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Strategic Leadership and Competitive Advantage in Islamic Banking: The Mediating Role of Knowledge Sharing in Iraq

Ibraheem Mohammed Abd[1*]

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how strategic leadership enhances competitive advantage in Iraqi Islamic banks through the mediating role of knowledge sharing. Iraqi Islamic banks provide a distinctive research setting because they operate under both conventional competitive pressures and Sharia-compliance requirements, which constrain certain financial practices and require managers to balance regulatory, ethical, and market considerations. This context is particularly relevant for examining how leadership capabilities and knowledge-sharing mechanisms contribute to competitive advantage. Strategic leadership is conceptualized through three dimensions: decision-making, flexibility and adaptability, and team empowerment. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design, data were collected from senior managers, supervisors, and employees working in 20 major Islamic banks in Baghdad. Of 530 distributed questionnaires, 485 valid responses were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The results show that strategic leadership has a significant positive effect on competitive advantage ($\beta = 0.374$, $p < 0.001$) and knowledge sharing ($\beta = 0.745$, $p < 0.001$), while knowledge sharing significantly enhances competitive advantage ($\beta = 0.392$, $p < 0.001$). The indirect effect of strategic leadership on competitive advantage through knowledge sharing is also significant ($\beta = 0.292$, $p < 0.001$), indicating partial mediation. These findings demonstrate that strategic leadership contributes to competitive advantage not only directly but also by creating an organizational environment that facilitates knowledge exchange. Practically, the findings suggest that managers of Islamic banks should strengthen participative decision-making, employee empowerment, organizational adaptability, and knowledge-sharing practices to improve competitive performance. The study contributes to the strategic leadership and knowledge management literature by providing empirical evidence from an underexplored Iraqi Islamic banking context and by clarifying the mechanism through which knowledge sharing translates leadership capabilities into competitive advantage.

INTRODUCTION

Rapid changes in the external environment present significant challenges for organizations, particularly in retaining and mobilizing critical resources that drive sustainable performance. In this context, strategic leadership plays a pivotal role in defining organizational direction, guiding decision-making, mobilizing resources, and influencing competitive outcomes (Suharto, 2023). Its impact is especially critical in Islamic banking, where competitive advantage is not only driven by financial returns but also shaped by adherence to Shariah principles, including the prohibition of Riba (interest) and Gharar (risk) (Mohamed, 2022; Ali *et al.*, 2022). Islamic banks in Iraq face unique governance and operational challenges, with limited mechanisms to ensure sustainable growth and contribution to the national economy (Alandejani, 2022; Kuyateh, 2025; Nor & Fidhayanti, 2022). The increasing competition within the banking sector has heightened customer expectations, pushing banks to develop superior products and services to maintain competitive advantage. Strategic leadership enables organizations to create a clear vision, align human and material resources, and enhance organizational adaptability and innovation (Abdeen *et al.*, 2025; Ashkevari & Ghasemi, 2023). Moreover, knowledge sharing has emerged as a vital organizational capability, directly influencing performance, fostering collaboration, and strengthening institutional culture (Olan *et al.*, 2022; Chaudhary *et al.*, 2023). Understanding the mechanisms through which strategic leadership drives knowledge sharing is particularly critical in the Iraqi Islamic banking sector, where institutions must balance Shariah compliance with market competitiveness. Effective leadership fosters a culture that encourages collaboration, facilitates innovation, and enhances the organization's flexibility and responsiveness to market and technological changes (Yulitasari *et al.*, 2025; Juma *et al.*, 2024; Rahmat & Ahman, 2025). Previous studies indicate that activating knowledge sharing strategically contributes significantly to competitive advantage (Yuen & Lam, 2024; Iqbal *et al.*, 2026; Chatterjee *et al.*, 2022; Khraishi *et al.*, 2023).

However, in the Iraqi context, there remains a research gap regarding the integration of strategic leadership, knowledge sharing, and competitive advantage, particularly in developing leadership models tailored to local banking challenges. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the role of strategic leadership in

[1] Al-Imam Al-Adham University College, Iraq
[*] Corresponding author's e-mail: ibrahimabdmo@imamaladham.edu.iq

enhancing competitive advantage, focusing on knowledge sharing as a mediator, and providing theoretical and empirical insights into improving the performance and adaptability of Islamic banks in Iraq. Iraqi Islamic banks face challenges in achieving sustainable competitive advantage due to market volatility and regulatory pressures. Limited research exists on how strategic leadership, decision-making, organizational flexibility, and team empowerment influence knowledge sharing and, consequently, competitive advantage in this context. Understanding these relationships is essential to develop effective strategies that enhance organizational performance and resilience.

Research Questions

1. How does strategic leadership affect knowledge sharing and competitive advantage in Iraqi Islamic banks?
2. What is the impact of decision-making, organizational flexibility, adaptability, and team empowerment on knowledge sharing and competitive advantage?
3. Does knowledge sharing play a mediating role between organizational capabilities and competitive advantage?

Significance of the Study

This study holds both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing body of literature on strategic leadership, knowledge sharing, and competitive advantage by examining these relationships in the context of Iraqi Islamic banks, a setting that has been largely underexplored. It addresses a critical gap by integrating organizational capabilities, leadership practices, and knowledge management mechanisms to understand how they jointly influence competitive performance.

Practically, the study provides actionable insights for bank managers, policymakers, and organizational leaders seeking to enhance performance, innovation, and resilience. By highlighting the role of strategic leadership and knowledge sharing in achieving sustainable competitive advantage, the findings can guide the development of leadership strategies, governance practices, and knowledge management initiatives that are tailored to the unique operational and regulatory environment of Islamic banking in Iraq. Ultimately, the research supports improved decision-making, human resource utilization, and organizational adaptability, enabling Islamic banks to remain competitive in a rapidly changing market.

