The Impact of Human Capital, Business Networks, and Organizational Innovation on Tourism Industry Success in Zhejiang Province, China*

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the individual and combined effects of human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation on the success of tourism SMEs, as well as to examine the structural relationships among these variables within the context of China's tourism SMEs, based on evidence from Zhejiang Province. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was adopted. Quantitative data were first collected from 400 tourism SMEs through structured questionnaires to test the proposed conceptual framework using descriptive statistics and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Subsequently, qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews with 15 key informants to further explain, contextualize, and enrich the quantitative findings. Qualitative content analysis was employed to identify underlying mechanisms and operational challenges influencing tourism SME performance.

The findings indicate that human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation have significant effects on tourism SME success, which in this study is reflected in business performance, service quality, adaptability, and organizational resilience. Among these factors, organizational innovation emerges as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.376$, $p < 0.001$), followed by human capital ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$) and business networks ($\beta = 0.295$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, organizational innovation plays a mediating role in the relationships between human capital, business networks, and tourism SME success, suggesting that innovation transforms internal capabilities and external network resources into competitive outcomes. Qualitative findings further emphasize the role of digital leadership, technology-enabled service delivery, and guanxi-based collaboration in enhancing organizational agility and post-crisis recovery. Overall, the study highlights the importance of strategically integrating human capital development, network collaboration, and organizational innovation to strengthen the sustainability and competitiveness of tourism SMEs.

Keywords: Human Capital; Business Networks; Organizational Innovation; Tourism SME Success; Sustainable Development

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted China's tourism industry, resulting in substantial reductions in both international and domestic travel. Tourism SMEs were especially vulnerable, grappling with swift changes in consumer preferences, stricter health protocols, and accelerated digitalization, despite governmental assistance programs (Zhou, 2023; UNWTO, 2022). Ongoing financial limitations, workforce shortages, and inconsistent digital competencies revealed underlying weaknesses within the sector, thereby highlighting the critical requirement for resilience, innovation, and robust human capital development to facilitate sustained recovery and enhance competitiveness.

Theoretically, this research employs Human Capital Theory as its central framework to elucidate how workforce skills, adaptability, and leadership capabilities contribute to organizational resilience and innovation capacity. Complementing this viewpoint, Social Capital Theory, as applied to China's guanxi-based business networks, elucidates how inter-firm relationships foster resource sharing, knowledge dissemination, and collaborative innovation. Dynamic Capabilities Theory, in conjunction with organizational learning, furnishes the integrative framework for interpreting organizational innovation as a process through which firms convert internal competencies and external resources into adaptive strategies and enduring performance (Kostadinović and Stanković, 2021). These theories, in concert, construct a cohesive conceptual basis that positions organizational innovation as a crucial linking mechanism between human capital, business networks, and the success of tourism SMEs.

Zhejiang, a province in China known for its digital progress, has a thriving tourism sector with many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This sector is supported by strong business networks and government policies that encourage innovation in the digital economy and tourism. Research shows that domestic tourism in Zhejiang rebounded to about 90% of its pre-pandemic levels. This recovery was largely due to SMEs that successfully used digital technologies, built strong collaborative networks, and invested in their employees. In contrast, businesses that struggled to adapt or lacked strong network connections continued to face operational difficulties and limited chances for recovery (Kanchanathaveekul et al., 2024). Zhejiang's unique characteristics make it a suitable setting for studying how contextual factors affect the strategic importance of human capital, networks, and innovation in the tourism sector's recovery after a crisis.

Therefore, this research investigates the key factors that drive success and resilience in Chinese tourism SMEs. It does this by examining the relationships between human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation, considering organizational innovation as a mediating factor. The study aims to contribute to theory by providing a comprehensive understanding of innovation-driven resilience in tourism SMEs. It also seeks to provide practical, evidence-based insights for policymakers and industry professionals looking to

improve digital skills, collaborative networks, and long-term competitiveness in the post-pandemic tourism economy.

Objective of the Research

1. To examine the direct and indirect effects of human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation on tourism SME success in Zhejiang Province, China.

