

Entrepreneurial Resilience, Entrepreneurial Orientation, and Digital Transformation Capability: A Conceptual Framework for Innovation Performance in Chinese E-Commerce Startups

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Abstract

Purpose: This study develops a dynamic-capability framework linking entrepreneurial resilience (ER), entrepreneurial orientation (EO), and digital transformation capability (DTC) to innovation performance (IP) in Chinese e-commerce startups. It addresses the risk of viewing these capabilities in isolation by showing that resilience must be channelled through a proactive strategy and operationalized via digital transformation. **Design/methodology/approach:** Grounded in Dynamic Capabilities Theory, the model (ER → EO → DTC → IP) is proposed for empirical testing through a longitudinal, time-lagged design—measuring ER and EO at Time 1, DTC at Time 2, and IP at Time 3—using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). **Research limitations/implications:** Although conceptual at this stage, the proposed framework sets the foundation for longitudinal, multi-wave empirical validation. It highlights the need to consider venture stage, sub-sector type (B2C vs. B2B), and founder experience as control variables that shape capability development trajectories in digital ecosystems. **Practical implications:** Founders should balance resilience, strategic boldness, and digital execution; investors and policymakers should assess capability complementarities rather than isolated factors. **Originality/value:** This study contributes to entrepreneurship and digital transformation literature by offering a unified, dynamic-capability perspective that connects ER, EO, and DTC within the context of China's digital platform economy. It highlights the strategic cost of neglecting their interdependence—resilient firms may survive but fail to innovate, and proactive startups may envision but fail to execute without digital capability alignment.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial Resilience, Entrepreneurial Orientation, Digital Transformation Capability, Innovation Performance, Dynamic Capabilities, Resource-Based View, Chinese E-Commerce Startups

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the digital economy has reshaped global competition by significantly lowering search, coordination, and transaction costs, while enabling rapid recombination of data, platforms, and services (UNCTAD, 2023; OECD, 2022). E-commerce stands out as a particularly dynamic sector within this digital shift, where digitized market intermediation, sophisticated logistics management, and widespread mobile payments have accelerated innovation and market entry. China has emerged as a central hub in this transformation, with e-commerce transactions reaching approximately ¥46.8 trillion in 2023, constituting over 40% of global retail e-commerce (Ministry of Commerce, 2024; CNNIC, 2024). This growth is supported by extensive mobile payment systems, comprehensive logistics networks, and robust platform ecosystems such as Taobao/Tmall, JD.com, Pinduoduo, and Douyin (People's Bank of China, 2023).

However, these same conditions that drive rapid growth also elevate the risks associated with market participation. E-commerce startups frequently encounter high failure rates, often struggling to sustain innovation-driven growth amid intense price competition, escalating customer acquisition costs, and complex digital channel integration requirements (iResearch, 2023; McKinsey & Company, 2022). In such fast-paced environments, consistently transforming ideas into viable products, processes, and innovative business models—referred to as innovation performance (IP)—becomes critical for survival and maintaining competitive advantage (Alegre & Chiva, 2013; Gunday, Ulusoy, Kilic, & Alpan, 2011).

This paper addresses a key question emerging from this context: Despite acknowledging the importance of innovation, why do many Chinese e-commerce startups face persistent difficulties in maintaining long-term innovation performance? We propose that the answer lies in the interaction of three key organizational capabilities emphasized in entrepreneurship and digital transformation literature: entrepreneurial resilience (ER), entrepreneurial orientation (EO), and digital transformation capability (DTC). ER denotes an organization's adaptive persistence in facing adversity (Bullough & Renko, 2013; Ayala & Manzano, 2014). EO represents a strategic posture characterized by innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking (Miller, 1983; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Covin & Miller, 2014). DTC captures a firm's strategic ability to integrate, adapt, and utilize digital technologies effectively for value creation (Bharadwaj, 2000; Vial, 2019; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

Drawing upon the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT), we conceptualize entrepreneurial resilience (ER) as an essential adaptive capability that strategically informs entrepreneurial orientation (EO) and is technologically enacted through digital transformation capability (DTC), thereby driving superior innovation performance (IP). Within this framework, ER promotes opportunity identification under uncertain conditions, EO channels these opportunities into proactive experimentation and strategic risk-taking, and DTC operationalizes and scales these initiatives through digital technology integration. Collectively, this sequential pathway from ER through EO and DTC to IP addresses gaps in

existing research, which has often studied EO or DTC independently, and responds to the call for context-specific entrepreneurship theories tailored to China's platform-centric digital economy (Bruton, Zahra, & Cai, 2018).

