

Navigating Uncertainty Through Resilience, Absorptive Capacity and Adaptive Performance in Shaping SME Exit Intentions in the Tourism Industry

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Abstract

This research examines how absorptive capacity and adaptive performance address the connection between entrepreneurs' resilience and their desire to leave their businesses among Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in the tourism industry. Specifically, this study focuses on tourism SMEs in Terengganu, Malaysia, a region heavily dependent on tourism as a key economic driver. The study integrates multiple constructs within the tourism entrepreneurship domain, including resilience, absorptive capacity, adaptive performance, and business exit intentions. A survey was conducted using self-administered questionnaires between October 2023 and December 2023, with valid responses from 205 tourism SMEs. The data were analysed using Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The results demonstrated a significant relationship between entrepreneurial resilience and the intention to exit the business, with absorptive capacity and adaptive performance acting as key mediators. The findings provide insights into how resilience helps entrepreneurs navigate challenges, sustaining their businesses amid uncertainties. The study offers strategic implications for tourism entrepreneurs, policymakers, and industry stakeholders by emphasising the importance of resilience and adaptive strategies in reducing business exit intentions. These insights contribute to a broader understanding of how entrepreneurial resilience, absorptive capacity, and adaptive performance interplay to influence critical business decisions, which can inform policies and interventions aimed at enhancing SME sustainability, particularly in emerging tourism markets.

Key Words: Entrepreneurial Resilience, Absorptive Capacity, Adaptive Performance, Business Exit Intentions, Small and Medium Enterprises, Terengganu

JEL Classification: L26, Z32

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1. Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in driving economic growth and creating job opportunities, with the majority being dependent on the tourism industry (Surya et al., 2022). These enterprises significantly contribute to the tourism industry ecosystem by offering diverse services, including hotels, restaurants, tour operators, travel agencies, and local attractions. They cater to the needs of tourists and enhance the overall experience, transforming tourism into a thriving sector. SMEs in the tourism sector are typically locally owned and operated, giving them a unique advantage in understanding the local culture and providing personalised services to tourists (Yaja & Kumar, 2021). Furthermore, SMEs are often more flexible, innovative, and responsive to changing market demands, making them essential for the growth and sustainability of the tourism industry (Anning-Dorson, 2021). Their ability to adapt, innovate, and remain competitive is not only critical for their long-term sustainability but also enables them to effectively navigate operational challenges and uncertainties (Ključnikov et al., 2022).

SMEs in the tourism industry have a remarkable ability to offer personalised and authentic services that create a unique appeal for tourists seeking local and authentic experiences. Unlike larger corporations, SMEs are often deeply rooted in the communities in which they operate, and their services reflect the local culture, customs, and traditions. As a result, SMEs in tourism are often perceived as the gatekeepers of cultural heritage and preserve the authenticity of the destination while providing economic benefits to the local community (Alahmadi et al., 2022). The localisation of SMEs in tourism is a significant contributor to the overall social and economic progress of a place, with revenues that tend to circulate within the local economy and benefit various stakeholders (Son et al., 2021). This includes local businesses, residents, and governments, who all benefit from the economic activity generated by SMEs. The positive impact of SMEs on local communities is particularly noteworthy as they provide employment opportunities to residents and promote the development of small businesses.

Despite that, in the dynamic landscape of SMEs within the tourism sector, the emergence of business exit intentions represents a significant concern. SMEs face many challenges, such as intense competition, seasonal fluctuations, and external economic pressures (Rajah & Woeffray, 2022). The challenges that these enterprises face can often place a strain on their resilience. Consequently, entrepreneurs may contemplate business exit as a strategic response to navigate impossible obstacles or declining profitability (Rajah & Woeffray, 2022). These challenges are further compounded by the uncertainty and vulnerability inherent in the tourism industry, which requires substantial investments. Understanding the determinants of business exit intention among SMEs in tourism becomes crucial for policymakers and industry stakeholders looking to develop specific interventions and support mechanisms (Hohen & Schweizer, 2021).

SMEs in the tourism industry face inherent uncertainties, making entrepreneurial resilience a crucial trait for navigating adversity and recovering from setbacks (Elshaer & Saad, 2022). This resilience is further amplified by absorptive capacity through assimilating new information and knowledge from the external environment (Kastelli et al., 2023). For SMEs in tourism, the ability to adapt to changing market trends, technological advancements, and customer preferences is vital. Adaptive performance, characterised by the agility to adjust strategies and operations in response to evolving circumstances, bridges resilience and absorptive capacity (Pratoom, 2022). Combining these factors creates a substantial structure that enables SMEs to overcome obstacles and take advantage of potential opportunities. It is crucial to comprehend and nurture the interdependent association to ensure the endurance and competitiveness of SMEs within the tourism sector. Policymakers and industry stakeholders can leverage this understanding to design targeted support mechanisms that enhance entrepreneurial resilience, absorptive capacity, and adaptive performance, strengthening SMEs against the ever-shifting dynamics of the tourism landscape.

In alignment with this perspective, tackling the complex behaviours exhibited by SMEs can be effectively implemented by combining resilience and absorptive capacity theory. As cited by Beech et al. (2020), resilience theory focuses on the ability to absorb disturbances and maintain function, aligning with entrepreneurs' resilience in facing challenges. Meanwhile, Qian et al. (2023) stated that absorptive capacity theory is about the role of learning and resources in enhancing entrepreneurial intention. This theory explains how entrepreneurs' capacity to acquire, assimilate, and exploit knowledge impacts their resilience and subsequent business exit intentions. In fact, the foundational frameworks comprising these theories and the interrelationships among these factors in the tourism setting have yet to be exhaustively examined. Nassif and Garçon (2024) suggest the importance of examining these factors jointly, indicating a need for a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between different aspects of entrepreneurship. Studies also emphasise the significance of comprehending the function of these factors in predicting business exit intentions (Elshaer & Saad, 2022). This contributes to addressing the gap by exploring their combined effects on business outcomes, particularly as a new perspective that includes entrepreneurs' resilience, absorptive capacity, and adaptive performance in predicting business exit intentions.

Terengganu was chosen for its rich cultural heritage and diverse attractions, including pristine beaches, historical landmarks, and traditional arts, which provide excellent opportunities for SMEs in the tourism sector. This cultural diversity enhances the tourism experience and presents SMEs with a distinct array of global challenges and opportunities that reflect the broader dynamics seen in tourism-dependent regions (O'Connor, 2023). The reliance of Terengganu on tourism as a key economic driver aligns with findings that emphasise the critical role of tourism in regional economic development, particularly for SMEs (Huang et al., 2022). Moreover, the study of SMEs in Terengganu contributes to a broader understanding of how these enterprises manage resilience, absorptive capacity, and adaptive performance in the face of global challenges.