2. To analyze the mediating role of organizational innovation in the relationships among human capital, business networks, and tourism SME success in Zhejiang Province, China.

Research Methodology

This research employed a pragmatic mixed-methods approach using an explanatory sequential design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative strands to obtain comprehensive and reliable findings. The study consisted of the following stages of implementation:

The 1st Step: Documentary Study

The first stage consisted of a systematic review of literature and policy documents on post-crisis tourism recovery (UNWTO, 2022; Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2024). Core constructs—Human Capital (HC), Business Networks (BN/guanxi), Organizational Innovation (OI), and Tourism SME Success (TS)—were synthesized to develop the conceptual framework and hypotheses (H1–H5). Theoretical grounding was primarily based on Human Capital Theory and Dynamic Capabilities Theory, with Service-Dominant Logic used to support the interpretation of value co-creation and service innovation. Standard CFA/SEM criteria (χ^2/df < 2–3, CFI/TLI ≥ .95, RMSEA ≤ .06, AVE ≥ .50, CR ≥ .70) were specified to guide covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) model assessment.

The 2nd Step: Quantitative Research

The quantitative phase aimed to validate the hypothesized relationships through a structured questionnaire.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised owners, managers, and key personnel of tourism-related SMEs in Zhejiang Province (Hangzhou, Jinhua, Zhoushan, and Wenzhou). A stratified sampling method based on SME type and location was applied. The sample size of 400 SMEs was determined using Taro Yamane's formula where the population size was derived from official SME registration records provided by provincial tourism and commerce authorities in Zhejiang Province (N = 111,000; e = 0.05; 95% confidence level).

Research Instrument

39-item questionnaire measured four constructs: Human Capital (12 items), Business Networks (9), Organizational Innovation (9), and Tourism SME Success (9), using a 5-point Likert

scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Content validity was validated by three tourism management and SME innovation experts who assessed item relevance against set construct definitions, yielding an IOC value of 1.00 for all items. Reliability testing with 30 pilot respondents showed Cronbach's α = .818–.843 (overall .834) and CITC > .40 for all items.

Data Collection

Surveys were distributed via Wenjuanxing, email, and WeChat links, supplemented by printed forms where necessary. Participants received full consent forms ensuring anonymity and withdrawal rights.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics summarized respondent profiles. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) verified construct validity, followed by Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS to test hypotheses (H1–H5) and mediation effects, with criteria such as CFI/TLI ≥ .95 and RMSEA ≤ .06.

The 3rd Step: Qualitative Research

The qualitative strand aimed to explain and contextualize quantitative findings.

A total of 15 Key Informants were purposively selected, including SME owners, senior managers, digital innovation leaders, and representatives from tourism networks, chambers of commerce, and industry forums. Selection criteria required direct responsibility for innovation and operations, proven post-COVID adaptation experience, and active involvement in business networks.

Research Instruments and Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews (45–60 minutes each) and 2–3 focus-group discussions (FGDs, 6–8 participants each) were conducted in person or online, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Observation of business practices and follow-ups (such as digital training sessions and eco-tourism projects) was undertaken to triangulate data. To minimize duplication bias, focus-group discussions participants were drawn from a different pool of SMEs than those involved in the in-depth interviews.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step procedure (familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting). NVivo software was used for coding and data organization. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, analyst memoing, and audit trail documentation.

The 4th Step: Data Integration and Interpretation

An explanatory sequential design was applied—quantitative results were first analyzed through SEM, then interpreted using qualitative themes to explain significant and non-significant paths. This integration clarified mechanisms such as the role of *guanxi* in strengthening business networks (BN ⟶ OI) and digital leadership in enhancing human capital (HC ⟶ TS). The combined findings produced a refined conceptual model linking human

capital, business networks, and organizational innovation to tourism SME success, thereby strengthening theoretical and practical contributions.

