

# From Digital Resources to Sales Capabilities: A Resource-Based Perspective on Social Media Inertia in B2B Manufacturing Enterprises

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## Abstract

Despite the continued expansion of the global electric vehicle market, China's lithium battery anode material industry faces a persistent paradox: revenues are rising, yet profitability remains constrained as traditional competitive advantages weaken. In this context, many established B2B manufacturers have adopted digital tools but struggle to translate them into effective sales capabilities. Drawing on the Resource-Based View (RBV), this study employs a diagnostic single-case approach to examine JHY, a representative B2B manufacturing firm, to explain why digital resources remain underutilized. Empirical data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 internal stakeholders, ranging from senior executives to frontline sales staff, and were triangulated with external feedback from a client-side procurement director. The analysis indicates that the core challenge lies not in access to digital tools, but in how these tools are interpreted and enacted in everyday sales practice. The findings reveal a condition of "false digital prosperity," in which social media accounts are formally activated but used cautiously and superficially. Three interrelated structural frictions account for this outcome: cognitive misalignment between industrial norms and the social logic of digital platforms, content deficits arising from organizational silos that limit customer-oriented communication, and an institutional void caused by misaligned incentives and evaluation systems. External validation confirms that fragmented digital engagement is often perceived by customers as intrusive rather than value-adding. Overall, the study highlights that digital transformation in traditional B2B manufacturing depends less on tool adoption and more on resolving organizational frictions that inhibit capability development.

**Keywords:** Social Media, B2B Sales, Industrial Marketing, Digital Capability Gap, Capability Development, Digital Transformation, Resource-Based View, Organizational Inertia

## Introduction

Traditional manufacturing sectors are currently grappling with a "Digital Paradox" (Tóth et al., 2022). While companies invest billions in infrastructure—from CRM systems to social media platforms—these investments frequently fail to translate into tangible business value. For established B2B firms, this transition is particularly jarring. Unlike "digital natives," manufacturers must navigate a clash between the rigid, hierarchical logic of industrial production and the fluid, informal logic of digital networks. Digital transformation is not merely a technical upgrade but a profound organizational disruption requiring the "unlearning" of entrenched habits (Mattila et al., 2021). The core challenge, then, is no longer about just buying digital resources, but about resolving the internal frictions that prevent these resources from becoming effective organizational capabilities (Hortovanyi et al., 2023).

This paradox is nowhere more acute than in China's lithium battery anode material industry. While the global market for electric vehicles (EVs) has surged, China's battery supply chain has not seen the expected economic windfall. Instead, the industry is trapped in a state of "profitless growth": revenue is rising, but profits remain flat (IEA, 2024). Aggressive policy incentives and speculative capital have triggered irrational expansion, turning a once-profitable market into a hyper-competitive "red ocean" (Wu et al., 2024). The outlook remains concerning; global production capacity is expected to exceed demand by 60% by 2025, locking the industry into price wars (Max Reid, 2025). In this climate, relying on production scale and traditional "Guanxi" (business dining) is no longer sufficient to retain customers. Digital transformation has thus emerged not as a luxury but as a strategic necessity for survival.

However, the pivot to digital sales is fraught with difficulty. Intensifying competition demands adaptive sales teams capable of leveraging social media within a hybrid sales framework (Rangarajan et al., 2021a). The experience of JHY, a Southwest China-based manufacturer, exemplifies this struggle. Despite equipping its sales team with smartphones and WeChat accounts, JHY faces a condition of "false digital prosperity." Sales performance plummeted during the recent market downturn, while the sales team exhibited significant resistance to adopting digital workflows. This disconnect aligns with the Resource-Based View (RBV), which asserts that simply *owning* resources is distinct from possessing the *capability* to utilize them (Barney et al., 2001).

Despite the ubiquity of such failures, existing literature often overlooks them. While early research largely celebrated the benefits of digital adoption, emerging scholarship has begun to uncover the "dark side" of B2B digitalization (Papagiannidis et al., 2023). These studies warn that without proper organizational alignment, digital tools can lead to "unintended consequences" (Oikawa et al., 2024), such as operational inefficiency or employee resistance. However, a critical gap remains in explaining *why* this failure occurs from a resource perspective. Current RBV research often assumes a direct link between digital assets and performance, missing the complex process of "resource orchestration" (Duah et al., 2024). We still know little about how manufacturing firms specifically struggle to orchestrate social media resources within a traditional, relationship-based sales culture.

