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Building Sustainable Competitive Advantage through Talent Management Strategies: A Resource Based Perspective on Chinese Tech SMEs

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Abstract

In the knowledge-based economy, talent is increasingly recognized as a key strategic asset for organizations seeking to achieve sustainable competitive advantage, particularly in technology based small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in China. This study investigates the impact of four core dimensions of talent management strategies, namely talent identification, talent attraction, talent development, and talent retention, on sustainable competitive advantage. Although talent management has attracted growing attention in strategic human resource management research, limited empirical evidence exists on how these distinct strategic dimensions influence competitive outcomes within the SMEs context. This study adopts a quantitative approach by collecting survey data from senior managers working in Chinese technology-based SMEs. The data are analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling to evaluate both the measurement and structural models. The results indicate that all four talent management strategies have a significant and positive influence on sustainable competitive advantage. Among them, talent talent identification and talent attraction show the strongest effects. These findings contribute to the literature by offering a more detailed application of the Resource Based View in understanding talent management strategy and by providing practical guidance for SME leaders aiming to strengthen their long-term competitiveness through strategic talent capital investments.

Keywords: Talent Management Strategies, Sustainable Competitive Advantage, Resource Based View, Technology Based SMEs

Introduction

In recent years, technology-based small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have emerged as critical engines of innovation, economic vitality, and industrial upgrading in China(Yao et al., 2024). These enterprises play a strategic role in driving technological

advancement, enhancing regional competitiveness, and supporting the country's transition toward a knowledge-based and innovation-driven economy. Given their inherent flexibility, agility, and innovation potential, tech SMEs are considered central to China's national development priorities(Sun et al., 2024). However, despite their strategic position, these enterprises face numerous challenges in sustaining competitive advantage, particularly when it comes to attracting and retaining top-tier talent in an increasingly competitive labor market(Zhang et al., 2023).

Talent mobility in China's technology-based SMEs has intensified significantly, with skilled professionals in core technical and research roles becoming highly sought after by both domestic and international firms (Tong et al., 2022). The shortage of qualified talent and the difficulty in retaining key individuals have emerged as major barriers to maintaining innovation and ensuring the long-term viability of technology-based SMEs (Hwang et al., 2020). In this context, the ability of an organization to identify, attract, develop, and retain talent is no longer simply a huma resource function. Rather, it is a strategic necessity that directly influences business outcomes. As a result, talent management strategies have become essential to maintaining organizational adaptability and achieving sustainable competitive advantage(Ceglinski, 2020; Barahma et al., 2021).

Strategic talent management consists of four interrelated strategies: talent identification, talent attraction, talent development, and talent retention. Together, these strategies determine how effectively an organization can build and sustain the talent capital needed to realize its long-term objectives. While innovation capabilities and technical assets are often emphasized in competitive strategy, the internal capability to manage talent effectively plays an equally important role (Egwakhe et al., 2023). This view aligns with the Resource Based View of the firm, which argues that talent capital can provide a foundation for sustainable competitive advantage when it is valuable, rare, inimitable, and supported by the organization (Sanders et al., 2022).

Although past research has investigated the effects of talent management on outcomes such as innovation and firm performance (Luna-Arocas, 2023), relatively few studies have examined the direct impact of specific talent management strategies on sustainable competitive advantage (Jooss et al., 2023; Jyoti & Rani, 2014). This gap is especially evident in the context of Chinese technology-based SMEs, where talent challenges are particularly acute and where the strategic management of talent is still evolving.

The objective of this study is to examine how the four dimensions of talent management strategy (identification, attraction, development, and retention) influence sustainable competitive advantage in Chinese tech SMEs. Using the Resource Based View as a theoretical foundation, this study proposes and empirically tests a conceptual model linking talent management strategies to competitive outcomes. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section presents a review of the relevant literature. This is followed by a description of the research methodology and the data analysis procedures. The findings are then presented and discussed, followed by theoretical and practical implications. The paper concludes with limitations and directions for future research.