While previous research has examined business exit intentions, much of it has focused on larger corporations or different industries, leaving a gap in understanding how these dynamics specifically affect SMEs in the tourism sector, especially in emerging markets. The interaction between entrepreneurial resilience, absorptive capacity, and adaptive performance within tourism SMEs has not been thoroughly explored in the literature. This study, hence, addresses this research gap by examining the combined influence of resilience, absorptive capacity, and adaptive performance on business exit intentions within the tourism entrepreneurship domain.

The following sections of the paper include an in-depth exploration of the relevant literature, focusing on entrepreneurial resilience, absorptive capacity, and adaptive performance in the tourism sector. Next, the methodology section explains the use of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) to analyse data collected from tourism SMEs in Terengganu, Malaysia. The results section presents the key findings, followed by a discussion highlighting the theoretical and managerial implications. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations for policymakers and industry stakeholders to enhance SME sustainability and resilience in the tourism industry.

2. Literature review

2.1 Underpinning theory

This research extends the investigation into the connection among entrepreneurs' resilience, absorptive capacity, adaptive performance, and business exit intentions by incorporating resilience and absorptive capacity theory. The concept of resilience is observed as an adaptation that originated in ecology, notably through the pioneering work of Holling (1996), which defined resilience as the threshold of disruption that prompts a system to modify its structure. Prayag (2020) outlined resilience as the potential of a socio-environmental structure to assimilate disruptions, adapt during challenging periods, and evolve to enhance dynamism. In the tourism sector, resilience is especially important due to the

industry's vulnerability to various external shocks, such as economic downturns, natural disasters, and global crises like pandemics. For tourism SMEs, resilience refers to their ability to withstand and navigate these disturbances while continuing to provide essential services. These enterprises are often more exposed to such disruptions due to their limited resources, yet they have the advantage of flexibility and deep local knowledge, which aids in adapting to new challenges (Ketter, 2022). Tourism resilience encompasses the industry's capacity to endure and navigate disturbances and transformations at local, regional, and global scales, helping SMEs respond to and adapt to global shifts, disruptions, and alterations (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Integrating absorptive capacity and adaptive performance is critical for effectively leveraging resilience theory. Applying resilience theory to tourism SMEs is crucial to understanding how these businesses survive and recover, particularly in emerging markets where tourism is a major economic driver (Zhu et al., 2022; Jones & Comfort, 2020).

Research on SMEs in the tourism industry has been conducted globally, particularly in regions like Europe, Asia, and Latin America, showing that resilience, absorptive capacity, and adaptive performance are key factors in determining business sustainability (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Ketter, 2022). For example, studies in European and Southeast Asian contexts have shown that SMEs in tourism face similar challenges related to market volatility, seasonality, and external pressures. However, little attention has been given to how these factors influence business exit intentions in emerging markets, particularly in Southeast Asia. While much of the research focuses on developed economies or large-scale enterprises, tourism SMEs in emerging markets like Terengganu, Malaysia, remain underexplored. This study contributes to bridging this gap by providing insights from the tourism industry in Terengganu, thus adding a Southeast Asian perspective to the global discourse on entrepreneurial resilience and performance in tourism.

The absorptive capacity theory also further enhances the interconnectedness of the variables chosen for this study. This theory provides a distinct perspective that examines organisational learning and innovation (Chatterjee et al., 2021). Absorptive capacity is particularly relevant for tourism SMEs, as they must continuously innovate to adapt to rapidly changing customer preferences and external market trends. These SMEs often operate in dynamic environments where being able to recognise and assimilate external knowledge is key to staying competitive. For tourism SMEs, absorptive capacity allows them to take advantage of technological advancements, new market opportunities, and global trends, thereby fostering innovation and strengthening their resilience (Gray, 2006). By engaging in research and development activities, tourism SMEs can enhance their absorptive capacity, which is essential for long-term sustainability in a volatile industry. Previous research indicates that absorptive capacity as a moderator leads to positive outcomes, such as improving competitive advantage and mitigating the risks of business exit (Qian et al., 2023). Furthermore, the significant role of absorptive capacity extends to enhancing competitiveness and facilitating knowledge transfer within the tourism sector (Azinuddin et al., 2023). Therefore, this theory provides a critical framework for tourism SMEs to navigate complexities, utilise external knowledge effectively, and achieve sustainable growth in tourism-dependent regions. SMEs in such regions often rely heavily on their ability to absorb and implement external knowledge to adapt to shifting market dynamics and maintain business continuity.

2.2 Entrepreneurial resilience and absorptive capacity

Entrepreneurial resilience and absorptive capacity are integral to shaping the success of tourism SMEs. Entrepreneurial resilience pertains to an SME's tendency to adapt, recuperate, and thrive in facing challenges and uncertainties within the dynamic tourism industry (Rastegar et al., 2023). Resilience often involves strategic decision-making, innovation, and the capacity to swiftly adjust to evolving market circumstances, unforeseen events, or external shocks (Rastegar et al., 2023). Resilient entrepreneurs within the tourism sector are more likely to navigate uncertainties successfully by ensuring their enterprises' continuous operation and growth (Elshaer & Saad, 2022).

Simultaneously, absorptive capacity is essential for tourism SMEs to effectively acquire, incorporate, and apply external knowledge and information for competitive advantage (Tufan & Mert, 2023). Therefore, absorptive capacity enables SMEs to stay attuned to market trends, customer preferences, and technological advancements to foster innovation and adaptability. The connection involving entrepreneurial resilience and absorptive capacity in tourism SMEs is intricate and interconnected. This can be demonstrated by how resilient entrepreneurs are better equipped to embrace and leverage external knowledge, enhancing their absorptive capacity for sustainable growth and competitiveness (Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022).

