proposed innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking, Lumpkin and Dess (1996) extended the construct to include competitive aggressiveness and autonomy. This study adopts innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness due to their relevance to competitive behaviour in the fast-food sector, also, they collectively capture how firms identify and exploit opportunities in competitive environments. Thus, is widely accepted as a multidimensional construct which jointly influence firm performance and survival. In this study, EO is treated as a dependent (outcome) variable, representing the behavioural outcomes of leadership practices within fast-food enterprises. This perspective assumes that leadership styles shape organizational attitudes and actions, thereby influencing the degree to which firms adopt innovative practices, act proactively in anticipating market changes, and respond aggressively to competitors. Innovativeness reflects the firm's tendency to support creativity and introduce new products or processes; proactiveness denotes a forward-looking orientation characterized by anticipating and acting on future demand; while competitive aggressiveness represents the intensity with which a firm challenges competitors to improve its market position. These dimensions provide measurable indicators through which the impact of leadership styles on entrepreneurial behaviour can be assessed. Thus, positioning EO as a dependent variable enables the study to examine how transformational, transactional, and servant leadership styles are associated with variations in entrepreneurial behaviours among fast-food businesses in Owerri, Imo State.

Innovativeness

Innovativeness refers to a firm's tendency to support and engage in creativity, experimentation, and the introduction of new products, services, or processes. As conceptualized by Miller (1983), it reflects the extent to which organizations depart from existing practices to develop novel solutions and improve their competitive position. Firms high in innovativeness actively invest in new ideas, adapt to technological changes, and encourage employees to generate and implement creative solutions. Moreover, they are better positioned to respond to environmental changes and achieve superior performance (Hughes & Morgan, 2007). In the context of fast-food enterprises in Owerri, innovativeness manifests through the introduction of new menu items, modification of recipes, adoption of modern food preparation technologies, and improvement in service delivery processes. It also includes efforts to create unique customer experiences, such as customized meals or improved ordering systems, which enhance customer satisfaction and competitiveness.

Proactiveness

Proactiveness denotes a firm's forward-looking orientation, characterized by anticipating future market demands and acting ahead of competitors. According to Miller (1983), it reflects the ability of firms to seize opportunities by initiating actions rather than merely reacting to environmental changes. Proactive firms are opportunity-seeking, trend-sensitive, and often take the lead in introducing new products or entering new markets (Lumpkin and Dess (2001). In fast-food enterprises in Owerri, proactiveness is evident in anticipating customer preferences, introducing new products ahead of competitors, expanding services such as delivery options, and responding quickly to changes in consumer demand. It also includes strategic actions like opening outlets in high-traffic locations and adjusting operations to meet emerging market trends. Moreover, proactiveness strengthens competitive positioning by enabling early entry into new markets and first-mover advantages,

however, its benefits vary with environmental dynamism and resource base (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Rauch et al., 2009). Furthermore, it interacts with other capabilities such as market sensing, and digital readiness to convert early action into performance gains (Kusa, 2024).

Competitive Aggressiveness

This denotes a firm's tendency to directly and intensely challenge competitors in order to improve its market position. As advanced by Lumpkin and Dess (1996), it reflects a firm's willingness to outperform rivals through bold and assertive competitive actions. This can be achieved through aggressive pricing, rapid competitive responses, and relentless pursuit of market share. For fast-food businesses, this could manifest through actions such as price competition, promotional campaigns, menu differentiation, faster service delivery, strategic location positioning or location expansion strategies and active responses to competitors' moves to attract and retain customers. Competitive aggressiveness can help small firms maintain visibility and market relevance especially in saturated markets (Kraus et al., 2012). Firms exhibiting high competitive aggressiveness continuously monitor rivals and implement actions aimed at attracting and retaining customers in a highly competitive environment. However, Al-Harthi (2024) and Górska-Warsewicz et al. (2024) have advanced for conceptual clarification and contextualization of competitive aggressiveness, noting that in some sectors it is the key entrepreneurial orientation dimension driving performance, while in others it moderates the effectiveness of innovativeness and proactiveness.