Research Objectives

The study aims to achieve the following objectives

1. To examine the effect of strategic leadership on knowledge sharing and competitive advantage in Iraqi Islamic banks.
2. To analyze the impact of decision-making, organizational flexibility, adaptability, and team empowerment on knowledge sharing and competitive advantage.
3. To investigate the mediating role of knowledge sharing between organizational capabilities and competitive advantage.
4. To provide practical recommendations for enhancing leadership practices, knowledge management, and overall performance of Islamic banks in Iraq.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic leadership is a type of leadership geared toward long-term organizational success through a focus on competitive advantage. Strategic leadership is preoccupied with competitive dynamics, with a focus on the qualities, skills and attributes of strategic leaders that affect organizational performance (Sani Supriyanto, 2019). Strategic leaders adopt a range of behaviors and make specific decisions shaped by the executive context. These behaviors include the nature and quality of strategic processes in the organization; the extent to which they mobilize resources across functions, units and geographies; and the nature of oversight and corporate governance. Competitive advantage is critical for institutions that operate in turbulent environments (Tahsildari, 2015). Competitive advantage occurs when firms offer greater value to customers through lower prices or additional benefits (Yuen & Lam, 2024). For the Islamic banking sector, competition has intensified, requiring a re-examination of operations, performance and the strategic issues that dominate. Islamic banks must provide a compelling value proposition that takes into account stakeholders in diverse markets such as the Middle East, Africa, Europe, Asia and Australia, and that balances economic and social objectives for long-term sustainability (Yuen & Lam, 2024).

Strategic leadership

Strategic leadership within financial institutions involves coordinating resources, capabilities, and actions to achieve superior outcomes amid evolving competitive dynamics. It encompasses a range of decision-making processes that influence the formulation and execution of strategies related to markets, processes, products, and technologies. Strategic leaders in Islamic banks face unique challenges. Sharia-compliant banking regulations constrain financial institutions from pursuing opportunities readily available to conventional banks, necessitating careful navigation of diverse stakeholders' legitimate interests and expectations. For instance, the need to sustain deposits among religiously motivated customers and meet corporate social responsibility obligations reduces Islamic banks' operational flexibility. These challenges increase the criticality of effective strategic leadership for Islamic banks seeking to forge and sustain competitive advantages (Tahsildari, 2015) (Sani Supriyanto, 2019)

Competitive advantage

Islamic banking is a financial system based on the Islamic Shari'ah principles, and loans provided under this system do not have an interest charge since Riba (interest) is

prohibited in Islam. Islamic financial institutions can be distinguished into Islamic banks, Islamic development banks, Islamic insurance (Takaful) companies, and Islamic capital markets (Islam, 2024). To achieve desired goals of profit or social enhancement, the religions with their utmost wisdom founded various financial institutions based on Islamic finance principles including but not limited to, Moudharabah, Murabahah, and Qard Hassan. (Kazak & Alim, 2022) ,The Islamic bank specifically is a financial institution that conducts its transactions based on Islamic Shari'ah principles. Islamic banking does not merely mean keeping completely away from Riba (interest). Rather, it involves not only refraining from dealing with interest, but also financing only ventures that have a clear benefit to mankind. Islamic banks can also be more accurately termed as Shari'ah-compliant financial institutions, as they extend their financial services in accordance to Islamic laws. These financial institutions provide Shari'ah-compliant or permissible products such as Mudharabah, Murabaha, and Ijarah. Complex mechanisms have also been developed to reflect and transfer risk with the least Riba embedded (Tahsildari, 2015). Due to the specific prohibitions of Shari'ah, Islamic banks face limited financial avenues which makes them innovative and an attractive alternative to modern banking systems. The overall motivation for undertaking Islamic banking-related activities including Shari'ah-compliant fund collection and investment is the general welfare and overall interest of mankind. The clear concern for the sake of mankind also makes the Islamic fund management system an ethical undertaking since the activities undertaken rarely contravene the interest of mankind. (Adekoya2022)(Khalifah *et al.*2024) ,Islamic banks show their client a novel and visionary leading in cleaning the finance way to comply with the system (Sani Supriyanto, 2019). An extensive number of researchers have focused on Islamic banking as it rests on the principles that govern the typical activities that take place in such financial institutions. These studies focused on opportunities, challenges, and modelling of the systems based on the avowed pro-Islam.

Knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing is an organizational capability that enables the distribution and absorption of knowledge and experience (Zarezadeh Mehrizi, 2016). Sharing knowledge fosters faster individual and organizational learning, creativity, and performance improvement. Employees need opportunities to communicate their knowledge and experiences with others (Bello Ibrahim, 2020). Factors that stimulate or hinder knowledge sharing can therefore be classified as either organizational or individual. The main individual characteristics influencing knowledge sharing are knowledge, personality, and interpersonal skills; organizational factors include culture, leadership, trust, and a collaborative environment.

Knowledge is categorized into tacit and explicit (Agustini & Sulistyo, 2017). Tacit knowledge is difficult to articulate, share, and imitate, and resides in the minds of individuals, while explicit knowledge can be easily communicated and shared. Organizational antecedents that support knowledge sharing can be grouped into five categories: top management support, reward systems, information technology, team dynamics, and organizational culture. Barriers include lack of time, management support, and employee interest; cultural uncertainty; performance monitoring; and limited communication capacity.