This study hypothesised that the relationship between entrepreneurial resilience and absorptive capacity is substantial. For instance, Ibarra-Cisneros and Hernandez-Perlines (2019) emphasise the significance of knowledge absorption in enhancing entrepreneurial competitiveness. They argue that entrepreneurial orientation influences business performance, and this effect is moderated by absorptive capacity in Mexican manufacturing SMEs. Similarly, Chaudhary (2019) presents findings regarding the involvement of entrepreneurial orientation in forging a connection amidst adaptability in company success and strategy. Research conducted by Al-Hakimi et al. (2021) similarly demonstrates the constructive effect of entrepreneurial orientation on the robustness of the supply chain within SMEs. Notably, this study reveals that the relationship is indirect, as it is entirely mediated by absorptive capacity and innovation. These studies collectively suggest a symbiotic relationship wherein entrepreneurial resilience catalyses absorptive capacity development in tourism SMEs. Although no direct research shows the relation between entrepreneurial resilience and absorptive capacity, it is noteworthy that while entrepreneurial orientation emphasises proactive entrepreneurial behaviours, entrepreneurial resilience centres on organisational resilience. Their shared focus on adaptability, learning, and innovation prioritises their synergy in shaping organisational success. Given the dynamic, this research formulated the subsequent hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Entrepreneurial resilience influences absorptive capacity*

2.3 Absorptive Capacity and Adaptive Performance

Absorptive capacity and adaptive performance are critical constructs in understanding the dynamics of tourism SMEs. Absorptive capacity becomes indispensable as these enterprises often operate in dynamic and ever-changing environments where the ability to learn and adapt swiftly is paramount. A study by Azinuddin et al. (2022) draws attention to the importance of absorptive capacity in facilitating innovation and strategic adaptation within tourism SMEs. This enables them to respond effectively to market shifts, emerging trends, and competitive pressures.

Adaptive performance, alternatively, concerns a firm's capacity to adapt its plans, systems, and procedures to address environmental changes or problems (Park & Park, 2019). In tourism SMEs, adaptive performance manifests in various forms, including developing new products and services, customising experiences to meet evolving consumer preferences and exploring alternative business models to remain competitive. Studies such as those by Elshaer and Saad (2022) emphasise the crucial position of adaptive performance in sustaining tourism SMEs' long-term viability and resilience amidst challenges like economic downturns, natural disasters, and pandemics. Therefore, understanding the association between absorptive capacity and adaptive performance is essential as it sheds light on how tourism SMEs can effectively harness their learning capabilities to drive continuous innovation and strategic evolution. Ultimately enhancing their overall performance and competitiveness in the market. The following hypotheses are formulated from the comprehensive interactions of the constructs:

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Absorptive capacity influences adaptive performance*

2.4 Adaptive Performance and Business Exit Intention

Research on tourism SMEs has increasingly focused on understanding the dynamics of adaptive performance and its potential influence on business exit intention (Elshaer & Saad, 2022). Adaptive performance in the context of SMEs pertains to the capacity of these organisations to flexibly modify their strategy, operations, and services in regard to internal and external challenges or opportunities challenges (Park & Park, 2019). This adaptability is crucial for survival and growth, particularly in the volatile and competitive tourism industry. This includes changing consumer preferences, economic fluctuations, and environmental shifts that can significantly impact business operations.

Several studies have highlighted a notable correlation between adaptive performance and business exit intention among tourism SMEs. As evidenced by Elshaer and Saad (2022), SMEs in the tourism sector that demonstrate higher levels of adaptive performance are often better equipped to navigate turbulent environments and overcome obstacles that may otherwise lead to business closure. This relationship suggests that a strong capacity for adaptive performance may be a protective factor against the intention to exit the business. SMEs with greater flexibility and responsiveness are more adept at identifying and capitalising on emerging opportunities while mitigating potential threats to their survival. Given this comprehension, the subsequent hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Adaptive performance influences business exit intention*

2.5 Mediating Effect of Absorptive Capacity

Within SMEs operating in the tourism sector, the linkages between entrepreneurial resilience and business exit intention is a critical area of study, specifically when viewed through absorptive capacity. Entrepreneurial resilience is essential to whether SMEs thrive or falter in the industry. It refers to the adeptness of entrepreneurs to adapt, rebound, and thrive amidst adversity, difficulties, or setbacks (Rastegar et al., 2023). This resilience is often tested by various external changes. Examples include economic recessions and catastrophic events like climate change or consumer preference shifts, all prevalent in the dynamic tourism industry (Purnomo et al., 2021). However, there still needs to be more understanding regarding how entrepreneurial resilience influences the likelihood of business exit intentions, especially within the tourism sector. This knowledge gap persists despite its significant importance for policymakers, industry practitioners, and academics. Insight into this relationship can offer valuable guidance for developing strategies to enhance tourism SMEs' survival and growth.

Moreover, absorptive capacity emerges as a critical mechanism through which entrepreneurial resilience influences business exit intentions in tourism SMEs. Absorptive capacity indicates the proficiency of a firm to procure, integrate, and utilise outside information efficiently (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Therefore, utilising absorptive capacity as a mediator could bridge the gap between the relationship explored in this study concerning entrepreneurial resilience and business exit intention within tourism SMEs. Corcoles Munoz et al. (2023) highlighted the significance of absorptive capacity as a mediating factor in demonstrating its pivotal role in fostering sustainability orientation within hospitality and tourism firms. By leveraging absorptive capacity, tourism SMEs can more effectively recognise and capitalise on new opportunities, navigate the market's uncertainties, and mitigate the risk of business exit (Elshaer & Saad, 2022). This conceptual framework focuses on the intricate interplay between entrepreneurial attributes, organisational capabilities, and strategic decision-making processes within tourism SMEs. Hence, the hypothesis proposed for this research is as follows:

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *Absorptive Capacity mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial resilience and business exit intention*

2.6 Mediating Effect of Adaptive Performance

Research in tourism SMEs has increasingly focused on understanding the factors influencing business sustainability and longevity (Rastegar et al., 2023; Tufan & Mert, 2023). At the forefront of discussion is the hypothesis that a mediator, adaptive performance, plays a crucial role in the relationship

between entrepreneurial resilience and the intention to exit a business. Entrepreneurial resilience is characterised by the ability of individuals to recover or rebound from adversity and navigate challenges effectively. It has been identified as a crucial determinant of business survival (Purnomo et al., 2021). The flexibility and response to evolving situations are vital for the sustained success of tourism SMEs, which often face dynamic and uncertain environments.

This can be explained through adaptive performance, which denotes the capacity of individuals or organisations to adjust their behaviours, strategies, and operations in response to environmental changes (Park & Park, 2019). Adaptive performance for tourism SMEs includes innovating products and services, pivoting marketing strategies, and adopting new technologies to meet changing market demands and conditions. Studies indicate that firms with elevated levels of adaptive performance excel at withstanding external shocks, enhancing their likelihood of survival and long-term viability (Adam & Alarifi, 2021).

