

Building Sustainable Resilience: Essential Capabilities for SMEs.

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Abstract

This article investigates the resilience of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through a triadic analytical lens: absorptive capacity, renewal capacity, and appropriation capacity. Anchored in a qualitative conceptual approach, this study is based on an extensive review of academic literature that elucidates the dynamic interplay between these capabilities in the context of turbulence and uncertainty. The epistemological positioning is constructivist, favoring an interpretative logic to capture the complexity of SME behavior in evolving environments. The principal finding highlights that the integration of these three capacities significantly enhances the strategic agility and sustainable competitiveness of SMEs. In particular, firms that cultivate mechanisms for knowledge absorption, continuous innovation, and the protection and valorization of their intellectual outputs are more capable of transforming exogenous shocks into vectors of growth. This article offers a synthetic framework for understanding the multidimensional nature of organizational resilience in SMEs and provides theoretical and practical insights for researchers and practitioners.

Keywords: Resilience, SMEs, absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity, renewal capacity, innovation, appropriation, organizational learning, strategic agility.

Introduction

Resilience has become a central concept for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), especially in an ever-changing global context. In the face of current economic, environmental and socio-political challenges, the ability of SMEs not only to survive, but also to thrive is more crucial than ever. To operate in highly complex and changing environments, it is essential to understand the essential dimensions of this resilience - namely, the capacity to absorb, the capacity to renew, and the capacity to adapt. This article proposes to explore these dimensions through an extensive Literature review, highlighting the challenges SMEs face and the strategies they can adopt to strengthen their resilience. Our aim is to provide an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms underpinning SME Resilience, and their ability to adapt and innovate in a rapidly changing world.

Methodological Approach and Epistemological Positioning

This article adopts a conceptual and theoretical approach based on a qualitative, exploratory methodology aimed at structuring and deepening the understanding of SME resilience through the integrative analysis of absorptive, renewal, and appropriation capacities. From an epistemological standpoint, the research is anchored in a constructivist paradigm, which posits that knowledge is co-constructed through the interpretation of phenomena within their contextual specificities. This position allows for the appreciation of the dynamic, evolutionary, and situated nature of SME resilience, particularly in volatile environments. The mode of reasoning employed is primarily abductive. Rather than beginning with a rigid theoretical framework or a hypothesis to be tested deductively, the study iteratively mobilizes academic literature and conceptual insights to formulate an explanatory model grounded in the complexity of the phenomena observed. This abductive logic aligns with the nature of dynamic capabilities and resilience, which often emerge from non-linear processes. The methodological choice of a conceptual literature-based inquiry is justified by the need to synthesize and articulate fragmented bodies of knowledge across strategic management, organizational learning, and innovation studies. This synthetic approach aims to provide a robust theoretical framework that can serve as a basis for future empirical investigations. Thus, this article is not an empirical case study but a theory-building contribution, seeking to enrich the academic conversation on SME resilience while offering practitioners a structured lens for strategic action.

1. A conceptual framework for resilience:

1.1. Definition of Resilience:

Resilience in the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is defined as the ability of an organization to cope with disruption, adapt and reinvent itself. It encompasses not only resistance to shocks, but also the ability to transform after a crisis. According to Sweeney and Soutar (2001), “resilient firms are those that are able to adapt rapidly to change”. This gives them a competitive advantage that is essential for their survival and long-term growth.

Moreover, according to Lengnick-Hall and Beck (2005), resilience is “the ability of an organization to prepare for disruptive events, adapt to the changes, and evolve in response to these challenges”. This demonstrates the importance of a proactive approach to anticipating crises.

Finally, according to Bhamra, Dani and Burnard (2011), “resilience implies not only the ability to survive a crisis, but also to learn from it to strengthen the organization”. This perspective highlights the dimension of learning and continuous evolution that is essential for SMEs in a complex and dynamic business environment.

