

The impact of Organizational Legitimacy on SRDI enterprises’ Innovation Resilience: A case study of Henan Province, China

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Abstract

This study examines how Organizational Legitimacy influences Innovation Resilience in SRDI enterprises, with Absorptive Capacity as a mediator and Inter-organizational Social Capital as a moderator. Based on resource-based, dynamic capability and social capital theories, it constructs a framework in which legitimacy boosts resilience through resistance, recovery and re-growth capabilities. Analyzing 421 Henan SRDI enterprises via SEM, the results show that legitimacy promotes resilience directly and indirectly through absorptive capacity, while social capital positively moderates this link. Mature enterprises gain institutional dividends by overcoming the "legitimacy blind spot", and social capital acts as a "network amplifier". This research integrates institutional and capability perspectives, offering new explanations for SRDI enterprises’ resilience under external shocks.

Keywords: innovation resilience; organizational legitimacy; absorptive capacity; inter-organizational social capital

Introduction

Trade protection, technological blockades and supply chain decoupling have put Chinese manufacturing firms in a tough spot between survival and innovation. SRDI enterprises are strategically important for industrial security but face high vulnerability due to technological lock-in, talent dependence and financing constraints, yet also enjoy great potential from digitalization, green transition and policy dividends. Improving innovation resilience has become key to assessing their vitality. Existing research mostly uses static indicators like R&D intensity and patents, which ignore dynamic adaptation to external shocks and fail to explain resilience differences among similar-resource firms, lacking analysis from organizational legitimacy and inter-organizational social capital. Resilience focuses on dynamic adaptability rather than mere outcomes. This study fills the theoretical gap and offers guidance for SRDI enterprises' development.

Research Objectives

In summary, this paper aims to explore the internal mechanism of the influence of Organizational Legitimacy on SRDI enterprises' Innovation Resilience. The research objectives are as follows:

1. To study the direct impact of Organizational Legitimacy on Innovation Resilience of SRDI enterprises.
2. To investigate how Absorptive Capacity mediates the relationship between Organizational Legitimacy and Innovation Resilience, revealing how external resources are transformed into internal resilience capabilities.
3. To study the interactive effect of Organizational Legitimacy and Inter-organizational Social Capital on Innovation Resilience.

Literature Review

Organizational Legitimacy enhances SRDI enterprises' Absorptive Capacity by reducing transaction costs, facilitating access to high-quality knowledge sources, and attracting R&D talents (Suchman, 1995; Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Legitimate enterprises gain preferential access to policy resources, industry networks, and cooperative opportunities, which expand their prior knowledge base and cross-border search capabilities (Zahra & George, 2002; Teece, 2007). Absorptive Capacity then transforms these external resources into Innovation Resilience through rapid identification, efficient digestion, and flexible application of knowledge, enabling enterprises

to resist shocks, recover quickly, and achieve re-growth (Duchek, 2020; Lane et al., 2006). Inter-organizational Social Capital enhances Organizational Legitimacy, thereby strengthening Innovation Resilience (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Sun et al., 2020).

This paper proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Organizational Legitimacy has a positive impact on the Innovation Resilience of SRDI enterprises.

H2: Organizational Legitimacy has a positive impact on Absorptive Capacity.

H3: Absorptive Capacity has a positive impact on the Innovation Resilience of SRDI enterprises.

H4: Absorptive Capacity plays a mediating role between Organizational Legitimacy and the Innovation Resilience of SRDI enterprises.

H5: Inter-organizational Social Capital positively moderates the relationship between Organizational Legitimacy and the Innovation Resilience of SRDI Enterprises.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review hypothesis, the framework diagram of this study was constructed, as shown in Figure 1.