Strategic leadership and competitive advantage

Strategic leadership is responsible for competitive advantage in times of dynamic change (Abdeen *et al.*2025). In financial institutions, competitive dynamics dictate attention to strategic choice behavior, resource mobilization, and strategic governance processes (Zuhairi, M. M. K., & ussein, M. K. 2023. 47). (Kanji *et al.*, 2023) Competitive advantage derives from decisions affecting product, market, technology, and customer approaches; allocation of scarce financial, technology, human, and equipment resources to selected strategic options; and oversight of implementation and adaptation processes as performance feedback accumulates (Hussein, M. K., etl. 2023. 80); (Zhu *et al.*, 2023). With Islamic banking—subject to finance and non-financial stakeholder constraints and requisite product, customer, and technology innovations—a focus on strategic leadership behaviors, decisions, and process applications is particularly relevant (Sani Supriyanto, 2019). Research shows strategic leadership influences competitive advantage through intellectual capital yet a finer-grained view respects Islamic considerations. Knowledge-sharing behavior bridges the leadership-advantage relation.

Competitive advantage concerns unique benefits from product, service, or process differentiation relative to rivals; acceptance of a higher-priced, socially-responsible financing mode; ability to attract depositors; and sustained governmental support. (Jerab & Mabrouk, 2023) Stakeholder commitment warrants retention as an extension of knowledge-sharing behavior (Tahsildari, 2015). Islamic principles dictate attention to socio-economic-improvement-oriented goals, regulatory constraints, finance and non-finance stakeholder requirements, sustainability, and Sharia-compliant means, ends, products, and processes. A broader synthesis captures organizational capability and its finance-covered implicit and explicit dimensions; an Islamic specification emphasizes purposeful, context-sensitive finance (W. (Eric) Wardaya, 2016).

Knowledge sharing as a mediator

Strategic leaders managing Islamic banks influence competitive advantage via strategic choices, resource mobilization, and governance (Al_Rihaymee *et al.*2024). Knowledge sharing as an organizational capability mediates the relationship by serving as a conduit for implementing strategic leadership decisions and enhancing organizational performance, in line with formal models

of the resource-based view (RBV) (Bello Ibrahim, 2020). As illustrated by these frameworks, strategic leadership fosters the development of knowledge-sharing capabilities, which in turn enhance innovation, quality, and cost-effectiveness. Consequently, knowledge sharing is positioned between strategic leadership and competitive advantage:

Similar to other organizational capabilities, knowledge sharing is significantly influenced by strategic leadership; hence it is expected that such capability mediates the effect of strategic leadership on competitive advantage (Agustini & Sulistyo, 2017). Strategic leaders, for instance, can promote an organizational culture that encourages knowledge exchange among employees. In addition, strategic leaders can help create and communicate a vision of the importance of knowledge sharing within Islamic banks. Such leaders also dedicate attention to measures and mechanisms that support knowledge sharing, such as information-technology-based communication platforms or structured programs that match employee expertise with knowledge-needs across the organization. Overall, such behaviors position knowledge sharing as a primary organizational capability that translates strategic leadership into enhanced performance.

Conceptual model and hypotheses

A conceptual model representing the relationships among strategic leadership, knowledge sharing, and competitive advantage is proposed in Figure 1. Strategic leadership supports the attainment of competitive advantage (Tahsildari, 2015) in Islamic banks by facilitating strategic choices and the mobilization of resources (Agustini & Sulistyo, 2017). In addition, strategic leadership provides systems of governance that determine how resources are configured and used. Islamic banks with strong strategic leadership are therefore expected to enhance their competitive advantage.

Knowledge sharing can act as a mediator between strategic leadership and competitive advantage. An organization's ability to invest in knowledge sharing depends on the extent to which strategic leadership fosters a culture and practices conducive to this capability (Kamariah Bt Abdul Wahid *et al.*, 2019). Through investments in knowledge sharing, Islamic banks develop an organizational capability that influences the ability of the organization to innovate in product, service, and process domains. Investments in knowledge sharing represent a structured approach to enhancing competitive advantage. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Strategic leadership positively influences the competitive advantage of Islamic banks.

H1-1: Decision-making positively influences competitive advantage.

H1-2 :Flexibility and adaptability positively influence competitive advantage.

H1-3: Team empowerment positively influences competitive advantage.

H2: Strategic leadership positively influences knowledge sharing.

H2-1: Decision-making positively influences knowledge sharing.

H2-2: Flexibility and adaptability positively influence knowledge sharing.

H2-3: Team empowerment positively influences knowledge sharing.

H3: Knowledge sharing positively influences competitive advantage.

H4: Knowledge sharing mediates the relationship between strategic leadership and competitive advantage.

H4-1: Knowledge sharing mediates the relationship between decision-making and competitive advantage.

H4-2: Knowledge sharing mediates the relationship between flexibility and adaptability and competitive advantage.

H4-3: Knowledge sharing mediates the relationship between team empowerment and competitive advantage.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design using a survey method to examine the relationships between strategic leadership, knowledge sharing, and competitive advantage.

Population and Sample

The descriptive analytical method was used, relying on a sample of senior leaders and supervisors in Iraqi Islamic banks, specifically the 20 largest Islamic banks in Iraq, located in Baghdad, out of a total of 31 banks operating in Iraq. These banks were chosen because they are the most active in terms of capital and commercial banking activity established in Iraq. The study population consisted of 5,460 individuals, from whom a random sample of 530 individuals was selected. This sample included bank managers, bank vice presidents for administrative affairs, branch managers, heads of financial, technical, and administrative departments, deputy department heads, and accounting, financial, and administrative staff. The questionnaire was distributed to all participants, and 485 valid responses were obtained after excluding incomplete questionnaires. Thus, the final sample size was 485, representing the total number of completed questionnaires.

