

Women's entrepreneurial leadership on culinary micro small medium enterprises success: The mediating role of absorptive capacity

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ABSTRACT

In many developing economies, culinary businesses run by women face dynamic market challenges that demand adaptive leadership and effective knowledge utilization. This study explores the influence of women's entrepreneurial leadership on the business success of micro, small, and medium enterprises in the culinary sector with absorptive capacity as a mediating factor. A survey method was used to gather quantitative data from 350 women entrepreneurs, and partial least squares structural equation modeling was used for statistics analysis. The results show that women's leadership qualities, such as empathy, teamwork, and flexibility, significantly improve company performance. Additionally, absorptive capacity serves a critical mediating function by allowing entrepreneurs to obtain, absorb, and apply outside knowledge for innovation and market adaptation. The study emphasizes how crucial it is to support women's entrepreneurial leadership and knowledge-absorption skills to promote long-term company growth. These findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and business practitioners in designing targeted interventions to support women entrepreneurs in resource-constrained environments.

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1. Introduction

In the Sukabumi Regency, West Java, Indonesia, the culinary industry offers many job prospects, particularly for young people and women. Micro small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), especially those in the food and beverage sector, frequently recruit locally, giving people jobs in urban and rural locations (Bartik, 2020). In many Indonesian regions, including the Sukabumi Regency, the MSMEs sector accounts for a significant proportion of the workforce. Until now, MSMEs in Indonesia have contributed around 97% of the employment nationwide (Limanseto, 2022). Approximately 14.6% of the MSMEs players joined the digital ecosystem and used e-commerce during the pandemic. It is anticipated that 38% of the

MSMEs will switch to digital platforms (Hendrayati et al., 2024; Rayhan et al., 2024). In the Sukabumi Regency, this trend is mirrored, as many residents rely on small culinary businesses for their livelihoods.

Culinary businesses in the Sukabumi Regency also have strong connections with the local agriculture and food production sectors, fostering local supply chains. Restaurants, cafés, and street vendors source ingredients from nearby farms, thus supporting the agricultural economy (Ramdan et al., 2023). This connection between the culinary sector and agriculture helps stabilize income for local farmers, ensuring the demand for locally grown produce, which promotes regional economic circulation. Sukabumi Regency is known for its natural beauty and culinary diversity, attracting local and international tourists. The culinary sector enhances the tourist experience by offering unique, traditional dishes that reflect the local culture. Sukabumi Regency specialty foods such as mochi cakes and traditional Sundanese dishes are key attractions that attract visitors to the region (Turgarini et al., 2018; Pratama et al., 2022). Culinary tourism significantly boosts local businesses and contributes to economic development (Palupi & Abdillah, 2019). A survey on tourism in West Java indicated that approximately 30% of tourists highlighted food experiences as a primary reason for visiting (Ramdhany et al., 2022; Setiyawan et al., 2023), which also benefits the local economy in the Sukabumi Regency.

The culinary sector in the Sukabumi Regency is also a hub for women entrepreneurs who own and manage many MSMEs. Women's involvement in culinary businesses has empowered them economically and socially, contributing to household income and community development (Hendrayati et al., 2019; Nurlatifah & Saefuddin, 2022). According to a study on women's entrepreneurship in Indonesia, about 50% of MSMEs are owned by women, and a significant portion of these businesses are in the food, beverage, and fashion industries (Hendrayati et al., 2025; Putit et al., 2025). In the Sukabumi Regency, this is reflected in the rising number of women-led culinary ventures, directly contributing to the region's economic growth. Most previous studies have focused on urban settings or general MSMEs populations with limited attention to women-led culinary MSMEs (Sajjad et al., 2020), especially in semi-rural areas such as the Sukabumi Regency.

The business success of MSMEs is significantly influenced by absorptive capacity and women's entrepreneurial leadership. MSMEs can innovate, adjust to market changes, and increase operational efficiency by absorbing, assimilating, transforming, and utilizing external knowledge (Senivongse et al., 2019; Setyaningrum et al., 2023). Businesses with high absorptive capacity are better at adopting new technologies, adjusting to customer preferences, and leveraging external partnerships to enhance their competitive edge (Farida & Setiawan, 2022). On the other hand, women's entrepreneurial leadership plays a crucial role in MSMEs success, particularly in the culinary sector. Women entrepreneurs (womenpreneurs) often adopt unique leadership styles that emphasize collaboration, community engagement, and transformational leadership (Hendrayati & Gaffar, 2016; Ariasih et al., 2024). Prior research has not sufficiently examined how feminine leadership traits influence knowledge absorption and business success (Jing et al., 2022). These traits foster supportive work environments and drive innovation. Studies show that women-led businesses demonstrate higher resilience and adaptability, which are crucial for MSMEs that face volatile market conditions. Combining absorptive capacity with strong leadership enables MSMEs to handle challenges, seize opportunities, and achieve sustainable business growth.