Furthermore, empirical evidence supports the notion that entrepreneurial resilience positively influences adaptive performance (Elshaer & Saad, 2022). Entrepreneurs who exhibit resilience are more likely to proactively seek innovative solutions, learn from setbacks, and leverage their resourcefulness to adapt to changing circumstances (Guerrero & Walsh, 2023). Thus, entrepreneurial resilience may foster adaptive performance, mitigating business exit intention among tourism SMEs. This interrelationship focuses on the importance of fostering resilience-building initiatives and promoting adaptive capabilities within the tourism sector to enhance the sustainability and resilience of SMEs in the face of adversity. Drawing from this comprehension, the ensuing hypothesis is constructed for this study:

Hypothesis 5 (H5). *Adaptive Performance mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial resilience and business exit intention*

2.7 Mediating Effect of Absorptive Capacity and Adaptive Performance

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of entrepreneurial resilience, absorptive capacity, adaptive performance, and their relationship, presently, there is insufficient empirical research delving into the proposed sequential mediation model. While individual studies have explored the relationships between some of these constructs in isolation, a notable gap in research comprehensively examines their sequential mediation pathway in the context of tourism SMEs. This scarcity of empirical evidence presents an opportunity for further research to empirically validate the hypothesised relationships and aid in a more profound comprehension of the mechanisms that underlie SME survival and success in the tourism industry. By filling this gap, researchers can offer significant perspectives for policymakers, industry practitioners, and entrepreneurs endeavouring to develop effective strategies for enhancing resilience, absorptive capacity, and adaptive performance in tourism SMEs.

Adaptive performance, the final link in this sequential mediation model, encompasses tourism SMEs' agility, flexibility, and responsiveness in adapting to changing circumstances and exploiting emergent opportunities (Elshaer & Saad, 2022). As absorptive capacity enables the acquisition and integration of new information and resources, it fosters the adaptive capabilities of SMEs, enabling them to innovate, pivot, and sustain competitive advantage in dynamic environments (Zahoor et al., 2022). Consequently, the hypothesised relationship posits that entrepreneurial resilience directly influences business exit intention and exerts an indirect effect through its sequential mediation via absorptive capacity and adaptive performance. This conceptual framework emphasises the importance of fostering resilience, enhancing absorptive capacity, and nurturing adaptive performance to mitigate the risk of business exit. One prevailing hypothesis posits that the interchange among these factors follows a sequential mediation pathway, wherein entrepreneurial resilience influences business exit intention indirectly through absorptive capacity and adaptive performance.

Hypothesis 6 (H6). *The relationship between entrepreneurial resilience and business exit intention is sequentially mediated by absorptive capacity and adaptive performance*

3. Methods

This research employed a robust quantitative, cross-sectional approach to examine the relationships between absorptive capacity, adaptive performance, entrepreneurial resilience, and the intention to exit among entrepreneurs in the tourism industry. Data collection was conducted from September to November 2023, and it was conducted by trained enumerators who distributed questionnaires to participants in person. The list of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) approached was sourced from the official tourism government list, ensuring that all participants were actively registered and operating within the tourism industry. The direct distribution of questionnaires not only contributed to higher response rates but also allowed for immediate clarification of any queries raised by respondents, thereby enhancing the accuracy of the data collected.

The study targeted SMEs in Terengganu, Malaysia, a region strategically selected for its prominent role in the national tourism sector. Terengganu's selection was deliberate due to its reputation as a key player in Malaysia's tourism industry, offering a rich diversity of businesses suitable for the study's focus on entrepreneurial dynamics. The targeted SMEs were classified according to Malaysia's SME Corporation criteria, which defines businesses based on employee numbers (fewer than 200 employees) and specific levels of annual turnover, depending on the industry. The SMEs included in this study encompassed a broad range of tourism-related businesses, such as accommodations, tour operators, handicraft producers, and local service providers. This diverse selection ensured that the findings would be applicable to various types of tourism SMEs, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of entrepreneurial dynamics within the sector.

The entrepreneurs surveyed were individuals aged 18 and above who were actively involved in running these SMEs. Only those with direct entrepreneurial experience of at least two years in the tourism sector were included in the study. This criterion was applied to ensure that participants had sufficient exposure to the challenges and dynamics of running a tourism-related SME, providing reliable and relevant insights into their business operations and resilience strategies. Entrepreneurs were selected through purposive sampling, which allowed the research to focus on individuals with the necessary expertise and experience to contribute to the study's objectives.

The GPower software was utilised to determine the minimum sample size required for the study. Based on power analysis, GPower estimated that at least 119 respondents would be necessary to achieve statistically significant results with sufficient power. This estimation was derived by considering the anticipated effect size, the desired power level (set at 0.80), and the complexity of the research model, which includes multiple constructs and measurement items (Nwadi et al., 2024). While GPower provides a robust framework for sample size determination, it is important to corroborate these findings with established guidelines in the literature. Notably, the work of MacCallum et al. (1999) offers valuable insights into sample size requirements for factor analysis based on the number of constructs and measurement items involved in the research model. According to their findings, a larger sample size is generally recommended to enhance the stability and reliability of factor solutions, especially when the model is complex. Specifically, MacCallum et al. (1999) suggest that under conditions where communalities are high (above 0.6), and factors are well-determined, smaller samples of fewer than 100 respondents might suffice. However, when communalities are low, larger samples, potentially exceeding 300 or more, are recommended to ensure reliable results. Although communalities were not directly measured in this study, the sample size of 205 respondents exceeds the minimum requirements suggested by both GPower and MacCallum et al. (1999), which provides confidence that the factor solutions will be stable and reliable, even in the case of lower communalities or poorly overdetermined factors. To further address potential challenges such as non-response rates and incomplete questionnaires, a conservative approach was implemented by increasing the target sample size by an additional 15%. This adjustment brought the total target sample size to 137 respondents. Ultimately, a total of 205 valid responses were collected, which were included in the final analysis after excluding incomplete or

insufficiently completed questionnaires. This sample size not only exceeds the minimum requirements suggested by GPower but also aligns with the recommendations from MacCallum et al. (1999), thereby enhancing the robustness of the findings.

The process of entering data and performing descriptive analysis was carried out using SPSS Statistics 27 software. Moreover, the research framework and hypotheses were examined utilising SmartPLS 3.1.1. The researchers selected Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), a commonly employed method in tourism research (Koc et al., 2022; Usakli & Kucukergin, 2018). This approach enables the examination of both measurement and structural models. This can mainly be beneficial when dealing with data that has intricate hierarchical structures and is not distributed in a typical manner (Wang et al., 2019). PLS-SEM was considered suitable considering the intricate nature of the structural model and the goal of investigating intricate connections between build dimensions (Hair et al., 2020).

In a two-step procedure, the structural and measurement models were assessed using PLS-SEM. The measurement model was evaluated by examining various aspects, including convergent validity, discriminant validity, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) of the components and measurement items. Path analysis and the coefficient of determination were used to evaluate the structural model. The measurement model's reliability and validity were evaluated using SmartPLS.