The sample comprised 485 participants drawn from major Iraqi Islamic banks, ensuring a representative coverage of organizational roles and experience levels. Regarding gender distribution, the sample included 153 females (31.5%) and 332 males (68.5%), reflecting a male-dominant workforce, which aligns with previous findings in the banking sector of the region (Mohamed, 2022; Alandejani, 2022).

In terms of educational background, the majority of respondents held a Bachelor's degree (56.9%), followed by Higher Diplomas (21.0%), Master's degrees (12.8%), and Doctorates (9.3%), indicating a generally well-qualified workforce capable of executing complex banking operations and strategic tasks. This distribution suggests that Iraqi Islamic banks maintain a competent

Table 1: Sample characteristics

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	153	31.5
	Male	332	68.5
Education Level	Bachelor's	276	56.9
	Higher Diploma	102	21.0
	Master's	62	12.8
	Doctorate (Ph.D.)	45	9.3
Experience	Less than 5 years	105	21.6
	5–10 years	150	30.9
	11–15 years	96	19.8
	16–20 years	74	15.3
	More than 20 years	60	12.4
Domain / Position	Bank Manager	20	4.1
	Vice President for Finance and Administration	40	8.2
	Branch Managers	42	8.7
	Department Heads	70	14.4
	Assistant Department Managers	80	16.5
	Unit Managers	77	15.9
	Staff (Accountants, Auditors, Administrators)	156	32.2

human capital base, essential for implementing strategic leadership and knowledge-sharing initiatives (Suharto, 2023; Abdeen *et al.*, 2025).

The work experience profile shows that 30.9% of respondents had 5–10 years, 21.6% less than 5 years, 19.8% 11–15 years, 15.3% 16–20 years, and 12.4% more than 20 years of experience. This diversity in tenure indicates a balanced mix of emerging talent and seasoned professionals, which is advantageous for fostering organizational knowledge transfer and resilience (Olan *et al.*, 2022; Chaudhary *et al.*, 2023).

Regarding organizational positions, the sample included 20 Bank Managers (4.1%), 40 Vice Presidents for Finance and Administration (8.2%), 42 Branch Managers (8.7%), 70 Department Heads (14.4%), 80 Assistant Department Managers (16.5%), 77 Unit Managers (15.9%), and 156 staff (32.2%). This distribution reflects a comprehensive representation of hierarchical levels, enabling the study to capture both strategic and operational perspectives. The substantial proportion of staff and mid-level managers indicates a strong base for evaluating knowledge sharing, decision-making, and strategic leadership processes across different organizational layers.

Overall, the descriptive statistics confirm that the sample is adequately representative of the Iraqi Islamic banking sector, both in terms of demographics, educational attainment, experience, and organizational roles. This ensures the robustness and generalizability of subsequent analyses examining the impact of strategic leadership, organizational capabilities, and knowledge sharing on competitive advantage.

Measurement Scales

Strategic leadership was measured using three dimensions (decision-making, team empowerment, and flexibility and adaptability) adapted from Suharto (2023). Knowledge sharing was measured using the scale developed by Agustini and Sulistyo (2017). Competitive advantage was measured using two dimensions (cost and service quality) adapted from Hussein *et al.* (2024). All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

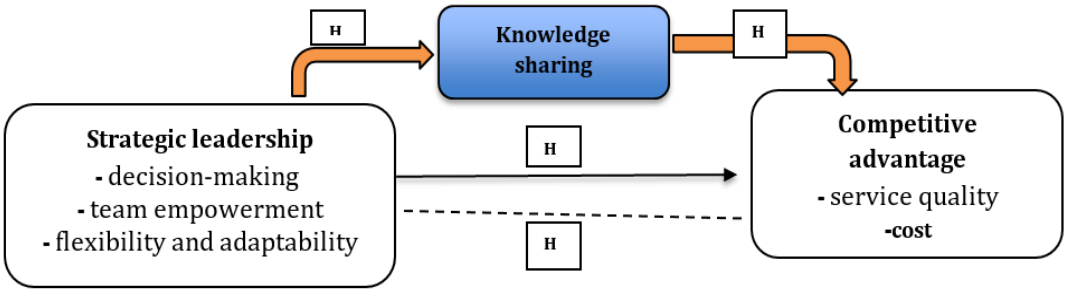


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Showing the Relationship Between Strategic Leadership, Knowledge Sharing, and Competitive Advantage

Data Analysis Method (PLS-SEM)

The descriptive statistics presented in Table (2) provide an overview of respondents' perceptions regarding the main variables of the study, namely strategic leadership, knowledge sharing, and sustainable competitive advantage. Overall, the results indicate a moderate to relatively high level of agreement among respondents concerning the presence of these practices within the surveyed organizations.

With respect to strategic leadership, the overall mean score reached 3.7812 with a standard deviation of 0.5764, and a Relative Importance Index (RII) of 0.7562, indicating a relatively high level of perceived strategic leadership practices. Among its sub-dimensions, flexibility and adaptability recorded the highest mean value (M = 3.8427; RII = 0.7685), suggesting that respondents perceive organizational leaders as having a strong ability to adapt to environmental and organizational changes. This reflects the increasing importance of adaptive leadership in dynamic and competitive environments. Meanwhile, team empowerment achieved a mean of 3.7648 (RII = 0.7530), indicating a favorable perception of leaders' efforts to empower employees and encourage participative management. The decision-making dimension recorded a mean of 3.7215 (RII = 0.7443), which also reflects a relatively positive evaluation of leaders' decision-making processes within the organizations.

