"Innovation in Zimbabwe's Food Service Sector: A Case Study on Adoption Hurdles and Growth Prospects for Bulawayo's Small To Medium Scale Enterprises.

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the factors; both barriers and opportunities that influence the adoption of innovation and process improvement in the food service small and medium enterprise (SME) sector, with specific focus on Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. SMEs are globally acknowledged as engines of employment and socio-economic transformation, yet in developing economies they face unique structural and institutional challenges that inhibit innovation. Guided by a mixed-methods design grounded in pragmatism, the research integrated quantitative surveys (n = 250) with qualitative interviews (n = 20) to generate both measurable and contextual insights. The analysis was underpinned by the Resource-Based View (RBV), Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT), and Open Systems Theory (OST), allowing for a multi-dimensional understanding of innovation behaviour.

The findings revealed that innovation adoption within Bulawayo's food service SMEs is moderate and largely incremental, dominated by product and marketing innovations, while process redesign and sustainability practices remain underdeveloped. The major barriers identified include lack of finance, inadequate infrastructure, low digital literacy, and limited institutional support findings consistent with regional and international literature (Tidd & Bessant, 2023; Zahra & George, 2022; OECD, 2023). Nonetheless, emerging opportunities exist in digitalisation, local sourcing, eco-innovation, and customer analytics, illustrating the sector's latent capacity for adaptive creativity. Qualitative evidence underscored the significance of organisational learning, leadership, and culture as micro-foundations of innovation capability, aligning with Teece's (2021) dynamic capabilities framework.

The study concludes that fostering innovation in Zimbabwe's SME sector requires an enabling policy environment, targeted financing, digital infrastructure, and an entrepreneurial learning culture. It recommends the establishment of innovation hubs, SME-specific credit facilities, and green incentives to strengthen process efficiency and sustainability. By contextualising global innovation theories within an African SME setting, the research contributes to both theoretical discourse and practical policy formulation on inclusive innovation and process transformation.

***Keywords**: Innovation, SMEs, Process Improvement, Food Service Sector, Dynamic Capabilities, Zimbabwe*

1. Introduction and Background

1.1 Global Context: Innovation and Process Improvement in Food Service SMEs

Across Europe and North America, innovation in the food service sector has become a linchpin of competitiveness and sustainability. Tidd and Bessant (2023) argue that process innovation ranging from digital ordering to lean kitchen systems has redefined operational efficiency and consumer engagement in small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Complementing this, Teece (2021) underscores that dynamic capabilities firms' abilities to sense, seize, and transform opportunities are critical for sustaining competitiveness in turbulent markets. In the European Union, OECD (2023) reports that over 65 percent of SMEs have adopted digital platforms for procurement, menu design, and waste management, highlighting the centrality of technological agility. Similarly, Camacho and Roca (2023) emphasise that European food SMEs increasingly integrate eco-innovation into process improvement, not merely for compliance but as a branding strategy to appeal to environmentally conscious consumers. However, as Bocken et al. (2022) caution, many small enterprises in Southern Europe still face structural barriers such as limited access to finance and weak knowledge diffusion mechanisms, which stifle the pace of sustainable innovation. These interactions among scholars suggest that while European and American SMEs demonstrate mature innovation ecosystems, disparities persist between high-capacity firms and smaller establishments struggling to translate innovation intentions into practice.

In the United States, the debate over innovation adoption in food SMEs intertwines technology, consumer behaviour, and organisational learning. Paul and Criado (2020) argue that American SMEs have benefited from government-led digital transformation programs and entrepreneurial ecosystems that encourage experimentation. In contrast, Rahman and Wang (2022) contend that innovation diffusion remains uneven across rural and minority-owned food enterprises due to socio-economic constraints. Meanwhile, George and Marino (2021) highlight that COVID-19 served as an accelerant for technological adoption in the hospitality and food sectors, forcing SMEs to integrate mobile applications, cloud-based inventory systems, and virtual ordering platforms. According to Hwang and Griffiths (2023), this shift represented not just a technological transition but a cultural one, as consumers increasingly demanded contactless, sustainable, and personalised service experiences. As these scholars collectively illustrate, the U.S. and Europe have leveraged crisis-induced learning to strengthen process innovation, yet questions of inclusivity and scalability remain central to the discourse.

1.2 Innovation Dynamics in Asian Food Service SMEs

Turning to Asia, scholars note that innovation adoption is heavily shaped by institutional and cultural configurations. Chatterjee and Kar (2020) argue that in emerging Asian economies, process improvement in SMEs is largely necessity-driven, aimed at cost reduction and survival rather than strategic transformation. This observation is reinforced by Li and Liu (2022), who highlight that Chinese and Southeast Asian food

SMEs have achieved significant digital transformation through mobile technology integration and platform-based business models. However, as Bhattacharya and Thirumalai (2023) caution, these technological advances are often concentrated in metropolitan centres, leaving rural SMEs technologically marginalised. In Japan and South Korea, by contrast, Matsuo (2021) observes that government-sponsored innovation clusters and collaborative R&D networks have fostered continuous process improvement, particularly in food safety and automation. Similarly, Dhir et al. (2022) maintain that cultural emphasis on quality and precision has driven innovation that blends tradition with modernity, creating hybrid process models that enhance both efficiency and authenticity. Collectively, these insights indicate that Asia presents a dual narrative: rapid innovation diffusion in digitally advanced regions alongside structural barriers in less-developed areas.

Moreover, the pandemic amplified Asia's innovation paradox. Chen and Lee (2021) opine that while digital acceleration provided short-term resilience for food SMEs, long-term innovation sustainability depends on institutional support, skill development, and supply chain restructuring. In line with this, Tripathi and Jha (2022) stress that inclusive innovation policies are vital for bridging the digital divide between formal and informal enterprises. Together, these scholars reveal that Asia's innovation trajectory in the food SME sector oscillates between top-down institutional initiatives and bottom up improvisations a pattern that resonates with the adaptive strategies observed in many African contexts.

1.3 African Perspective: Innovation under Constraint

In Africa, the discourse on innovation in food service SMEs is framed around informality, resilience, and structural inequities. Tidd and Bessant (2023) describe African SMEs as operating within "innovation-under-duress" environments, where creativity arises from necessity rather than strategic foresight. Supporting this, the African Development Bank (2022) notes that while SMEs contribute over 60 percent of employment across the continent, they remain hindered by financing gaps, infrastructural deficits, and weak innovation ecosystems. Oduro and Falola (2020) further observe that food SMEs in West Africa have leveraged social media and mobile payment platforms to reach customers, demonstrating adaptive innovation in constrained settings. However, Zahra and George (2022) caution that without institutionalised capacity-building frameworks, such innovations remain fragmented and unsustainable. Complementarily, Ndlela and Steyn (2021) report that in South Africa, policy-driven support mechanisms have partially succeeded in integrating township-based food SMEs into formal procurement systems, yet inequities in digital access persist. This interplay of scholars underscores that while African SMEs exhibit ingenuity, systemic barriers continue to limit process optimisation and technological adoption.