Despite the growth in women entrepreneurship, many MSMEs in the Sukabumi Regency face challenges in achieving sustainable success due to limited knowledge absorption, resource capabilities, and entrepreneurial leadership skills. These businesses often cannot effectively identify and utilize external knowledge, such as market trends,

technological innovations, and strategic partnerships, which are crucial for long-term growth (Fernández-Olmos & Ramírez-Alesón, 2017; Pereira et al., 2021). By examining the mediating function of absorptive capacity between women's entrepreneurial leadership and business success, this study can assist in identifying research gaps. Although absorptive capacity has been studied in innovation and performance, its mediating role between women's entrepreneurial leadership and business success remains underexplored, especially in the MSMEs culinary context. Despite the growing literature on MSMEs performance and entrepreneurial leadership, gaps remain in understanding how women's leadership traits interact with knowledge management capabilities, especially in culinary MSMEs operating with limited resources, such as Sukabumi Regency. Furthermore, existing studies rarely posit absorptive capacity as a mediating mechanism linking leadership to business success. This study addresses these gaps by focusing on a sector and demographics often overlooked in mainstream research, and providing evidence-based insights for policy and practice.

This study is expected to uncover gaps in current support systems, such as inadequate training or mentorship programs, and highlight the need for better interventions for entrepreneurial leadership and absorptive capacity to improve business success. This study intends to fill the highlighted research gaps by examining how absorptive capacity mediates the relationship between women's entrepreneurial leadership and business success among culinary MSMEs in the Sukabumi Regency.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Literature Review

The resource-based view (RBV) theory covers the interaction of women's entrepreneurial leadership, absorptive capacity, and business success of MSMEs. RBV theory emphasizes the role of internal resources, such as leadership skills and absorptive capacity, as critical drivers of a firm's competitive advantage and success (Ávila, 2022; Mokbel Al Koliby et al., 2024). Women's entrepreneurial leadership can be viewed as a unique resource that provides strategic direction and innovation, while absorptive capacity is another vital resource that enhances a firm's ability to recognize and integrate valuable external knowledge (Hendrayati et al., 2019; Rashid et al., 2019; Siwiyanti et al., 2025). Combining these resources leads to sustainable business success by allowing MSMEs to leverage their internal strengths, adapt to changing environments, and outperform their competitors. RBV theory is particularly relevant to MSMEs, which rely on maximizing limited resources for competitive advantage (El Nemar et al., 2022).

2.1.1. Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership

Women's entrepreneurial leadership has distinct characteristics that set it apart from traditional leadership models, often reflecting a blend of empathy, collaboration, and social consciousness. Transformational leadership theory, which holds that leaders inspire and encourage followers by creating an inclusive and empowered environment, helps explain these distinctive leadership qualities (Lopez et al., 2021; Baroudi, 2022). Women entrepreneurs often demonstrate higher levels of empathy and collaboration, enabling them to build strong teams and create supportive workplaces (Aisyah et al., 2023). This collaborative style enhances employee engagement and loyalty, which leads to incredible innovation and business success. Additionally, relationship building is a crucial trait in women's entrepreneurial leadership, where their ability to forge and maintain strong ties with stakeholders, whether employees, customers, or business partners, helps build trust and sustain business growth.

Women entrepreneurs also tend to prioritize work-life balance, which can influence their leadership approach (Brue, 2018). This emphasis may result in more

flexible and compassionate workplace policies that attract a diverse workforce. Furthermore, women leaders often champion diversity and inclusion, ensuring that their businesses foster equitable practices and diverse perspectives (Beba & Church, 2020; Azizuddin & Shamsuzzoha, 2024). Their leadership extends beyond the business itself, with a notable commitment to community involvement as they often seek to return to the communities in which they operate (Kakade et al., 2024). Empathy, relationship building, work-life balance, diversity, and community involvement make women's entrepreneurial leadership distinctive, blending business success with social impact.

2.1.2. Absorptive Capacity

The ability of a company to identify the value of fresh external information, absorb it, and use it for business purposes is known as the absorptive capacity in MSMEs. According to this hypothesis, dynamic capability helps businesses innovate and adjust to shifting conditions (Salisu & Bakar, 2020; Bag & Rahman, 2023). This capability is particularly crucial for MSMEs, who often face resource constraints but rely heavily on external knowledge for survival and growth. The absorptive capacity of MSMEs is measured across four key dimensions: the acquisition, assimilation, transformation, and exploitation of knowledge (Dawa et al., 2020; Jallad & Karadas, 2024). The first dimension (acquisition and assimilation) involves identifying and incorporating relevant external knowledge into a firm's existing knowledge base. Systems that collect data from external sources, including clients, rivals, and market trends, are necessary (Rusliati et al., 2020; Neumeyer et al., 2021). The two dimensions (transformation and exploitation) involve converting acquired knowledge into actionable strategies and effectively utilizing it to enhance the firm's processes, products, or services (Jackson, 2019). For MSMEs, strong absorptive capacity enables them to remain competitive by quickly adapting to market changes, fostering innovation, and improving overall business performance. These dimensions work together to create a learning organization capable of leveraging external knowledge for sustainable growth.