Literature Review

Talent Management Strategies

Talent management strategies refer to a set of integrated, organization-wide approaches designed to identify, attract, develop, and retain individuals whose skills, knowledge, and capabilities are critical to achieving long-term strategic objectives. As a strategic function of human resource management, talent management strategies aim not only to fill current positions but also to ensure a continuous pipeline of high-quality talent capable of sustaining competitive advantage in dynamic business environments (Collings et al., 2019). Building on the Resource Based View (RBV), these strategies recognize human capital as a valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resource that requires deliberate planning and alignment with organizational goals (Kaliannan et al., 2023). In the context of technology-based SMEs, talent management strategies are particularly critical due to the rapid pace of technological change, the high demand for specialized skills, and the constant threat of talent mobility.

Talent Identification Strategy

Talent identification is the strategic process of recognizing individuals with high potential to occupy key roles that drive organizational success (Yildiz & Esmer, 2022). This process involves identifying strategically important positions, assessing internal and external talent pools, and aligning workforce planning with long-term business priorities (Anlesinya et al., 2019; Chadee & Raman, 2012). In technology-based SMEs, talent identification is crucial for securing expertise in research and development, engineering, and other innovation-intensive domains. Organizations often employ structured assessment tools, competency mapping, and proactive recruitment pipelines to minimize talent gaps (Jooss et al., 2023). A balanced approach that integrates internal promotions with external hiring ensures both continuity and fresh perspectives, ultimately enhancing organizational responsiveness and adaptability (Liu et al., 2020).

Talent Attraction Strategy

Talent attraction focuses on positioning the organization as an employer of choice through employer branding, a compelling employee value proposition (EVP), and a supportive organizational culture (Knezović et al., 2020). Effective attraction strategies aim to differentiate the organization in the labor market by highlighting competitive compensation, professional development opportunities, and a positive work environment (Nurmala & Hermina, 2024; Yildiz & Esmer, 2022). Employer branding influences job seekers' perceptions of the organization's values and vision, while the EVP communicates tangible and intangible benefits such as career progression, work-life balance, and recognition (Soeling et al., 2022). In technology-based SMEs, attraction strategies often emphasize innovation culture, growth potential, and leadership accessibility to appeal to high-caliber candidates (Chen et al., 2023).

Talent Development Strategy

Talent development refers to the systematic enhancement of employees' skills, knowledge, and competencies to ensure alignment with evolving organizational needs (Abiwu & Martins, 2022). This includes competency-based training, career path planning, leadership development, and mentoring programs (Jayaraman et al., 2018). In the fast-changing context of technology-based SMEs, talent development emphasizes digital literacy, problem-solving, and adaptive leadership (Luthia, 2023). By investing in targeted development initiatives, organizations not only build internal capabilities but also strengthen employee engagement

and commitment, which are essential for sustaining competitive advantage (Plaikner et al., 2023).

Talent Retention Strategy

Talent retention involves implementing policies and practices to preserve high-quality employees in key roles over the long term (Sandeepanie et al., 2024). Retention strategies may include competitive remuneration, opportunities for career advancement, flexible work arrangements, and cultivating a strong organizational reputation (Al Aina & Atan, 2020). Leadership quality, supportive culture, and alignment between organizational and individual goals play a crucial role in employee commitment (Shinta et al., 2024). In technology-based SMEs, where competition for skilled talent is intense, retention strategies must be closely integrated with strategic business functions to prevent the loss of critical expertise and maintain organizational continuity (Suriati et al., 2024).

Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA)

Sustainable competitive advantage refers to a firm's ability to maintain a superior market position over its competitors by leveraging resources and capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and organizationally supported (Jay B. Barney, 1991; Khan et al., 2019). While competitive advantage may be temporary, SCA implies durability over time despite environmental changes and competitive pressures. From the RBV perspective, talent capital, when strategically managed, can serve as a foundation for SCA by enabling unique value creation that is difficult for competitors to replicate.

The main attributes of SCA include resource value, ensuring that resources contribute meaningfully to customer satisfaction and profitability; rarity, ensuring that resources are not widely available to competitors; inimitability, preventing competitors from easily duplicating the firm's capabilities; and organizational capability, which ensures the firm can effectively leverage and protect these resources (Barney & Hesterly, 2012). In technology-based SMEs, SCA often manifests through innovation capacity, high-quality products or services, superior managerial capabilities, and a resilient organizational culture that supports adaptation in fast-changing markets.