To address this gap, this study employs a diagnostic single-case approach to analyze the internal frictions within JHY. We explicitly link the micro-level phenomenon of "social media inertia" to the broader social science debate concerning Socio-Technical Systems (STS). While

managers might dismiss employee resistance as simple reluctance, recent research suggests it stems from a structural "misalignment" between the social and technical subsystems of an organization (Govers & van Amelsvoort, 2023). We argue that sales force resistance is not merely non-compliance, but a manifestation of "systemic friction"—where the rigid social structure of the firm clashes with the open nature of digital tools. By adopting this lens, we respond to recent calls to examine how human agency navigates digital adoption in resource-constrained environments (Amanollahnejad et al., 2026).

## Literature Review

This chapter critically reviews the theoretical foundations and contemporary literature underpinning our research question. We begin by examining the Resource-Based View (RBV) to explain how internal resources contribute to competitive advantage. Next, we analyze the shifting landscape of B2B sales digitization, specifically focusing on hybrid sales models, social selling capabilities, and the unique dynamics of the Chinese market. Finally, we synthesize these perspectives into a conceptual framework that guides the study's methodology and data analysis.

### *The Resource-Based View*

This study adopts the Resource-Based View (RBV) to diagnose the disconnect between digital investment and actual sales performance at the case company. Modern RBV theory has evolved, shifting its focus from physical assets to intangible, knowledge-based, and digital resources (Cuthbertson & Furseth, 2022). In today's competitive B2B environment, simply possessing digital infrastructure is no longer a differentiator; it is merely an entry requirement, not a source of sustainable competitive advantage.

Central to our argument is the critical distinction between digital resources and digital capabilities. Research indicates that internet resources alone do not inherently create commercial value. Instead, value emerges only when these resources are transformed into active business capabilities through specific organizational practices (Soto-Acosta & Meroño-Cerdan, 2008). Similarly, technological assets rely on dynamic organizational capabilities to exert any real impact on corporate performance (Chatterjee et al., 2024).

For manufacturing SMEs, bridging the gap between resource possession and capability deployment proves difficult. While SMEs often possess the necessary digital inputs, they frequently lack the strategic mechanisms to integrate these tools into core operations to generate value. This gap often stems from insufficient human capital (Chaudhuri et al., 2022). Human capital is the primary driver of digital transformation; without employees who are willing and skilled enough to leverage digital tools, technological assets remain dormant (Willie, 2024). Applying this logic to digital marketing, competitive advantage lies not in the mere presence of social media channels, but in the effective execution of specific campaigns (Hagen et al., 2022).

### *Digital Transformation in B2B Sales: From Interpersonal to Hybrid Models*

The global pandemic has accelerated a fundamental shift in B2B sales. The traditional dichotomy between field and inside sales has given way to a hybrid model that blends physical interaction with digital engagement (Rangarajan et al., 2021b). This transition is driven not just by technology, but by changing buyer behavior: customers increasingly prefer digital

channels for information gathering, reserving face-to-face meetings for complex negotiations (Bowen et al., 2021). For SMEs expanding internationally, this shift offers critical leverage. Integrating social media with traditional approaches allows resource-constrained firms to maintain continuous dialogue with overseas clients, effectively overcoming size limitations and reducing travel costs during the persuasion phase (Fraccastoro et al., 2021).

Crucially, effective B2B social media use goes beyond simple information broadcasting; it requires specific organizational capabilities and systems. Research shows that integrating social media with Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems yields the highest return on investment. This integration converts informal social interactions into institutional knowledge, preventing client data from remaining the private property of individual salespeople (Itani et al., 2022). Furthermore, social selling is now understood as a multidimensional process comprising: (1) Insight Generation (identifying needs); (2) Connection (opening channels); and (3) Interaction (building relationships). This distinction is vital for the case company: simply connecting via WeChat is insufficient without the concurrent skills to generate insight and foster interaction (Terho et al., 2022).

In the Chinese context, digitalization takes on a unique cultural dimension, acting as an extension of "Guanxi." Far from being dehumanizing, digital tools in China serve as modern vehicles for traditional relationship-building, helping to maintain interpersonal trust and encourage partners to go beyond their contractual roles (Zhou et al., 2020). Moreover, digitalization offers a strategic escape from price wars. By leveraging digital platforms to showcase expertise and articulate complex value propositions, manufacturers can shift the conversation from price negotiation to value co-creation—a critical pathway for firms trapped in commoditized markets (Keränen et al., 2023).