2.1.3. Business Success

MSMEs commercial success must be maintained and sustained over short-, medium-, and long-term periods to ensure its survival and growth in a competitive market. In the short term, MSMEs focus on attaining strong financial performance through effective cost controls, revenue creation, and cash flow stability (Alhawamdeh et al., 2024). Quick responsiveness to market demands and customer feedback can drive market performance and help businesses establish loyal customers (Suharto et al., 2022). Implementing effective customer relationship management strategies enhances customer satisfaction and retention, which is critical for immediate financial health (Putit et al., 2024; Royo-Vela et al., 2024). Additionally, cultivating a culture of operational efficiency allows MSMEs to streamline processes, reduce waste, and enhance productivity, thus reinforcing their short-term viability (Strang & Vajjhala, 2024).

In the medium-to long-term, MSMEs must shift their focus toward innovation and product development to remain relevant in evolving markets (Gyedu et al., 2021). Commitment to continuous improvement and adaptation is essential for sustaining a competitive advantage. Investing in human capital and employee development is equally important, as skilled and motivated employees drive creativity and operational excellence (Dixit & Sinha, 2020). As MSMEs prioritize these areas, they build resilience

against market fluctuations and position themselves for sustained growth. Moreover, strong market performance fosters brand recognition and trust, enabling MSMEs to explore new opportunities and expand their reach. Using these measures, MSMEs can create a comprehensive strategy that ensures immediate success and lays the groundwork for long-term sustainability and growth in an ever-changing business environment.

2.2. Hypothesis Development

2.2.1. Positive Effect of Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership on Absorptive Capacity

Women's entrepreneurial leadership can significantly influence an organization's ability to manage knowledge, particularly by enhancing its absorptive capacity. Absorptive capacity refers to a firm's ability to identify, assimilate, transform, and apply external knowledge to commercial ends (Zahra & George, 2002). Leadership, which encourages openness, collaboration, and a learning orientation, plays a central role in facilitating this process (Jansen et al., 2009). Women entrepreneurs often exhibit transformational leadership traits, such as empathy, participatory decision-making, and relational thinking (Hendrayati & Gaffar, 2016; Baroudi, 2022), which foster environments conducive to learning and knowledge-sharing. These characteristics make women leaders particularly effective in promoting knowledge acquisition and integration as core elements of absorptive capacity. Prior studies also suggest that inclusive and emotionally intelligent leadership styles, frequently associated with women entrepreneurs, positively influence organizational learning and dynamic capabilities (Lopez et al., 2021; Aisyah et al., 2023). **H₁: Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership Has a Positive Effect on Absorptive Capacity.**

2.2.2. Positive Effect of Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership on Business Success

Entrepreneurial leadership is a key internal resource that contributes directly to business success. From an RBV perspective, women's leadership traits, including empathy, adaptability, and community orientation, represent unique intangible assets that enhance firm performance (Ávila, 2022; Mokbel Al Koliby et al., 2024). Women-led enterprises are often characterized by a collaborative and value-driven culture that promotes employee engagement, customer loyalty, and social capital, which are crucial for business growth (Brue, 2018). Furthermore, transformational leadership behaviors among women (such as inspiring vision, empowering teams, and nurturing stakeholder relationships) are associated with enhanced innovation, operational effectiveness, and long-term sustainability (Azizuddin & Shamsuzzoha, 2024; Kakade et al., 2024). Empirical evidence shows that women entrepreneurs in MSMEs contribute meaningfully to household income and regional economies, especially in sectors such as culinary business that benefit from relationship-driven leadership (Hendrayati et al., 2019; Nurlatifah & Saefuddin, 2022). **H₂: Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership Has a Positive Effect on Business Success.**

2.2.3. Positive Effect of Absorptive Capacity on Business Success

Absorptive capacity is increasingly recognized as a driver of competitive advantage and business success, especially for MSMEs operating in dynamic environments. Firms with strong absorptive capacity are more adept at responding to market trends, technological shifts, and customer needs, thereby achieving better performance outcomes (Salisu & Bakar, 2020; Farida & Setiawan, 2022). The ability of culinary MSMEs to absorb and utilize external knowledge (such as customer preferences, food innovation, or digital marketing strategies) has a direct impact on

product quality, service delivery, and market relevance (Bag & Rahman, 2023; Jallad & Karadas, 2024). Absorptive capacity enables firms to convert raw market information into strategic decisions, allowing for faster adaptation and more effective resource utilization (Jackson, 2019; Dawa et al., 2020). These capabilities are especially critical for small businesses in resource-constrained regions, such as Sukabumi Regency, where the external environment often dictates survival and success. **H₃: Absorptive Capacity Has a Positive Effect on Business Success.**

2.2.4. The Mediating Role of Absorptive Capacity on the Effect of Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership on Business Success