Regarding the knowledge sharing variable, the results show a mean score of 3.6395 with a standard deviation of 0.7487 and an RII value of 0.7279, suggesting a moderate-to-high level of knowledge-sharing practices among employees. The analysis further reveals a close similarity between the two dimensions of knowledge sharing. Individual knowledge sharing recorded a mean of 3.6423 (RII = 0.7285), indicating that employees demonstrate a reasonable willingness to exchange knowledge and experiences with colleagues. Similarly, organizational knowledge sharing obtained a mean value of 3.6368 (RII = 0.7271), suggesting that the organizational environment moderately supports structured mechanisms for knowledge dissemination and institutional learning.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	RII
Strategic Leadership	485	3.7812	0.5764	0.7562
Decision-Making	485	3.7215	0.5982	0.7443
Team Empowerment	485	3.7648	0.5639	0.7530
Flexibility & Adaptability	485	3.8427	0.5745	0.7685
Knowledge Sharing	485	3.6395	0.7487	0.7279
Individual Knowledge Sharing	485	3.6423	0.7716	0.7285
Organizational Knowledge Sharing	485	3.6368	0.8614	0.7271
Competitive Advantage	485	3.3926	0.6418	0.6785
Cost	485	3.4718	0.7826	0.6944
Quality	485	3.3117	0.5863	0.6623

In terms of sustainable competitive advantage, the overall mean score was 3.3926 with a standard deviation of 0.6418, and an RII value of 0.6785, reflecting a moderate level of perceived competitive advantage among the studied organizations. At the dimensional level, the cost dimension achieved the highest mean (M = 3.4718; RII = 0.6944), indicating that cost efficiency appears to be relatively more emphasized as a competitive strategy. In contrast, the quality dimension recorded a mean of 3.3117 (RII = 0.6623), which suggests that although quality practices are present, there remains room for further improvement in order to strengthen the organizations' long-term competitive positioning. Overall, these findings suggest that while organizations demonstrate relatively strong practices in strategic leadership and knowledge sharing, the translation of these practices into higher levels of sustainable competitive advantage remains moderate. This indicates the potential need for greater integration between strategic leadership behaviors and knowledge-sharing mechanisms in order to enhance organizational competitiveness and long-term sustainability.

The importance and tests of the relationship between variables in the first model

The first model aims to test the impact of strategic

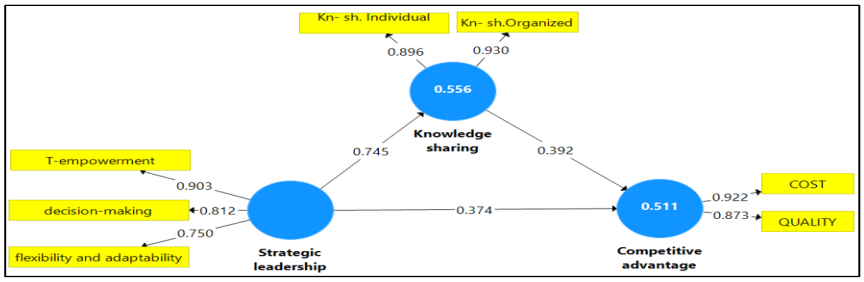


Figure 2: Structural Model of Strategic Leadership, Knowledge Sharing, and Competitive Advantage

Table 3: measurement model assessment

Variables	Items	Outer Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Competitive Advantage	QUALITY	0.873	0.763	0.893	0.807
	COST	0.922			
Knowledge Sharing	Kn-sh Individual	0.896	0.802	0.909	0.833
	Kn-sh Organized	0.930			
Strategic Leadership	T-empowerment	0.903	0.761	0.863	0.679
	Decision-making	0.812			
	Flexibility & Adaptability	0.750			

leadership, the independent variable, directly and indirectly on the dependent variable, competitive advantage, through knowledge sharing as a mediator.

Table (3) presents the results of the measurement model assessment, including factor loadings as well as reliability and convergent validity indicators. The findings reveal that all indicator loadings exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating a strong association between the observed indicators and their respective latent constructs.

Furthermore, Cronbach's alpha values ranged between 0.761 and 0.802, exceeding the minimum acceptable level of 0.70, which suggests that the measurement scales demonstrate a satisfactory level of internal consistency. In addition, the composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.863 to 0.909, surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.70, thereby confirming the reliability of the constructs used in the study.

Regarding convergent validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged between 0.679 and 0.833, which are above the acceptable threshold of 0.50. This indicates that the measurement model achieves adequate convergent validity.

Accordingly, the measurement model meets the required reliability and validity criteria, allowing the study to proceed

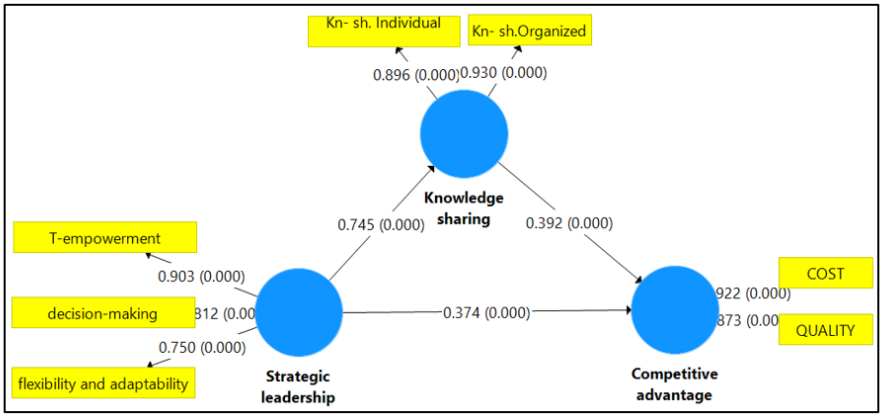


Figure 3: Structural Model of the Relationships Among Strategic Leadership, Knowledge Sharing, and Competitive Advantage

Table 4: Strategic Leadership, competitive advantage, and knowledge sharing

Path Coefficients	β	(M)	(STDEV)	T	P Values
Knowledge sharing -> Competitive advantage	0.392	0.385	0.061	6.397	0.000
Strategic leadership -> Competitive advantage	0.374	0.380	0.057	6.540	0.000
Strategic leadership -> Knowledge sharing	0.745	0.745	0.020	37.450	0.000
Strategic leadership -> Knowledge sharing -> Competitive advantage	0.292	0.287	0.047	6.230	0.000

with the structural model analysis and hypothesis testing.

