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Original Article (Qualitative)

From Survival to Evolution: A Comprehensive and Dynamic Model of Organizational Resilience for Iranian SMEs in Permacrisis Ecosystem Using Meta-synthesis

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Abstract

This study aims to design a comprehensive and dynamic model to explain organizational resilience in Iranian small and medium-sized enterprises. Given that these companies operate in a unique ecosystem of permanent crisis, traditional resilience models based on cross-sectional shocks seem inadequate to explain their dynamics. This research is exploratory and theoretical in nature and is based on the interpretive paradigm. A mixed methodological approach including metasynthesis as the main method and bibliometric analysis as a complementary method was used, and bibliometric data were extracted from 953 articles in Scopus and analyzed with VOSviewer software. After a systematic search of reliable databases and screening, 67 key articles were selected and synthesized and integrated through a content analysis process. Qualitative data analysis led to the identification of 460 unique conceptual codes that were categorized into 15 organizing themes and 5 overarching themes including: “1. Drivers and enabling factors, 2. Multilevel capabilities (individual/entrepreneurial, organizational, network/institutional), 3. Dynamic process cycle (anticipation, exposure, learning), 4. Resilient strategies (defensive, adaptive, offensive), and 5. Heterogeneous outcomes”. The main finding of the research is “A dynamic and multilevel model of organizational resilience in a permanent crisis environment,” which conceptualizes resilience as an evolutionary meta-capability. This research presents the first comprehensive and dynamic theoretical framework to explain resilience in the Iranian perma-crisis ecosystem, and its main innovation lies in conceptualizing resilience as an evolutionary process for the strategic transition from survival to evolution and showing the mechanisms of this transition.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

The business landscape is witnessing a paradigm shift as it enters an era of constant turmoil and unpredictable disruptions. This environment, described as the “Woka world”, has seriously challenged the fundamental principles of traditional strategic management. In these circumstances, the survival and sustainable growth of organizations requires a capacity beyond short-term resistance, known in the literature as the concept of organizational resilience (Chi et al., 2025). The understanding of the concept of resilience has evolved from the traditional “go back” perspective to the new “leap forward” paradigm, emphasizing strategic learning and transformation (Hernes et al., 2025). However, the existing literature suffers from three gaps: theoretical fragmentation and lack of integrated models, a homogeneous view of resilience pathways, and a lack of sensitivity to context.

Much of the research has examined resilience in response to episodic crises and has not been able to explain it in the context of a permanent crisis (permacrisis), a structural situation in which multiple and intertwined crises have become the norm (Maalouf et al., 2025). This concept accurately describes the unique nature of the Iranian business environment. Iranian companies, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, operate in a multi-crisis ecosystem shaped by a combination of factors such as economic and institutional instability, international sanctions, social unrest, geopolitical tensions, and infrastructure challenges (Shabani et al., 2025). Numerous pieces of evidence, including the National Business Environment Monitoring Reports and the unprecedented rise in the Uncertainty Index, confirm this turbulent ecosystem. These conditions render resilience models developed in more stable environments ineffective.

At the heart of this ecosystem, SMEs, as the driving force of the economy, face a paradox: on one hand, they are more vulnerable due to resource constraints; and on the other hand, they have a higher potential for agility due to their flexibility (Koporcic et al., 2025). How this potential is activated in Iran’s high-risk context is a question that, despite valuable domestic research, still requires a comprehensive model based on systematic knowledge synthesis.

Accordingly, this study aims to design and present a comprehensive, dynamic, and multi-level model of organizational resilience for SMEs in Iran’s perma-crisis ecosystem. This article conceptualizes resilience as an evolutionary meta-capability for the transition from survival to evolution, moving beyond a static perspective. To achieve this goal, this research uses meta-synthesis and bibliometric analysis to systematically synthesize previous researches to arrive at a new and context-sensitive theoretical framework and answer the fundamental question: “What are the dimensions and components of a comprehensive model of organizational resilience in Iranian small and medium-sized enterprises in a permanent crisis ecosystem”?