### **Conceptual Framework**

We propose a diagnostic conceptual framework (see Figure 1) to analyze the paradox of resource abundance versus capability deficiency observed at JHY Company. The framework is grounded in the critical distinction between social media resources and social selling capabilities. Our central argument is that the mere accumulation of resources does not automatically translate into performance; rather, resources must undergo a complex organizational transformation to be activated as competitive capabilities. In the context of JHY, this transformation is disrupted by profound organizational friction. Tailored to the traditional Chinese B2B manufacturing context, the framework identifies three structural barriers that disrupt the conversion of social media resources into sales capabilities. First, cognitive misalignment refers to the psychological conflict between the sales team's entrenched "manufacturing mindset" and the "social logic" required for effective digital engagement. Experienced professionals often resist adopting social media for communication, citing concerns over professionalism and information leakage.

**Content Deficit:** While the company possesses extensive technical data, it fails to transform this raw material into socially engaging content. Consequently, salespeople are left "constraint-bound," forced to rely on obscure parameters that resonate poorly with clients.

**Institutional Void:** This barrier exists where the organization declares transformation a strategic imperative but fails to implement congruent incentive mechanisms or systematic training.

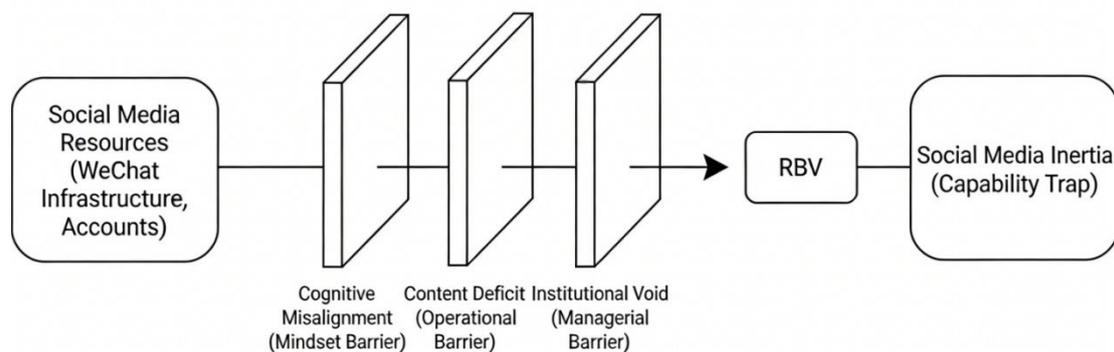


Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework of the Study

The framework's output demonstrates that when resource conversion is blocked by these barriers, the sales organization retreats into social media inertia. Despite possessing advanced tools, the company falls back on "path dependency"—reverting to comfort zones like traditional banquets and price wars—rather than driving innovation. As illustrated in Figure 1, social media resources serve as inputs, while cognitive, content-related, and institutional frictions intervene in the conversion process, ultimately resulting in social media inertia rather than capability development.

## Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design employed to investigate the phenomenon of social media inertia. Given our objective to diagnose root causes and understand the complex, human-centered barriers hindering digital adoption, we adopted a qualitative, diagnostic single-case study approach. This methodology allows for an in-depth, contextual exploration of the "how" and "why" behind resistance behaviors—nuances that purely quantitative methods often fail to capture.

### Research Design

We adopted an interpretivist philosophical stance to explore the underlying causes of social media inertia, rather than merely measuring its frequency. Since interpretivism posits that reality is socially constructed, understanding organizational behavior requires decoding the subjective meanings salespeople assign to their actions (Goldkuhl, 2012). At JHY Company, the failure of digital transformation is not a technical glitch but a result of how employees cognitively construct social media as a tool. Therefore, this paradigm allows us to uncover the psychological and cultural motivations behind these behavioral barriers. Methodologically, we employed a qualitative single-case strategy. Case studies are ideal for answering "How" and "Why" questions, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are blurred (Yin, 2018). By focusing exclusively on JHY, we were able to examine hierarchical interactions, cross-departmental friction, and micro-politics with a depth that multi-case comparisons or quantitative surveys rarely achieve.