Our study contributes in three significant ways. First, we incorporate ER within the microfoundations of DCT—specifically sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring—highlighting it as an organizational capability rather than solely an individual attribute. Second, we clearly define EO and DTC as interconnected mediators that convert resilience into measurable innovation outcomes, detailing a sequential mechanism particularly relevant for digital startups. Third, we propose a research agenda aimed at empirically validating this theoretical framework within Chinese e-commerce startups, covering aspects such as construct operationalization, appropriate research designs, and analytical methods tailored for environments characterized by high growth and uncertainty.

Literature Review

Entrepreneurial Resilience (ER)

ER refers to the capability to withstand adversity, positively adapt, and recover while pursuing opportunities in uncertain environments (Masten, 2001; Bullough & Renko, 2013; Ayala & Manzano, 2014). In startups, ER manifests organizationally via pivoting routines, resource bricolage, and rapid learning from failure (Fisher, Maritz, & Lobo, 2016; Corner, Singh, & Pavlovich, 2017). These routines are particularly salient in China's e-commerce ecosystem, where platform rules, consumer preferences, and competitive intensity shift quickly (McKinsey & Company, 2022; Reuters, 2024).

ER is theorized to support innovation by enabling sustained exploration under uncertainty, reframing constraints as creative prompts, and maintaining momentum across failed experiments (Shepherd, 2020; Duchek, 2020). However, evidence on ER at the firm level—distinct from individual traits—remains comparatively sparse and context-dependent, underscoring the need to specify ER's organizational microfoundations and its pathways to IP in China's digital markets (Bruton, Zahra, & Cai, 2018).

Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO)

EO encapsulates innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking (Miller, 1983; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Covin & Miller, 2014). Meta-analytic evidence links EO positively to performance outcomes, particularly innovation (Rauch, Wiklund, Lumpkin, & Frese, 2009). In emerging and high-velocity contexts, EO supports fast experimentation, rapid product iterations, and competitive moves that build and refresh advantage (Li, Zhao, Tan, & Liu, 2008; Wales, 2016). We expect ER to be an antecedent to EO: resilient ventures are more likely to persevere in opportunity search, commit to bold initiatives, and tolerate setbacks (Bullough & Renko, 2013; Fisher et al., 2016). In platform economies, EO helps firms launch new channel strategies (e.g., livestreaming commerce, social shopping), adopt novel customer acquisition tactics, and proactively shape niches (KPMG & AliResearch, 2023; Zhang & He, 2021).

Digital Transformation Capability (DTC)

DTC is the ability to integrate, reconfigure, and strategically apply digital technologies to transform processes, offerings, and business models (Vial, 2019; Warner & Wäger, 2019). It encompasses technology stacks (cloud, data, AI/analytics), human capital and digital skills,

governance, and culture aligned with experimentation and learning (Bharadwaj, 2000; Hess, Matt, Benlian, & Wiesböck, 2016; Kane et al., 2015).

In the context of the Chinese platform economy, DTC captures how startups dynamically interact with powerful digital platforms (e.g., Taobao, Douyin, JD.com) to access traffic, data, and analytics, while simultaneously developing their own digital assets, such as customer data infrastructures, livestreaming operations, and automation workflows. Thus, DTC represents a strategic orchestration capability—one that combines technological integration with strategic agility and cross-boundary collaboration. (Guo, Yang, Huang, & Guo, 2023; Khin & Ho, 2019). We expect ER to support DTC development by sustaining iterative technology adoption under uncertainty, and EO to further catalyze DTC by motivating experimentation with new digital platforms and analytics (Liu, Chen, & Chou, 2011; Wilden et al., 2013).

Innovation Performance (IP)

IP captures the extent to which firms generate and implement new products, services, processes, or business models that improve competitiveness (Alegre & Chiva, 2013; Chen, Lin, & Chang, 2009; OECD/Eurostat, 2018). Startups rely disproportionately on IP for survival and growth, especially in digital markets with short product life cycles (Autio, Kenney, Mustar, Siegel, & Wright, 2014).