Theoretical Framework

The RBV provides the primary theoretical foundation for this study, emphasizing that firms achieve SCA by acquiring and managing resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991). Talent, as a strategic resource, meets these criteria when managed effectively through integrated talent management strategies. However, because resources alone are static, this study also draws on the Dynamic Capabilities View (DCV), which highlights the firm's ability to adapt, integrate, and reconfigure its resource base in response to environmental shifts (Teece et al., 1997). This dual-theory approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how talent management strategies can both leverage existing human capital and adapt it to evolving business needs, particularly in the volatile environment faced by Chinese technology-based SMEs.

Research Gap

Previous research has explored various aspects of talent management and its relationship with organizational performance, innovation, and employee engagement (Collings et al.,

2019; Pandita & Ray, 2018). Studies have shown that talent management practices positively influence innovation capability, employee retention, and overall competitiveness (Jibril & Yesiltas, 2022; Egwakhe et al., 2023). However, most prior work has examined these relationships in large organizations or in Western contexts, with relatively limited focus on SMEs in developing economies. Moreover, few studies have systematically addressed the four distinct strategies of talent management (identification, attraction, development, and retention) in relation to SCA.

In the context of Chinese technology-based SMEs, this gap is particularly significant. These firms operate in highly dynamic, resource-constrained environments where talent management is critical to innovation and long-term competitiveness, yet the strategic management of talent remains under-researched. By focusing on the four dimensions of talent management strategies and their direct impact on SCA, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature and extends the application of the RBV and DCV to an important organizational context.

Methodology

Research Design and Data Collection

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to investigate the effects of four dimensions of talent management strategies, namely talent identification, attraction, development, and retention, on sustainable competitive advantage in Chinese technology-based SMEs. The research adopted a structured questionnaire to ensure standardization and comparability of responses. The target population consisted of senior executives, who were considered key informants due to their direct involvement in talent management decision-making. Simple random sampling was used to enhance the representativeness of the sample and minimize selection bias. Data were collected through an anonymous, self-administered online questionnaire, which facilitated efficiency and reduced geographical constraints. Prior to participation, respondents were informed that their involvement was voluntary, their responses would remain confidential, and they retained the right to withdraw at any stage without negative consequences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. A total of 440 questionnaires were distributed and returned, of which 403 were deemed valid after screening for completeness and consistency, resulting in an effective response rate of 90 percent, which meets the recommended threshold for structural equation modeling using PLS-SEM.