The 5th Step: Presentation and Dissemination of Results

Research findings are presented sequentially—covering methods, measurement models, structural results, and thematic interpretations—followed by policy and managerial implications. Key outputs include CFA and SEM tables (loading values, reliability, model fit), path diagrams, and the final integrated framework. Dissemination will take place through academic journals, international conferences, and stakeholder workshops organized with Zhejiang tourism associations. Bilingual executive summaries (Chinese/English) will be provided to participating SMEs to ensure practical impact and knowledge transfer.

Research Results

Results related to the first objective indicate that Human Capital (HC), Business Networks (BN), and Organizational Innovation (OI) all had significant positive effects on the success of tourism SMEs in Zhejiang Province. Business Networks recorded the highest mean score (M = 4.11), followed by Organizational Innovation (M = 3.92) and Human Capital (M = 3.90), indicating a moderate-to-high level based on the five-point Likert scale. The results of the SEM analysis indicated that HC (β = 0.312, $p < 0.001$), BN (β = 0.295, $p < 0.001$), and OI (β = 0.376, $p < 0.001$) had significant positive direct effects on Tourism SME Success (TS), with organizational innovation being the most influential predictor. The R^2 value for TS was 0.68, suggesting that the structural model explained 68% of the variance in tourism SME success. For clarity, hypotheses are grouped by analytical objective: direct effects on TS (H1–H3), antecedents of OI (H4–H5), and mediation effects (H5a–H5b).

Table 1: Structural Path Analysis Results for Objective 1

Hypothesis	Structural Path	β	t-value	p-value	Conclusion
H1	HC ⟶ TS	0.312	6.412	< 0.001	Supported. Human capital has a significant positive effect on SME success.
H2	BN ⟶ TS	0.295	5.884	< 0.001	Supported. Business networks significantly enhance SME success.
H3	OI ⟶ TS	0.376	6.847	< 0.001	Supported. Organizational innovation is the strongest predictor of SME success.

Note: TS refers to Tourism SME Success. The Squared Multiple Correlations indicate that the structural model explains 68% of the variance in TS ($R^2 = 0.68$).

The results related to the second objective indicate that Human Capital (HC) and Business Networks (BN) significantly contribute to Organizational Innovation (OI), which in turn influences tourism SME success. Specifically, HC had a significant positive effect on OI ($\beta = 0.428$, $p < 0.001$), while BN also exerted a significant effect on OI ($\beta = 0.341$, $p < 0.001$), confirming both variables as key antecedents of innovation capacity. Measurement model assessment based on confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated satisfactory construct validity, with factor loadings ranging from 0.672 to 0.889, composite reliability exceeding 0.70, and average variance extracted values above 0.50 for all constructs. Furthermore, indirect effects analysis using bootstrapping procedures confirmed that Organizational Innovation significantly mediated the relationships between Human Capital and tourism SME success, as well as between Business Networks and tourism SME success, with confidence intervals indicating the statistical significance of the mediated paths ($\beta = 0.376$, $p < 0.001$).

The research suggests that human capital, particularly the digital skills, adaptability, and leadership abilities of employees, is crucial for innovation and competitive advantage in small and medium-sized tourism businesses. Business networks strengthen these skills by providing access to resources, strategic partnerships, and government support. As a result, these networks create more opportunities for collaboration and market growth. Organizational innovation is, therefore, a key process. Companies can leverage their human and network assets to develop adaptable strategies and organizational robustness. This capability is

particularly crucial in the context of financial limitations, workforce deficits, and restricted connectivity.

The integration of quantitative data with qualitative insights demonstrates that digital competencies, flexible leadership, and guanxi-based relationships collectively contribute to innovation processes. Notwithstanding the ongoing resource limitations and workforce instability experienced by tourism SMEs, supportive policy environments, governmental incentives, and digital readiness enable the conversion of structural constraints into opportunities for post-crisis recovery, growth, and sustained competitive advantage.