3.1 Measurement

The research survey was created in English and consisted of six sections. The initial section (Section A) aimed at collecting demographic information from the respondents, including gender, race, age, marital status, highest level of education, and business background, encompassing years since starting the business and the extent of previous work experience before starting the business. The following segments of the questionnaire evaluated the perspectives of the participants, with Section B focusing on entrepreneurs' resilience through twenty-five items (Elshaer & Saad, 2022), Section C addressing absorptive capacity with nine items (Zahoor et al., 2022), Section D examining adaptive performance with nineteen items (Elshaer & Saad, 2022), and Section E exploring business exit intention with three items (Elshaer & Saad, 2022). The choice of questions was designed to capture the specific challenges and dynamics of running SMEs in the tourism sector, such as dealing with external shocks, innovating to meet customer demands, and adapting business models to cope with market fluctuations. The survey was structured to include five-point Likert scale items, allowing participants to express their level of agreement with various statements related to the constructs under investigation. The scale ran from one (indicating strong disagreement) to five (indicating strong agreement). In order to ascertain the face validity of the scale, three tourism specialists were consulted and asked to provide questionnaire-based feedback regarding the suitability of the measurements.

3.2 Validity and reliability

A preliminary investigation was carried out before the primary survey to reduce inaccuracies and assess the pertinence and value of the objects while measuring the effect of absorptive capacity and adaptive performance on the connection between entrepreneurial resilience and intention to exit a business. In this endeavour, 20 questionnaires were distributed to SME entrepreneurs, with 10 targeting those who had been in business for over five years, given their experience and familiarity with the industry. The pilot study yielded Cronbach's Alpha (CA) values above the 0.70 threshold, indicating a high degree of internal consistency. Feedback was incorporated through minor revisions aimed at improving clarity, primarily through slight rephrasing and item modifications.

3.3 Ethics and Consent

This study was categorised as minimal risk, and therefore, ethics approval was not required. However, all data handling procedures adhere to the Malaysian Personal Data Protection Act 2010. Prior to data collection, participants aged 18 years and above were selected based on eligibility criteria. They were provided with a concise overview of the study, including details on the nature of the questions and the approximate time required to complete the questionnaire. Verbal consent was obtained from each participant before completing the questionnaire. Participants were assured that their responses would be only used for scholarly reasons.

4. Results

4.1 Respondents Profiles

Table 1 presents a snapshot of the demographic and experiential characteristics of the participating entrepreneurs. The data shows a majority of female respondents (59.5%) compared to males (40.5%). The age distribution is led by the 44 to 54 age group (26.8%), followed closely by the 35 to 44 age group (26.3%), while those aged 18 to 24 are least represented (12.7%). Married individuals form a significant portion (76.6%), with singles at 19.0%. Educational attainment is mainly at the high school level (63.9%), with degree holders at 9.8%. Business experience varies, with 7 to 9 years (17.6%) and over 16 years (21.5%) being prominent. Individually-owned businesses dominate (94.1%), and most have annual sales below MYR100,000 (72.7%), indicating a prevalence of small-scale enterprises.

Table 1. Respondents profiles

Variable	Category	N	% of respondents
Gender	Male	83	40.5
	Female	122	59.5
Age	18-24	26	12.7
	25-34	31	15.1
	35-44	54	26.3
	44-54	55	26.8
	Over 55	39	19.0
Marital Status	Single	39	19.0
	Married	157	76.6
	Divorce	1	0.5
	Widow	8	3.9
Highest level of education	Primary School	4	2.0
	High School	131	63.9

	Short Courses	14	6.8
	Diploma	30	14.6
	Degree	20	9.8
	Master	3	1.5
	No Formal Qualification	3	1.5
Duration since commencement of business	Less than a year	7	3.4
	1- 3 years	34	16.6
	4 - 6 years	33	16.1
	7 - 9 years	36	17.6
	10 - 12 years	35	17.1
	13 - 15 years	14	6.8
	16 - 18 years	6	2.9
	19 - 20 years	6	2.9
	More than 20 years	34	16.6
Years of experience in the tourism industry	Less than 3 years	39	19.0
	3 - 6 years	35	17.1
	6 - 9 years	37	18.0
	9 - 12 years	35	17.1
	12 - 15 years	15	7.3
	More than 16 years	44	21.5
Ownership type of business operation	Individual-owned	193	94.1
	Jointly-owned	12	5.9
Annual sales turnover of the business	Less than MYR 100,000	149	72.7
	MYR 100,001 - MYR 199,999	45	22.0
	MYR 200,000 - MYR 299,999	7	3.4

	MYR 300,000 - MYR 1,199,999	3	1.5
	MYR 10,000,000 - MYR 14,999,999	1	0.5

Source: Own elaboration

4.2 Measurement Model

The assessment incorporated an examination of the measurement model's discriminant validity, convergence, and reliability (Hair et al., 2020). The scale reliability was confirmed based on factor loadings that exceeded 0.70, except for two outer loadings, ERH1 and PAMS3, which fell below the required minimum threshold. According to Hair et al. (2017), a loading between 0.4 and 0.7 is deemed acceptable if both the composite reliability (CR) and average variance extraction (AVE) meet the threshold. The results of the validity and reliability tests indicated that the CR for each construct varied between 0.946 and 0.977, surpassing the minimum value of 0.7 and signifying acceptable levels. The information regarding the validity and reliability of the gathered data, as confirmed by the computation of CA, is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. First-order measurement model assessment

Construct/Associated Item	Outer Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Entrepreneurs' Resilience				
		0.977	0.978	0.655
<i>Optimism</i>				
ERO1	0.821			
ERO2	0.814			
ERO3	0.759			
ERO4	0.744			
ERO5	0.817			
ERO6	0.818			
ERO7	0.822			
ERO8	0.802			
<i>Hardiness</i>				
ERH1	0.626			
ERH2	0.720			
ERH3	0.848			

ERH4	0.858			
ERH5	0.860			
ERH6	0.837			
ERH7	0.831			
ERH8	0.865			
ERH9	0.780			
<i>Resourceful</i>				
ERR1	0.735			
ERR2	0.801			
ERR3	0.837			
ERR4	0.851			
ERR5	0.813			
ERR6	0.845			
ERR7	0.873			
Absorptive Capacity				
		0.969	0.969	0.802
PP1	0.794			
PP2	0.856			
PP3	0.927			
PP4	0.915			
PP5	0.904			
PP6	0.909			
PP7	0.931			
PP8	0.907			
PP9	0.909			
Adaptive Performance				
		0.970	0.972	0.663
<i>Creativity</i>				
PAC1	0.828			
PAC2	0.807			