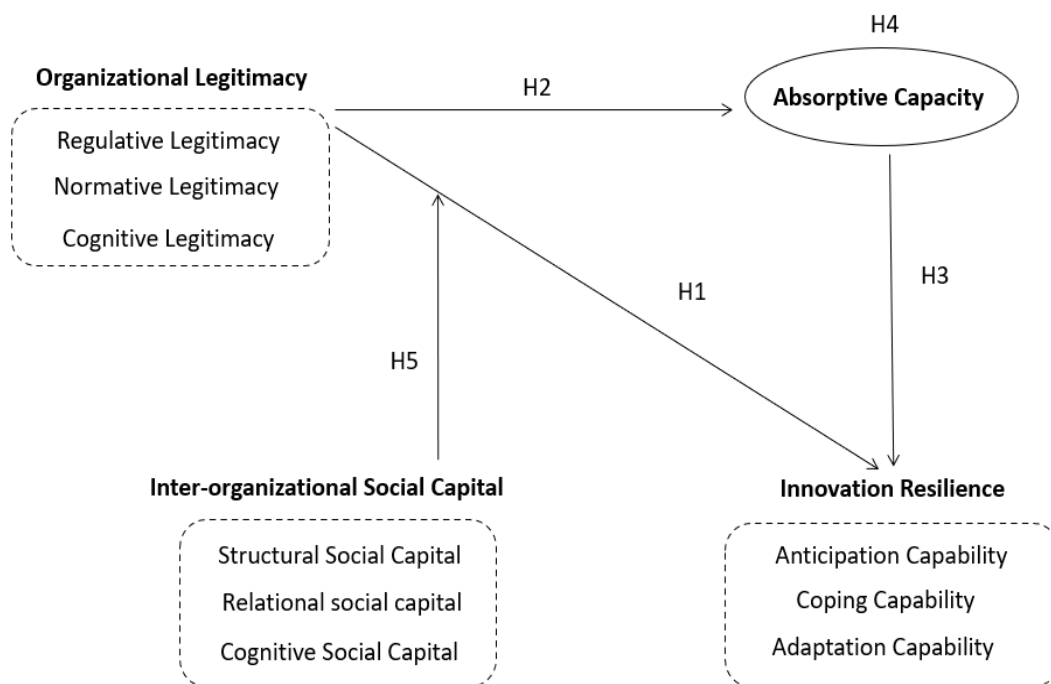


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

Sample and data collection

This study collected data through China's leading online survey platform "Survey Jump". A random sampling method was employed. The data collection objects were SRDI enterprises registered within Henan Province as of August 2025, officially recognized by the Henan Provincial Department of Industry and Information Technology and within the validity period. The questionnaire survey of this study was formally distributed and collected from September to November 2025, and the subsequent data sorting, entry and statistical analysis were fully completed in December 2025. A total of 551 questionnaires were collected, and after eliminating invalid questionnaires, 421 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis.

Measures

Based on the studies of Duchek (2020) and Zhang and Xue (2025), this study measures Innovation Resilience from three dimensions: anticipation capability (5 items), coping capability (4 items), and adaptation capability (4 items). Drawing on the research findings of Yu and Mei (2016), Organizational Legitimacy is measured from three dimensions: regulative legitimacy (5 items), normative legitimacy (5 items), and cognitive legitimacy (4 items). Inter-organizational Social Capital is measured from three dimensions: structural capital (3 items), relational capital (3 items), and cognitive capital (3 items), based primarily on the research of Cao and Hu (2019). Referring to the studies of Jansen et al. (2004) and Wei et al., (2005), Absorptive Capacity is measured using 7 items. In line with the theoretical framework established by the literature review, a quantitative methodology was adopted. Data were gathered via a survey instrument operationalized using the Likert five-point scale. The questionnaire was finally approved by the STIU-HREC014/2026 ethical review certification.

Data analysis

SPSS 22.0 was employed to perform descriptive statistical analyses, which served as a preliminary step to support subsequent modeling. Following this, AMOS 24.0 was utilized to examine the data and test the proposed hypotheses.

Research Results

Sample Characteristics

From Table 1, the sample of SRDI enterprises demonstrates that the majority (59.5%) have been established within 5–15 years. Most are concentrated in high-end equipment manufacturing and new materials (72.4%). In terms of scale, 87.2% have fewer than 500 employees, with annual revenues primarily ranging from 20–100 million RMB (89.6%). Respondents are predominantly mid-to-senior managers (76.3%), ensuring strong insight into organizational operations.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics (N=421)

Item	Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Years Since Establishment	2 years < Years ≤ 5 years	138	32.8
	5 years < Years ≤ 10 years	131	31.1
	10 years < Years ≤ 15 years	120	28.5
	>15 years	32	7.6
Main Business Scope	New-generation IT & Software	50	11.9
	High-end Equipment & Core Components	123	29.2
	New Materials & Green Low-carbon Tech	182	43.2
	Biomedicine & High-performance Medical Devices	53	12.6
	Other	13	3.1
Annual Revenue	Below 20 million RMB	16	3.8
	20–50 million RMB	210	49.9
	50–100 million RMB	167	39.7
	100–400 million RMB	12	2.9
	Above 400 million RMB	16	3.8
Number of Employees	Below 50	101	24.0
	50–199	133	31.6
	200–499	133	31.6
	500–999	33	7.8
	1000 or above	21	5.0
Position in the Enterprise	Senior Manager	133	31.6
	Middle Manager	188	44.7
	Junior Manager	67	15.9
	Core R&D personnel	33	7.8

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Table 2 shows that the mean values of all variables are greater than 3, with absolute values of skewness less than 3 and absolute values of kurtosis less than 5, indicating that these variables approximately follow a normal distribution (Cain et al., 2017).