IP is typically assessed via subjective and objective indicators (e.g., new product sales ratio, speed to market, process efficiency gains). In platformized Chinese e-commerce, innovation spans product/service features, customer experience design (e.g., livestreaming, social commerce), data monetization, and business model reconfiguration (KPMG & AliResearch, 2023; McKinsey & Company, 2022). We posit that DTC directly enhances IP by enabling rapid experimentation and scaling, with ER and EO supplying the motivational and strategic substrates.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed dynamic framework linking entrepreneurial resilience (ER), entrepreneurial orientation (EO), digital transformation capability (DTC), and innovation performance (IP). ER provides the adaptive foundation that enables firms to act under uncertainty. EO channels this adaptive energy into proactive, innovative, and risk-taking behaviors, while DTC allows firms to integrate, reconfigure, and strategically apply digital technologies to achieve superior innovation outcomes.

To make these relationships explicit and testable, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Entrepreneurial Resilience (ER) positively influences Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO).

H2: Entrepreneurial Resilience (ER) positively influences Digital Transformation Capability (DTC).

H3: Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) positively influences Digital Transformation Capability (DTC).

H4: Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) positively influences Innovation Performance (IP).

H5: Digital Transformation Capability (DTC) positively influences Innovation Performance (IP).

H6: Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) mediates the relationship between Entrepreneurial Resilience (ER) and Innovation Performance (IP).

H7: Digital Transformation Capability (DTC) mediates the relationship between

Entrepreneurial Resilience (ER) and Innovation Performance (IP). H8: Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) and Digital Transformation Capability (DTC) sequentially mediate the relationship between Entrepreneurial Resilience (ER) and Innovation Performance (IP).

Together, these eight hypotheses depict both direct and mediated effects and allow for potential feedback learning loops among capabilities—acknowledging that digital transformation outcomes may, in turn, enhance future resilience and strategic orientation.

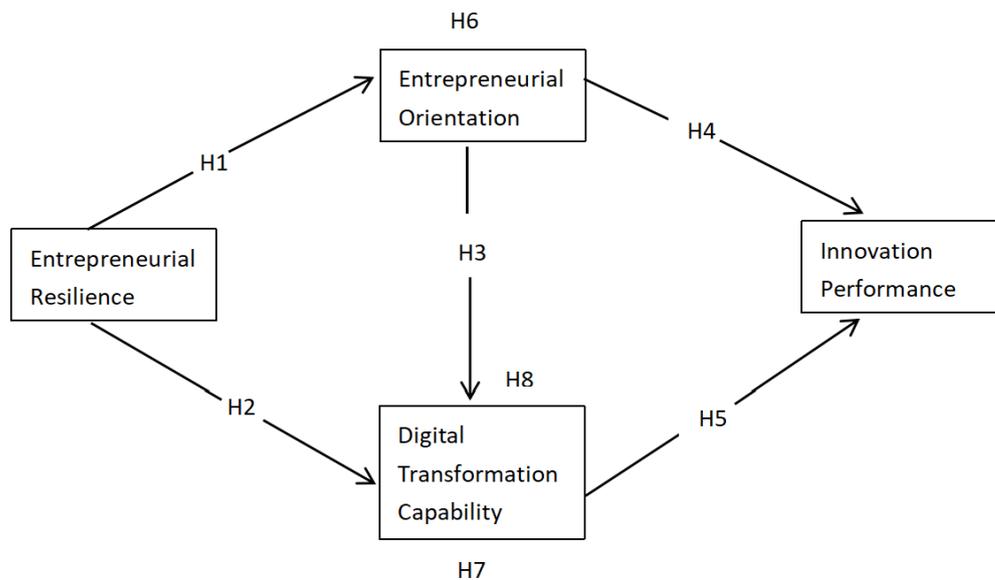


Figure 1. *Conceptual framework*

Methods

To empirically validate the proposed framework, this study adopts a quantitative, explanatory research design. While cross-sectional surveys may provide an initial understanding of the structural relationships among entrepreneurial resilience (ER), entrepreneurial orientation (EO), digital transformation capability (DTC), and innovation performance (IP), a multi-wave or longitudinal design is strongly recommended as the primary approach. Such a design captures the dynamic development of capabilities over time, consistent with the study's theoretical foundation in Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT).