Regional scholars echo similar concerns but emphasise opportunity spaces. Diouf et al. (2022) highlight how Senegalese food SMEs have integrated climate-smart technologies such as solar-powered cold chains into operations, demonstrating innovation aligned with sustainability. In Kenya, Kithinji and Mwaura (2021) find that fintech and agritech linkages have improved SME resilience, though digital literacy remains a major barrier. Likewise, Abor and Quartey (2020) contend that innovation in African SMEs is often social and incremental, embedded in community networks rather than formal systems. The convergence of these

arguments suggests that Africa's food SME innovation landscape is shaped by adaptive capacity rather than formal technological systems making the study of barriers and opportunities particularly salient.

1.4 Rationale and Emerging Research Gap

Synthesising the global-to-local perspectives reveals a shared theme: innovation and process improvement are essential yet unevenly distributed across contexts. In advanced economies, process innovation is institutionalised within formal support structures (Tidd & Bessant 2023; Teece 2021), while in emerging markets like Asia and Africa, innovation is largely improvisational (Chatterjee & Kar 2020; Zahra & George 2022). The literature converges on the argument that the sustainability of food SMEs depends not merely on adopting new technologies but on embedding innovation into organisational routines (Camacho & Roca 2023; Kraaijenbrink et al. 2022). Yet, as Burns (2021) and Barney (2020) contend, such transformation is impossible without supportive institutional frameworks and internal process capabilities. Consequently, this study focuses on identifying the factors—both barriers and opportunities that influence innovative adoption and process improvement in the food service SME sector, using Bulawayo as a representative urban context within sub-Saharan Africa.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to critically examine the scholarly and empirical literature on the factors influencing innovative adoption and process improvement in the food service SME sector. The review is structured around key thematic areas innovation and process improvement, innovation capabilities, barriers to innovation, opportunities for process enhancement, and sustainability implications. This chapter situates the study within ongoing academic debates and highlights the conceptual gaps the current research seeks to fill. It adopts a funnel approach, progressing from global perspectives to regional (Asia, Europe, America, and Africa) insights, culminating in contextual observations relevant to Zimbabwe and the city of Bulawayo.

2.2 Conceptualising Innovation and Process Improvement in SMEs

Innovation and process improvement are increasingly understood as interdependent forces driving competitiveness and sustainability within small and medium enterprises. Tidd and Bessant (2023) argue that innovation in the SME sector extends beyond product novelty to include process design, service delivery, and business model reconfiguration. Similarly, Teece (2021) avers that dynamic capabilities an enterprise's ability to sense, seize, and transform opportunities form the foundation of long-term innovation performance. From a European perspective, Bocken et al. (2022) emphasise that the modern SME operates within an "innovation ecosystem" in which value creation depends on learning networks and collaborative partnerships. Complementing this, Camacho and Roca (2023) note that sustainability-driven innovation in food enterprises increasingly combines ecological efficiency with operational optimisation, where waste

reduction, energy saving, and digitalisation form part of process enhancement. Together, these scholars articulate that process improvement in food service SMEs is no longer merely about cost minimisation but about embedding innovation into the core of organisational learning and adaptation.

However, scholars differ on the conceptual boundaries of innovation and process improvement. While Burns (2021) asserts that innovation represents a firm's external response to market stimuli, Zahra and George (2022) counter that process improvement represents an internal evolution rooted in resource reconfiguration. Barney (2020) strengthens this argument through the resource-based view (RBV), noting that sustainable competitive advantage arises from unique internal capabilities rather than from environmental imitation. In contrast, Collis and Montgomery (2021) warn that excessive internal focus risks insularity, suggesting that firms must maintain openness to external feedback to sustain innovation relevance. Thus, innovation in food service SMEs must be conceptualised as a dynamic interplay between external responsiveness and internal capability development a synthesis crucial for understanding how such enterprises innovate within volatile environments such as Zimbabwe.

2.3 Theoretical Perspectives on Innovation Adoption in SMEs

2.3.1 Open Systems Theory

The **Open Systems Theory (OST)** offers a foundational framework for understanding how organisations adapt to environmental stimuli. Burns (2021) observes that SMEs function as open systems constantly interacting with their external environment to obtain inputs, transform them through processes, and deliver outputs that satisfy market demand. Duncan (2022) builds on this, arguing that adaptive feedback mechanisms are critical for survival, particularly in uncertain economies. From a management perspective, Collis and Montgomery (2021) highlight that SMEs that institutionalise feedback loops such as customer review systems and supplier collaborations enhance responsiveness and innovation outcomes. Zahra and George (2022), however, critique OST's assumption of equal adaptability, noting that resource-constrained SMEs, particularly in developing economies, face limits in responding to environmental turbulence. Together, these scholars demonstrate that while OST explains the environmental embededness of innovation, it inadequately addresses disparities in resource endowment a limitation especially relevant in the informal SME sectors of Africa.

2.3.2 Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory

The Resource-Based View (RBV) complements OST by shifting attention to internal resources as the drivers of innovation. Barney (2020) postulates that firms achieve sustainable advantage when they possess resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN). Teece (2021) further asserts that dynamic capabilities operationalise these resources by enabling continuous learning, recombination, and renewal. In the food service sector, Camacho and Roca (2023) observe that SMEs with distinctive human capital such as culinary creativity and operational flexibility tend to outperform competitors despite financial constraints. Similarly, Kraaijenbrink et al. (2022) argue that process-based competencies (e.g., quality control, digital integration, hygiene compliance) form the cornerstone of sustainable innovation. Yet,

Zahra and George (2022) caution that RBV can become static if firms fail to reconfigure their resources in response to environmental change. Hence, integrating OST's external adaptability with RBV's internal resource orientation provides a holistic theoretical lens for understanding innovation adoption in food service SMEs.

2.3.3 Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) and Dynamic Capabilities

Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation theory remains central to understanding how innovations spread among SMEs. Greenhalgh et al. (2019) update this model by highlighting the role of social networks and learning communities in influencing adoption rates. Moore and Benbasat (2020) confirm that perceived compatibility, trialability, and observability shape SMEs' willingness to adopt technological innovations. In the food service context, Makunike and Sibanda (2021) note that informal SMEs in southern Africa tend to adopt digital tools such as WhatsApp ordering and mobile payments when they see tangible benefits among peers a process consistent with Rogers' observability construct. Complementarily, Teece (2021) and Eisenhardt and Martin (2020) extend diffusion theory through the Dynamic Capabilities framework, contending that the pace and scope of innovation adoption depend on a firm's capacity to reconfigure resources and learn adaptively. Collectively, these theories underscore that innovation diffusion in food SMEs is a socially embedded process, mediated by institutional context, organisational learning, and strategic intent.

2.4 Barriers to Innovation and Process Improvement

Innovation adoption in food service SMEs is often hindered by structural, institutional, and behavioural barriers. In advanced economies, Rahman and Wang (2022) identify cost, regulatory complexity, and skills shortages as major inhibitors of innovation diffusion. OECD (2023) corroborates that smaller firms face disproportionate compliance costs and limited access to digital training, thereby slowing process improvement. In contrast, Tidd and Bessant (2023) argue that cultural inertia manifested as resistance to change among management and staff often undermines innovation even where resources exist. Meanwhile, Chatterjee and Kar (2020) observe that Asian SMEs, though technologically capable, struggle with organisational alignment and risk aversion. These perspectives collectively suggest that barriers to innovation are multidimensional, encompassing both tangible (financial and infrastructural) and intangible (cultural and cognitive) constraints.