While women's entrepreneurial leadership provides vision, motivation, and strategic guidance, absorptive capacity reflects how external knowledge is captured and executed. The connection between leadership and absorptive capacity establishes a channel for creativity, agility, and market responsiveness, which are critical for the success of MSMEs (Senivongse et al., 2019; Pereira et al., 2021). The RBV and dynamic capability perspectives suggest that internal resources (such as leadership) must be supported by knowledge management capabilities (such as absorptive capacity) to generate performance outcomes (Neumeyer et al., 2021). Prior research has rarely examined this mediating mechanism, particularly in women-led MSMEs in the culinary sector. However, emerging studies emphasize the importance of absorptive capacity in translating a leadership-driven vision into tangible innovations and performance gains (Fernández-Olmos & Ramírez-Alesón, 2017; Rashid et al., 2019). **H₄: Absorptive Capacity mediates the Relationship between Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership and Business Success.**

2.3. Research Framework

Several previous studies have explored the intercorrelation between women's entrepreneurial leadership, absorptive capacity, and business success, providing a solid foundation for this research. Arifin et al. (2016), for example, looked at how absorptive capability and entrepreneurial leadership enhance corporate performance, emphasizing the importance of these elements in accomplishing organizational objectives. Similarly, Shafique and Kalyar (2018) emphasized the dynamic interaction between corporate entrepreneurship, absorptive capacity, and transformational leadership. Rehman et al. (2021) examined how entrepreneurial leadership affected the effectiveness of product innovation and found that design thinking, intra-firm networks, and absorptive capacity had intervening impacts. Following Rusliati et al. (2020), this study highlights the significance of absorptive capacity as a mediating variable in the association between leadership and economic performance. To shed light on how women's leadership qualities can improve knowledge absorption and promote sustainable business growth, this study builds on these insights by examining the impact of women's entrepreneurial leadership on absorptive capacity and business success, particularly in the culinary sector of MSMEs. The research framework examines the effect of women's entrepreneurial leadership on the business success of MSMEs, with absorptive capacity as a mediating variable, as illustrated in Figure 1.

This research framework connects women's entrepreneurship leadership to business success through the mediation of absorptive capacity. This framework illustrates the relationship between women's entrepreneurial leadership, absorptive capacity, and the business success of MSMEs. It proposes that women's entrepreneurial leadership directly influences the success of culinary MSMEs and indirectly affects success through the mediating role of absorptive capacity. RBV theory, which is based on this approach,

highlights internal organizational resources (including leadership and knowledge capabilities) as important sources of competitive advantage. Empathy, teamwork, and transformative behavior are characteristics of women's leadership, which is viewed as a special strength that promotes creativity and strategic direction. Absorptive capacity, defined as a firm's ability to acquire, assimilate, transform, and apply external knowledge, enables MSMEs to adapt to market changes and improve performance. The framework emphasizes its strategic role in translating leadership potential into tangible business outcomes by placing absorptive capacity as a mediator. This model is relevant to MSMEs in resource-limited settings to leverage their internal strengths for sustainability and growth.

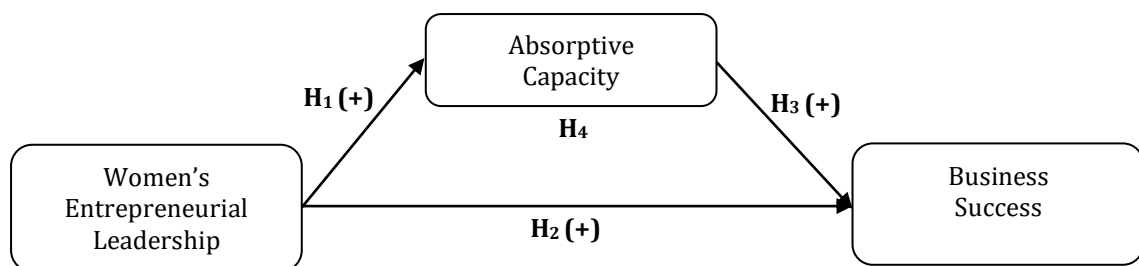


Figure 1. Research Framework

3. Research Methods

3.1. Population and Sampling Method

The population in this study consists of 3,940 women entrepreneurs (womenpreneurs) operating in the culinary sector in Sukabumi Regency, West Java, Indonesia. These women-led MSMEs include food-based businesses such as home-based catering services, small restaurants, food stalls, and snack producers. From this population, a minimum sample size of 350 respondents was determined, ensuring sufficient representation. Simple random selection was used to select the sample, ensuring that every member of the population had an equal chance of being included (Fazal et al., 2022; Manríquez et al., 2022), thereby enhancing the generalizability of the findings.

3.2. Data Collection Method

To test the hypotheses and investigate causal links between variables in real-world contexts, this study used a quantitative research approach with an explanatory survey design. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire with closed-ended items to measure three main variables: women's entrepreneurial leadership, absorptive capacity, and business success. Respondents rated their agreement with each item using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Prior to completing the distribution, the questionnaire was pilot tested for clarity and appropriateness.