Leadership Styles and Entrepreneurial Orientation

The relationship between leadership styles and entrepreneurial orientation (EO) is well established in management literature, as leadership behaviour plays a critical role in shaping organizational strategies and actions. Entrepreneurial orientation, as conceptualized by Miller (1983) and extended by Lumpkin and Dess (1996), reflects a firm's tendency to engage in innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness. Leadership styles influence how organizations identify opportunities, respond to environmental changes, and compete within their industry. Transformational leadership is associated with innovativeness, as it encourages creativity, vision, and the generation of new ideas among employees. Transactional leadership aligns with competitive aggressiveness through its emphasis on performance, control, and goal attainment, which supports firms in responding effectively to competitive pressures.

Servant leadership relates to proactiveness by fostering employee empowerment, responsiveness, and a customer-oriented approach that enables firms to anticipate and act on future market needs. Thus, the interaction between leadership styles and EO determines the extent to which fast-food businesses can remain adaptive, innovative, and resilient in a competitive environment. Leadership style significantly shapes the entrepreneurial posture of an organization, and remains a critical determinant of organizational direction, innovation, and competitiveness, particularly within fast-paced sectors like the fast-food industry. Within the context of fast-food enterprises in Owerri, these relationships suggest that leadership styles are closely linked with the extent to which firms' exhibit entrepreneurial behaviours. However, consistent with the correlational design of this study, the nexus is viewed as associational rather than causal, indicating that leadership styles are related to variations in entrepreneurial orientation without implying direct cause-and-effect relationships.

Empirical Review

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that leadership style significantly influences firms' entrepreneurial orientation (EO), particularly in dynamic business environments such as the fast-food sector. In Nigeria, Chikezie and Nwosu (2022) found that transformational leadership had a strong positive impact on innovation and proactive decision-making among SMEs in the service sector. Their findings indicated that transformational leaders enhance creativity and flexibility, leading to improved firm performance. Similarly, Makumbe (2024) reported that transformational leadership fosters adaptive innovation and long-term competitiveness in emerging markets, suggesting its suitability for fast-food enterprises operating in volatile environments. Equally, Okafor and Ogbu (2021) discovered that transactional leadership positively influences short-term performance and competitiveness of small enterprises in Enugu State through reward-based motivation and goal clarity. However, the study cautioned that excessive reliance on transactional practices may hinder innovative initiatives.

Supporting this, Nwokorie and Eze (2020) observed that transactional leadership maintains operational efficiency but limits proactive and innovative behaviour among employees in Nigeria's hospitality industry.

Previous studies have examined the relationship between leadership styles and organizational outcomes in Nigeria, with evidence suggesting that transactional leadership significantly enhances firm performance and competitiveness (Ugwu, 2024). Similarly, entrepreneurial orientation dimensions, including competitive aggressiveness, have been found to significantly influence SME performance (Eze et al., 2022). Beyond individual leadership styles, broader studies on entrepreneurial orientation provide further support for these relationships. Wales (2021) emphasized that entrepreneurial orientation dimensions such as innovativeness and proactiveness are critical drivers of firm competitiveness and strategic positioning. Evidence on servant leadership reveals its growing relevance to entrepreneurial outcomes. Eneh (2022) found a significant relationship between servant leadership and innovative work behaviour among employees in service firms, emphasizing empowerment and trust as mediators. Also, Obi & Nwosu (2021) reported that servant leadership enhanced employees' creativity and innovation in hospitality firms in Anambra State. Likewise, Canavesi et al. (2021) concluded that servant leadership encourages a culture of collaboration and learning, fostering innovation and proactive market responses. Overall, these studies converge on the notion that leadership style is a critical antecedent of entrepreneurial orientation. Transformational and servant leadership styles are generally associated with higher innovativeness and proactiveness, while transactional leadership tends to support competitive aggressiveness through structured control and rewards. Despite these contributions, existing studies largely focus on isolated leadership styles or general entrepreneurial outcomes, with limited attention to the integrated relationship between transformational, transactional, and servant leadership styles and specific entrepreneurial orientation dimensions such as innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness.