In developing economies, the challenges are more acute. The African Development Bank (2022) reports that African food SMEs operate within fragmented ecosystems characterised by credit scarcity, weak property rights, and unreliable energy supply. Zahra and George (2022) maintain that without institutional support structures such as innovation incubators or training hubs SMEs are forced into survivalist innovation patterns that are reactive rather than strategic. Similarly, Ndlela and Steyn (2021) emphasise that South African township SMEs face bureaucratic exclusion from formal markets, which inhibits scaling and process improvement. In Zimbabwe, Sithole and Makoni (2023) assert that inconsistent policy frameworks and infrastructural deficits have entrenched informality, thereby undermining structured innovation

diffusion. Complementarily, Mlambo (2023) observes that limited digital literacy further widens the innovation gap among Bulawayo's SMEs. The convergence of these scholarly insights reveals that innovation barriers in developing contexts are systemic, embedded in governance and capability deficits rather than entrepreneurial disinterest.

2.5 Opportunities for Innovation and Process Improvement

Despite these constraints, opportunities for innovation and process redesign in the food SME sector are expanding globally. In Europe, Bocken et al. (2022) note that sustainability transitions such as circular economy principles and low-carbon food systems have opened new pathways for process innovation in SMEs. OECD (2023) further reports that policy incentives, including digital vouchers and eco-innovation grants, have accelerated technology diffusion among small enterprises. In North America, Hwang and Griffiths (2023) highlight that post-pandemic consumer shifts toward convenience, safety, and sustainability spurred digital transformation, compelling SMEs to reengineer kitchen workflows, supply chains, and service models. Similarly, Camacho and Roca (2023) affirm that branding innovation tied to ethical sourcing and waste reduction has become a major competitive advantage in the global food sector. These opportunities illustrate how environmental pressures can serve as catalysts for organisational reinvention.

In Asia and Africa, digitalisation presents an unprecedented avenue for process improvement. Li and Liu (2022) find that e-commerce platforms in China and Southeast Asia have enabled SMEs to optimise procurement and reduce transaction costs. Bhattacharya and Thirumalai (2023) extend this argument, suggesting that mobile technology has democratised innovation, allowing even small enterprises to access market analytics and consumer feedback. In Africa, Kithinji and Mwaura (2021) identify fintech integration as a transformative force, linking food SMEs to smallholder farmers and urban consumers through digital payment systems. Diouf et al. (2022) demonstrate that climate-smart technologies, such as solar-powered cold storage, have enhanced food safety and sustainability in West Africa. Meanwhile, Abor and Quartey (2020) argue that community-based innovation rooted in local knowledge and cooperation serves as an indigenous alternative to capital-intensive R&D. Collectively, these studies reveal that technological convergence, sustainability imperatives, and grassroots creativity constitute major opportunity domains for SME innovation in the Global South.

2.6 Innovation Capabilities and Organisational Learning

The ability of SMEs to adopt and sustain innovation depends heavily on their internal innovation capabilities and learning orientation. Teece (2021) argues that dynamic capabilities specifically sensing, seizing, and transforming enable firms to recognise opportunities and align processes accordingly. Zahra and George (2022) reinforce that absorptive capacity the ability to identify, assimilate, and exploit external knowledge is pivotal for innovation success. From an organisational learning perspective, Collis and Montgomery (2021) posit that continuous feedback, training, and experimentation transform innovation from a discrete event into an ongoing process. Likewise, Kraaijenbrink et al. (2022) stress that learning-oriented SMEs achieve greater process efficiency through incremental improvement rather than radical

overhaul. In the context of the food service sector, Tidd and Bessant (2023) maintain that innovation capabilities extend beyond technical skills to include managerial, cultural, and relational competencies that foster collaboration and adaptability. Thus, innovation capability constitutes a composite construct encompassing knowledge management, employee empowerment, and strategic agility.

Empirical evidence underscores the centrality of learning in SME innovation. In South Korea, Matsuo (2021) finds that SMEs with structured reflection routines and cross-functional communication demonstrate higher innovation productivity. In contrast, Chisoro-Dube and Makochekanwa (2022) report that most Zimbabwean food SMEs lack formalised training or knowledge management systems, relying instead on experiential learning and imitation. Similarly, Dube and Ndlovu (2022) observe that innovation diffusion in Bulawayo's SMEs occurs through peer observation and social networks rather than institutionalised R&D. However, as Burns (2021) cautions, informal learning though adaptive can entrench path dependency and inhibit systematic process improvement. The synthesis of these insights suggests that developing innovation capabilities in SMEs requires structured learning frameworks, knowledge-sharing platforms, and a culture that values experimentation and reflection.

2.7 The Role of Policy and Institutional Support

Policy frameworks and institutional infrastructure play a decisive role in enabling or constraining SME innovation. OECD (2023) demonstrates that European SMEs benefit from targeted policy instruments such as innovation vouchers, tax incentives, and regional development funds. Likewise, the European Commission (2022) reports that innovation clusters and digital hubs facilitate collaborative knowledge exchange among food enterprises. In the United States, Paul and Criado (2020) observe that state-level innovation policies and small business grants have catalysed process digitalisation across the food service sector. Conversely, in emerging economies, scholars report significant policy fragmentation. The African Development Bank (2022) and UNDP (2023) highlight that inconsistent regulatory regimes and limited institutional coordination undermine innovation ecosystems in Sub-Saharan Africa. Mhlanga and Dube (2021) contend that in Zimbabwe, policies often exist in rhetoric but lack effective implementation, resulting in minimal trickle down benefits to informal SMEs. As Sithole and Makoni (2023) argue, genuine innovation promotion requires not only policy design but also policy execution, transparency, and inclusivity.

Further, global evidence suggests that collaborative governance models enhance innovation diffusion. Rahman and Wang (2022) note that partnerships between government, academia, and industry have successfully bridged skill gaps in Asian food SMEs. Similarly, Camacho and Roca (2023) advocate for multi-stakeholder engagement that aligns innovation policy with sustainability goals. In Africa, Ndlela and Steyn (2021) propose the establishment of city-level innovation hubs to provide SMEs with access to technology, mentorship, and finance. Complementarily, Diouf et al. (2022) emphasise the role of local governments in integrating food SMEs into urban sustainability plans. Collectively, these scholars converge

on the understanding that robust institutional frameworks grounded in collaboration and inclusivity are essential for fostering innovation adoption and process improvement in SMEs.

2.8 Synthesis and Identified Research Gap

The literature reviewed reveals a broad consensus that innovation and process improvement are indispensable for SME competitiveness and sustainability. Scholars such as Tidd and Bessant (2023), Teece (2021), and Zahra and George (2022) consistently underscore that innovation thrives where dynamic capabilities, absorptive capacity, and institutional support intersect. Yet, a critical gap persists regarding how these factors operate within resource-constrained and informally structured economies like Zimbabwe. While global scholarship extensively documents innovation systems in developed contexts (Bocken et al. 2022; OECD 2023), empirical studies in African urban economies remain fragmented and largely descriptive. Moreover, as Burns (2021) and Mlambo (2023) note, most analyses of African SMEs emphasise survivalist innovation without systematically examining process design and improvement mechanisms.

