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The Influencing Factors on Knowledge Management Adoption by SMEs in Chinese Manufacturing Industry

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Abstract

This study aims to provide the conceptual framework on Knowledge Management Adoption by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Chinese Manufacturing Industry. This exploration emphasizes its implications for organizational performance and competitiveness within the region. This study represents a comprehensive research endeavour aimed at understanding and enhancing the adoption of knowledge management (KM) by SMEs in Chinese manufacturing industry. Drawing on established frameworks such as the TOE (Technological, Organizational, and Environmental) model and Resource-Based View (RBV), the study identifies on key influencing factors, including organizational culture, top management support, and technological resources. By proposing a conceptual framework that integrates these variables, and comprehensive literature collection and theoretical analysis the study aims to elucidate the relationships among these factors and KM adoption. The significance of the study in its contribution to both academic literature and practical implications for SME and policymakers. The findings provide valuable insights into the intricacies of KM adoption within this specific industry, offering practical implications tailored to the local context.

Keywords
Knowledge Management Adoption, SME, Manufacturing Industry, TOE model, Resource-Based View.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background of Study

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) serve as foundational pillars in numerous economies, especially in emerging markets, contributing significantly to poverty reduction, the crafting of supportive entrepreneurial policies, employment, export growth and foreign direct investment (Al-Haddad, Sial, Ali, Alam, Khuong & Khanh, 2019). In China, SMEs account for over 98% of all enterprises and are responsible for more than 60% of the country's GDP (China Small and Medium Enterprise Development Promotion Center, Small and Medium Enterprise Bureau, 2024). Despite China's prominent role as a manufacturing powerhouse, its international competitiveness in the manufacturing sector remains relatively weak. Notably, many SMEs, especially those in manufacturing, have traditionally operated at the lower end of the value chain (Phoenix net, 2024). A prevalent issue among these enterprises is a limited appreciation for the value of knowledge in production and management, leading to underutilization of knowledge assets. Advancing the manufacturing sector necessitates a focus on technological innovation, research and development capabilities, effective intellectual capital management, and comprehensive enterprise management (Lin, 2018).

1.2 Problem Statements

Nur Fatinah, Nurmalina, Mohamad Allif, & Shamsul Baharin (2023) state that SMEs, characterized by flexible management and flat organizational structures, foster innovation and entrepreneurship. Control often relies on personal supervision by owners, and formal procedures are infrequent. These individuals are crucial for realizing the benefits of knowledge management in supporting business operations, given their central role. However, the daily demands of SMEs require special attention, leading to situations where strategic issues are overlooked due to time and resource constraints. Owner-managers play a pivotal role in SMEs, often overseeing planning and decision-making processes single-handedly (Bridge & O'Neill, 2012). Limited financial resources and expertise result in a significant amount of information being stored in the thoughts of the owner and a select few key employees (Hofer & Charan, 1984). For Small-Medium Enterprises (SMEs), resource constraints necessitate careful utilization of available resources to avoid the potentially severe consequences of poor choices, unlike larger corporations (Jarillo, 1989). Nur Fatinahet al. (2023) further argues that the criteria explored in research on Knowledge Management adoption in large-size group company can't be seamlessly applied to SMEs without considering their context.

Many researchers (van Zyl, Henning & van der Poll, 2022; Wang, Y.M. & Wang, Y.C., 2016) opined that the current problem revolves around the critical role of Knowledge Management（KM） adoption in facilitating the knowledge management cycle within organizations, particularly crucial for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) operating in the manufacturing industries in the developing countries. SMEs, with their limited resources, face significant challenges compared to larger organizations in implementing effective KM initiatives. The importance of KM adoption in the knowledge economy cannot be overstated, as they provide a competitive advantage to organizations that effectively apply knowledge (Gourova, 2010; Suryawan, Putra & Pratiwi, 2015; Wang & Wang, 2016; Farooq & Vij, 2018; Mazorodze & Buckley, 2019). However, despite the growing recognition of the significance of KM, the adoption of KM in SMEs, particularly in China, remains underexplored in the literature.