PAC3	0.849			
PAC4	0.777			
<i>Reactivity in the face of emergencies</i>				
PARITFOE1	0.851			
PARITFOE2	0.787			
PARITFOE3	0.872			
PARITFOE4	0.886			
<i>Inter-adaptability</i>				
PAIA1	0.822			
PAIA2	0.823			
PAIA3	0.841			
PAIA4	0.860			
<i>Training and learning</i>				
PATAL1	0.745			
PATAL2	0.729			
PATAL3	0.764			
<i>Managing stress</i>				
PAMS1	0.849			
PAMS2	0.858			
PAMS3	0.672			
Business Exit Intention (R)				
		0.946	0.956	0.902
NMP1	0.932			
NMP2	0.974			
NMP3	0.943			

Source: Own elaboration

Convergent validity looks at the degree to which a construct accounts for the variability observed in its indicators (Hair et al., 2020). In this study, the AVE for each construct varied between 0.655 and 0.902, surpassing the threshold of 0.5. This suggests that the indicators explain a minimum of 50% of the variances in the constructs. Considering that every AVE value surpassed 0.5, the convergent validity of the model was validated (Koc et al., 2022; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Additionally, the results of the measurement models, which relied on parameter estimates and statistical significance, provided further support for the validity of all constructs (Rahim et al., 2022).

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) analysis

	Absorptive Capacity	Adaptive Performance	Business Exit Intention	Entrepreneurial Resilience
Absorptive Capacity				
Adaptive Performance	0.882			
Business Exit Intention	0.423	0.442		
Entrepreneurial Resilience	0.835	0.881	0.451	

Source: Own elaboration

A discriminant validity check was conducted in this study using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio to ensure that multicollinearity was not an issue (Rahim et al., 2022). The HTMT ratio is a widely accepted method for assessing discriminant validity, with values below 0.90 indicating good discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015). This threshold is commonly referenced in the literature as a standard for assessing constructs that may be conceptually related, ensuring that the constructs are sufficiently distinct (Berkman & Çatak, 2021). However, a more conservative threshold of 0.85 is often suggested for constructs that are conceptually distinct, as it offers a more stringent measure of discriminant validity (Roemer et al., 2021). Given the nature of the constructs in this study, the 0.90 threshold was applied, balancing theoretical relevance with empirical evidence. The decision to use the 0.90 threshold aligns with recommendations from various studies that emphasize its effectiveness in ensuring that constructs are not only theoretically sound but also empirically validated (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019; Hair et al., 2019).

To examine discriminant validity further, the HTMT ratio for each pair of constructs was calculated based on their item correlations, as presented in Table 3. The statistical results validate the measurement scale's discriminant validity and ascertain that no constructs overlap.

4.3 Structural Model

In order to validate the structural model and evaluate the significance and robustness of the proposed connections, bootstrapping was implemented. This entailed examining the path analyses incorporated in the structural model, utilising the PLS algorithm to analyse metrics including explanatory variance (R^2), beta (β), p-value, confidence interval (adjusted for bias), effect size (f^2), and the blindfolding method (Q^2). The results obtained from the bootstrapping method are displayed in Table 4, with a graphical representation of the findings in Figure 1.

Table 4. Structural estimates (path analysis)

Hypotheses	Path Analysis	Decision	Beta (β)	Confidence Interval (Bias Corrected)	f^2	R^2	Q^2

				2.5%	97.5%			
H ₁	Entrepreneurial Resilience -> Absorptive Capacity	Supported	0.816***	0.740	0.864	1.957	0.662	0.526
H ₂	Absorptive Capacity -> Adaptive Performance	Supported	0.859***	-0.583	-0.258	0.225	0.735	0.482
H ₃	Adaptive Performance -> Business Exit Intention	Supported	-0.441***	0.799	0.898	2.772	0.183	0.160

Note: ***($p < 0.001$) **($p < 0.01$) *($p < 0.05$)

f^2 : Effect size; R^2 : Explanatory variance; Q^2 : blindfolding.

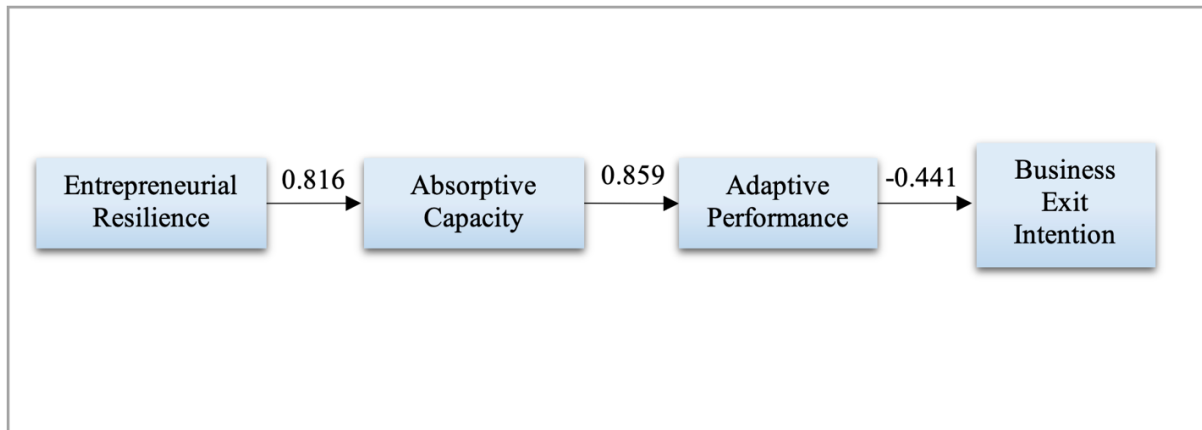
Source: Own elaboration

It can be confirmed that the dimension of entrepreneurial resilience exhibits statistically significant explanatory power, explaining 66.2% ($R^2 = 0.662$) of the variance of absorptive capacity, indicating a robust explanatory capability. The absorptive capacity dimension demonstrates slightly greater explanatory power, significantly explaining 73.5% ($R^2 = 0.735$) of the variance of adaptive performance. Additionally, adaptive performance dimensions significantly account for 73.5% ($R^2 = 0.735$) of business exit intention variance.

The magnitude of the effect, denoted as f^2 , is categorised as small, medium, or large. Specifically, values ranging from 0.02 to 0.15 are considered small, those from 0.15 to 0.35 are considered medium, and values exceeding 0.35 are classified as large effect sizes (Hair et al., 2020; Cohen, 1988). Consistent with this categorisation, all dimensions demonstrate large effect sizes, including entrepreneurial resilience on absorptive capacity ($f^2 = 1.957$), absorptive capacity on adaptive performance ($f^2 = 0.225$), and adaptive performance on business exit intention ($f^2 = 2.772$).