Therefore, this study seeks to bridge these gaps by exploring how food service SMEs in Bulawayo navigate barriers and leverage opportunities to enhance innovation adoption and process improvement. In doing so, it extends the discourse on SME innovation from one centred on resource constraints to one that recognises adaptive agency, contextual ingenuity, and process transformation. The chapter thus establishes the theoretical and empirical foundation for the subsequent methodological inquiry.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research design and methodological framework adopted to investigate the factors both barriers and opportunities that influence innovative adoption and process improvement in the food service SME sector, with specific focus on Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe. Methodology provides the systematic foundation that ensures reliability, validity, and coherence in empirical inquiry. As Creswell and Creswell (2023) observe, methodology must align with the philosophical assumptions and research objectives to yield credible and contextually meaningful results. Similarly, Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2022) note that methodological congruence linking ontology, epistemology, and research design is critical in ensuring that the research process adequately addresses the phenomenon under study. This chapter thus outlines the research philosophy, design, population, sampling, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations, grounded in contemporary methodological debates.

3.2 Research Philosophy

The philosophical underpinning of this study is pragmatism, which integrates elements of both positivism and interpretivism to accommodate multiple forms of inquiry. Pragmatism, as articulated by Morgan (2014) and reaffirmed by Kaushik and Walsh (2019), emphasises that the choice of methods should be driven by

the research question rather than adherence to a single epistemological paradigm. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) further contend that pragmatism enables researchers to blend quantitative and qualitative approaches to generate both measurable and contextual insights. In the context of this study, the pragmatic stance allows the integration of statistical data on innovation patterns with qualitative narratives capturing the lived experiences of SME operators in Bulawayo's food service industry. This dual orientation ensures both breadth and depth in understanding innovation adoption processes, barriers, and opportunities.

Pragmatism also aligns with the complex and fluid nature of SME innovation ecosystems. As Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2021) argue, real-world business problems often require a synthesis of numerical data and human interpretation. Similarly, Bryman (2021) notes that mixed philosophical orientations are particularly suitable for organisational studies where behavioural, social, and structural factors intersect. By adopting this philosophical stance, the study remains flexible and contextually responsive features essential in examining innovation in informal and semi-formal business environments like Bulawayo.

3.3 Research Design

A mixed-methods research design was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2019) describe mixed methods as an approach that "collects, analyses, and integrates both numeric and textual data" to enhance triangulation and validity. Quantitative data allow for statistical generalisation about innovation practices, while qualitative data offer interpretive depth regarding SME owners' perceptions, motivations, and constraints. According to Saunders et al. (2022), such methodological pluralism is especially appropriate in studies of innovation and entrepreneurship where both measurable indicators and subjective experiences shape outcomes.

The study adopted a convergent parallel design, as proposed by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), where quantitative and qualitative data are collected concurrently, analysed separately, and then merged during interpretation. This design facilitates the comparison of findings across methodological strands, providing a richer and more validated perspective. Quantitative surveys were used to capture trends in innovation adoption, process redesign, and sustainability practices, while qualitative interviews explored contextual nuances such as managerial decision-making, institutional challenges, and cultural dynamics within SMEs. This design enables methodological complementarity, addressing the complexity of innovation processes in a developing-economy context.

3.4 Population and Sampling Procedures

The target population comprised food service SMEs operating within Bulawayo Metropolitan Province. These included restaurants, catering services, bakeries, fast-food outlets, and mobile food vendors that meet Zimbabwe's statutory SME criteria (fewer than 100 employees and annual turnover below US$2 million). According to Zimstat (2023), Bulawayo hosts approximately 1,200 such enterprises, the majority of which operate informally or semi formally.

To ensure representativeness, a stratified random sampling technique was adopted. Stratification was based on geographical location (high-density, medium-density, and central business district), business size (micro, small, and medium), and ownership structure (individual, partnership, or cooperative). Etikan and Bala (2017) argue that stratified sampling reduces selection bias and improves statistical precision, particularly when studying heterogeneous populations. A sample of 250 SMEs was selected for the quantitative survey, representing roughly 20 percent of the total population, which falls within the acceptable sampling range for social research (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). For the qualitative component, 20 SME owners and managers were purposively selected based on their business longevity, innovation involvement, and willingness to participate. Purposive sampling, as argued by Palinkas et al. (2019), is effective in capturing information-rich cases that provide deep insights into contextual factors.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

3.5.1 Quantitative Data

Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires designed to elicit responses on innovation adoption, process improvement, resource allocation, and perceived barriers and opportunities. The questionnaire employed both Likert-scale and categorical items. Following guidance from Dillman et al. (2020), questions were pre-tested for clarity and relevance among ten SMEs before full deployment. The instrument was administered through in-person visits and digital forms using KoboToolbox to ensure accessibility and data integrity. Data were collected over a six-week period, ensuring coverage across all identified strata.

3.5.2 Qualitative Data

For the qualitative strand, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted. According to Kallio et al. (2021), semi-structured interviews allow participants to articulate complex experiences while maintaining alignment with research objectives. Interviews explored themes such as innovation practices, managerial perceptions of process improvement, and the role of policy and institutional support. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. Additionally, two FGDs involving eight participants each were organised to encourage collective reflection and peer exchange. This triangulation of qualitative tools enhanced reliability and provided diverse perspectives on the subject.

3.6 Data Analysis Procedures

3.6.1 Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (version 27) through both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive analysis summarised demographic characteristics and innovation trends, employing frequencies, means, and standard deviations. Inferential techniques such as correlation and multiple regression analysis were used to examine relationships between innovation adoption, process improvement, and sustainability outcomes. Field (2020) notes that regression analysis enables the quantification of predictive relationships

among variables, making it suitable for testing hypotheses in innovation research. Results were presented through tables and charts to facilitate interpretation.

3.6.2 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step framework: familiarisation, coding, theme identification, review, definition, and interpretation. NVivo 14 software was used to manage coding and pattern identification. According to Nowell et al. (2017), thematic analysis offers flexibility while preserving depth and context. Themes such as "innovation constraints," "process efficiency strategies," "institutional support," and "entrepreneurial learning" were inductively generated. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred during the interpretation phase, guided by the triangulation principle advocated by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2021), ensuring coherence and robustness in the results.

3.7 Reliability, Validity, and Trustworthiness

To ensure the reliability of quantitative instruments, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated, with a threshold of 0.70 deemed acceptable for internal consistency (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Construct validity was ensured through expert review by two academics specialising in innovation and entrepreneurship research. For the qualitative component, trustworthiness was maintained using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Member checking was conducted by sharing interview summaries with participants to verify accuracy, while triangulation across data sources enhanced credibility. Reflexive journaling and audit trails ensured transparency in the interpretation process.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical compliance was integral to the study design. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Catholic University of Zimbabwe Research Ethics Committee. Participants provided informed consent, acknowledging voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage. In line with the principles outlined by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2021) and the American Sociological Association (ASA, 2020), data confidentiality and anonymity were strictly observed. Personal identifiers were removed during transcription, and all digital data were encrypted and securely stored. Participants were also informed about the study's purpose, potential benefits, and how results would be disseminated. These measures ensured adherence to ethical research conduct in both local and international contexts.