Based on the findings of Nguyen, Cu. & Vu. 's (2022) study, it becomes evident that practical implications underscore the significant roles of Organizational Context factors such as Organizational Culture, Top Management Support, and Technological & Environmental Contexts including Technological Resources (Technology readiness & role of Technology) in shaping the adoption process of systems. The primary aim of this study is to explore the relationships among various factors such as Organizational Culture, Top Management Support, and Technological and knowledge management (KM) adoption within SMEs among Chinese manufacturing industry. While KM has the potential to empower SMEs by facilitating the creation, organization, and utilization of knowledge, thereby bolstering competitive advantage, and fostering growth, its adoption remains a challenge for many traditional Chinese SMEs. This is a critical concern given the Chinese government's emphasis on SME development and the manifold benefits that KM can confer, including enhanced performance, innovation, and competitiveness. The underutilization of KM in Chinese SMEs has been corroborated in prior research (Wang, Qin. & Mi. 2024).

Research Questions

RQ 1: Is there a relationship between organizational culture and the adoption of KM among SMEs in manufacturing industry in China?

RQ 2: Is there a relationship between top management support on the adoption of KM by SMEs in manufacturing industry in China?

RQ 3: Is there a relationship between technological resources on the adoption of KM among SMEs in manufacturing industry in China?

Research Objective

RO 1: To examine the relationship of organizational culture on the adoption of KM among SMEs in manufacturing industry in China?

RO 2: To examine the relationship of top management support on the adoption of KM by SMEs in manufacturing industry in China?

RO 3: To examine the relationship of technological resources on the adoption of KM among SMEs in manufacturing industry in China?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Knowledge Management

Stata (1989) defined knowledge management as a management organization process that combines data processing ability with human innovation ability to provide services for the survival and development of an organization in a changing environment. Hedlund (1994) enriched the concept of knowledge management from the perspective of resource management evolution, and pointed out that knowledge management is a necessary guarantee for the normal operation planning and planning of an organization. Erik Sveiby (1997), in the knowledge-based enterprises from the angle of knowledge learning, knowledge management, defined that it is possible to take an advantage of intangible assets to create economic value of art, and pointed out that the knowledge organization should rely on an enterprise staff's knowledge. Malhotra (1998) based on the so-called knowledge management is to organize the external to locate and solve the complicated and changeable environment adapted to the current organization, promote the organization of information on key issues, survival and development ability of organization, its essence is in the process of information technology to process the data, create and develop the innovative ability of people to cooperate, information and members of the organization in the transfer of the process to achieve the goal of effective management; Macintosh, Filby & Kingston (1999)believed that knowledge management is to facilitate the analysis of certain knowledge that enterprises may need, and then make plans according to the actual situation, so as to effectively develop knowledge assets and thus achieve the strategic goals of enterprises. Yang & He (2013) define knowledge management in enterprise management, point out that knowledge management is the enterprise's uncertain and complicated external environment, combined with the internal condition. Internal conditions are to identify, acquire knowledge, create, applicate and share the management activities, such as systematic and methodical. Alavi & Leidner (2001) believe that knowledge management is the management of knowledge transformation process, and it is an important factor affecting the uncertainty of enterprise activities and development no matter in enterprises of any scale. Wang (2004) believe that knowledge management is a complex dynamic process and needs to be expounded and analyzed from different perspectives. Knowledge management is mainly discussed from the perspectives of knowledge classification, dynamic ability and knowledge network.

2.2 Organizational Culture

Organizational culture refers to the fundamental beliefs, value standards, and behavioral norms that are formed over time and adhered to by the majority of an organization's members. The concept of organizational culture was first introduced by Pettigrew (1979) paper "On Studying Organizational Cultures." Also known as corporate or company culture, organizational culture has become a crucial area of research, providing a means to explain complex organizational phenomena and offering a new approach to motivating and controlling employees. Managers hope to use shared values to encourage employee commitment and improve productivity (Martin, 2001). Different researchers have studied organizational culture from various perspectives, including internal and external organizational characteristics and the inherent features of the culture itself. Consequently, insights and opinions on organizational culture vary. Pettigrew (1986) defined organizational culture as a system of shared meanings among members of a group within a specific time and space context. He viewed organizational culture as comprising symbols, language, ideologies, beliefs, rituals, and myths, marking the formal starting point of organizational culture studies. Lemken, Kahler & Rittenbruch (2000) described organizational culture as detailing the core beliefs, value standards, and social customs that govern individual behavior within an organization. It encompasses a shared system of philosophies, assumptions, values, expectations, attitudes, and norms that collectively constrain organizational behavior. Stock & McDermott (2000) viewed organizational culture as a set of basic assumptions, values, and concepts shared by members of the organization.