Gaps of the Study

Despite the growing literature, and established link between leadership styles and EO notable gaps remain, while empirical research focusing on fast-food businesses within Imo State remains limited. Most Nigerian studies explored leadership and entrepreneurial orientation broadly among SMEs and service firms without focusing on fast-food enterprises, which face distinct innovation and competitiveness challenges. Moreover, servant leadership remains underexplored compared to transformational and transactional styles. Previous research often examined only one or two EO dimensions, neglecting the integrative view of innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness. Finally, the geographical gap persists, as little evidence exists from Owerri, Imo State, despite its vibrant fast-food ecosystem. This study thus contributes by examining how transformational, transactional, and servant leadership styles jointly influence innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness among fast-food businesses in Owerri, Imo State.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a survey design with a target population of 235 employees from ten (10) selected fast-food enterprises in Owerri, Imo State. This design allows the researcher to gather opinions and perceptions from managers and supervisors of fast-food businesses in Owerri. The enterprises were purposively chosen based on business type criteria, including engagement in quick-service operations, possession of a defined management structure (manager, supervisors, and frontline staff), routine service, regular customer turnover, and active participation in a competitive market environment. Furthermore, the selected enterprises had been in operation for more than 5 years and have staff strength ranging from 15 to 36+, reflecting organizations of sufficient scale for observing leadership practices and entrepreneurial orientation. Thus, these characteristics provide a suitable context for analysing the relationship between leadership styles and entrepreneurial orientation in fast-food enterprises. A sample of 148 respondents was determined using Taro Yamane's formula. Given the strategic nature of the study variables, managers and supervisors with strategic and functional responsibilities were purposively selected as respondents. To ensure fair representation across enterprises, Bowley's proportionate allocation was applied to distribute the 148 questionnaires in proportion to each enterprise's employee strength. Bowley's formula was applied solely for allocation purposes, not as a probability sampling method, and therefore does not conflict with the non-probability design.

Of the 148 questionnaires distributed, 136 were correctly completed and used for analysis, representing a 91.9% response rate. The questionnaire underwent content and face validity checks by two experts in management studies and research methodology to ensure that the items accurately measured the intended variables. Reliability was tested through Cronbach’s Alpha using a pilot study conducted on 20 respondents outside the main sample, and all constructs recorded coefficients exceeding the 0.70 threshold, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Data collected were coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used to summarize respondents’ opinions, while the inferential statistics was carried out using Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficient (SROCC) to test the relationship between leadership styles and entrepreneurial orientation dimensions. The level of significance was set at 0.05 (5%). SROCC was considered appropriate due to the ordinal nature of the Likert-scale data and the study’s focus on examining the strength and direction of relationships between variables

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 1: Reliability Test of Study Variables (n=136)

Variables	Dimension	Number of Items	Cronbach’s Alpha (α)
Leadership Styles	Transformational Leadership	3	0.893
	Transactional Leadership	3	0.879
	Servant Leadership	3	0.867
Entrepreneurial Orientation	Innovativeness	3	0.881
	Proactiveness	3	0.874
	Competitive Aggressiveness	3	0.869

Source: Field Survey, 2025 and SPSS Version 23.0

As shown in Table 1 above, all constructs recorded alpha values ranging from 0.867 to 0.893, exceeding the recommended minimum threshold of 0.70. This indicates that the measurement scales used for leadership styles and entrepreneurial orientation were internally consistent and reliable for the study.

Table 2: Demographic Variable of Respondents (n=136)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	77	56.6
	Female	59	43.4
Age(Years)	21-30	28	20.6
	31-40	60	44.1
	41-50	36	26.5
	51+	12	8.8
Position	Manager	45	33.1
	Supervisor	91	66.9

Educational Qualification	Diploma/NCE	28	20.6
	Bachelor's Degree	83	61.0
	Master's Degree	25	18.4
Years in Service	5-10	48	35.3
	11-15	64	47.1
	16+	24	17.6

Source: Field Survey, 2025 and SPSS Version 23.0

Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of the 136 respondents, and comprised 45 managers (33.1%) and 91 supervisors (66.9%), all of whom hold strategic and functional responsibilities within their fast-food enterprises. The gender distribution of 77 males and 59 females indicates a relatively balanced representation of respondents, suggesting gender inclusiveness in leadership roles. This diversity may enhance leadership perspectives and strengthen the validity of the findings by reducing gender-related bias in assessing leadership styles and entrepreneurial orientation. The majority of respondents were aged 31-40 years (44.1%), followed by 41-50 years (26.5%), indicating a workforce with considerable professional experience. In terms of educational qualifications, most respondents held Bachelor's degrees (61.0%), with smaller proportions having Diplomas/NCE (20.6%) or Master's degrees (18.4%). Regarding years in service, most respondents had 11-15 (64), and 5-10 years (48) of experience, while fewer had 16 years and above (24). This indicates that the respondents are experienced and knowledgeable, strengthening the credibility of their responses on leadership styles and entrepreneurial orientation.