Specifically, future empirical studies could measure ER and EO at Time 1, DTC at Time 2, and IP at Time 3. This temporal structure allows researchers to examine how early-stage resilience and strategic orientation foster later digital capability formation and, subsequently, innovation outcomes. A time-lagged design also mitigates common method variance (CMV) and enhances causal inference, enabling researchers to observe potential feedback effects—such as how innovation outcomes may reinforce subsequent entrepreneurial resilience and orientation.

The target population comprises Chinese e-commerce startups established within the past five years. Respondents should include founders and senior managers who directly influence strategic, technological, and innovation decisions. Data can be collected via online surveys distributed through entrepreneurship incubators, startup associations, and digital-commerce communities. A minimum of 200 valid responses is recommended for robust statistical

analysis using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which is appropriate for predictive, mediation-heavy models with moderate sample sizes (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019).

Measurement draws upon validated scales from prior research: ER from Fisher et al. (2016), EO based on innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking (Covin & Miller, 2014; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996), DTC encompassing managerial digital familiarity, strategic clarity, support, and integration into operations (Ukko et al., 2019; Warner & Wäger, 2019), and IP using subjective measures of product quality, commercialization speed, and innovation outcomes (Chen, Lin, & Chang, 2009; Alegre & Chiva, 2013). Likert-type scales should be varied across constructs to reduce CMV.

To strengthen internal validity, researchers should include control variables that account for contextual and firm-level differences. Recommended controls include venture age/stage, as entrepreneurial resilience may have stronger effects in early-stage firms; sub-sector type (B2C vs. B2B); firm size (number of employees or annual revenue); and founder experience (years of managerial or entrepreneurial experience). These controls help isolate the effects of the key constructs on innovation performance and ensure robustness of results.

For analysis, researchers should evaluate measurement reliability and validity (indicator loadings, AVE, CR), assess discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion and HTMT ratios), and test path coefficients, R^2 , and f^2 values. Mediation and sequential mediation effects should be examined using bootstrapping, while CMV can be checked via marker-variable techniques and full collinearity variance inflation factors (VIF) (Kock & Lynn, 2012).

By adopting this time-sequenced, control-adjusted, and PLS-SEM-based methodology, researchers can rigorously test the dynamic capability interactions proposed in the ER–EO–DTC–IP framework and uncover how entrepreneurial capabilities co-evolve to sustain innovation in China’s digital economy.

Discussion and Conclusion

China's e-commerce market offers exceptional growth potential, but its volatility increases the importance of adaptive strategies and digital capabilities. This paper explores how entrepreneurial resilience (ER), entrepreneurial orientation (EO), and digital transformation capability (DTC) work together in sequence to drive sustained innovation performance. By positioning ER within the dynamic capabilities framework and clarifying how EO and DTC act as interconnected mediators, our framework enhances theoretical understanding and provides a practical roadmap for entrepreneurs, investors, and policymakers. We also recommend future empirical research to test, refine, and identify boundary conditions of this model across different venture stages, regions, and platform contexts in China's digital economy. Moreover, while this study presents a sequential pathway from ER through EO and DTC to innovation performance, these relationships should not be interpreted as strictly linear. In practice, capability development is recursive and co-evolutionary—digital transformation outcomes can strengthen organizational resilience through experiential learning, while innovation success can refine entrepreneurial orientation and technology strategies. Future research may thus adopt longitudinal or dynamic modeling approaches to

capture these feedback loops, offering a more holistic understanding of how these capabilities mutually reinforce one another over time.

Theoretical Implications

This study strengthens the theoretical understanding of how entrepreneurial resilience (ER), entrepreneurial orientation (EO), and digital transformation capability (DTC) interact as dynamic, interdependent capabilities rather than isolated constructs. By integrating ER into the Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT) at the firm level, this paper extends existing work that traditionally conceptualizes resilience as an individual trait. Here, ER is reconceptualized as an organizational capability that supports the sensing and reconfiguring dimensions of DCT—embedded in routinized practices such as adaptive resource allocation, post-crisis learning, and opportunity recognition that sustain long-term adaptability (Duchek, 2020; Corner, Singh, & Pavlovich, 2017).