2.3 Top management Support

Early research on top management Support primarily explained it from the perspectives of attitude and behavior (Lasher, Ives & Jarvenpaa, 1991). Attitudinal explanations describe top management Support as an arrangement of positive attitudes, manifesting as "enthusiastic recognition," commitment, and "opinions or wishes" (Keil, 1995; Liang, Saraf, Hu & Xue,2007). Behavioral explanations depict top management Support as the implementation of direct management actions, such as providing technical assistance (Compeau, Higgins & Huff, 1999), participation (Jarvenpaa & Ives, 1991), and "facilitating enterprise resource planning assimilation" (Liang, Wang, Xue & Ge,2007). From this perspective, top management Support primarily reflects the provision of resources and the creation of a favorable environment by top management to support and promote relevant activities. This process requires top managers to demonstrate a high level of involvement in both beliefs and actions. Top management belief is characterized by a high degree of recognition and affirmation of the project's value, reflecting their personal cognition and importance attached to it. Top management involvement is manifested through substantial actions and behaviors in activities, which can be genuinely perceived by other members of the organization. Kumar, Mangla, Luthra & Ishizaka (2019) argue that the importance of top management support stems from its ability to significantly influence other human resource-related factors. The higher the overall level of top management support, the greater the recognition of relevant management practices by top management, which can lead to quicker acceptance of change by organizational members and the formation of a positive organizational atmosphere.

2.4 Technological Resources

Narayanan (2002) argued that the rapid development of modern science and technology has an increasingly profound and widespread impact on economic and social activities. In turn, social and economic development drives scientific and technological iteration and innovation. Consequently, technology resource management is increasingly becoming a critical activity for gaining a competitive advantage, with

technology resources being unique resources directly related to production technology activities. Therefore, the level of technology management directly reflects an enterprise's ability to develop and utilize technology resources, as well as its capability to allocate these resources effectively. Tsai (2004) pointed out that technology resources are crucial for product development and improving production efficiency. They are a vital source for product research and development and a key factor in achieving a competitive advantage, thus underscoring the significant role of technology resources in the growth of enterprises. Song, Droge, Hanvanich & Calantone (2005) studied the operational efficiency of enterprises and concluded that the reasonable allocation of resources can enhance operational efficiency. Technology resources are a prerequisite for the effective functioning of technological capabilities, and the most effective way to utilize these resources is through superior technology management capabilities. Li, He & Peng (2017) proposed that technology resources are one of the main components of new enterprises. They are essential for developing new product functions and creating outstanding performance, serving as core resources in the process.

2.5 Resource-Based View (RBV)

The Resource-Based View (RBV) theory, proposed by Professor Wernerfelt in 1984, holds significant application value in the field of management, providing theoretical support for numerous studies on corporate resources. Wernerfelt was the first to introduce the concept of the "Resource-Based View" (RBV), highlighting the importance of a firm's internal environment for its development. He proposed that firms are composed of resources rather than merely being engaged in product market activities. This perspective sparked new academic thinking, shifting the focus of strategic research from a "product" view to a "resource" view. Strategic resources gradually became the focal point in discussions about improving a company's market position and performance. Subsequently, Barney's research further enriched the understanding of the RBV, emphasizing that a firm's resources and capabilities form the basis of its competitive advantage. To achieve sustainable competitive advantage, a firm's resources and capabilities must be rare and inimitable, as general resources do not possess these characteristics. The formalization of the RBV into a theory occurred after Grant explicitly named it as such. RBV believes that SMEs can gain sustainable competitive advantages by owning and utilizing valuable, rare and irreplaceable resources and capabilities (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney,1991; Prajogo & Ahmed, 2006). In the context of adoption of knowledge management, RBV can help identify the resources (both tangible and intangible) and capabilities necessary for successful adoption and implementation. RBV is a useful framework for understanding how organizations can effectively adopt knowledge management (Barney,1991; Grant,1999). Wiklund & Shepherd (2003) argue that RBV is crucial for understanding how organizational resources contribute to competitive advantage.