1.2. Stakes and the Importance of Resilience:

The resilience of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is fundamental to the economic stability and vitality of local communities. They represent a significant portion of the global economy and play a central role in job creation and innovation. However, they often face unique challenges, such as limited financial resources and increased vulnerability to external shocks. As the OECD (2020) points out, “the majority of SMEs lack the liquidity to weather long periods of crisis,” emphasizing their exposure to economic unpredictability.

This fragility highlights the importance of a proactive approach to resilience. By developing appropriate strategies, SMEs can not only navigate through periods of uncertainty but also convert crises into opportunities for growth and innovation. According to Lengnick-Hall and Beck (2011), Organizational Resilience is “the ability of a company to effectively absorb, develop situation-specific responses, and ultimately engage in transformative activities to capitalize on disruptive surprises that potentially threaten the survival of the organization”. By strengthening their ability to adapt, SMEs contribute to the dynamism of local economies, acting as engines of innovation and job creation.

Thus, investing in the resilience of SMEs is essential not only for their survival, but also for the long-term economic health of the communities in which they operate. As Börekci, Rofcanin

and Gürbüz (2015) stated, “Organizational resilience represents the qualities and adaptive capabilities that enable an organization to survive and sustain itself during turbulent situations”.

2. Dimensions of Resilience :

Organizational resilience is essential to a company's ability to navigate uncertain environments and overcome crises. It manifests itself in several key dimensions: Absorptive Capacity, which can manage shocks without disrupting operations; Renewal Capacity, which promotes adaptability and innovation; and Appropriation Capacity, which integrates lessons from the past to enhance organizational learning. Together, these dimensions provide a framework for understanding how companies, and in particular small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), can develop effective strategies for sustainability and growth.

Table 1: Three Core Capacities of SME Resilience

Capacity	Definition	Key Mechanisms	Strategic Value
Absorptive	Ability to identify, assimilate, and apply external knowledge	Knowledge acquisition, assimilation, transformation, application (Zahra & George, 2002)	Accelerates learning and responsiveness to environmental shifts
Renewal	Capability to adapt and innovate in response to environmental change	Product/process innovation, agile culture, strategic foresight	Ensures survival and long-term competitiveness
Appropriation	Capacity to capitalize and protect innovation and knowledge	Implementation, legal protection (IP), exploitation (licensing, commercialization)	Transforming knowledge into competitive advantage and market differentiation

Source : Authors

2.1. Absorptive capacity :

Absorptive capacity is a fundamental concept for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It is their first line of defense in the face of disruption. It is defined as a firm's ability to identify, assimilate, and apply external knowledge to improve its processes and products (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). In the context of a crisis, this capability becomes paramount as it allows companies to quickly readjust to new circumstances, learn from past mistakes, and integrate relevant innovations.

Zahra and George (2002) emphasize that absorptive capacity is essential for transforming external knowledge into internal innovation. This is particularly relevant for SMEs, which often operate in uncertain environments. Firms that establish networks for collaboration and information exchange are better equipped to capture and use relevant knowledge, increasing their resilience in the face of challenges. In fact, the ability to absorb not only permits the seizing of opportunities, but also the combating of threats, which strengthens the competitive position of SMEs in the market.

- **Absorption Mechanisms:**

Absorption mechanisms are essential for strengthening the resilience of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in a constantly changing economic environment. These mechanisms enable SMEs to seek, integrate and apply external knowledge, fostering innovation and adaptation in the face of challenges.

Knowledge acquisition: This first mechanism concerns the ability of SMEs to identify and seek out relevant information from a variety of external sources, such as market research, academic publications and professional networks. A proactive approach to knowledge acquisition enables companies to keep abreast of trends and best practices in their sector.

Knowledge Assimilation: Once information is acquired, it is critical to interpret and integrate it into the organization's internal processes. This requires an organizational culture that is open to learning and innovation. SMEs that encourage collaboration in cross-functional teams are better equipped to assimilate this new knowledge. They can then adapt their strategies and operations based on the lessons learned.

Applying knowledge: Finally, the ability to put acquired knowledge into practice is critical. This may involve developing new products, improving existing processes or adopting new technologies. SMEs that succeed in applying this knowledge not only increase their competitiveness, but also demonstrate an ability to innovate that sets them apart in the marketplace.