More importantly, this framework clarifies the cost of misunderstanding these relationships. Startups that treat ER, EO, and DTC as separate or sequentially disconnected capabilities risk serious strategic imbalance. Without channeling resilience through a proactive entrepreneurial orientation, resilient firms may persist but fail to innovate—stuck in survival mode rather than growth mode. Conversely, startups that emphasize EO without developing DTC may generate visionary ideas but lack the digital infrastructure and analytical capability to execute them. By showing that resilience must be channeled through EO and operationalized via DTC, this study provides a nuanced theoretical explanation for why many promising ventures struggle to translate intent into innovation performance.

The framework also advances EO and DTC research by positioning them as complementary and sequential mediators. EO initiates strategic direction and opportunity-seeking behavior, while DTC transforms these strategies into actionable digital initiatives. This integration bridges previously fragmented literatures on strategic posture and digital capability building (Rauch et al., 2009; Wales, 2016; Warner & Wäger, 2019). Finally, by situating the model within the Chinese e-commerce startup context, this study contributes to comparative entrepreneurship research. It demonstrates how platform dependence, algorithmic competition, and institutional turbulence shape capability co-evolution—providing valuable boundary conditions for dynamic capability theory in emerging digital economies (Bruton, Zahra, & Cai, 2018; KPMG & AliResearch, 2023).

Practical and Social Implications

For founders, the findings underscore that resilience alone is insufficient unless paired with strategic proactiveness (EO) and digital execution (DTC). Founders should embed structured learning mechanisms—such as post-mortem reviews, agile experimentation, and redundancy planning—while simultaneously nurturing a culture of innovation and calculated risk-taking. DTC should be viewed not as a one-off investment but as a cumulative strategic capability built through data infrastructure, analytics talent, and process integration aligned with strategic goals (Warner & Wäger, 2019; Vial, 2019).

For investors and incubators, the framework highlights the pitfalls of assessing startups solely by short-term market metrics. Instead, evaluations should consider dynamic capability complementarities—how resilient routines, strategic experimentation, and digital integration

co-develop. Post-investment programs should emphasize digital capability mentoring and ecosystem access to help founders translate strategic intent into tangible technological outcomes.

For policymakers, supporting innovation requires interventions that strengthen not only financial and regulatory conditions but also the underlying capability base of startups. Initiatives such as digital-skills bootcamps, data-sharing infrastructure, and regulatory sandboxes for new business models (e.g., livestream commerce) can accelerate the ER–EO–DTC trajectory. By fostering integrated capability development rather than piecemeal interventions, policymakers can amplify the competitiveness and innovation sustainability of startups within China’s digital economy (OECD, 2022; World Bank & Alibaba Group, 2019).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study provides a comprehensive conceptual framework integrating entrepreneurial resilience (ER), entrepreneurial orientation (EO), and digital transformation capability (DTC) within the dynamic capabilities perspective, several limitations should be noted. First, as a conceptual paper, it lacks empirical validation; therefore, the proposed relationships remain theoretical until tested with longitudinal or time-lagged data. Second, the model is contextualized within Chinese e-commerce startups, which may constrain external validity because institutional structures, platform ecosystems, and entrepreneurial cultures differ across regions. Third, the framework focuses primarily on firm-level dynamics and does not capture cross-level interactions, such as individual founder resilience or team-level digital competence. Finally, the study assumes linear and sequential relationships among ER, EO, DTC, and innovation performance, which may oversimplify the recursive and co-evolutionary nature of capability development in real-world contexts.

Future research could empirically test and refine this framework using longitudinal or panel data to examine how capabilities evolve over time and influence innovation trajectories. Comparative studies across industries and countries would help establish boundary conditions and enhance generalizability. Researchers may also explore moderating or mediating mechanisms—such as organizational learning capability, digital ecosystem participation, environmental turbulence, or institutional support—that shape these relationships. Moreover, qualitative or mixed-method approaches, including case studies and configurational (fsQCA) analyses, could uncover diverse capability-development pathways. Finally, future work might integrate behavioral and psychological dimensions of entrepreneurship, examining how founder cognition, team resilience, and digital mindset interact with strategic and technological capabilities to sustain innovation in rapidly changing digital economies.

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