2.6 TOE Framework

The T-O-E framework, as proposed by Tornatzky & Fleischer (1990), provides a holistic model for understanding innovation and technology adoption. It delineates three pivotal enterprise contexts influencing adoption and implementation: organizational conditions and reconfiguration (Chatterjee, Grewal, & Sambamurthy, 2002), technology development (Kauffman & Walden, 2001), and industry environment (Kowath & Choon, 2001). Scholars such as Awa, Ojiabo & Emecheta (2015), Al-Qirim (2006), Jeyaraj, Rottman, & Lacity (2006), and Sabherwal, Jeyaraj, & Chowa (2006) opine on various aspects of technology adoption, including the pool of internal and external technologies, perceived usefulness, technical and organizational compatibility and capability, learning curve, complexity, pilot

testing, and visibility. These factors collectively influence the decision-making process surrounding technology adoption within organizations. According to these scholars, organizations context encompass descriptive metrics including the scope of the enterprise's business, support from top management, organizational culture, multiple management levels gauged by factors such as vertical differentiation, formalization, and centralization, the caliber of human capital, as well as aspects related to size and its implications such as internal slack resources and specialization. The environmental context includes the promoting factors and inhibiting factors of various operations, including competitive pressures, commercial partnership' readiness, sociocultural factors, government policy support, and the role and availability of technology support infrastructures, such as access to quality ICT consultants. Within the environmental context, competitive pressure is defined by the enterprise's actions in Business Competitive Edge, Research and Development (R&D), the availability of domestic and overseas ICT talent, and the creation of related applications/services (Pang & Jang, 2008). Additionally, external support is measured by the level of encouragement from governments and non-governmental agencies (NGOs), which may include less restrictive loan terms, tax incentives, subsidies, grants, and the provision of facilities for seamless service (Bingham, 1976；Akbulut, 2002).

2.1 Hypotheses Development

2.1.1 Organizational Culture

Findings from Vu & Alonso's study (2023) suggest that employees' knowledge holds implications for various aspects such as new talent development, mentoring, and organizational inspiration. The researchers stress that organizations should cultivate an environment conducive to employee development and retention, recognizing their role in fostering organizational knowledge growth. There is substantial impact of organizational culture on the adoption of KM among SMEs. Coakes (2004) states that Knowledge management thrives within organizations that cultivate a learning culture. Success hinges on individuals actively participating in a learning organization, continually developing skills, competencies, and general knowledge. This dynamic, where employees are engaged in ongoing learning and personal development, contributes significantly to the effectiveness of knowledge management programs. Organizational culture plays a pivotal role in fostering an environment where such learning initiatives are not only encouraged but ingrained in the fabric of daily operations.

The holistic perspective of hypothesis 1 underscores the intricate interplay between culture and innovation, emphasizing the relevance of organizational culture, particularly guided by top management leaders, in steering the adoption of KM among SMEs.

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive and significant relationship between Organizational culture and the adoption of KM among SMEs in manufacturing industry in China.

2.1.2 Top Management Support

The findings of Vu & Alonso (2023) highlight the crucial importance of cultivating an organizational culture where knowledgeable employees feel empowered to share their expertise collaboratively. Their study demonstrates that collective knowledge significantly enhances organizational creativity and problem-solving capabilities. Additionally, organizations with robust knowledge bases display greater adaptability to new external knowledge and more effective optimization of existing internal knowledge (Jin, Yang, Fawad Sharif, Li & Du, 2022).

In light of these findings, Vu & Alonso (2023) stress the vital role of top management support in organizations, particularly in fostering a conducive environment for enriching their knowledge reservoirs. Malik, Budhwar & Kandade, (2022) advocate for providing motivational support, such as recognition and promotion, to cultivate a culture of knowledge acquisition and sharing. Conversely, intrinsic rewards, including opportunities for creativity and engaging work tasks, also play a pivotal role in this process (Murayama, 2022).