JHY Company was selected based on its dual role as both a *typical* and a *critical* case. As a typical case, JHY represents the quintessential traditional B2B manufacturer in China—possessing strong physical assets and offline networks, yet struggling to adapt to the digital

wave. Its transformation anxieties reflect a pervasive feature of the broader industry. As a critical case, JHY presents a significant theoretical paradox. The company has invested heavily in digital infrastructure, yet suffers from extremely low usage. If structural barriers can be identified in such a resource-rich environment, the findings will offer powerful insights into the "capability trap" phenomenon (Patton, 2014).

### *Data Collection*

To conduct a comprehensive diagnosis of organizational inertia at JHY Company, we employed a purposive sampling strategy with maximum variation. Our objective was not to pursue statistical universality, but to capture the diverse—and often conflicting—perspectives within a single case (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). The final sample of 14 participants created a panoramic structure, spanning the entire chain of command from strategic decision-makers to frontline executors, and crucially, extending to external stakeholders.

The internal sample design balanced vertical hierarchical depth with horizontal operational breadth: Vertically, respondents included Vice Presidents and Sales Directors to articulate strategic intent, alongside middle managers and frontline staff to reveal real-world execution challenges. This cross-level approach is critical for identifying where strategic objectives break down during cascading. Horizontally, we deliberately selected members from both Key Account (KA) and Small-to-Medium Enterprise (SME) groups. This distinction is vital: while KA representatives rely on formal, high-stakes interactions, SME representatives operate in transaction-oriented environments—theoretically the optimal setting for social selling. A critical feature of our data collection was the inclusion of an external validator: a purchasing director from a client company. Unlike most organizational studies that rely solely on internal self-reports, this role provided an objective benchmark to validate the actual effectiveness of JHY's sales efforts. This external perspective served as a robust triangulation tool, enabling us to compare salespeople's self-perceived behaviors against the actual outcomes experienced by customers, thereby exposing significant cognitive dissonance.

Data were collected via in-depth semi-structured interviews, each lasting 45 to 60 minutes. To ensure psychological safety and encourage candor regarding organizational shortcomings, all sessions were conducted one-on-one in private settings with a strict guarantee of anonymity. The interview protocol moved beyond superficial usage metrics to probe three core dimensions: (1) discrepancies between reported behaviors and actual daily habits; (2) specific psychological or structural barriers; and (3) genuine perceptions of institutional support. This process yielded approximately 150,000 words of verbatim transcripts, establishing a rich database for analysis.

### *Data Analysis*

We analyzed the transcription data using a thematic analysis framework with an inductive approach. This method allowed patterns to emerge directly from participants' narratives rather than forcing data into predefined classifications (Fereday et al., 2006). We chose this approach for its inherent flexibility, which is essential for generating the rich, detailed insights needed to diagnose the root causes of organizational inertia. The analysis followed three iterative phases: Immersion and Open Coding. We engaged in repeated reading of the transcripts to generate initial codes. During this phase, we tagged specific statements

reflecting obstacles, attitudes, or contradictions. This meticulous process yielded over 100 initial codes that captured employees' raw, unprocessed "pain points." Categorization: We methodically organized these preliminary codes into sub-themes through comparison and classification, identifying underlying connections among dispersed data points. Theoretical Aggregation: Finally, we mapped these sub-themes onto the Resource-Based View (RBV) framework. Through this process of abstraction, we identified three aggregated dimensions that explain the gap between resources and capabilities: *Cognitive Misalignment*, *Content Deficit*, and *Institutional Void*.

## Findings

This section reveals the underlying mechanisms driving JHY Company's social media inertia, drawing on data from 14 in-depth interviews and external client feedback. Our findings indicate that despite achieving universal digital coverage at the infrastructure level, the company remains paralyzed by three structural barriers: *Cognitive Misalignment*, *Content Deficit*, and *Institutional Void*. This gap between resource possession and capability deployment not only stalls internal transformation but, as evidenced by client feedback, triggers negative reactions in the external market.

### *The Gap between Tool Proliferation and Application Depth*

Although JHY mandates that all employees activate WeChat, this has created a state of "false digital prosperity." The Sales Director revealed that the actual penetration of social media in core business operations remains below 20%, with interactions largely limited to superficial holiday greetings or file transfers. This was corroborated by the Key Account Team Leader, who noted that engagement with top-tier clients like CATL and BYD still depends heavily on traditional emails and in-person visits. This reality starkly illustrates our core thesis: JHY suffers not from a scarcity of resources, but from a systemic paralysis in converting those resources into capabilities.