Descriptive Statistics Analysis

Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were computed to summarize responses from the questionnaire items measured between the dimensions of leadership styles and measures of entrepreneurial orientation.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Leadership Styles

Leadership Styles	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Transformational	136	1.00	5.00	3.8137	.84216
Transactional	136	1.00	5.00	3.7518	.72652
Servant	136	1.00	5.00	3.7463	.74725
Valid N (listwise)	136				

Source: Field Survey, 2025 and SPSS Version 23.0

Table 3 above shows that transformational, transactional and servant leadership styles have mean scores (3.8137, 3.7518, and 3.7463) and standard deviations (.84216, .72652 and .74725) respectively. These results depict that fast-food enterprise leaders in Owerri display transformational, transactional, and servant leadership behaviours at moderately high levels.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO)

EO	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Innovativeness	136	1.00	5.00	3.8475	.82514

Proactiveness	136	1.00	5.00	3.7622	.74521
Competitive Aggressiveness	136	1.00	5.00	3.8156	.75832
Valid N (listwise)	136				

Source: Field Survey, 2025 and SPSS Version 23.0

Likewise, table 4 above indicates that innovativeness, proactiveness and competitive aggressiveness have mean scores (3.8475, 3.7622 and 3.8156) and standard deviations (.82514, .74521 and .75832) respectively. These results portray that entrepreneurial orientation is strongly present, with innovative behaviours slightly more prominent than proactiveness and competitive aggressiveness. Thus, the mean ratings of leadership behaviors and EO dimensions were high (3.7 to 3.8), with moderate variation (SD = 0.7 to 0.8), suggesting that leaders in these enterprises generally display behaviors conducive to entrepreneurial activities, while some variability exists among respondents.

Testing of Hypotheses

Decision rule: Where $P < 0.05$ = Reject the null hypotheses and accept the alternate; Where $P > 0.05$ = Accept the null hypotheses, and reject the null hypotheses.

Table 5: Correlation Results of Transformational Leadership and Measures of Entrepreneurial Orientation

Leadership Styles	Entrepreneurial Orientation	p-(rho)	Sig(p-value)	Strength	Direction	Decision(0.05)
Transformational	Innovativeness	.742**	0.000	Strong	Positive	Reject H ₀₁
Transformational	Proactiveness	.697**	0.001	Strong	Positive	Reject H ₀₂
Transformational	Competitive Aggressiveness	.661**	0.003	Strong	Positive	Reject H ₀₃

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Field Survey, 2025 and SPSS version 23.0

Table 5 above indicates the results of the correlation matrix obtained from the relationship between transformational leadership and innovativeness, proactiveness and competitive aggressiveness. Based on the above results, hypotheses (H₀₁, H₀₂ and H₀₃) were rejected and their alternates (Ha₁, Ha₂ and Ha₃) accepted depicting the existence of positive significant associations between transformational leadership and measures of EO (innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness).

Table 6: Correlation Results of Transactional Leadership and Measures of Entrepreneurial Orientation

Leadership Styles	Entrepreneurial Orientation	p-(rho)	Sig(p-value)	Strength	Direction	Decision(0.05)
Transactional	Innovativeness	.465**	0.018	Moderate	Positive	Reject H ₀₄
Transactional	Proactiveness	.473**	0.011	Moderate	Positive	Reject H ₀₅
Transactional	Competitive Aggressiveness	.498**	0.006	Moderate	Positive	Reject H ₀₆

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Field Survey, 2025 and SPSS version 23.0

Likewise, table 6 above shows the correlation matrix results of the relationship between transactional leadership and innovativeness, proactiveness and competitive aggressiveness. Sequel to the above findings, null hypotheses (**H₀₄, H₀₅, and H₀₆**) were equally rejected and their alternates (**Ha₄, Ha₅, and Ha₆**) accepted implying that transactional leadership significantly correlates with innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness.

Table 7: Correlation Results of Servant Leadership and Measures of Entrepreneurial Orientation.