Path Coefficients Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

The results of the structural model analysis using the PLS-SEM approach revealed the existence of statistically significant positive relationships among the main variables of the study. The findings indicate that knowledge sharing has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage, with a path coefficient of (β = 0.392), a T-value of 6.397, and a significance level of ($P < 0.001$). This result suggests that enhancing knowledge exchange processes among individuals and organizational units contributes to improving the organization's ability to leverage its knowledge resources and transform them into sustainable competitive advantages. This finding is consistent with the existing literature, which emphasizes

that organizational knowledge represents one of the most critical strategic resources supporting competitive superiority in the contemporary business environment.

The results also reveal a direct positive effect of strategic leadership on competitive advantage, with a path coefficient of (β = 0.374), a T-value of 6.540, and a significance level of (P < 0.001). This effect reflects the vital role of strategic leadership in directing organizational resources and strengthening the organization's dynamic capabilities, enabling it to respond effectively to environmental changes and achieve competitive superiority.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate a strong and positive effect of strategic leadership on knowledge sharing, with a path coefficient of (β = 0.745), a T-value of 37.450, and a significance level of (P < 0.001). This indicates that strategic leaders play a fundamental role in building an organizational environment that encourages knowledge exchange and enhances organizational learning. The magnitude of this strong effect highlights that strategic leadership is a critical factor in facilitating knowledge flow within the organization.

Moreover, the results of the indirect effect analysis reveal a significant mediating role of knowledge sharing in the relationship between strategic leadership and competitive advantage. The indirect path coefficient reached (β = 0.292) with a T-value of 6.230 and a significance level of (P < 0.001). This finding indicates that the influence of strategic leadership on competitive advantage is not limited to the direct effect but also extends indirectly through the enhancement of knowledge-sharing processes within the organization, thereby enabling knowledge to be transformed into a strategic resource that supports competitive superiority.

Based on these results, it can be concluded that knowledge sharing plays a partial mediating role (partial mediation) in the relationship between strategic leadership and competitive advantage, as the direct relationship between strategic leadership and competitive advantage remains significant alongside the indirect effect through knowledge sharing. This finding underscores the importance of integrating strategic leadership practices with effective knowledge management mechanisms, as such integration plays a fundamental role in strengthening organizations' competitive capabilities.

Testing the Second Model

This model aims to examine the effect of the three dimensions of strategic leadership—decision-making, team empowerment, and flexibility and adaptability—on

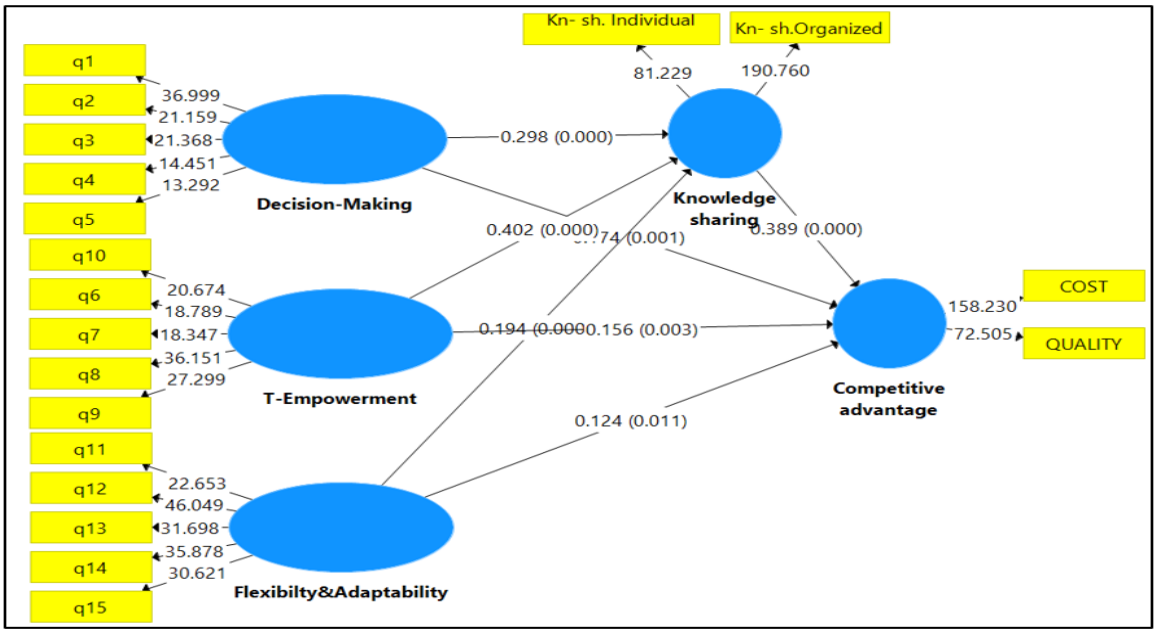


Figure 4: Structural Model Showing the Relationships Among Decision-Making, T-Empowerment, Flexibility and Adaptability, Knowledge Sharing, and Competitive Advantage

competitive advantage, with knowledge sharing serving as a mediating variable., as illustrated in Figure (4).