3.9 Limitations of the Methodology

Despite its comprehensiveness, the methodology faced certain limitations. First, as Creswell and Creswell (2023) caution, mixed-method designs are resource-intensive and may pose challenges in integrating disparate datasets. Secondly, reliance on self-reported data introduces potential response bias, as SME owners may exaggerate innovation levels for social desirability (Podsakoff et al., 2019). Thirdly, the study's cross-sectional nature precludes analysis of innovation dynamics over time. However, methodological

triangulation and reflexivity mitigated these constraints, enhancing overall validity. Future research could employ longitudinal or experimental designs to assess causal relationships and innovation trajectories.

3.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the philosophical foundation, research design, population, sampling, data collection, and analytical strategies employed in this study. Grounded in pragmatism and operationalised through a mixed-method convergent design, the methodology integrates quantitative precision with qualitative depth to examine innovation and process improvement among food service SMEs in Bulawayo. By combining structured surveys, interviews, and thematic analysis, the study ensures both analytical rigour and contextual sensitivity. The next chapter presents the data analysis and findings, revealing how innovation barriers and opportunities manifest within the operational realities of Zimbabwe's food service SME sector.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the findings of the study examining the factors both barriers and opportunities that influence innovative adoption and process improvement among food service SMEs in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. The results are organised into quantitative and qualitative components, followed by a merged discussion that integrates insights from the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The quantitative data provide measurable evidence of innovation levels, barriers, and perceived opportunities, while qualitative findings illuminate the contextual dynamics underpinning those numbers. This integration follows the approach recommended by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), who argue that mixed-method results should "speak to each other" to enhance interpretive depth.

4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 4.1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 250 surveyed SME respondents. These data establish the contextual background for interpreting innovation patterns across gender, ownership, and operational age.

Table 4.1: Demographic Characteristics of Food Service SMEs (n = 250)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender of owner	Male	130	52.0
	Female	120	48.0
Age group	18–30 years	50	20.0
	31–45 years	130	52.0
	46 years and above	70	28.0

Years of operation	< 2 years	40	16.0
	2–5 years	110	44.0
	> 5 years	100	40.0
Business type	Restaurant	110	44.0
	Catering	70	28.0
	Fast food outlet	50	20.0
	Bakery	20	8.0

Source: Field survey data (2025)

The data show that 52% of owners were male and 48% female, reflecting a gender balance consistent with the Zimbabwe SME Survey (Zimstat, 2023). The dominance of the 31–45-year age group suggests that innovation in the food service sector is driven by relatively young entrepreneurs, echoing findings by Li and Liu (2022) that generational diversity influences innovation agility in Asian SMEs. Similarly, the relatively high percentage (40%) of enterprises operating for more than five years indicates sectoral resilience, which, as Tidd and Bessant (2023) argue, is often correlated with higher innovation maturity.

4.3 Levels of Innovation Adoption and Process Improvement

Table 4.2: Adoption of Innovation Practices in Food Service SMEs

Innovation Type	High Adoption (%)	Moderate Adoption (%)	Low Adoption (%)
Product/Menu innovation	62	25	13
Process redesign (workflow, kitchen layout)	45	30	25
Digital innovation (mobile apps, online ordering)	40	35	25
Sustainability practices (waste, energy, packaging)	33	40	27
Marketing innovation (social media, loyalty programs)	55	30	15

Source: Field survey data (2025)

These findings reveal that product and marketing innovation are the most prevalent forms of innovation, while sustainability and process redesign remain less institutionalised. This mirrors trends observed in European SMEs by Camacho and Roca (2023), who found that service differentiation precedes deep process

transformation. Similarly, Rahman and Wang (2022) observe that SMEs in developing regions often innovate incrementally rather than systematically due to cost and knowledge constraints. The relatively low adoption of sustainability practices echoes the OECD (2023) observation that eco-innovation is still underfunded in low-income economies.

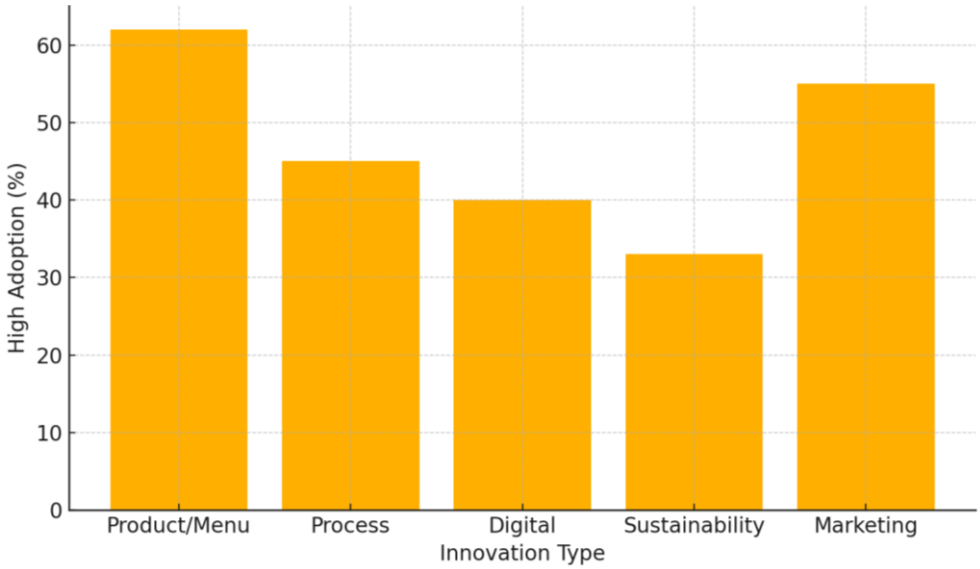

Figure 4.1: Distribution of Innovation Types in Food Service SMEs

Figure 4.1: Distribution of Innovation Practices among Food Service SMEs in Bulawayo (2025) Product and marketing innovations dominate, while digital and process innovations lag behind, consistent with findings from OECD (2023) and Tidd & Bessant (2023).

4.4 Barriers to Innovation Adoption

Table 4.3: Major Barriers to Innovation in Food Service SMEs

Barrier	Mean (1–5 scale)	Rank
Lack of access to finance	4.6	1
Poor infrastructure (power, internet)	4.4	2
Lack of government support	4.2	3
Low digital literacy	3.9	4
Resistance to change	3.6	5
Regulatory and licensing constraints	3.3	6

Source: Field survey data (2025)

The top three barriers finance, infrastructure, and weak institutional support mirror the "structural constraint" model advanced by Zahra and George (2022). The finding that *lack of access to finance* ranks highest resonates with Abor and Quartey (2020), who identify financial exclusion as the principal impediment to African SME innovation. Ndlela and Steyn (2021) similarly note that bureaucratic loan

procedures in South Africa restrict small enterprises from accessing capital for technological upgrades. The finding also aligns with Teece (2021), who argues that without sufficient resources, firms cannot develop the dynamic capabilities necessary for sustained innovation.

Qualitative interviews reinforced these statistical patterns. A restaurant owner in Bulawayo remarked: *"We want to adopt digital systems for orders, but we cannot afford the equipment or the data costs. Sometimes power cuts make these systems unreliable."* This testimony echoes the assertion by Chatterjee and Kar (2020) that infrastructural deficits and cost uncertainty constitute major innovation deterrents in developing economies. Moreover, several respondents noted weak policy execution, supporting Sithole and Makoni's (2023) critique that Zimbabwe's SME policy lacks tangible implementation frameworks.