Leadership Styles	Entrepreneurial Orientation	p-(rho)	Sig(p-value)	Strength	Direction	Decision(0.05)
Servant	Innovativeness	.617**	0.001	Strong	Positive	Reject H ₀₇
Servant	Proactiveness	.574**	0.002	Moderate	Positive	Reject H ₀₈
Servant	Competitive Aggressiveness	.522**	0.004	Moderate	Positive	Reject H ₀₉

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Field Survey, 2025 and SPSS version 23.0

Similarly, table 7 above indicate the correlation matrix results of the relationship between servant leadership and innovativeness, proactiveness and competitive aggressiveness. Based on the above findings, the earlier hypothetical statements (**H₀₇, H₀₈, and H₀₉**) were rejected and their alternates (**Ha₇, Ha₈, and Ha₉**) accepted. This denotes that servant leadership significantly and positively have links with all the measures of entrepreneurial orientation (innovativeness, proactiveness and competitive aggressiveness).

DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS

The findings of this study revealed that transformational, transactional, and servant leadership styles each exert a positive and significant influence on entrepreneurial orientation (EO) specifically on innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness within fast-food enterprises in Owerri, albeit at varying strengths. Transformational leadership exhibited a strong and positive significant relationship with innovativeness (rho = .742, 0.000 < .05); proactiveness (rho = .697, 0.001 < .05), competitive aggressiveness (rho = .661, 0.003 > .05) respectively. This result portrays that transformational leaders who inspire and intellectually stimulate their employees enhance their innovative capacities, and initiative. Also, transactional leadership indicated a moderate and positive significant association with innovativeness (rho = .465, 0.018 < .05); proactiveness (rho = .473, 0.011 < .05); competitive aggressiveness (rho = .498, 0.006 > .05). The results suggest that transactional leaders, through contingent rewards and performance monitoring, motivate employees to anticipate market trends and engage in assertive competition. Furthermore, servant leadership displayed a strong and positive significant association with innovativeness (rho = .617, 0.001 < .05), a moderate positive significant association with proactiveness (rho = .574, 0.002 < .05); and competitive aggressiveness (rho = .522, 0.004 > .05). This suggests that servant leaders, through empathy, empowerment, and shared decision-making, build trust and intrinsic motivation that translate into collective commitment to outperform competitors.

These outcomes align with empirical evidence from various contexts. Goestjahjanti et al. (2022) confirmed that transformational leadership strengthens organizational learning and innovation. Dzomonda et al. (2023) found that transformational leadership significantly predicts EO among SMEs in South Africa, while Iqbal et al. (2021) reported that transformational leadership enhances EO through organizational learning capability. Öncer (2013) demonstrated that transactional leadership moderately influences EO, especially structured risk-taking and competitive behaviors. Servant leadership has also been shown to positively affect EO. Alafeshat and Aboud (2019) and Gutiérrez-Broncano et al. (2024) reported that servant leadership fosters innovation strongly and proactiveness and competitive aggressiveness moderately through knowledge sharing and a supportive culture.

Also, Ekmekcioglu and Öner (2023) similarly showed that servant leadership encourages innovative and entrepreneurial behaviours through perceived organizational support.

Theoretically, the study has extended leadership and entrepreneurship theories to the fast-food and SME context in developing economy. Transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1990) explains the strong relationships observed with EO, as visionary and inspiring leaders motivate employees to innovate, act proactively, and pursue competitive advantages. Transactional leadership theory (Burns, 1978) accounts for the moderate effects, highlighting how structured rewards and performance monitoring guide employees toward goal attainment and competitive actions. Servant leadership theory (Greenleaf, 1977) clarifies the strong influence on innovativeness and moderate influence on other EO dimensions, emphasizing the role of employee empowerment, trust, and knowledge-sharing culture in fostering entrepreneurial behaviors.

Practical Implementation Framework

Based on the findings of this study, a practical implementation framework is proposed to guide fast-food managers in Owerri, Imo State in aligning leadership styles with entrepreneurial orientation outcomes. The framework emphasizes how transformational, transactional, and servant leadership styles can be deliberately applied to enhance innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness.