Kraaijenbrink et al (2010) found that SMEs with robust knowledge management systems, such as databases and collaboration platforms, have stronger absorptive capacity, which makes them more capable of effectively adjusting to market changes. Similarly, a study by Caniëls and Veld (2019) shows that SMEs that establish open communication channels with their customers are better able to detect market signals, improving their absorptive capacity.

Networks and partnerships: also play a key role in these absorption mechanisms. SMEs that build strong relationships with other companies, suppliers and academic institutions benefit from the sharing of knowledge and resources. These networks enrich the social capital of SMEs and facilitate access to critical information that can be transformed into innovation.

By integrating these elements, SMEs can not only optimize their absorptive capacity, but also strengthen their overall resilience towards market uncertainties. An organizational culture that values continuous learning and collaboration is therefore crucial to success in this dynamic environment.

- **Key approaches to Absorption capacity:**

Improving the absorptive capacity of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is essential to strengthening their resilience and their ability to be more competitive in the market. These strategies include

Reinforcing collaborative networks: SMEs should establish strategic partnerships with other companies, universities or research centers. These alliances allow access to new knowledge and the sharing of resources. In addition, participation in industrial clusters promotes the exchange of information and the adoption of best practices within a collaborative ecosystem.

Invest in training and skills development: It's critical to provide regular training to employees to help them develop skills in innovation management and data analysis. At the same time, the promotion of a culture of continuous learning encourages employees to acquire new skills and share their knowledge, enriching the entire organization.

Implementation of knowledge management systems: SMEs should set up internal databases to store and share knowledge within the company. The use of information-sharing platforms and digital tools also facilitates communication and knowledge exchange between employees, thereby strengthening absorptive capacity.

Create an open culture of innovation: Fostering an environment where new ideas are valued is paramount. SMEs must encourage innovation by embracing failure. The establishment of

continuous feedback mechanisms allows for feedback on new ideas and initiatives and supports continuous improvement.

Technology tool deployment: Investing in data analytics tools helps extract relevant information from existing data.

Furthermore, researching solutions based on artificial intelligence can help identify market trends and opportunities, making the SMEs more responsive.

Promoting R&D: Allocating a budget for research and development projects is vital. SMEs should seek external funding, such as grants or tax credits, to support their R&D initiatives and explore new technologies or methods.

Internal process evaluation and adaptation: Finally, it is important to analyze and adapt internal processes to effectively integrate new knowledge. Adopting agile project management methods enables rapid change and adaptation to new information.

By implementing these strategies, SMEs can significantly improve their absorptive capacity, enabling them to adapt more effectively to market challenges and seize new growth opportunities.

2.2. Renewal capacity:

The renewal capacity of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is a fundamental concept that refers to their ability to innovate and adapt to market changes. This capacity is essential to the survival and prosperity of SMEs, especially in times of crisis or in the face of rapid changes in consumer needs.

Renewability refers to the ability of SMEs to reinvent their products, services and processes in response to market changes and crises. According to Harrison and Leitch (2019), this includes not only the ability to adapt, but also to anticipate future developments. This notion encompasses several dimensions, including:

Product innovation: Developing new products or improving existing products to meet changing consumer needs.

Process innovation: Optimizing internal processes to improve efficiency and responsiveness.

Organizational innovation: Adapting organizational structure and culture to foster innovation and flexibility (Tidd & Bessant, 2018).

- **Renewal capacity range:**

Surviving the downturn: SMEs that invest in research and development (R&D) and that adopt a culture of innovation are more likely to survive and thrive in times of crisis. Cohen and

Levinthal (1990) point out that such companies are able to reinvent their products and services in response to changing consumer needs.

Organizational resilience: Gassmann and Zeschky (2008) show that SMEs that incorporate open innovation practices, involving customers and other stakeholders in the development process, increase their capacity for renewal and subsequently their resilience. This enables them to cope better with unforeseen challenges.