3.3. Measurement of Variables

Women's entrepreneurial leadership (WEL) was measured using five indicators: empathy and collaboration, relationship building, work-life balance, diversity and inclusion, and community involvement. These indicators reflect the unique leadership characteristics often demonstrated by women entrepreneurs and have been adapted from previous studies (Hendrayati & Gaffar, 2016; Brue, 2018; Kakade et al., 2024). The four elements of acquisition, absorption, transformation, and exploitation of external knowledge are used to quantify absorptive capacity (AC). These indicators are based on the framework of Zahra and George (2002) and have been widely applied in MSMEs and innovation studies (Dawa et al., 2020; Bag & Rahman, 2023). Business Success (BS) is

assessed using six indicators: financial performance, market performance, innovation and product development, operational efficiency, customer relationship management, and human capital development. These indicators capture the short and long-term aspects of MSMEs performance and are synthesized from the existing literature (Alhawamdeh et al., 2024; Suharto et al., 2022; Royo-Vela et al., 2024).

3.4. Data Analysis Method

After data collection, responses were carefully reviewed, cleaned, and coded for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, percentage, and categorical frequency distributions, were used to describe the demographic characteristics of the respondents and provide a preliminary overview of the main research variables. This study employed partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) using Smart PLS software for hypothesis testing. This method was chosen because of its ability to handle complex models, formative and reflective constructs, and its relatively small sample sizes (Danks et al., 2020; Musyaffi et al., 2022). The direct effects (between women's entrepreneurial leadership and business success) and mediating influence of absorptive capacity were tested using PLS-SEM. To ensure the validity and robustness of the findings, the model evaluation comprised tests of path coefficients, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and model-fit indices.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Characteristics of Respondents

Based on the data collected through structured questionnaires distributed to women entrepreneurs in the culinary sector of the Sukabumi Regency, this section presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The analysis focused on three main categories: age group, educational background, and duration of business experience. These characteristics provide an essential context for interpreting the entrepreneurial behavior and business practices of women-led MSMEs in the culinary industry. The detailed classifications are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents

Classification	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	All Female	350	100 %
Age	21 - 30	29	8.3 %
	31 - 40	190	54.3 %
	41 - 50	113	32.3 %
	Above 50	18	5.1 %
Education Level	Junior High School	3	0.9 %
	Senior High School	218	62.3 %
	Diploma	19	5.4 %
	Bachelor	108	30.9 %
	Magister/Doctoral	2	0.6 %
Experience	1 - 5	130	37.1 %
	6 - 10	109	31.1 %
	10 - 15	98	28.0 %
	More than 15	13	3.7 %

All respondents in this study 100% were female entrepreneurs, which is consistent with the study's targeted population. Most responders (54.3%) were between 31 and 40, suggesting that most womenpreneurs were in their prime years for economic activity and productivity. This was followed by those aged 41 to 50 years (32.3%), younger entrepreneurs aged 21–30 accounted for 8.3%, and a smaller group above 50 made up

5.1%. According to these statistics, women in their early to mid-career stages are the ones who engage in culinary entrepreneurship in Sukabumi Regency the most. Most respondents (62.3%) had a senior high school diploma, indicating that secondary education is a typical educational background for women entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, 30.9% had obtained a bachelor's degree, and 5.4% held a diploma. Only a small percentage had completed postgraduate education (0.6%) or junior high school (0.9%). This indicates a moderate level of educational attainment, with a significant number of respondents possessing formal post-secondary qualifications. Regarding entrepreneurial experience, 37.1% of respondents had engaged in culinary business activities for 1–5 years, while 31.1% had experience ranging from 6–10 years. Another 28.0% had been active for 10–15 years, and a smaller group (3.7%) had over 15 years of experience. This distribution reflects a diverse mix of early-stage and established entrepreneurs.

4.2. Descriptive Analysis

The essential variables' statistical definitions and indications are displayed in Table 2, which also displays the mean, standard deviation (SD), percentage, and associated category. The mean score for women's entrepreneurial leadership is 3.949, with a standard deviation of 0.500, indicating that 73.7% of respondents rated this variable as high. The mediating variable, absorptive capacity has a mean score of 3.999 and an SD of 0.488, with 75.0% of respondents perceiving it as high. Lastly, the dependent variable, business success shows a mean value of 3.996 and a standard deviation of 0.435, with 74.9% of respondents classifying it within the high category. These findings suggest a strong perception of leadership, absorptive capacity, and business success among women entrepreneurs in the study.

Table 2. Statistical Descriptions of Variables and Indicators

Variables	Mean	SD	%	Category
Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership (WEL)	3.949	0.500	73.7	High
WEL1	4.004	0.529	75.1	Extremely High
WEL2	3.870	0.484	71.7	High
WEL3	4.044	0.470	76.1	Extremely High
WEL4	3.834	0.509	70.9	High
WEL5	3.994	0.475	74.9	High
Absorptive Capacity (AC)	3.999	0.488	75.0	High
AC1	4.042	0.463	76.0	Extremely High
AC2	3.992	0.503	74.8	High
AC3	4.065	0.520	76.6	Extremely High
AC4	3.898	0.445	72.5	High
Business Success (BS)	3.996	0.435	74.9	High
BS1	4.009	0.400	75.2	Extremely High
BS2	3.893	0.439	72.3	High
BS3	4.136	0.419	78.4	Extremely High
BS4	3.870	0.427	71.7	High
BS5	3.948	0.459	73.7	High
BS6	4.123	0.395	78.1	Extremely High

4.3. Validity Test

A validity test was conducted using the outer loading values of the measurement model to ensure that each indicator accurately measured its corresponding construct. As shown in Figure 2 and Table 3, the analysis employed the bootstrapping technique in PLS-SEM with a loading value of ≥ 0.7 considered acceptable.