- i. Managers are first expected to evaluate their dominant leadership behaviours by reflecting on the extent to which they demonstrate transformational (vision-driven and innovative), transactional (performance-driven and structured), and servant (employee-centered and supportive) leadership practices. This self-awareness provides the basis for aligning leadership actions with desired entrepreneurial outcomes.
- ii. To improve innovativeness, managers should adopt transformational leadership behaviours by encouraging idea generation, supporting experimentation with new products or services, and recognizing creative contributions from employees. Such practices foster a culture of innovation and continuous improvement within the organization.
- iii. Enhancing competitive aggressiveness requires the application of transactional leadership practices. Managers should set clear performance targets, monitor employee output, and implement reward systems tied to goal attainment. This approach ensures operational efficiency and drives sales growth, customer satisfaction, and overall business performance.
- iv. For proactiveness, managers should emphasize servant leadership behaviours by empowering employees to respond promptly to customer needs, encouraging open communication, and creating a supportive work environment. This enables the organization to anticipate market trends and respond quickly to competitive pressures.
- v. To ensure effectiveness, managers should monitor key performance indicators, including the frequency of new product introductions, responsiveness to customer feedback, sales growth, and customer retention. Regular evaluation of these indicators allows for timely adjustments in leadership approach and operational strategies.
- vi. Finally, managers should adopt a continuous improvement orientation by remaining flexible in their leadership styles, incorporating feedback from employees and customers, and investing in ongoing development. This adaptability is essential for sustaining entrepreneurial orientation and achieving long-term competitiveness in the fast-food industry.

Overall, this framework provides a concise and actionable guide for translating leadership styles into practical strategies that enhance innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness. This study has practical implications for leadership development for SMEs, strategic human resource practices, policy and capacity building. Collectively, these findings suggest that a balanced combination of leadership approaches is essential for cultivating EO in SMEs. In the context of fast-food enterprises in Owerri, transformational leadership drives innovation and proactivity, transactional leadership reinforces disciplined pursuit of competitive objectives, and servant leadership nurtures an environment conducive to initiative and knowledge-driven innovation. Therefore,

leaders aiming to strengthen EO should strategically integrate these leadership behaviors to enhance innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness among employees.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between leadership styles (transformational, transactional, and servant) and entrepreneurial orientation (innovativeness, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness) of fast food businesses in Owerri, Imo State. Based on the analyzed data using Spearman's Rank Order Correlation, the findings revealed that all three leadership styles exhibited significant positive associations with entrepreneurial orientation dimensions, though at varying strengths. Specifically, transformational leadership emerged as the strongest predictor of entrepreneurial orientation, implying that leaders who inspire, motivate, and intellectually stimulate their employees are more likely to foster creativity, innovation, and proactive market behavior. Servant leadership also showed strong and moderate positive relationship, underscoring the importance of empathy, empowerment, and ethical service in nurturing entrepreneurial behavior. In contrast, transactional leadership, though significant, demonstrated a moderate relationship, suggesting that a purely reward-based approach may enhance compliance and operational efficiency but may not fully promote innovation and risk-taking. The study concludes that effective leadership is a critical determinant of entrepreneurial orientation, particularly in the fast food industry where innovation, responsiveness, and competitiveness are essential for business survival and growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Against the backdrop of the findings and conclusion, the under listed recommendations were put forward to fast food owners and their managers in Owerri, Imo State:

- i. Adopt transformational leadership practices by encouraging creativity, supporting innovation, and motivating employees to contribute new ideas, as this significantly enhances innovativeness.
- ii. To implement transactional leadership strategies, including setting clear performance targets and providing performance-based rewards, in order to improve market performance and operational efficiency.
- iii. Practice servant leadership by empowering employees, fostering open communication, and prioritizing staff welfare, as this promotes proactiveness and responsiveness to customer needs.
- iv. Establish structured systems for monitoring performance, including tracking innovation activities, customer feedback, and sales growth, to ensure continuous improvement.
- v. Invest in leadership development and training programmes to enhance their ability to effectively combine different leadership styles based on situational demands.
- vi. Government agencies such as Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) and ministry of Commerce and industry should design and implement leadership developmental policies targeted at small service enterprises like fast-food businesses that will promote structural training through workshops, seminars, and mentorship schemes.
- vii. Policy makers should introduce innovation-supportive policies for SMEs which includes incentives for creativity, grants for business upgrading, simplified access to credit, and government-backed programmes encouraging proactive market strategies. This will help fast-food enterprises remain competitive.
- viii. Future researchers should expand the scope of the study to other sectors (manufacturing, construction, trade, agriculture, transportation, and education) and regions (south-South, South-East, South-West, and North-Central etc.) as well as, conduct longitudinal survey design and adopt advanced statistical technique such as SEM or introduce a mediating/moderating variable in order to provide a broader insights of the studied variables.

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