Table 2: Integrated Quantitative and Qualitative Results for Objective 2: The Mediating Role of Organizational Innovation

Research Objective (RO2)	Hypothesis	Quantitative SEM Results	Qualitative Themes	Integrated Interpretation / Key Findings
Explain how HC, BN, and OI interact to influence TS	H2: HC ⟶ OI	β = 0.428, t = 7.221, p < .001	Employees' digital skills, adaptability, and creativity helped firms adopt new technologies and redesign services.	**Supported.** HC strongly enhances OI. Skilled employees convert knowledge into innovative practices, strengthening competitiveness.
	H4: BN ⟶ OI	β = 0.341, t = 6.109, p < .001	Partnerships and trusted networks enabled resource sharing, market access, and co-innovation.	**Supported.** BN promotes OI by providing external knowledge and collaboration channels; networks function as catalysts for collective innovation.

Research Objective (RO2)	Hypothesis	Quantitative SEM Results	Qualitative Themes	Integrated Interpretation / Key Findings
	H5a: HC ⟶ OI ⟶ TS	β = 0.161 (boot), p < .001	Innovation converted workforce capability into tangible performance outcomes.	**Supported.** OI partially mediates HC ⟶ TS. HC enhances innovation, improving service quality, competitiveness, and sustainability.
	H5b: BN ⟶ OI ⟶ TS	β = 0.128 (boot), p < .001	Networks accelerated innovation adoption and market expansion.	**Supported.** OI partially mediates BN ⟶ TS. BN strengthens adaptability, market reach, and resilience in tourism SMEs.
—	Model Fit	χ^2/df = 2.42; CFI = 0.968; TLI = 0.962; RMSEA = 0.047	Contextual enablers: digital culture, government support; Barriers: financial and workforce constraints	The model demonstrates excellent fit, supporting the adequacy of the specified structural relationships among HC, BN, OI, and TS.

Research shows that the success of tourism in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Zhejiang Province is improved by human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation. Organizational innovation acts as a mediator, translating human skills and network resources into improved performance. The emphasis is on the significance of digital expertise, flexible leadership, and partnerships built on guanxi in building resilience and competitiveness within the tourism industry.

The New Body of Knowledge

The new knowledge generated by this study lies in the development of an author-generated HC–BN–OI Synergy Model, which empirically explains how human capital, business networks, and organizationa linnovation interact as an integrated system to drive the success and resilience of tourism SMEs in Zhejiang Province. Unlike prior studies that examine these factors in isolation, this research demonstrates their synergistic and multi-level effects across individual, organisational, and societal dimensions.

Specifically, the study provides new empirical evidence that organizational innovation functions as a central transformative mechanism, converting individual-level human capabilities and network-based external resources into tangible performance outcomes, including service innovation, adaptability, and sustainable competitive advantage. The findings further reveal how digital literacy, adaptive skills, and leadership capabilities at the individual level are amplified through business networks—particularly collaborative and guanxi-based relationships—to enhance innovation capacity within tourism SMEs in Zhejiang Province..

The study introduces a multi-level knowledge framework that links micro-level skill development, meso-level organizational innovation, and macro-level tourism ecosystem outcomes. This comprehensive viewpoint builds on existing human capital and network theories by illustrating how their interaction, through organizational innovation, promotes long-term sustainability and post-crisis recovery in the tourism sector. Consequently, the HC–BN–OI Synergy Model offers both theoretical advancement and practical guidance for scholars, industry practitioners, and policymakers seeking to strengthen tourism SMEs in dynamic, digitally driven environments.

Table 3: New Body of Knowledge: HC–BN–OI Synergy Model Framework

Level 1: Individual Level (Micro Level)	Level 2: Organizational Level (Meso Level)	Level 3: Societal Level (Macro Level)
New Knowledge Gained -Digital literacy for technology-enabled service delivery -Adaptive capacity for responding to market and digital change - Professional capability integrating leadership and innovation mindset	**Organizational-Level Practical Benefits** -Improved operational efficiency through innovation-driven processes -Enhanced service innovation and customer -centered value creation -Greater adaptability to environmental and technological change - More effective collaboration across supply-chain and platform partners	**Societal-Level Practical Benefits** -Contribution to economic growth and tourism sector resilience -Strengthened tourism SME ecosystem through network-based innovation -Promotion of sustainable and inclusive tourism systems -Increased support for creative and digital tourism industries
Practical Benefits - Enhanced digital competencies aligned with smart tourism practices - Improved employability and career resilience of tourism professionals - Increased capacity for co-creation and participatory innovation with stakeholders	**Organizational Applications** -Development of integrated innovation and digital transformation strategies -Organizational redesign toward flexible and learning-oriented structures -Enhanced crisis management capability and organizational resilience	**Societal Applications** -Evidence-based tourism policy development and innovation governance -Community capacity building through skills development and collaborative platform -Regional branding and destination competitiveness strategies

Discussion of Research Results

1. To examine the direct and indirect effects of human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation on tourism SME success in Zhejiang Province, China.