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics analysis

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Innovation Resilience	3.595	0.850	-0.273	-0.931
Organizational Legitimacy	3.301	0.801	-0.330	-0.787
Inter-organizational Social Capital	3.297	0.796	-0.154	-0.815
Absorptive Capacity	3.063	0.937	0.076	-1.065

Reliability and Validity Analysis

The reliability analysis results in Table 3 demonstrate that Cronbach's alpha values for all variables are above 0.7. This indicates strong internal consistency and stability of the measures (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). According to Hair et al. (2011), AVE values greater than 0.5 and larger than squared correlations between variables (Table 4) collectively confirm that the measurement model possesses adequate convergent and discriminant validity.

Table 3 Reliability and Convergent Validity

Variable	Dimension	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Innovation Resilience	Anticipation Capability	0.887	0.890	0.620
	Coping Capability	0.866	0.867	0.621
	Adaptation Capability	0.868	0.868	0.623
Organizational Legitimacy	Regulative Legitimacy	0.880	0.882	0.601
	Normative Legitimacy	0.875	0.875	0.584
	Cognitive Legitimacy	0.848	0.849	0.584
Inter-organizational Social Capital	Structural Social Capital	0.856	0.861	0.675
	Relational Social Capital	0.848	0.849	0.652
	Cognitive Social Capital	0.844	0.844	0.643
	Absorptive Capacity	0.922	0.923	0.633

Table 4 Discriminant Validity

	IR	OL	IOSC	AC
IR	0.762			
OL	0.422	0.746		
IOSC	0.565	0.346	0.712	
AC	0.473	0.505	0.392	0.796

Note: IR=Innovation Resilience; OL=Organizational Legitimacy; IOSC=Inter-organizational Social Capital; AC=Adaptation Capability.

Hypothesis Tests

Table 5 Path Analysis Results

Hypothesis	Path	β	S.E.	C.R.	P	Result
H1	IR<---OL	0.249	0.070	3.665	***	Supported
H2	AC<---OL	0.505	0.082	8.894	***	Supported
H3	IR<---AC	0.348	0.045	5.517	***	Supported

Note: IR= Innovation Resilience; OL= Organizational Legitimacy; AC=Absorptive Capacity; *** indicates $p < 0.001$

Table 5 presents the path analysis results. Organizational Legitimacy has a significant positive impact on Innovation Resilience ($\beta = 0.249$, $p < 0.001$). Organizational Legitimacy also has a significant positive impact on Absorptive Capacity ($\beta = 0.505$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, Absorptive Capacity has a significant positive impact on Innovation Resilience ($\beta = 0.348$, $p < 0.001$). These findings support hypotheses H1, H2, and H3.

Mediating Effect Test

Table 6 presents the results of the mediating effect test. To more accurately verify the mediating effect, the Bootstrap method was employed, with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and a 95% confidence interval level, using the bias-corrected nonparametric percentile method for sampling. As shown in the table, the total effect of Organizational Legitimacy on Innovation Resilience is 0.425, with a confidence interval of [0.314, 0.539], excluding 0, indicating the presence of a total effect. The direct effect is 0.249, with a confidence interval of [0.104, 0.383], excluding 0, indicating the presence of a direct effect. The indirect effect is 0.176, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.121, 0.249], excluding zero, indicating a significant mediating effect. Thus, Hypothesis H4 is supported.

Table 6 Mediating Effect Test Results

Mediation Path	Effect Size	SE	95% Confidence Interval	
			LLCI	ULCI
Total Effect	0.425	0.057	0.314	0.539
Direct Effect	0.249	0.070	0.104	0.383
Indirect Effect	0.176	0.031	0.121	0.249

Moderating Effect Analysis

Table 7 presents the moderating effect analysis. Organizational Legitimacy has a significant positive impact on Innovation Resilience ($\beta = 0.263$, $p < 0.001$). The interaction term between Organizational Legitimacy and Inter-organizational Social Capital also has a significant positive impact on Innovation Resilience ($\beta = 0.152$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that Inter-organizational Social Capital plays a moderating role in the relationship between Organizational Legitimacy and Innovation Resilience. Thus, Hypothesis H5 is supported.