Concerning the predictive significance of the model, the constructs' Q^2 values need to surpass zero, according to Pai et al. (2020). Evaluating these predictive significance outcomes, it can be inferred that all the frameworks analysed in this research can be considered significant predictive models, following the criteria outlined by Henseler et al. (2012).

Figure 1. Bootstrapping result



Source: Own elaboration

4.4. Mediation effect

This study displays the outcomes of the mediation analysis in Table 5 and visually represents them in Figure 2. A specific indirect analysis approach with bootstrapping was used to measure the mediation effect. The study found a series of sequential paths between entrepreneurial resilience and business exit intention, with absorptive capacity as the first mediator (M1) and adaptive performance as the second mediator (M2). The specific indirect effect path “Entrepreneurial Resilience -> Absorptive Capacity -> Adaptive Performance” ($\beta = 0.701^{***}$) result is significant, indicating a strong positive indirect effect of entrepreneurial resilience on adaptive performance through absorptive capacity. Next, the specific indirect effect path “Absorptive Capacity -> Adaptive Performance -> Business Exit Intention” ($\beta = -0.379^{***}$) result is significant and negative, indicating that higher absorptive capacity is associated with lower business exit intentions through adaptive performance. Lastly, the specific indirect effect path “Entrepreneurial Resilience -> Absorptive Capacity -> Adaptive Performance -> Business Exit Intention” ($\beta = -0.310^{***}$) is significant and negative, indicating that higher entrepreneurial resilience is associated with lower business exit intentions through absorptive capacity and adaptive performance. As a result, the research discovered that entrepreneurial resilience had a profound and beneficial influence on business exit intention through absorptive capacity and adaptive performance, which supported H4, H5, and H6. The negative specific indirect effect result indicates that the mediator variable indirectly mediates the relationship between the independent variable (IV) and the dependent variable (DV). However, the direction of this mediation is negative.

Table 5. Mediation effects testing (indirect path analysis)

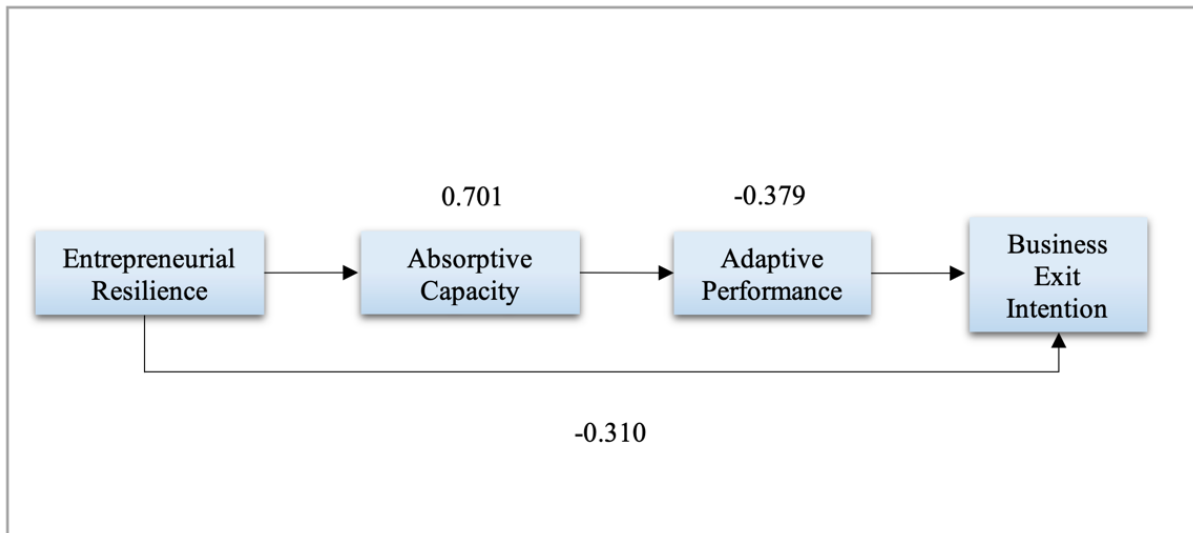
Hypotheses	Path Analysis	Beta (β)	P-Values	Confidence Interval (Bias Corrected)		Result
				2.5%	97.5%	
H4	Entrepreneurial Resilience-> Absorptive Capacity-> Adaptive Performance	0.701***	0.000	0.616	0.776	Significant
H5	Absorptive Capacity-> Adaptive Performance-> Business Exit Intention	-0.379***	0.000	-0.521	-0.236	Significant

H6	Entrepreneurial Resilience-> Absorptive Capacity-> Adaptive Performance-> Business Exit Intention	-0.310***	0.000	-0.435	-0.189	Significant
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Note: *** ($p < 0.001$) ** ($p < 0.010$) * ($p < 0.05$)

Source: Own elaboration

Figure 2. Mediation result



Source: Own elaboration

5. Discussion

The findings of this study unequivocally demonstrate the significant relationship between entrepreneurs' resilience, absorptive capacity, adaptive performance, and business exit intentions among SMEs in Terengganu, Malaysia. A comprehensive understanding of these relationships has been attained through using PLS-SEM. Consistent with existing literature, this study strongly confirms that resilience plays a pivotal role in sustaining entrepreneurial ventures, particularly in the face of adversity or challenges. Entrepreneurs exhibiting higher levels of resilience are significantly less inclined to exit their businesses, highlighting their ability to navigate turbulent environments and persist in pursuing their goals (Elshaer & Saad, 2022; Ciptono et al., 2023). For instance, Elshaer and Saad (2022) demonstrated how adaptive performance and institutional orientation mediate the connection between entrepreneurs' resilience and their experience of job instability and plans to depart their firms. This study adds depth to that understanding by offering insights into how various aspects of resilience and adaptive strategies directly impact entrepreneurs' intentions to exit their businesses. Similarly, Alshebami (2022) highlighted the potential for entrepreneurial resilience to moderate the relationship between self-belief and intention, suggesting that resilience is a critical factor in shaping how entrepreneurs perceive and act on their business intentions.

The study establishes that absorptive capacity and adaptive performance significantly influence the relationship between entrepreneurs' resilience and business exit intentions. Previous research has highlighted the importance of absorptive capacity, adaptive performance, and resilience in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes (Elshaer & Saad, 2022). This study goes beyond existing findings by demonstrating that resilient entrepreneurs who exhibit exceptional adaptability and actively engage with the external environment of their business are significantly less likely to experience career insecurity or consider exiting their enterprises. The positive correlation between absorptive capacity and business performance is further reinforced by this study, aligning with prior research indicating that organisations with greater absorptive capacity achieve superior performance (Ahmed et al., 2020; Cho et al., 2023).