### *Cognitive Misalignment*

The first line of defense against transformation stems from a clash between the senior employees' ingrained "industrial mindset" and the "social logic" required by digital tools. This conflict manifests primarily as a tension between formality and informality. Veteran Salesperson A, who manages the CATL account, views WeChat as a liability. He fears that sending emojis or voice messages to major clients with stringent protocols could be perceived as unprofessional. Similarly, Salesperson C, a staunch proponent of "banquet culture," argues that text communication can never replace the emotional bonds forged during face-to-face drinking sessions. Consequently, he has developed a mental block against social tools, dismissing them as superficial. A second driver is extreme risk aversion. Salesperson B, who has a technical background, expressed acute anxiety regarding data leakage. In the absence of clear information classification guidelines, he fears that sharing pilot test data in 500-member group chats could violate confidentiality agreements. To mitigate personal liability, he adopted a defensive strategy: "do nothing rather than do wrong." This has led to a complete cessation of social media use for technical collaboration. Driven from the bottom up, this cognitive resistance has effectively marginalized digital tools in critical business scenarios.

### *Content Deficit*

While veterans resist digital tools, younger salespeople face a different hurdle: a *Content Deficit*. They possess the will to engage digitally but lack the necessary "ammunition". The experience of Representative G, a digital native with extensive social selling experience, is telling. Upon joining JHY, she discovered that the only available collateral was obscure Excel parameter sheets provided by R&D. Lacking "market-ready" packaging, this raw data failed to resonate; her attempts to share these files were met with silence from clients. Attempting to bridge this gap, Representative D tried creating her own content to connect with younger clients. However, lacking deep technical expertise, her efforts backfired. Clients not only dismissed the amateurish quality but also actively corrected her imprecise parameter descriptions, damaging her professional credibility. The Assistant General Manager attributed this failure to organizational silos: Marketing lacks the budget to translate R&D's technical output into customer-facing content. Consequently, the sales team is left with powerful channels but no message. Unable to share value-driven content, they are forced to revert to generic holiday greetings, significantly diluting the strategic value of social engagement.

### *Institutional Void*

The final structural barrier is the *Institutional Void*—a management system that inadvertently punishes digital initiative. Our analysis reveals that JHY's performance evaluation and training systems remain tethered to the pre-digital era. First, KPIs create a conflict of interest. The Sales Director confirmed that metrics focus exclusively on monthly shipments and payment collections. Driven by short-term survival pressure, staff view social media efforts not as a strategic investment, but as an unpaid burden. The SME Client Group Leader summarized this toxic dynamic: without specific digital incentives, employees face a "zero-sum" scenario where "success brings no reward, but mistakes bring punishment". Second, there is a severe resource imbalance. The HR Director exposed a critical gap in capability building: 80% of the training budget is diverted to production technology. The remaining 20%, though earmarked for sales, is spent entirely on traditional offline negotiation techniques. This leaves both veterans and rookies "naked" in the digital arena, perpetuating an unbridgeable skills gap.

### *External Validation: The Client Perspective*

The external perspective from the Client Procurement Director provided the most critical validation for our study. Far from being impressed, he delivered a scathing critique of JHY's social media performance, dismissing it as little more than "spam". He pointed out a fatal lack of focus: the content failed to address major clients' concerns regarding supply chain stability, while simultaneously failing to offer any differentiation for SME clients. Adding to this friction were consistently delayed response times. Most damningly, he revealed that he had already blocked several JHY sales representatives' accounts to stop the noise. This feedback unequivocally demonstrates the study's ultimate conclusion: without strategic alignment, content creation, and institutional support, blind digital experimentation is not merely ineffective—it actively erodes brand equity.

### **Summary**

The breakdown at JHY was systemic. Cognitive misalignment erected psychological barriers; content deficits caused tactical paralysis; and institutional voids stifled sustained momentum. These internal fractures did not exist in isolation—they intertwined to degrade

the external client experience. This causal chain resolves the study's central paradox: it explains exactly why JHY, despite possessing abundant digital resources, was forced to retreat into inertia and inefficient traditional competitive models.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Drawing on the Resource-Based View (RBV), this chapter discusses why JHY remains unable to convert its digital investments into effective sales capabilities, despite possessing a substantial base of technological and organizational resources. The discussion first revisits the empirical findings to interpret how multiple structural frictions shape digital inertia in a traditional B2B manufacturing context. It then considers the managerial implications of these frictions, before outlining the study's limitations and concluding with broader reflections.