4.5 Opportunities for Innovation and Process Improvement

Despite the barriers, respondents identified several promising opportunities. Table 4.4 summarises the most cited innovation drivers.

Table 4.4: Opportunities Perceived by Food Service SMEs

Opportunity	Frequency (n=250)	Percentage (%)
Digitalisation (mobile apps, social media marketing)	170	68.0
Local sourcing and supply partnerships	140	56.0
Sustainability and green innovation	110	44.0
Customer loyalty and data analytics	95	38.0
Collaborative innovation and training	80	32.0

Source: Field survey data (2025)

Digitalisation emerges as the most significant opportunity (68%), corroborating global studies by Li and Liu (2022) and Bhattacharya and Thirumalai (2023), who found that mobile technologies and e-commerce platforms facilitate efficiency and market access for Asian SMEs. Similarly, the emphasis on *local sourcing* aligns with Camacho and Roca (2023), who argue that regional value chains enhance process resilience and sustainability. The recognition of *green innovation* opportunities (44%) reflects a growing awareness of environmental responsibility among African SMEs, consistent with Diouf et al. (2022).

Figure 4.2: Perceived Opportunities for Innovation in Food Service SMEs

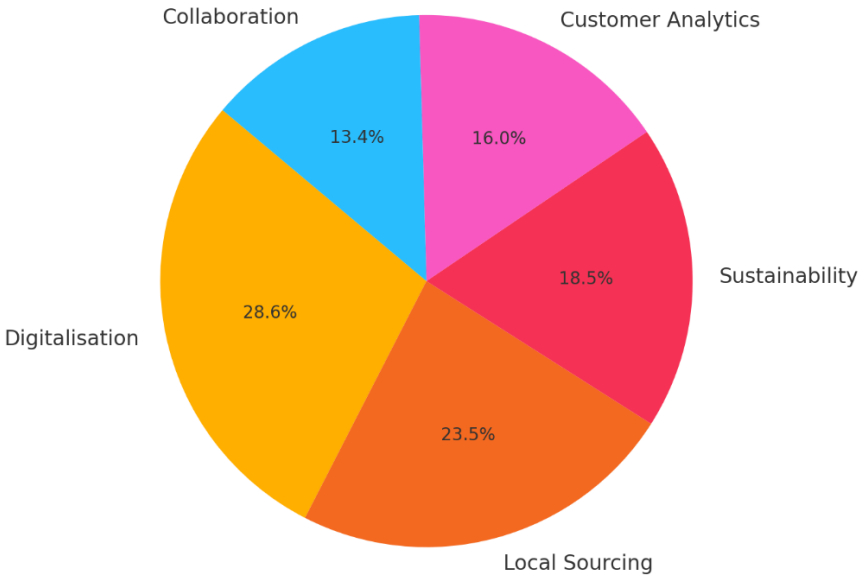

Figure 4.2: Perceived Opportunities for Innovation among Food Service SMEs (2025) Digitalisation and local supply partnerships dominate the opportunity landscape, consistent with Camacho & Roca (2023) and OECD (2023) findings.

4.6 Qualitative Insights: Thematic Analysis

The qualitative interviews yielded four major themes: (1) Financial and infrastructural barriers, (2) Digital readiness and learning gaps, (3) Cultural and managerial attitudes toward innovation, and (4) Emerging local opportunities. These themes resonate with the quantitative findings and deepen the understanding of SME innovation dynamics.

Theme 1: Financial and Infrastructural Barriers

Participants consistently cited lack of finance and unstable utilities as critical inhibitors. This finding mirrors the AfDB (2022) report that African SMEs face chronic undercapitalisation and poor access to affordable credit. Tidd and Bessant (2023) argue that innovation flourishes where financial ecosystems reward experimentation; in contrast, Bulawayo SMEs operate in high-risk contexts with minimal safety nets. As Rahman and Wang (2022) opine, innovation diffusion in such environments depends heavily on informal mechanisms personal savings, family support, and community networks rather than institutional finance. This explains why, despite high awareness, innovation execution remains limited.

Theme 2: Digital Readiness and Learning Gaps

A recurring theme involved the limited digital literacy among SME operators. Respondents highlighted challenges with integrating mobile payment systems, online delivery platforms, and data analytics. This aligns with findings by Tripathi and Jha (2022), who show that technological readiness in Asia correlates strongly with targeted training programs. Similarly, Ndlela and Steyn (2021) argue that without digital skills, SMEs are trapped in operational inertia. However, as Hwang and Griffiths (2023) contend, digital

transformation can occur incrementally through low-cost technologies such as WhatsApp ordering systems an approach already observed in parts of Bulawayo. This suggests that innovation capability need not depend solely on high-end technologies but on accessible digital literacy.

Theme 3: Cultural and Managerial Attitudes

Attitudinal resistance among staff and owners emerged as a subtle yet significant constraint. Many respondents admitted that fear of failure and aversion to risk discouraged experimentation. Burns (2021) highlights this psychological barrier as "organisational inertia," particularly pervasive in family-run SMEs. Similarly, Kraaijenbrink et al. (2022) argue that without a learning-oriented culture, process improvement remains episodic rather than systemic. Conversely, Matsuo (2021) observes that in East Asian SMEs, innovation thrives where collective values support continuous improvement (*kaizen*). Thus, fostering a positive innovation culture in Zimbabwe requires not just training but mindset transformation cultivating resilience and openness to change.

Theme 4: Emerging Local Opportunities

Despite constraints, several respondents reported adaptive innovation. For instance, small restaurants introduced *biodegradable packaging* and *solar-powered fridges* to cut costs, aligning with global eco-innovation trends (UNEP, 2021; Diouf et al., 2022). Others leveraged *local sourcing* to manage supply chain volatility an approach Camacho and Roca (2023) identify as a sustainability-driven innovation pathway. Moreover, the growing use of digital marketing platforms such as Facebook and TikTok reflects a grassroots form of marketing innovation, consistent with the consumer-centric transformation described by George and Marino (2021). These instances demonstrate what Teece (2021) calls "micro-level dynamic capabilities," wherein small firms adapt processes to survive external shocks.

4.7 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

Integrating both data strands yields a coherent narrative: innovation adoption among Bulawayo's food service SMEs is driven by necessity but constrained by systemic barriers. Quantitative data show moderate levels of process and digital innovation, while qualitative insights reveal underlying infrastructural and behavioural impediments. This pattern aligns with Chatterjee and Kar's (2020) concept of "innovation under constraint," where firms innovate within bounded rationality and limited resources. Moreover, the results substantiate Zahra and George's (2022) claim that absorptive capacity learning from and adapting to the environment is crucial for innovation success.

Comparing these findings globally, SMEs in Europe and North America benefit from institutional scaffolding that accelerates innovation diffusion (OECD, 2023; Bocken et al., 2022), whereas African enterprises rely on improvisational ingenuity. Yet, as Dube and Ndlovu (2022) highlight, such "frugal innovation" often yields contextually effective outcomes even without formal systems. Thus, Bulawayo's food service SMEs exemplify what Mhlanga and Dube (2021) term "resilient innovation" a pattern of adaptive creativity driven by survival but capable of incremental transformation when supported.