Trend anticipation: Renewal capacity enables SMEs to anticipate market developments and proactively adapt to emerging trends. Roper and Love (2002) find that SMEs engaged in R&D activities have a stronger capacity for Renewal, which enables them to respond promptly to changes in consumer needs.

Flexibility and creativity: Renewal capacity is often correlated with organizational flexibility and creativity. SMEs that adopt agile and innovative practices are better prepared to reinvent themselves in times of crisis, which is crucial for their long-term survival (Flamant, 2020).

- **Role of innovation:**

Innovation is of crucial importance for the ability of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to renew themselves, in order to adapt to market developments and meet changing consumer needs. According to Tidd and Bessant (2018), innovation can appear in several forms, each contributing to the flexibility and resilience of SMEs.

Product innovation: is essential for maintaining market relevance. Developing new products or improving existing ones, guided by customer feedback, requires iterative development cycles. This approach ensures that products actually meet expectations

Gassmann and Zeschky (2008), who emphasize the importance of incorporating feedback to refine the offerings.

Process innovation: also contributes to operational efficiency. Optimizing internal processes, for example through automation or workflow reengineering, can significantly improve performance. The adoption of digital technologies, such as enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems, enables integrated, agile resource management which facilitates rapid response to market changes (Roper & Love, 2002).

On the other hand, SMEs can innovate their business model. Moving from a traditional sales model to a subscription-based model can open up new revenue streams and strengthen customer loyalty, providing essential flexibility in the face of emerging trends (Flamant, 2020).

SMEs can adopt several best practices to strengthen their innovation capabilities. The use of **rapid prototyping techniques** to test and validate product ideas can reduce development time and improve alignment with customer expectations (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). In addition, implementing **open innovation systems** that encourage the integration of customer and partner ideas into the innovation process enriches new product development.

Innovation is a key driver of SME resilience. As Cohen and Levinthal (1990) point out, firms need to develop an “absorptive capacity” to integrate external innovations and strengthen their competitiveness. SMEs that invest in research and development (R&D) and adopt a culture of innovation are more likely to survive a crisis. Flamant (2020) points out that this capacity to innovate enables SMEs to overcome significant challenges and persevere in the face of adversity.

- **Renewal challenges for SMEs:**

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face several significant challenges when it comes to developing their innovation capacity. This is critical to their competitiveness and survival in the marketplace. The following are some of the most important obstacles that they face:

Lack of financial resources: SMEs often have limited budgets, which have an impact on their ability to invest in research and development (R&D) and innovation initiatives. In a survey conducted by McKinsey, 39% of SME managers cited lack of funding as a significant obstacle to innovation. This financial constraint can prevent them from exploring new technologies or improving their products and services, limiting their growth potential.

Resistance to change: Corporate culture and ingrained work habits can inhibit the acceptance of new ideas or methods. According to a study by McKinsey & Company, 70% of transformation initiatives fail due to employee resistance. This resistance may also stem from a lack of awareness of the importance of innovation to the survival and prosperity of an organization.

Limited access to markets: SMEs may find it difficult to penetrate larger markets where they could introduce their innovations. Large companies often have the resources and established networks to dominate these markets, leaving little room for SMEs to gain a foothold. As the International Trade Center points out, SMEs are often excluded from trusted trader schemes, making it difficult for them to access business opportunities.

To overcome these challenges, SMEs need to implement appropriate strategies. For example, setting up open innovation systems and using rapid prototyping techniques can foster an

environment conducive to innovation. By integrating ideas from customers and partners, they can create solutions that better meet market needs despite the constraints they face.

2.3. Appropriation capacity :

Appropriation capability refers to the way small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) integrate and capitalize on internal and external resources to adapt and innovate. According to Mäkelä and Vuori (2016), this capability encompasses the use of knowledge, technology, and social networks to improve business performance. In other words, it enables SMEs to capitalize on innovation and acquired knowledge by effectively implementing new ideas while protecting the results obtained from imitation.