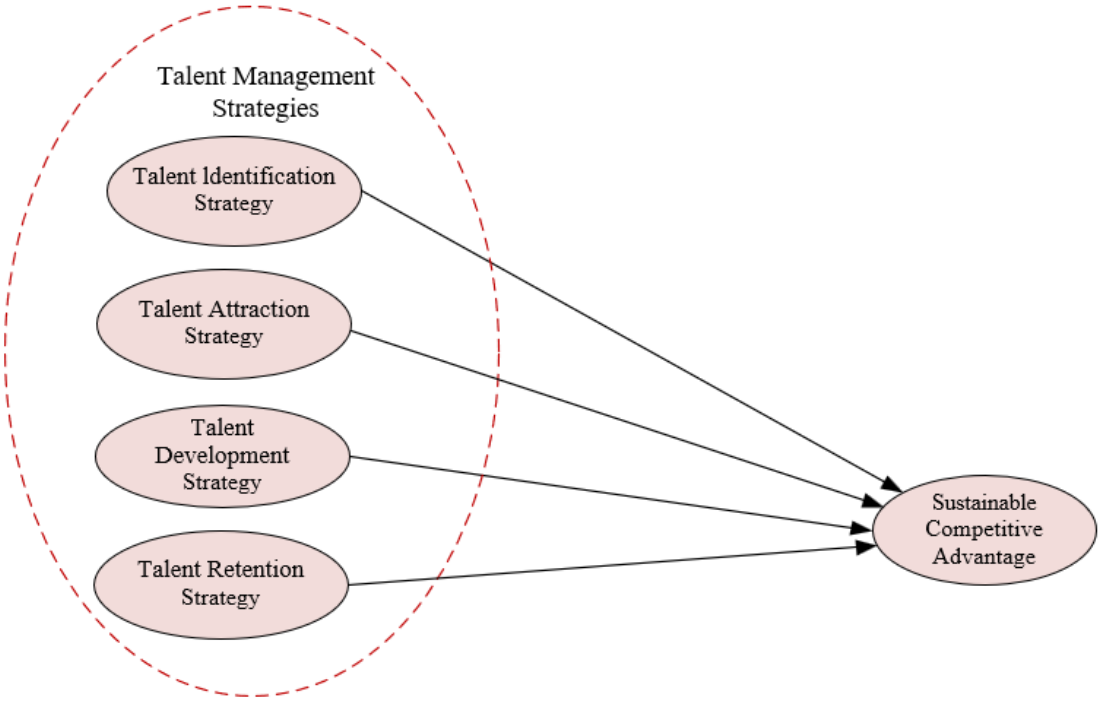
Measurement of Constructs

All constructs in this study were measured using multi-item scales adapted from established studies to ensure content validity and comparability with prior research. The measurement instrument was developed in English and translated into Chinese using the back-translation method (Brislin, 1986) to ensure semantic equivalence. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”), allowing for the assessment of respondents’ perceptions regarding the degree to which each statement reflected their organization’s practices or outcomes.

This study will adopt and adapt the three talent management practice scales, namely talent identification, talent development developed by Savov et al., 2020, as well as the two scales of talent attraction and talent retention developed by Lyria (2014). The dependent

variable, Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA), was measured using items derived from Hussain et al. (2020). The items reflected the core RBV attributes of value, rarity, inimitability, and organizational capability, as well as the ability to sustain superior performance over time. These measurement items were refined through expert review to ensure contextual relevance for Chinese technology-based SMEs.

Research Model



Data Analysis

The statistical analysis for this study will be conducted using SPSS version 26.0 and the SmartPLS 4.1.0 software to analyze and interpret the survey data. Descriptive statistics will be used to summarize the characteristics of the sample, while correlation and regression analyses will be employed to investigate the relationships between talent management strategies and sustainable competitive advantage.

Results

The results of the data indicators in this study all met the required standards, indicating that the model data have high convergent validity and that the internal correlations among the variables meet the required criteria.

Reliability and Validity Analysis

Reliability and convergent validity

Cronbach's Alpha and Convergent Validity Analysis

	Factor loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
SCA1	0.899	0.875	0.906	0.617
SCA2	0.740			
SCA3	0.777			
SCA4	0.787			
SCA5	0.712			
SCA6	0.785			
TAS1	0.899	0.914	0.930	0.625
TAS2	0.774			
TAS3	0.727			
TAS4	0.798			
TAS5	0.794			
TAS6	0.799			
TAS7	0.778			
TAS8	0.742			
TDS1	0.906	0.896	0.921	0.660
TDS2	0.810			
TDS3	0.805			
TDS4	0.783			
TDS5	0.789			
TDS6	0.773			
TIS1	0.908	0.912	0.928	0.589
TIS2	0.747			
TIS3	0.743			
TIS4	0.779			
TIS5	0.725			
TIS6	0.752			
TIS7	0.714			
TIS8	0.753			
TIS9	0.769			
TRS1	0.918	0.915	0.931	0.630
TRS2	0.786			
TRS3	0.792			
TRS4	0.790			
TRS5	0.771			
TRS6	0.745			
TRS7	0.781			
TRS8	0.756			

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity refers to the degree to which different constructs or latent variables in a measurement instrument are distinct from one another, and is also known as discriminant validity in measurement. It ensures that different latent variables are conceptually and empirically separate, meaning that the measurements for different latent variables capture

their distinctiveness. Discriminant validity is primarily assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio.

A lower HTMT value indicates higher discriminant validity between two latent variables. Generally, the HTMT value for each pair of dimensions should be less than 0.85. If the HTMT value between two latent variables exceeds 0.85, it may indicate high collinearity or insufficient discriminant validity. The results of this study show that the HTMT values for all dimensions are below 0.85, which meets the recommended threshold.