"Table (4) below presents the model quality indicators for the second model."

The table presents the results of the measurement model assessment in terms of reliability and convergent validity. The findings indicate that Cronbach's alpha values ranged between 0.749 and 0.819, exceeding the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70, which suggests that the measurement scales demonstrate a satisfactory level of internal consistency. Furthermore, the composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.833 to 0.909, which are above the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming the reliability of the constructs used in this study. Regarding the average variance extracted (AVE), the values ranged between 0.502 and 0.833, all exceeding the minimum acceptable value of 0.50, thereby indicating that the measurement model achieves adequate convergent validity. In addition, the results of the factor loadings show that most values exceed 0.70, which

Table 5: Measurement Model Assessment: Outer Loadings, Reliability, and Convergent Validity

Variables	Items	Outer Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Competitive Advantage	COST	0.923	0.763	0.893	0.807
F	QUALITY	0.873			
Decision-Making	q1	0.810	0.749	0.833	0.502
	q2	0.745			
	q3	0.734			
	q4	0.596			
	q5	0.636			
Flexibility & Adaptability	q11	0.676	0.819	0.874	0.582
	q12	0.790			
	q13	0.774			
	q14	0.786			
	q15	0.781			
Knowledge Sharing	Kn-sh Individual	0.897	0.802	0.909	0.833
	Kn-sh Organized	0.929			
T-Empowerment	q6	0.710	0.777	0.848	0.529
	q7	0.681			
	q8	0.811			
	q9	0.745			
	q10	0.684			

confirms the adequacy of the measurement indicators in representing the latent constructs within the model. Accordingly, the study proceeds to test the hypotheses reflected in the second model.

Path Coefficients

Path Coefficients Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

The results of the structural model analysis using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) revealed a set of statistically significant positive relationships among the variables examined in this study. The findings indicate that decision-making has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage, with a path coefficient of ($\beta = 0.174$), a T-value of 3.409, and a significance level of ($P = 0.001$). This result suggests that the effectiveness of decision-making processes within the organization contributes to strengthening its ability to achieve competitive superiority.

The results also show a positive and significant effect of decision-making on knowledge sharing, with a path coefficient of ($\beta = 0.298$) and a T-value of 6.730 at a significance level of ($P < 0.001$). This indicates that improving the quality of managerial decision-making enhances the flow and exchange of knowledge among individuals and organizational units.

Furthermore, the findings reveal a positive effect of flexibility and adaptability on competitive advantage, with a path coefficient of ($\beta = 0.124$) and a T-value of 2.544 at a significance level of ($P = 0.011$). This reflects the importance of organizations possessing flexible capabilities that enable them to respond effectively to environmental changes and achieve competitive superiority. In addition, flexibility and adaptability were found to have a positive and significant effect on knowledge sharing, with a path coefficient of ($\beta = 0.194$) and a T-value of 4.721 at a significance level of ($P < 0.001$), suggesting that a flexible organizational environment encourages knowledge exchange among employees.

On the other hand, the results confirm a strong positive effect of knowledge sharing on competitive advantage, with a path coefficient of ($\beta = 0.389$) and a T-value of 6.617 at a significance level of ($P < 0.001$). This finding highlights the strategic role of knowledge sharing in supporting innovation, improving organizational performance, and strengthening the competitive capabilities of organizations.

The findings also indicate a positive and significant effect of team empowerment on competitive advantage, with a path coefficient of ($\beta = 0.156$) and a T-value of 2.964 at a significance level of ($P = 0.003$). In addition, a strong positive effect of technological empowerment on knowledge sharing was identified, with a path coefficient of ($\beta = 0.402$) and a T-value of 9.097 at a significance level of ($P < 0.001$). This suggests that the use of digital technologies and information systems plays a crucial role in facilitating knowledge exchange processes within the organization.

Regarding the mediation effects, the results reveal a significant mediating role of knowledge sharing in the

Table 6: Direct and Indirect Effects of Decision-Making, Flexibility and Adaptability, and Team Empowerment on Competitive Advantage Through Knowledge Sharing

	β	(M)	(STDEV)	T	P Values
Decision-Making -> Competitive advantage	0.174	0.176	0.051	3.409	0.001
Decision-Making -> Knowledge sharing	0.298	0.298	0.044	6.730	0.000
Flexibilty&Adaptability -> Competitive advantage	0.124	0.123	0.049	2.544	0.011
Flexibilty&Adaptability -> Knowledge sharing	0.194	0.195	0.041	4.721	0.000
Knowledge sharing -> Competitive advantage	0.389	0.388	0.059	6.617	0.000
T-Empowerment -> Competitive advantage	0.156	0.156	0.052	2.964	0.003
T-Empowerment -> Knowledge sharing	0.402	0.403	0.044	9.097	0.000
Decision-Making -> Knowledge sharing -> Competitive advantage	0.116	0.115	0.024	4.804	0.000
Flexibilty&Adaptability -> Knowledge sharing -> Competitive advantage	0.076	0.075	0.019	3.951	0.000
T-Empowerment -> Knowledge sharing -> Competitive advantage	0.156	0.157	0.031	5.033	0.000

relationship between the independent variables and competitive advantage. Specifically, knowledge sharing mediates the relationship between decision-making and competitive advantage, with an indirect effect coefficient of ($\beta = 0.116$) and a T-value of 4.804 at a significance level of ($P < 0.001$). It also mediates the relationship between flexibility and adaptability and competitive advantage, with an indirect effect coefficient of ($\beta = 0.076$) and a T-value of 3.951. Furthermore, knowledge sharing mediates the relationship between team empowerment and competitive advantage, with an indirect effect coefficient of ($\beta = 0.156$) and a T-value of 5.033.