The importance of appropriation capacity is particularly highlighted by Deeds and Hill (1996), who point out that SMEs that collaborate with academic institutions are often better placed to integrate innovation into their processes. This integration is essential because it enables SMEs to translate ideas into practice, enhancing agility and responsiveness to market developments. In addition, Ryu and Park (2019) show that SMEs that invest in internal skill development through training are more effective in the incorporation of external knowledge into their daily operations. This underscores the importance of a culture of continuous learning, which Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) argue is a key element in capitalizing on innovation. They argue that companies that foster such a culture and implement knowledge management systems are better positioned to reap the full benefits of innovation.

There are several dimensions to appropriation:

- **Implementation:** This process transforms ideas into concrete practices within the organization, facilitating the integration of innovations.
- **Protection:** SMEs also have a need for legal mechanisms and strategies, such as patents and copyrights, to protect their innovations against imitation.
- **Exploitation:** Finally, marketing and licensing strategies allow SMEs to capitalize on innovations and maximize their returns on investment.

However, SMEs face challenges in the development of their appropriation capacity. Protection costs can be prohibitive, making it difficult to finance legal steps to protect innovations. What's more, in a highly competitive market, SMEs may struggle to differentiate themselves and fully exploit their innovations. Finally, uncertainty about the application of innovations can discourage SMEs from investing in new ideas for fear of commercial failure.

- **Appropriation strategies :**

Appropriation capability is essential for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to integrate and effectively use internal and external resources to adapt and innovate. There are several key strategies that SMEs can adopt to strengthen their appropriation capability.

Leveraging internal skills: Maximizing the use of human resources is paramount for SMEs. This begins with employee training and development. Providing training programs that enhance not only technical skills but also leadership and project management skills is critical. Proper skills development enables employees to better absorb innovations and apply them effectively within the business.

Talent management: also, a vital strategy, this involves identifying key talents within the organization and providing them with development opportunities to strengthen their commitment and contribution. This fosters a culture of learning and innovation, which is essential to the long-term survival of the company.

Use of external resources: access to external resources can greatly influence the appropriation capacity of SMEs. Strategic partnerships are a promising avenue. Collaborating with universities, research centers and other companies provides access to advanced technologies and sector-specific knowledge. Deeds and Hill (1996) point out that such collaborations facilitate the integration of innovations into SME processes, thereby strengthening their competitiveness.

In addition, SMEs should seek access to external financing. The use of government subsidies and private investment to fund innovation and expansion projects is essential to support their development. Such funding can relieve the financial burden of R&D and create an environment conducive to innovation.

To strengthen their capacity for appropriation, SMEs can implement the best practices. For example, an ongoing skills assessment helps to identify gaps and plan targeted training. This ensures that employees remain up to date with the latest trends and technologies, which in return strengthens the effectiveness of Appropriation.

Active networking is also essential. By participating in industry events and forums, SMEs can establish contacts and exchange ideas with other players in the sector. These interactions can lead to potential collaborations and knowledge swaps, enriching the company's innovation potential.

Finally, SMEs should **develop knowledge management systems** and **legal protection** (patents, trademarks, etc.) to secure their innovations. These strategies not only protect results but also create a sustainable competitive advantage. As Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) point out, companies that foster a culture of continuous learning and implement knowledge management systems are better placed to capitalize on their innovations. By adopting these strategies, SMEs can strengthen their capacity for Appropriation and position themselves favorably on the market.

While these capacities constitute the pillars of SME resilience, each of them presents specific operational and strategic challenges. The table below synthesizes these challenges and offers corresponding strategic levers that SMEs can mobilize to strengthen their adaptive performance.

Table 2: Challenges and Strategic Levers for Each Capability

Capability	Major Challenges	Major Challenges
Absorptive	Information overload, weak knowledge management structures	Build databases, foster external networks, internal knowledge-sharing culture
Renewal	Lack of R&D investment, resistance to change	Open innovation, digitalization, employee empowerment
Appropriation	Cost of IP protection, weak commercialization strategies	Strategic partnerships, funding access, internal training, legal instruments (patents, copyrights)

Source : Authors

3. Integrative model of SME resilience:

The interactions between Renewal, Absorption and Appropriation capabilities are not only essential to the Resilience of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), but they are also crucial to their competitiveness in the marketplace. The integrative model proposed by Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) emphasizes that SMEs that simultaneously cultivate these capabilities are better prepared to cope with market uncertainties. This model distinguishes two types of dynamics: **adaptive innovation capabilities**, which focus on flexibility and responsiveness, and **generative innovation capabilities**, which promote the creation of new

products and services. Companies that combine these two dynamics can navigate effectively in turbulent environments, transforming uncertainties into opportunities.