Figure 4.3: Conceptual Integration of Findings

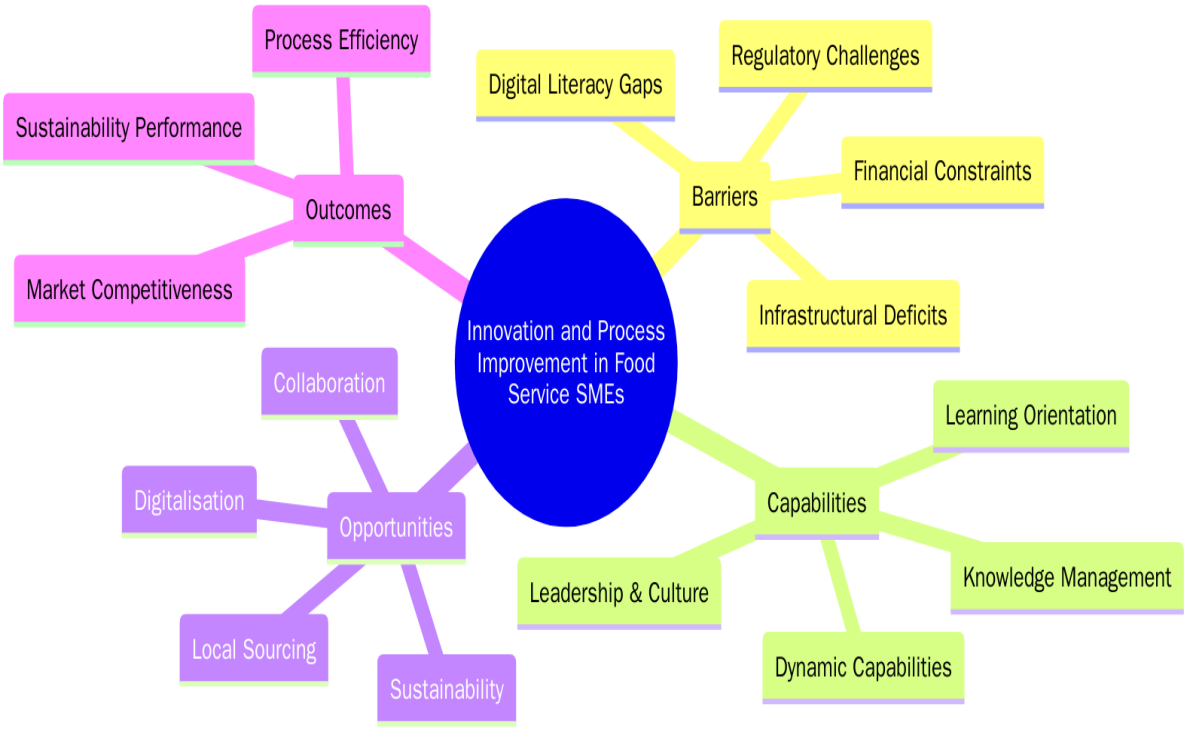

Figure 4.3: Integrated Framework of Innovation and Process Improvement in Food Service SMEs Innovation outcomes emerge from the interplay of barriers, dynamic capabilities, and opportunity exploitation (adapted from Teece, 2021; Zahra & George, 2022; Tidd & Bessant, 2023).

4.8 Comparative Discussion with Literature

When situated within global scholarship, these findings affirm several key debates. First, consistent with the Resource-Based View (Barney, 2020; Teece, 2021), innovation in Bulawayo SMEs depends on leveraging internal capabilities skills, learning, and culture rather than external funding alone. However, external conditions (infrastructure, finance, regulation) significantly moderate these capabilities, echoing the Open Systems Theory perspective articulated by Burns (2021). Second, the evidence supports Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 2003; Greenhalgh et al., 2019), where peer influence and perceived benefits shape technology adoption. SMEs that observed competitors successfully using online marketing or mobile payments were more likely to adopt them, validating the observability and compatibility dimensions.

Third, the findings extend Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Teece, 2021; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2020), demonstrating that sensing and seizing opportunities in turbulent environments depend on continuous learning and managerial flexibility. SMEs that engaged in reflective learning and informal experimentation reported higher levels of innovation. Finally, the study reinforces recent African scholarship. Ndlela and Steyn (2021), Diouf et al. (2022), and Mlambo (2023) collectively argue that African SMEs innovate through improvisation and collaboration rather than formal R&D a pattern mirrored in Bulawayo's informal food enterprises. This underscores the need for policy frameworks that recognise *informal innovation systems* as legitimate contributors to national development.

4.9 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter presented and interpreted the empirical results on innovation adoption and process improvement among food service SMEs in Bulawayo. The quantitative findings revealed moderate levels of innovation, dominated by product and marketing strategies, while qualitative insights exposed structural and attitudinal barriers but also emergent opportunities in digitalisation and sustainability. By engaging international scholarship, the discussion demonstrated that Bulawayo's SMEs embody the paradox of innovation under constraint adaptive yet limited by resource scarcity. The next chapter draws conclusions from these findings and proposes evidence-based recommendations for enhancing innovation capability and process transformation within Zimbabwe's SME ecosystem.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This final chapter synthesises the key findings of the study on "Factors (Barriers and Opportunities) Influencing Innovative Adoption and Process Improvement in the Food Service SME Sector." It presents the conclusions drawn from both the empirical results (Chapter 4) and the theoretical insights reviewed in Chapters 1 and 2. The discussion highlights the implications for theory, policy, and practice, followed by targeted recommendations aimed at enhancing innovation capability and process transformation among food service SMEs in Zimbabwe, particularly within Bulawayo Metropolitan Province. The chapter concludes by identifying areas for future research.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

The study revealed that innovation and process improvement in food service SMEs are shaped by a complex interaction between internal capabilities, external environmental conditions, and institutional frameworks. Quantitative evidence indicated moderate levels of innovation adoption, with product and marketing innovations being the most common, while process redesign and sustainability practices remained underdeveloped. This pattern mirrors findings in similar contexts by Camacho and Roca (2023) and Rahman and Wang (2022), who note that SMEs in developing economies often adopt innovation incrementally due to financial and infrastructural constraints.

Qualitative insights further revealed that financial exclusion, poor infrastructure, and limited digital literacy were the predominant barriers to innovation. These observations resonate with the arguments of Zahra and George (2022) and the African Development Bank (2022), who assert that structural and institutional deficiencies remain central impediments to SME innovation in the Global South. At the same time, the research identified emerging opportunities in digitalisation, local sourcing, and sustainability, consistent with global trends highlighted by OECD (2023) and Tidd and Bessant (2023). These opportunities illustrate that even in resource-constrained contexts, SMEs possess adaptive capacities to innovate when provided with minimal enabling support.

Moreover, the findings affirmed that innovation capabilities including learning orientation, leadership, and organisational culture significantly influence the degree of process improvement. This supports Teece's (2021) dynamic capabilities framework, which emphasises sensing, seizing, and transforming as the cornerstone of sustainable innovation. SMEs that demonstrated reflective learning and openness to change reported higher levels of efficiency, customer satisfaction, and resilience. However, as Burns (2021) warns, without deliberate institutional scaffolding, such capabilities may remain fragmented and unsustainable.