#### *Digital Resource and Capability Gaps in B2B Manufacturing Enterprises*

The case of JHY illustrates what can be described as a “false digital boom,” in which visible investments in digital tools and formal organizational arrangements coexist with limited capability development in sales practice. Rather than attributing this outcome to technological inadequacy, the findings suggest that the persistence of digital inertia is rooted in how resources are interpreted, enacted, and constrained within the organization. In this respect, the JHY case offers an empirical counterpoint to technologically deterministic assumptions that equate tool adoption with performance improvement.

Analysis of the interview data points to three interrelated structural frictions that shape this resource–capability gap. Cognitive misalignment reflects a tension between established industrial norms and the social logic associated with digital platforms. Senior sales staff did not dismiss social media as ineffective in principle; instead, they perceived its informality as misaligned with the rigor and legitimacy expected in high-stakes B2B transactions. This perception contributed to a cautious and defensive stance toward digital engagement, reinforcing existing sales routines rather than replacing them. The findings reveal a persistent content deficit that limits the practical use of digital tools. Although JHY generates extensive technical knowledge through its R&D activities, this knowledge is rarely translated into customer-facing materials that support sales interactions. From an RBV perspective, the challenge lies not in resource scarcity but in the organization's limited ability to convert technical assets into communicative forms that sales personnel can confidently deploy. As a result, digital engagement often remains superficial, centered on symbolic presence rather than substantive interaction. Digital inertia is further sustained by an institutional void at the organizational level. While senior management articulated digital transformation as a strategic objective, performance evaluation systems continued to prioritize short-term sales volume. This misalignment constrained experimentation with digital practices and reinforced reliance on familiar methods. Importantly, these frictions do not operate in isolation; together, they shape a context in which digital resources remain available but largely underutilized in everyday sales work.

#### *Management Insights: Strategies to Overcome Inertia*

The structural frictions identified above carry important implications for managers seeking to advance digital transformation in traditional B2B manufacturing firms. Escaping the capability trap requires moving beyond the deployment of digital tools toward a more differentiated and coordinated organizational response. At the cognitive level, a uniform

social media policy is unlikely to be effective. Instead, firms may benefit from segmenting digital engagement strategies according to client characteristics. For key accounts, social media can be repositioned as a low-risk, private service channel supporting technical coordination and document exchange, rather than as a primary negotiation platform. In contrast, engagement with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) may allow for more proactive use of public-facing digital channels to disseminate value-oriented content. Addressing the content deficit requires organizational mechanisms that bridge functional silos. Establishing cross-departmental processes to translate technical knowledge into customer-oriented materials can enhance sales teams' confidence in digital communication. Such mechanisms are less about producing promotional messages and more about enabling meaningful knowledge transfer between technical experts and market-facing staff. Finally, mitigating the institutional void calls for closer alignment between strategic intent and evaluation systems. When digital engagement is not reflected in performance metrics or supported through targeted training, sales personnel have limited incentives to invest time in unfamiliar practices. Adjusting evaluation criteria and reallocating training resources toward practical digital skills may help create conditions under which digital capabilities can gradually develop.

### **Research Limitations and Future Prospects**

While this study offers a deep diagnosis of the JHY case, several limitations must be noted. First, as a single-case design rooted in the specific context of B2B manufacturing, caution is required when generalizing these findings to B2C markets or other non-manufacturing sectors. Second, relying on cross-sectional data limits our view to a static snapshot; the study does not capture the dynamic evolution of the organization following the proposed interventions. Consequently, future research should adopt a longitudinal design to assess whether organizational inertia is effectively mitigated following the implementation of "content factories" or KPI reforms. Additionally, comparative studies examining B2B enterprises with diverse cultural backgrounds would provide further insight into the divergent paths of social transformation.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined why a resource-rich B2B manufacturing firm struggled to translate digital investments into effective sales capabilities. Using RBV as a diagnostic lens, the findings highlight how cognitive misalignment, content deficits, and institutional voids collectively constrain the enactment of digital resources in practice. Rather than treating social media as a technical add-on, the case of JHY underscores the importance of organizational alignment in shaping whether digital tools remain symbolic or become operationally meaningful. By focusing on the structural conditions that enable or inhibit capability development, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of digital transformation challenges in traditional manufacturing contexts.

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