Discriminant validity - HTMT

	SCA	TAS	TDS	TIS	TRS
SCA					
TAS	0.349				
TDS	0.334	0.257			
TIS	0.369	0.212	0.218		
TRS	0.400	0.263	0.421	0.298	

The Fornell-Larcker criterion is composed of the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each variable (bold values on the diagonal) and the correlation coefficients between variables. In the table below, the diagonal values are the square roots of the AVE (bolded), and the other values are the Pearson correlation coefficients between constructs. For all constructs, the square root of the AVE is greater than the corresponding correlation coefficient values. For example, the square root of the AVE for SCA is 0.785, which is greater than the maximum absolute value of its correlation coefficients, 0.367.

Discriminant validity - Fornell-Larque standard

	SCA	TAS	TDS	TIS	TRS
SCA	0.785				
TAS	0.325	0.790			
TDS	0.303	0.236	0.812		
TIS	0.336	0.194	0.200	0.768	
TRS	0.367	0.245	0.385	0.276	0.794

Correlation Analysis

The above analysis has confirmed that the questionnaire has passed the reliability and validity tests, demonstrating good internal consistency and adequate discriminant validity. Therefore, the collected sample data can be used for empirical analysis. To begin, the study examines whether there are relationships among the variables by conducting a correlation analysis, and the results are as follows:

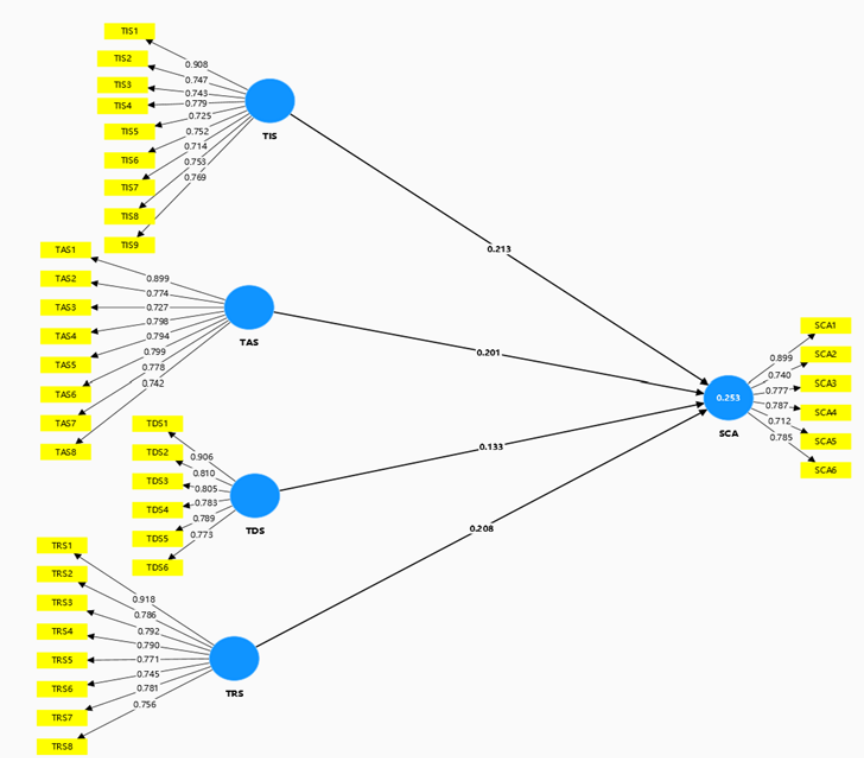
Correlations

	Talent Identification Strategy	Talent Attraction Strategy	Talent development Strategy	Talent Retention Strategy
Sustainable Competitive Advantage	.326**	.307**	.292**	.360**

The correlation analysis showed that all four dimensions of talent management strategies were significantly and positively related to sustainable competitive advantage. Talent retention strategy (r = 0.360) had the strongest correlation, followed by talent identification strategy (r = 0.326), talent attraction strategy (r = 0.307), and talent development strategy (r = 0.292), indicating that each dimension plays a meaningful role in enhancing long-term competitiveness.