Moreover, the findings solidify the understanding that psychological resilience is not only a factor in individual persistence but also a fundamental driver of business survival and long-term success. This study extends the scholarly discourse by highlighting how resilience, coupled with adaptive performance and absorptive capacity, forms a robust framework that safeguards entrepreneurs against the pressures of an uncertain business environment, ultimately reducing the likelihood of business exit. The significant relationship between resilience and well-established enterprises further outlines the critical role that psychological resilience plays in the endurance and success of entrepreneurial ventures (Chadwick & Raver, 2020).

6. Study Implications

6.1 Theoretical implications

The present study enhances the existing body of knowledge on resilience, absorptive capacity, and adaptive performance by integrating these constructs into a cohesive research model that examines their influence on business exit intentions within tourism SMEs. While previous studies have examined the role of entrepreneurial resilience and its direct impact on business sustainability, this research breaks new ground by illustrating how absorptive capacity and adaptive performance act as crucial mediators in this relationship (Elshaer & Saad, 2022). This contributes significantly to the limited exploration of these constructs in the tourism context, particularly in regions like Terengganu, which is heavily reliant on SMEs for economic growth.

Further contributing to the literature, this study addresses the research gap concerning the sequential mediation model. Previous research has typically isolated these constructs, examining the relationships between entrepreneurial resilience and adaptive performance or between absorptive capacity and firm innovation (Pratoom, 2022; Qian et al., 2023). However, the sequential mediation of absorptive capacity and adaptive performance between entrepreneurial resilience and business exit intentions has not been explored comprehensively, particularly within tourism SMEs. By filling this gap, this study enriches the theoretical framework and provides valuable insights into the complex interaction between individual entrepreneurial attributes and business decisions.

The findings advance the theoretical understanding by highlighting the mechanisms through which absorptive capacity and adaptive performance influence strategic decision-making in SMEs. Specifically, the operationalisation of absorptive capacity in this study demonstrates its role in helping firms not only absorb external knowledge but also transform it into adaptive strategies that reduce the likelihood of business exit (Zahoor et al., 2022). This emphasises the importance of absorptive capacity in dynamic environments, particularly in the tourism sector, where market conditions and external shocks are more prevalent.

Additionally, the study strengthens the theoretical foundation of resilience theory by positioning psychological resilience as a pivotal factor not only for individual persistence but also as a driver of long-term business success (Chadwick & Raver, 2020). By linking resilience to firm-level outcomes through adaptive performance and absorptive capacity, the research extends the scope of resilience theory to include more intricate interplays between entrepreneurial capabilities and organisational survival.

6.2 Practical implications

The study results offer significant practical implications for various stakeholders in the SME landscape, particularly within the tourism sector of Terengganu, Malaysia. Entrepreneurs are encouraged to prioritise cultivating resilience as a fundamental attribute for navigating the challenges inherent in business operations. This aligns with the findings of Quansah and Hartz (2021), who emphasise the role of strategic adaptation in small businesses, highlighting how effective leadership enhances resilience and adaptability. Resilience, combined with continuous learning and adaptation, is essential for long-term sustainability, especially in dynamic sectors like tourism (Quansah et al., 2022).

To support this, policymakers and industry stakeholders should invest in customised training programs aimed at improving entrepreneurs' absorptive capacity and adaptive performance. By equipping entrepreneurs to assimilate and apply new knowledge, stakeholders can foster opportunities for skill development through educational initiatives and networking events (Xie et al., 2019). These efforts contribute to building a robust entrepreneurial ecosystem that not only enhances the resilience of SMEs but also strengthens the overall economic stability and development of the region through sustainable tourism practices (Alonso-Muñoz et al., 2022).

In addition, fostering collaborative partnerships among SMEs, industry associations, and government agencies can help leverage collective resources and expertise. Such partnerships can facilitate the overcoming of shared challenges and capitalise on emerging opportunities within the tourism sector. Regular monitoring and evaluation of business performance remain essential for identifying areas of improvement and guiding strategic decision-making, further supporting resilience and adaptability (Ibnou-Laaroussi et al., 2020; Saleh & Manjunath, 2023). Ultimately, these efforts contribute to the sustainability and growth of SMEs, promoting economic stability and fostering both local and regional tourism development in Terengganu, Malaysia.

7. Conclusion

This study reveals significant relationships among entrepreneurial resilience, absorptive capacity, adaptive performance, and business exit intentions in tourism SMEs. The path analysis indicates that entrepreneurial resilience significantly explains absorptive capacity. Additionally, absorptive capacity significantly influences adaptive performance, and adaptive performance, in turn, affects business exit intentions. The mediation analysis confirms that entrepreneurial resilience positively influences adaptive performance through absorptive capacity, while higher absorptive capacity is associated with lower business exit intentions through adaptive performance. These findings highlight the critical role of resilience, absorptive capacity, and adaptive performance in shaping entrepreneurial decisions and business outcomes, offering an enriched understanding of their interactions, especially in the tourism context.

This research addresses a gap by operationalising the mediation effects of these concepts, advancing theoretical frameworks in entrepreneurship. The results emphasise the importance of cultivating resilience among entrepreneurs, supported by tailored training programs and policy interventions. Enhancing absorptive capacity and adaptive performance through continuous learning initiatives and collaborative partnerships can bolster SME sustainability and resilience in the dynamic tourism industry, fostering economic stability and regional development.

7.1 Recommendations for Future Research and Practical Applications

While this study focuses on tourism SMEs in Terengganu, future research should explore different regions and sectors to broaden the scope and ensure inclusivity across industries and locations. Employing a more representative sample and longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into

causal relationships and the temporal dynamics of resilience and business exit intentions. Moreover, integrating variables such as digital transformation, sustainability practices, or the role of government support could offer new perspectives on SME adaptability in tourism. Exploring the impact of technological advancements, such as the adoption of digital platforms, could shed light on how these innovations influence entrepreneurial resilience and business outcomes.

Practically, the findings suggest that entrepreneurship training programs should include modules on enhancing absorptive capacity and adaptive performance, focusing on adaptability and strategic decision-making. Policymakers could develop support systems that provide resources for continuous learning, knowledge sharing, and collaboration to improve resilience in SMEs. Encouraging partnerships between tourism SMEs and technology providers could help businesses leverage innovation for sustained growth and reduced exit intentions.

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