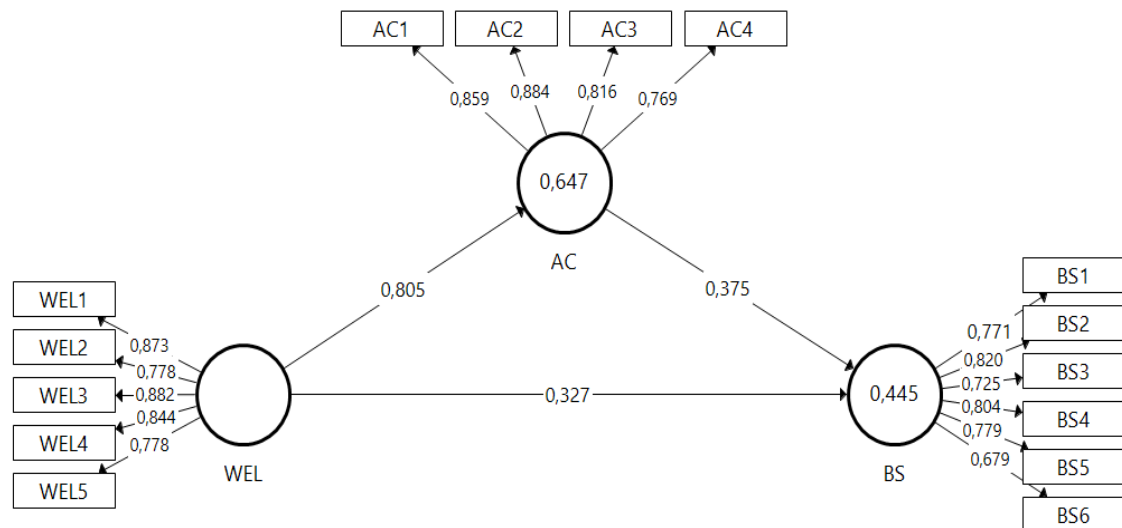


Figure 2. Overall Model

Table 3. Validity Test Result

Indicator	Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership	Absorptive Capacity	Business Success
WEL1	0.873		
WEL2	0.778		
WEL3	0.882		
WEL4	0.844		
WEL5	0.778		
AC1		0.859	
AC2		0.884	
AC3		0.816	
AC4		0.769	
BS1			0.771
BS2			0.82
BS3			0.725
BS4			0.804
BS5			0.779
BS6			0.679

The loading of the outer routes in Table 3 reveals strong and statistically significant relationships between the latent variables (women's entrepreneurial leadership, absorptive capacity, and business success) and their accompanying indicators. The t-statistics were exceptionally high, with p-values of 0.000, and all outer loading values were greater than 0.7, indicating that the observed variables accurately reflected their corresponding latent constructs.

4.4. Reliability Test

Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE) values are listed in Table 4 and serve to confirm the validity and reliability of these constructs. Construct validity and reliability evaluation for the three constructs. Women's entrepreneurial leadership, absorptive capacity, and business success are shown in Table 4. Women's entrepreneurial leadership (0.888), absorptive capacity (0.852), and business success (0.857). Cronbach's alpha values for each construct were above the 0.7 cutoff, suggesting good internal consistency. The reliability of the structures is further supported by the composite reliability values, which are significantly higher than the benchmark of 0.7. Business success was 0.894, absorptive capacity 0.900, and entrepreneurial leadership 0.918. Convergent validity was confirmed when each construct's AVE exceeded 0.5. A significant amount of variance in the observed variables can be explained by the latent constructs of women's entrepreneurial leadership, absorptive capacity, and business success, as seen by their respective AVEs of 0.692, 0.694, and 0.584. These findings support the validity and dependability of the model's constructs.

Table 4. Reliability Test Result

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership	0.888	0.918	0.692
Absorptive Capacity	0.852	0.900	0.694
Business Success	0.857	0.894	0.584

4.5. Model Test

The model was evaluated using the Goodness of Fit (GoF) criteria to determine its overall adequacy. A model is considered fit when it satisfies the three key criteria. First, a p-value of less than 0.001 was required for the Average Path Coefficient (APC) to demonstrate a significant level. Second, a p-value below 0.001 indicated excellent explanatory power for the Average R-squared (ARS). Finally, to verify that multicollinearity is not present, the Average Variance Inflation Factor (AVIF) must be less than the cutoff of 5. Table 5 summarizes the results of the model fit evaluation.