Table 7 Moderating Effect Analysis

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	P
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	3.561	0.037		96.501	0.000
OL	0.279	0.047	0.263	5.958	0.000
IOSC	0.391	0.047	0.366	8.372	0.000
OLxIOSC	0.191	0.053	0.152	3.567	0.000
R ² =0.263 adj-R ² =0.258 F=49.660 P=0.000					

Dependent Variable: Innovation Resilience

Discussion

Organizational legitimacy exerts a significant positive effect on the innovation resilience of SRDI enterprises, which is consistent with Zimmerman and Zeitz's (2002) legitimacy-resources-growth framework and Chen et al.'s (2025) findings. In the context of Henan Province, as a major manufacturing and innovation province in central China, SRDI enterprises rely heavily on legitimacy to access policy support, R&D funds and industrial resources. Higher legitimacy helps enterprises stabilize resource acquisition and resist risks from technological changes and market fluctuations, thus strengthening innovation resilience.

Organizational legitimacy also significantly promotes absorptive capacity, supporting the theoretical logic of Zhou et al. (2021). Compared with coastal regions, Henan lacks high-end innovation resources, and legitimacy serves as a key channel for enterprises to obtain external knowledge, technological achievements and industry–university–research cooperation, thereby improving their knowledge absorption and transformation capabilities.

Absorptive capacity significantly enhances the innovation resilience of SRDI enterprises, in line with Nakandala et al. (2023). Most SRDI enterprises in Henan focus on equipment manufacturing and new materials with relatively limited original innovation. Absorptive capacity enables them to digest and apply external advanced technologies, adapt to local industrial scenarios and maintain sustainable innovation.

Absorptive capacity plays a significant mediating role between organizational legitimacy and innovation resilience. As suggested by Oo and Rakthin (2022), legitimacy drives absorptive capacity through coercive isomorphism. In Henan, legitimacy brings policy dividends and external resources, while absorptive capacity converts such resources into internal technical capabilities, forming a complete transmission mechanism.

Inter-organizational social capital positively moderates the relationship between organizational legitimacy and innovation resilience, supporting Donbesuur et al. (2022). Henan's innovation ecosystem is government-led and cluster-based. Social capital including government–enterprise ties and industrial chain linkages amplifies the value of legitimacy, enabling enterprises to integrate multiple resources and further enhance innovation resilience.

New Knowledge from Research

This study provides new insights into SRDI enterprises' innovation resilience. It finds organizational legitimacy boosts resilience through dual paths, with absorptive capacity as a key mediator. Inter-organizational social capital acts as a boundary condition amplifying legitimacy effects, showing unique weak-position, high-leverage traits. The findings expand the legitimacy–resources–growth framework and explain how institutional advantages convert to dynamic capabilities amid external shocks.

Conclusions

This study explores organizational legitimacy's impact on SRDI enterprises' innovation resilience, using absorptive capacity as mediator and inter-organizational social capital as moderator. Based on 450 Henan enterprises, results show legitimacy significantly improves innovation resilience, absorptive capacity partially mediates the effect, and social capital positively moderates it. The findings integrate institutional and dynamic capability theories, revealing dual pathways for SRDI enterprises to enhance innovation resilience.

As a core province in the Central Plains Economic Zone, Henan's industrial layout, policy orientation and regional characteristics determine that its SRDI enterprises are typical representatives of regional technology firms, undertaking the important mission of promoting regional industrial transformation and upgrading and breaking through key technological bottlenecks. For such enterprises, cultivating political and social legitimacy is not a mere strategic choice, but a fundamental guarantee for their survival throughout the entire development cycle, especially in times of crisis. In fact, Henan's SRDI enterprises are highly dependent on regional policy support, local resource connection and social trust endorsement: cultivating political legitimacy helps them better access policy dividends, avoid institutional risks and obtain key development resources, while building social legitimacy enables them to gather market trust, integrate industrial chain resources, resist risks effectively in crisis scenarios, maintain operational resilience, and lay a solid foundation for sustainable innovation and long-term development.

Suggestions

This study proposes three suggestions for SRDI enterprises: build multi-dimensional organizational legitimacy to accumulate institutional resources; cultivate absorptive capacity to transform external knowledge; develop inter-organizational social capital to amplify institutional value. Enterprises at different stages should adopt flexible strategies, and the government should offer targeted policy support.

This study still has certain limitations. In terms of research scope, the research objects are only concentrated in SRDI enterprises in Henan Province, with a limited geographical coverage and a single economic and institutional background, which to some extent restricts the generalizability and extrapolation of the research conclusions. Meanwhile, the regional heterogeneity differences are not fully discussed in this paper. Therefore, future research can expand the research sample, select enterprises from different provinces, regions or diverse cultural and economic environments

to verify and revise the theoretical model of enterprise innovation resilience constructed in this study. It can further conduct comparative analyses of regional differences, so as to enrich relevant research findings and enhance the universality and practical application value of the research results.

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