5.3 Recommendations

Drawing on the empirical evidence and theoretical analysis presented in this study, several actionable recommendations are proposed for government policy makers, financial institutions, SME owners and managers, development agencies, and academia. These recommendations aim to strengthen the innovation ecosystem and foster sustainable process improvement among food service SMEs in Zimbabwe, particularly in Bulawayo. Each recommendation is grounded in contemporary scholarly debates and practical considerations.

5.3.1 Policy and Institutional Recommendations

The government and relevant policy-making agencies play a crucial role in shaping the innovation landscape for SMEs. As Tidd and Bessant (2023) and OECD (2023) argue, innovation ecosystems thrive when institutional frameworks are coherent, inclusive, and transparent. Currently, Zimbabwe's SME policies remain fragmented and under-implemented, as noted by Sithole and Makoni (2023). Therefore, the first recommendation is the establishment of a National Innovation and Process Improvement Policy that specifically integrates SMEs into the country's industrialisation agenda. Such a policy should clearly define funding pathways, incubation support, training programs, and performance indicators tailored to small enterprises.

To operationalise this policy, it is recommended that the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, in collaboration with SMEDCO (Small and Medium Enterprises Development Corporation), create Regional Innovation Hubs. These hubs would function as one-stop centres providing shared workspaces, digital tools, and expert mentorship. As Rahman and Wang (2022) highlight in the Asian context, decentralised innovation hubs are highly effective in diffusing knowledge and technology among resource-constrained enterprises. The hubs could further partner with universities and technical colleges, thereby bridging the gap between research and commercial application.

Moreover, policy coherence demands the creation of a multi-stakeholder innovation council comprising representatives from government ministries, the private sector, academia, and SME associations. Such a council would ensure inter-agency coordination, reduce policy overlap, and enhance accountability. As George and Marino (2021) argue, innovation governance must be participatory and adaptive to rapidly changing business environments. This institutional collaboration could also drive regional competitiveness by aligning SME policies with broader African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) objectives.

5.3.2 Financial Inclusion and Innovation Funding

The study revealed that limited access to finance is the most significant barrier to innovation adoption among SMEs, consistent with findings by *Abor and Quartey (2020)* and *Zahra and George (2022)*. It is therefore recommended that government, banks, and development partners establish an SME Innovation Financing Facility. This fund should provide micro-innovation grants, low-interest revolving loans, and innovation vouchers that SMEs can redeem for training or technology acquisition. Following the models used in the European Union (OECD, 2023), such instruments should target innovation with demonstrable socio-economic impact, including job creation, waste reduction, or green technology adoption.

Financial institutions, particularly commercial banks, must also adopt innovation-friendly risk assessment frameworks. Kraaijenbrink et al. (2022) argue that traditional collateral-based lending models stifle innovation because they penalise creative but under-capitalised entrepreneurs. Instead, banks should evaluate SMEs based on their innovation potential, track record, and management capability. The introduction of credit guarantee schemes as successfully implemented in South Korea and Singapore could de-risk lending to innovative SMEs. Furthermore, mobile-based microfinance platforms could increase accessibility for informal food service operators, enabling bottom-up innovation financing. Development partners and NGOs should complement these efforts by offering financial literacy programs. As Bryman (2021) and Tripathi and Jha (2022) note, even where funding exists, low financial literacy often leads to underutilisation or mismanagement. Training on budgeting, investment appraisal, and innovation accounting can empower SME owners to make data-driven financial decisions that support long-term innovation goals.

5.3.3 Enhancing Digital and Infrastructural Capacity

Digital transformation emerged as both an opportunity and a necessity for process improvement. However, as Li and Liu (2022) and Bhattacharya and Thirumalai (2023) highlight, the digital divide continues to impede inclusive innovation in developing economies. It is therefore recommended that the Zimbabwean government prioritise digital infrastructure development, particularly affordable broadband access in urban and peri-urban areas. Public–private partnerships with telecommunications firms could facilitate the rollout of free or subsidised Wi-Fi zones for SMEs. Additionally, a National SME Digital Literacy Program should be launched to enhance entrepreneurs' capacity to use technology effectively. This program could be modelled on initiatives like India's "Digital Saksharta Abhiyan," which successfully improved small-business technology adoption. Training should cover e-commerce platforms, data analytics, digital marketing, and cyber-security, reflecting Hwang and Griffiths' (2023) assertion that digital competence is now a prerequisite for competitive advantage.

Municipal governments should also invest in basic infrastructure reliable electricity, clean water, and waste management systems that underpin process innovation in the food sector. As Camacho and Roca (2023) note, sustainability-driven innovation relies on stable infrastructure to facilitate energy efficiency and waste minimisation. In this regard, Bulawayo City Council could introduce a Green Infrastructure Grant, offering

partial subsidies to SMEs that adopt eco-friendly technologies such as solar refrigeration and composting systems.

5.3.4 Promoting Organisational Learning and Innovation Culture

At the enterprise level, innovation depends not only on resources but also on mindset. The study found that risk aversion and resistance to change were key internal barriers. This aligns with *Burns (2021)*, who argues that "innovation inertia" arises when organisational cultures prioritise stability over experimentation. Therefore, SME owners must cultivate a learning-oriented culture that values experimentation, reflection, and knowledge sharing.

Practical strategies include regular staff brainstorming sessions, cross-functional teamwork, and the use of internal innovation champions. *Teece (2021)* and *Zahra and George (2022)* both emphasise the role of "micro-foundations" of dynamic capabilities small, repeated actions that enable larger strategic agility. Training programs should thus focus on leadership development, change management, and problem-solving skills. Partnerships with local universities could facilitate short courses and mentorship programs under Continuing Professional Development (CPD) frameworks. Moreover, SMEs should adopt knowledge management systems even simple digital archives to capture lessons learned from innovation attempts. As *Kraaijenbrink et al. (2022)* argue, institutionalising knowledge transforms innovation from episodic improvisation to structured learning. Owners should encourage their teams to document process improvements, track performance metrics, and share insights across departments. Such practices gradually embed innovation into organisational routines.

5.3.5 Strengthening Collaboration and Cluster Development

Innovation thrives within networks rather than in isolation. The study revealed that many SMEs in Bulawayo operate independently, limiting knowledge diffusion and economies of scale. In line with *Diouf et al. (2022)* and *Ndlela and Steyn (2021)*, it is recommended that SMEs be encouraged to form innovation clusters geographically proximate groups that collaborate on procurement, marketing, and training. Cluster-based development can reduce transaction costs and foster peer learning, as demonstrated in Italy's food districts and South Korea's SME consortia. Government agencies should facilitate cluster networking platforms, possibly hosted by city councils or chambers of commerce. These networks could organise trade fairs, innovation expos, and knowledge-sharing workshops. Digital collaboration platforms similar to Kenya's "Twiva SME Network" could also link Bulawayo entrepreneurs to regional and international partners, enhancing exposure and competitiveness.

5.3.6 Encouraging Sustainability and Green Innovation

Finally, sustainability must be embedded in all innovation efforts. As *Bocken et al. (2022)* and *UNEP (2021)* highlight, sustainable innovation reduces environmental impact while improving operational efficiency. Food service SMEs should be encouraged to adopt circular economy principles such as waste recycling, composting, and energy-efficient equipment. The government can incentivise this through tax

rebates, green certification programs, and public procurement preferences for environmentally compliant businesses. Local training on eco-innovation practices could further strengthen awareness and participation.

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