Table 5. Results of Model Test

Criteria	Value
Average Path Coefficient (APC)	0.502 (< 0.001)
Average R-squared (ARS)	0.546 (< 0.001)
Adjusted R-squared (ARRS)	0.544 (< 0.001)
Average Block VIF (AVIF)	2.108 (< 5)
Goodness of Fit	0.664 (> 0.360)

4.6. Hypothesis Test

Hypothesis testing was conducted based on the overall model output generated by Smart PLS to evaluate the relationships between women's entrepreneurial leadership, absorptive capacity, and business success. Bootstrapping was applied to assess the significance of each proposed path. The findings of hypothesis testing are summarized in Table 6. The p-values of 0.000, which are significantly below the conventional significance level of 0.05, show that all pathways are statistically significant in the table. The t-statistics for each path were also substantial, further confirming the strength of these relationships. As shown in Table 6, women's entrepreneurial leadership substantially impacts absorptive capacity, as evidenced by the path from women's entrepreneurial leadership to absorptive capacity, with a significant path coefficient of 0.805 and a high t-statistic of 42.151. The

direct path from women's entrepreneurial leadership to business success has a coefficient of 0.327 and a t-statistic of 3.711, suggesting a moderate and significant direct effect of women Entrepreneurial Leadership on business success. With a t-statistic of 4.701 and coefficient of 0.375, the path from absorptive capacity to business success indicates that absorptive capacity substantially impacts business success. The association between women's entrepreneurial leadership and business success is somewhat mediated by absorptive capacity, which has a coefficient of 0.302 and t-statistic of 4.592. These findings show the importance of absorptive capacity as a mediating factor in boosting business success through women's entrepreneurial leadership.

Table 6. Hypothesis Test

Hypothesis	Original Value	Bootstrap Value	Standard Deviation	T-Statistic	P Value
Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership → Absorptive Capacity	0.805	0.805	0.019	42.151	0.000
Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership → Business Success	0.327	0.332	0.088	3.711	0.000
Absorptive Capacity → Business Success	0.375	0.371	0.080	4.701	0.000
Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership → Absorptive Capacity → Business Success	0.302	0.299	0.066	4.592	0.000

4.7. Discussion

4.7.1. The Effect of Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership on Absorptive Capacity

The findings indicate a strong and significant influence of women's entrepreneurial leadership on the absorptive capacity of MSMEs within the culinary sector in the Sukabumi Regency. Notably, the dimensions of work-life balance, empathy, and collaboration were the most substantial contributors (Brue, 2018; Zeler et al., 2022). These characteristics increase MSMEs ability to innovate and adjust to changes in the market by creating an atmosphere favourable to knowledge acquisition and exchange (Setyaningrum & Muafi, 2023; Joel & Oguanobi, 2024). In contrast, community involvement and relationship-building dimensions displayed weaker contributions, suggesting potential areas for development. This discrepancy may indicate that, while individual and interpersonal skills are being effectively leveraged, greater emphasis should be placed on external networking and community engagement (Smith et al., 2022; Nurdiani & Azizah, 2023). Strengthening these areas could enhance the overall absorptive capacity of MSMEs, facilitating better responsiveness to external opportunities and challenges, and thereby bolstering their competitiveness in the culinary market.

The findings suggest that several key indicators strongly support women's entrepreneurial leadership in the MSMEs of the culinary industry in the Sukabumi Regency. First, empathy and collaboration allow female entrepreneurs to create more inclusive and cooperative work environments, enhancing team morale and customer satisfaction. Relationship building is crucial for maintaining strong ties with customers, suppliers, and partners, fostering loyalty and long-term business success. Work-life balance further differentiates their leadership, helping them manage personal and professional responsibilities while maintaining sustainable operations. Additionally, their commitment to diversity and inclusion fosters innovation and creativity in their businesses. Finally, community involvement strengthens social ties that support business growth through local networking and social responsibility efforts. These

findings confirm the results of previous studies on these indicators (Brue, 2018; Baroudi, 2022; Aisyah et al., 2023; Kakade et al., 2024; Putit et al., 2025).

4.7.2. The Effect of Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership on Business Success

The considerable direct effect of women's entrepreneurial leadership on the business success of MSMEs in the culinary sector of Sukabumi Regency highlights the transformative potential of leadership styles that value inclusivity and creativity (Bhattacharya et al., 2024). Women entrepreneurial leaders often bring unique perspectives and approaches that enhance decision making and strategic planning, fostering a culture of adaptability and resilience. Leadership style can influence market performance by driving customer-centric initiatives and leveraging social networks for effective marketing. Women leaders can emphasize empathy and collaboration to cultivate strong relationships with customers and stakeholders, and maintain customer loyalty and market share. Regarding operational efficiency, women's entrepreneurial leadership can enhance team dynamics and employee engagement, leading to improved productivity and lower turnover rates (Shafique & Kalyar, 2018; Chun & Evans, 2023). Leaders prioritize work-life balance and empower their teams to create a motivated workforce that is more likely to contribute to streamlined processes and innovative solutions.