Path Analysis

In this study, PLS version 4.1.0 was used to develop and analyze the SEM model for the study variables, and the detailed results of the path analysis are presented as follows.



Model Fit

The model's explanatory power was evaluated by examining the R^2 value of the endogenous variable. As shown in the table, the R^2 value for SCA is 0.253, indicating that the model accounts for 25.3% of the variance in SCA. According to Cohen's (1988) guidelines, this represents a moderate level of explanatory power in the context of social sciences research.

R^2

	R^2	Adjusted R^2
SCA	0.253	0.246

Effect size, denoted as f^2, is used to assess the practical significance of different paths by calculating the magnitude of their effects. When the f^2 value is greater than 0.02, the path is considered to have an impact. The f^2 results in this study indicate that all paths have effective influence.

F^2

Path	F^2
TAS -> SCA	0.049
TDS -> SCA	0.020
TIS -> SCA	0.054
TRS -> SCA	0.046

Predictive Relevance

Q^2 is an important indicator for assessing the predictive relevance of a model, representing its ability to predict endogenous variables. A Q^2 value greater than 0 indicates that the model has a certain level of predictive relevance for the variable, and the higher the Q^2 value, the stronger the predictive ability. The results in the table show that the Q^2 values for all variables in the model are greater than 0, meeting the standard for predictive relevance and indicating that the model possesses good predictive capability.

Q^2

	SSO	SSE	Q^2
SCA	2418.000	1296.941	0.464
TAS	3224.000	1575.951	0.511
TDS	2418.000	1162.163	0.519
TIS	3627.000	1884.674	0.480
TRS	3224.000	1563.024	0.515

Path Analysis

The path coefficient results presented in the table illustrate the specific influence relationships among the different paths in the model. The table reports the path coefficients, t-values, and significance levels (p-values) for each path.

Result

	coefficient	M	STDEV	T	P
TAS -> SCA	0.201	0.205	0.044	4.561	0.000
TDS -> SCA	0.133	0.135	0.049	2.719	0.007
TIS -> SCA	0.213	0.217	0.049	4.309	0.000
TRS -> SCA	0.208	0.209	0.047	4.402	0.000

Path analysis results indicate that all four talent management strategies have significant positive effects on sustainable competitive advantage ($p < 0.01$). Talent identification strategy shows the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.213$), followed by talent retention ($\beta = 0.208$), talent attraction ($\beta = 0.201$), and talent development ($\beta = 0.133$). These findings confirm that each strategy contributes meaningfully to enhancing a firm's long-term competitiveness.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal a significant positive relationship between talent management strategies, comprising talent identification, attraction, development, and retention, and sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) in Chinese technology-based SMEs. This supports the Resource Based View (RBV), which posits that strategically managed human capital constitutes a valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resource capable of

sustaining long-term competitiveness. In the Chinese high-tech SME context, where talent scarcity and mobility present persistent challenges, strategic talent management emerges as a critical complement to technological capabilities in maintaining market differentiation and organizational resilience.

This research extends the RBV framework to an emerging economy context, illustrating that while its core principles are universally relevant, their application must be adapted to local institutional, economic, and labor market conditions. The results indicate that effective talent management strategies in China should align with national innovation policies, leverage regional talent clusters, and respond to the competitive intensity of technology-driven industries. For practitioners, the study underscores the need to embed talent management within broader strategic planning, ensuring that human capital initiatives are directly linked to organizational objectives and long-term growth.

From a policy perspective, governments and industry associations can enhance SMEs' access to skilled talent by supporting collaborative training programs, fostering industry-academia partnerships, and offering targeted incentives for talent development in strategic sectors. SME leaders are encouraged to adopt a holistic approach that combines competitive remuneration with opportunities for skill development, innovation participation, and career progression, while fostering a collaborative and adaptive work culture. By embedding these practices, Chinese technology-based SMEs can better navigate talent market volatility, strengthen their competitive positioning, and achieve sustainable long-term growth. Future research could build on these findings by employing longitudinal designs, incorporating multi-level perspectives, and exploring the mediating or moderating effects of innovation capability, organizational culture, or leadership style.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors confirm that there are no potential conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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