3.1. Adaptive and Generative Capacities:

The distinction between adaptive and generative capabilities is central to understanding how SMEs manage innovation under uncertainty. The table below contrasts these two dimensions, highlighting their focus, practical manifestations, and their respective contributions to organizational resilience.

Table 3: Adaptive vs. Generative Capacities (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000)

Type	Focus	Examples in SMEs	Contribution to Resilience
Adaptive	Flexibility, reactivity, incremental change	Real-time market response, customer feedback loops, agile project management	Enhances day-to-day responsiveness and survival
Generative	Radical innovation, value creation	New business models, disruptive products, strategic diversification	Builds long-term strategic positioning and leadership

Source: Authors

Adaptive capabilities relate to the flexibility and responsiveness of SMEs. They are essential for rapidly adjusting strategies and operations in response to market changes and consumer needs. For example, an SME that quickly integrates customer feedback into its processes can not only improve its products but also strengthen its customer relations.

Generative capabilities, on the other hand, focus on the creation of new ideas, products and services. They encourage continuous innovation and the development of innovative solutions, enabling SMEs to differentiate themselves from their competitors. This duality between adaptation and generation is crucial to maintaining dynamic innovation, and companies that succeed in combining these two aspects are better prepared to face market challenges.

3.2. Organizational resilience:

SME resilience, according to Eisenhardt and Martin's model, derives from this interconnectedness of capabilities. By fostering a culture of learning and collaboration, firms can strengthen their ability to assimilate knowledge, enabling them to anticipate market trends

and proactively innovate. This systemic approach helps SMEs to transform uncertainties into opportunities, making their market position more solid.

3.3. Practical implications:

To implement this model, SMEs need to invest in processes that foster innovation and continuous learning. This can include initiatives such as employee training, the creation of collaborative networks with other companies or institutions, and the adoption of technologies that facilitate the exchange of information. By overcoming barriers related to resources and organizational culture, SMEs can create an environment conducive to synergy between Absorption, Renewal and Appropriation capabilities.

Eisenhardt and Martin's (2000) integrative model highlights the importance of a holistic approach to building resilience in SMEs. By cultivating both adaptive and generative capabilities, enterprises can not only survive market challenges but also thrive by converting these challenges into levers for growth. This requires strong management commitment, and an organizational culture focused on innovation and learning, which are essential elements for successfully navigating a dynamic business environment.

Conclusion

The resilience of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) emerges as a multidimensional construct rooted in the dynamic articulation of absorptive, renewal, and appropriation capacities. These capabilities collectively determine the ability of firms not only to withstand external shocks but also to convert environmental disruptions into strategic opportunities. This study affirms that the development of resilience is contingent upon the synergistic deployment of these interrelated capacities. Absorptive capacity allows SMEs to harness external knowledge, while renewal capacity facilitates proactive innovation. Appropriation ensures that intellectual outcomes are valorized and shielded from competitive erosion. This triadic configuration enhances organizational agility, fosters learning processes, and secures long-term competitive positioning. To cultivate such resilience, SME leaders must foster an organizational culture that valorizes continuous learning, experimentation, and collaborative intelligence. Moreover, access to knowledge ecosystems and strategic networks becomes a critical vector of innovation and transformation.

In conclusion, resilience is not merely a reactive posture, it constitutes a strategic orientation rooted in capabilities that enable anticipation, adaptation, and advancement. Future empirical work is invited to operationalize and test this conceptual framework across diverse economic contexts, especially in emerging markets where resilience is both a necessity and a lever for inclusive growth.

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