4.7.3. The Effect of Absorptive Capacity on Business Success

effectively acquire and assimilate knowledge. This capability allows firms to identify valuable external information and integrate it into their existing frameworks, which is essential in the dynamic culinary sector of the Sukabumi Regency. Knowledge acquisition equips entrepreneurs with insights into market trends, consumer preferences, and competitive strategies (Wibowo et al., 2024). This information enables them to make informed decisions that align with evolving customer demand, thus enhancing product offerings and service quality. Staying attuned to industry enables entrepreneurs to innovate more effectively, leading to a sustainable competitive advantage (Strang & Vajjhala, 2024). Knowledge assimilation further enhances business success by fostering a culture of continuous learning within an organization. When entrepreneurs actively integrate new information, they promote collaboration and knowledge sharing among team members, leading to innovative solutions and improved operational efficiency (Cadrazco-Parra et al., 2020; Rerung et al., 2024). This synergy improves staff morale and the firm's ability to respond to difficulties and capitalize on new possibilities. Strong absorptive capacity empowers entrepreneurs to harness external knowledge effectively, facilitating informed decision-making and strategic innovation that drives business success in the competitive market of MSMEs.

4.7.4. Mediation Effect of Absorptive Capacity on the Relationship between Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership and Business Success

Absorptive capacity partially mediates the relationship between women's entrepreneurial leadership and business success, highlighting the importance of knowledge processes in this dynamic. Women leaders help MSMEs gain and assimilate valuable external knowledge by creating a learning- and innovation-friendly atmosphere. This enriched absorptive capacity allows businesses to translate effective leadership into improved market performance and operational efficiency, ultimately contributing to greater business success (Shafique & Kalyar, 2018; Dräger & Letmathe, 2023). Thus, while entrepreneurial leadership sets the stage, absorptive capacity acts as a vital facilitator in achieving the desired outcomes (Ávila, 2022; Rakthin et al., 2024).

The findings indicate that numerous important indicators greatly encourage women's entrepreneurial leadership in MSMEs of the culinary industry in the Sukabumi Regency. First, empathy and collaboration allow female entrepreneurs to create more inclusive and cooperative work environments, enhancing team morale and customer satisfaction. Relationship building is crucial for maintaining strong ties with customers, suppliers, and partners, fostering loyalty and long-term business success. Work-life balance further differentiates their leadership, helping them manage personal and professional responsibilities while maintaining sustainable operations. Additionally, their commitment to diversity and inclusion fosters innovation and creativity in their businesses. Finally, community involvement strengthens social ties that support business growth through local networking and social responsibility efforts. These findings confirm the results of previous studies on these indicators (Brue, 2018; Baroudi, 2022; Aisyah et al., 2023; Kakade et al., 2024; Putit et al., 2025).

Regarding absorptive capacity, MSMEs in the culinary industry gain from their ability to learn, assimilate, transform, and utilize external knowledge. Acquisition refers to entrepreneurs' ability to gather relevant market and industry information, which is then assimilated into their operations to improve business processes. Transformation occurs when this knowledge is adapted to fit the business's specific needs, leading to new insights and strategies. Finally, exploitation involves utilizing this transformed knowledge to enhance innovation, market positions, and financial outcomes. Several previous studies have examined the ability to absorb external knowledge for internal benefits (Jackson, 2019; Neumeyer et al., 2021; Hendrayati et al., 2024).

The business success of these MSMEs is reflected in multiple dimensions: financial performance through revenue growth and profitability; market performance via increased customer base and market share; and innovation and product development through the continuous introduction of new culinary offerings. Other critical factors include operational efficiency, which optimizes costs and processes; customer relationship management, which ensures customer loyalty; and human capital and employee development, fostering a skilled and motivated workforce. The contribution of each factor has been examined in several previous studies (Dixit & Sinha, 2020; Gyedu et al., 2021; Suharto et al., 2022; Alhawamdeh et al., 2024; Royo-Vela et al., 2024; Strang & Vajjhala, 2024).

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study show how crucial women's entrepreneurial leadership is the expansion of MSMEs in the Sukabumi Regency's culinary sector. This study demonstrates that leadership qualities such as empathy, teamwork, flexibility, and community service favorably impact the sustainability of businesses. Absorptive capacity is a vital mediator that allows business owners to gather, absorb, and utilize outside knowledge, thereby enhancing creativity and market flexibility. These findings highlight the importance of combining knowledge management techniques with entrepreneurial leadership development to improve MSMEs competitiveness and resilience. This study offers empirical proof that empowering female entrepreneurs via leadership development and improving their absorptive capacity can significantly impact economic growth, even in settings with limited resources.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. Its exclusive emphasis on the culinary MSMEs of Sukabumi Regency may restrict the applicability of the findings to other industries or geographical areas. Furthermore, other possible variables, including digital literacy, government backing, and technical improvements, were not specifically evaluated, although absorptive capacity was investigated as a mediating factor. Future studies should investigate these elements to provide a more thorough understanding of the factors

that influence MSMEs growth. Policymakers, educators, and business professionals should prioritize mentorship programs, financial support mechanisms designed explicitly for women-led MSMEs, and entrepreneurial leadership programs. The sustainability and prosperity of Indonesian women entrepreneurs can be further improved by promoting partnerships with industry professionals, accelerating digital transformation, and fortifying business networks.

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