Effective management leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the success of Knowledge Management (KM) initiatives, as highlighted by various researchers (Pan & Scarbrough, 1998; Holsapple & Joshi, 2000; Ribiere & Sitar, 2003). Leaders serve as influential role models, showcasing the desired behaviors for KM. They must demonstrate a willingness to share knowledge openly, engage in continuous learning, and actively seek new ideas. It is imperative that these leaders exemplify their commitment through actions, not just words. By doing so, they can inspire employees to emulate them, fostering increased participation in KM.

Storey & Barnett (2000) emphasize that top management support should be continuous and practical, capable of translating into concerted efforts that significantly contribute to the triumph of KM. Drawing from these insights, it can be posited that Top management support (Hypothesis 2) exert positive influences on the adoption of Knowledge Management (KM) among SMEs.

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive and significant relationship between Top management support and the adoption of KM among SMEs in manufacturing industry in China.

2.1.3 Technological Resources

Yousaf (2019) emphasizes the crucial role of technological advancement in knowledge management (KM) adoption within organizations. Without adequate technological support, managing knowledge becomes challenging, as the recording of operations at each organizational step is necessary. Organizations lacking in technological capabilities may struggle to effectively manage their knowledge resources.

Technical resources (TR) are one of the key factors in implementing knowledge management. TR, which used to function as a static archive of information, is now slowly evolving into a system for connecting people to information and between people. TR can enable rapid access, search, and information retrieval, and can support collaboration and communication between organizational members. In essence, it can certainly play a variety of roles to support an organization's KM adoption processes (Lee & Hong,2002; Alavi & Leidner, 2001). However, it is noteworthy to recognize that TR is only a tool not an ultimate solution (Wong & Aspinwall, 2003).

Drawing from these insights, it can be posited that technological resources (Hypothesis 3) exert positive influences on the adoption of Knowledge Management (KM) among SMEs.

Hypothesis 3: There is a positive and significant relationship between Technological Resources and the adoption of KM among SMEs in manufacturing industry in China.

3.0 Conceptual Framework

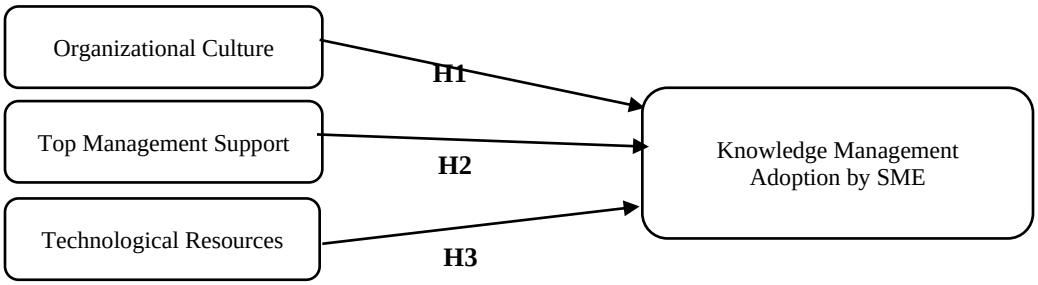

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

4.0 Conclusion

The main objective of this conceptual paper is to explore the relationship of Organizational Culture, Top Management Support, Technological Resources and the adoption of KM among SME. This research addresses significant gaps in literature by providing insights into the adoption of knowledge management (KM) by SMEs in Chinese manufacturing industry. Incorporating established frameworks such as the TOE model and Resource-Based View (RBV), this study enriches the theoretical underpinnings of KM adoption research. By examining the interplay between organizational culture, top management support, and technological resources, the study extends beyond traditional models, offering new perspectives on KM adoption mechanisms. The findings of this study provide actionable insights for SMEs in Chinese manufacturing industry, enabling them to make informed decisions regarding KM adoption strategies. Policymakers can benefit from this research by developing targeted policies and support mechanisms to promote KM adoption among SMEs in Henan. By understanding the organizational and environmental factors influencing KM adoption, policymakers can design interventions to facilitate knowledge sharing and innovation within the SME sector.

The limitations of this study lie in the fact that the sample is primarily composed of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from the manufacturing sector in China, which may not fully represent other industries or enterprises of different scales. Therefore, the generalizability of the study results may be limited. Consequently, future research could focus on conducting comparative studies on SMEs from different industries to explore the impact of industry characteristics on knowledge management (KM) practices.

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