The theoretical framework

Organizational Resilience

Hepfer & Lawrence (2022) defines resilience as “the ability of an organization to anticipate, respond to, recover from, and learn from adversity”. Organizational resilience is a multilevel phenomenon. The existing literature generally distinguishes three key levels of resilience: individual, organizational, and network/institutional (Hillmann & Guenther, 2021). 1. Individual level: This level focuses on the psychological resilience of employees, managers, and especially entrepreneurs (Hartmann et al., 2022). In the context of small and medium-sized enterprises, the individual resilience of the entrepreneur plays a vital and pivotal role in guiding the entire organization’s response to a crisis (Leonelli et al., 2024). 2. Organizational level: This level, which is the main focus of this research, addresses the resources, processes,

capabilities, and structures that allow the entire organization to cope with disruptions (Barasa et al., 2018). 3. Network/Institutional Level: This level examines resilience beyond the boundaries of an organization and focuses on the quality of the institutional environment, supportive policies, and the organization's relationships with external actors and stakeholders (Koporovic et al., 2025).

Koporovic et al. (2025) in a comprehensive umbrella review, identified key barriers to resilience in SMEs as constraints related to firm size and greater vulnerability to shocks, financial constraints and ineffective leadership and lack of crisis management skills; and key coping strategies included business continuity planning, organizational culture, technology adoption, proactive manufacturing, and strategic cooperations.

De Waal et al. (2025) identified four heterogeneous resilience paths (incomplete recovery and survival, performance recovery, leapfrogging, explosive leap) in a longitudinal study of Ukrainian companies in war conditions, which shows that survival in critical conditions is itself a form of resilience.

Research Methodology

This research is exploratory and theoretical in nature, based on an interpretive paradigm, and uses the meta-synthesis and bibliometric analysis methods.

Research Findings

Data analysis was conducted using the meta-synthesis method as the main method and bibliometric analysis as a complementary method. Also, bibliometric data were extracted from 953 articles in Scopus and analyzed with VOSviewer software. After a systematic search of reliable databases and screening, 67 key qualitative and conceptual studies were finally selected and synthesized and integrated through a content analysis process. The results showed that 460 conceptual codes were classified into 15 organizing themes and 5 overarching themes including “drivers and enabling factors, multilevel capabilities, dynamic process cycle, resilient strategies, and heterogeneous outcomes.” The main finding of the research is “A dynamic and multilevel model of organizational resilience in a permanent crisis environment”. This model conceptualizes resilience as an evolutionary meta-capability that emerges from the dynamic interaction between the reservoir of multilevel capabilities and the flow of a continuous learning cycle and includes the following elements: 1) drivers and enabling factors (permanent crisis context); 2) the core of resilience including multilevel capabilities (individual/entrepreneurial, organizational, and network/institutional) and a dynamic process cycle (anticipation, exposure, learning); and 3) heterogeneous outcomes (from survival to explosive mutation). This model operates through strategic choices (defensive, adaptive, offensive) and evolves over time with feedback loops and an “evolutionary learning spiral.”

Conclusion

The present study aimed to provide a comprehensive and dynamic model of organizational resilience in Iranian SMEs in a permanent crisis ecosystem using a meta-synthesis method. The findings of this study are fully consistent with studies that emphasize the pivotal role of the leader in SMEs (Leonelli et al., 2024; Branicki et al., 2018). However, this model goes further and shows that leader resilience (including strategic intelligence and managerial competencies) is not only a driver, but also the main catalyst for activating capabilities at other levels. At the organizational level, this model is consistent with the main literature by highlighting capabilities such as agility, learning culture and digital transformation

(Georgescu et al., 2024; Dowlatabadi, 2025) and shows that organizational capabilities are a platform for institutionalizing individual-level experiences and intuitions and transforming individual learning into organizational memory. At the network level, this model is also consistent with the findings of researchers by emphasizing strategic partnerships and resource dependency management (Koporcic et al., 2025). In the Iranian context, where formal institutions are weak and unreliable, informal and trust-based networks (social capital) become an alternative infrastructure for business. At the macro level, the resilience of small and medium-sized enterprises affects the resilience indicators of society, and supportive government policies can lead to strengthening the country's business ecosystem. This research, by moving beyond simplistic models, attempted to open the black box of resilience in the unique context of Iran's permanent crisis.