These findings indicate that knowledge sharing represents a key organizational mechanism for transforming leadership, organizational, and technological capabilities into competitive advantage, as it enhances the flow of knowledge and facilitates its effective utilization in developing organizational capabilities and achieving superiority in a competitive business environment. Accordingly, the results of the study confirm that strengthening effective decision-making practices, flexibility and adaptability, and team empowerment-supported by knowledge-sharing mechanisms-can substantially contribute to achieving sustainable competitive advantage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study focuses on Islamic banks operating in Iraq and aims to examine the effects of strategic leadership, decision-making, organizational flexibility, and team empowerment on knowledge sharing and competitive advantage, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of knowledge sharing. The results of the PLS-SEM analysis provide substantial support for most of the proposed hypotheses, confirming the critical role of these variables in enhancing competitive advantage within the context of the local Islamic banking sector. The results indicate that knowledge sharing has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage ($\beta = 0.389$, $T = 6.617$, $P < 0.001$). This finding is consistent with the studies of Suharto (2023) and Yuen & Lam (2024), which emphasized that knowledge exchange supports innovation and contributes to the creation of sustainable competitive advantages. Within the context of Islamic banking in Iraq, this result highlights the importance of knowledge flow among teams to ensure compliance with Sharia principles while maintaining competitive performance. This finding also aligns with the results reported by Mohamed (2022) and Juma *et al.* (2024) in studies conducted on Islamic banks in Kenya, where knowledge sharing among employees was found to enhance organizational adaptability to regulatory and economic challenges. The results demonstrate that strategic leadership has a direct positive effect on both competitive advantage and knowledge sharing ($\beta = 0.374$ and $\beta = 0.745$, respectively). These findings are consistent with Abdeen *et al.* (2025) and Ashkevari & Ghasemi (2023), who highlighted that strategic leadership strengthens organizational dynamic capabilities and promotes knowledge exchange. In Iraqi Islamic banks, this suggests that leaders who effectively guide teams according to Sharia-compliant principles while adopting best practices in knowledge management can achieve superior competitive performance.

The results reveal that decision-making and organizational flexibility positively influence both knowledge sharing and competitive advantage. These findings are consistent with Wardaya (2016) and Al-Rihaymee *et al.* (2024) in similar banking contexts, where studies demonstrated that flexibility and effective decision-making support knowledge flow and its transformation into sustainable competitive resources. In the context of Islamic banks in Iraq, these results highlight the importance of making Sharia-compliant decisions efficiently while maintaining the capacity to adapt to economic and regulatory changes. The study also shows that team empowerment has a positive effect on both competitive advantage and knowledge sharing ($\beta = 0.156$ and $\beta = 0.402$, respectively).

This finding supports the results of Al-Rihaymee *et al.* (2024) and Supriyanto (2019), which emphasized that empowering employees enhances knowledge exchange and stimulates innovation. In Iraqi Islamic banks, team empowerment plays a crucial role in developing employees' competencies in managing complex Islamic financial products and achieving sustainable institutional performance.

The mediation analysis indicates that knowledge sharing functions as a partial mediator between decision-making, organizational flexibility, team empowerment, and competitive advantage. These results are consistent with Chaudhary *et al.* (2023) and Iqbal *et al.* (2026), which emphasize that knowledge acts as a critical link that transforms organizational capabilities into competitive advantage. In the Iraqi context, the findings suggest that effective knowledge sharing among teams enables Islamic banks to innovate and implement Sharia-compliant financial practices more effectively.

Overall, the study confirms that integrating strategic leadership, effective decision-making, organizational flexibility, and team empowerment with a strong knowledge-sharing culture represents a key strategy for achieving sustainable competitive advantage in Islamic banks operating in Iraq.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between strategic leadership and competitive advantage in Iraqi Islamic banks, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of knowledge sharing. The findings confirm that strategic leadership positively influences both knowledge sharing and competitive advantage, while decision-making, organizational flexibility, and team empowerment further contribute to strengthening these organizational outcomes. Knowledge sharing emerges as an important mechanism for translating leadership and organizational capabilities into competitive value, thereby enhancing Islamic banks' ability to improve their performance and respond to changes in the banking environment.

The study's theoretical contribution lies in developing an integrated framework that connects strategic leadership and organizational capabilities with knowledge sharing and competitive advantage. This extends the literature on strategic management and knowledge management, particularly within the context of Islamic banking in emerging economies. Furthermore, the study provides empirical evidence from the Iraqi banking sector, where achieving competitiveness requires balancing organizational performance with Sharia compliance and responsiveness to market and regulatory changes.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of adopting an integrated managerial approach that combines strategic direction, participative decision-making, organizational flexibility, and team empowerment with an institutional culture that promotes knowledge and experience sharing. Such practices can strengthen organizational learning and innovation, improve responsiveness to market developments, and support the development of Sharia-compliant financial services, thereby enhancing competitive advantage.

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to certain limitations, particularly its geographical focus on Islamic banks operating in Baghdad and its reliance on a cross-sectional research design. Accordingly, future research could extend the investigation to other Iraqi governorates and international comparative settings, employ longitudinal research designs, and examine additional variables, such as digital transformation, organizational innovation, and dynamic capabilities, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the determinants of sustainable competitive advantage in Islamic banking.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the research focuses only on Islamic banks operating in Baghdad, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study adopts a cross-sectional design, which does not capture changes over time. Future studies may employ longitudinal designs and expand the sample to include banks in other regions or countries. In addition, future research may explore other mediating variables such as organizational innovation or digital transformation

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