The first research objective aimed to examine the individual and combined effects of Human Capital (HC), Business Networks (BN), and Organizational Innovation (OI) on the success of tourism SMEs in Zhejiang Province. The findings revealed that all three variables exert significant positive influences on SME performance, with OI emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.376$, $p < 0.001$), followed by HC ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$) and BN ($\beta = 0.295$, $p < 0.001$). This demonstrates that organizational innovation acts as a catalyst that transforms workforce competencies and inter-firm collaborations into tangible outcomes such as enhanced customer satisfaction, business growth, and long-term resilience. The results concerning Human Capital highlight the importance of core service competencies, including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and continuous skills development, in improving service quality and customer experience. These findings are consistent with Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964; 1993), which posits that investing in people through skills and leadership development directly improves productivity and competitiveness. The conclusion is further supported by Yang, Luu, and Qian (2021), who emphasized that transformational leadership fosters service innovation, and Zhu and Kanchanathaveekul (2020), who identified service quality competencies as critical to hotel competitiveness. Likewise, Zhu and Huang (2023) confirmed that leadership and innovation together drive higher performance in Chinese SMEs. Meanwhile, Business Networks were found to play a pivotal role in enhancing SME competitiveness. Guanxi-based collaborations, trust-based partnerships, and digital integration enable tourism SMEs to access resources, markets, and knowledge flows essential for growth. This finding corresponds with Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000), which highlights trust and reciprocity as crucial determinants of organizational success. Supporting evidence from Awais et al. (2023) confirms that digital collaboration and trust-based networks significantly enhance innovation capacity. Similarly, Gulati et al. (2000) argued that sustainable business networks must balance stability and agility to facilitate rapid knowledge transfer—an attribute reflected in Zhejiang's most adaptive SMEs. Overall, the findings under this objective reveal that the synergy among HC, BN, and OI determines the competitiveness of tourism SMEs. Firms that combine skilled human resources, collaborative networks, and innovation-oriented strategies achieve superior resilience and sustainable development within China's rapidly evolving tourism sector.

2. To analyze the mediating role of organizational innovation in the relationships among human capital, business networks, and tourism SME success in Zhejiang Province, China.

The second research objective sought to explain the interrelationships among HC, BN, and OI in determining the success of tourism SMEs. The analysis confirmed that OI serves as a

critical mediating mechanism, integrating internal human resource capabilities and external network resources to enhance business outcomes. Both HC and BN positively influence OI ($\beta = 0.428$ and $\beta = 0.341$; $p < 0.001$), which in turn significantly increases SME performance. These findings are consistent with Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Teece, 2007), which emphasizes that firms must continuously adapt and reconfigure resources to maintain competitiveness. In Zhejiang Province, tourism SMEs demonstrated this adaptability through the adoption of digital platforms, cultural product innovation, and agile management practices, which collectively supported post-crisis recovery and long-term resilience. This result aligns with the research of Anzules-Falcones et al. (2025), who emphasized the centrality of innovation for resilience, and Pilav-Velic et al. (2024), who highlighted the innovation–resilience nexus as the foundation of sustainable performance. However, challenges such as limited financial capacity, high labor turnover, and weak inter-firm cooperation remain significant barriers to innovation diffusion. These obstacles may be interpreted through the lens of Institutional Theory, which emphasizes the importance of supportive policies and institutional ecosystems in sustaining SME competitiveness. This conclusion aligns with recent global evidence reported by UNWTO (2023) and OECD (2022), which highlights how innovation-oriented environments and policy support contribute to the adaptability and international competitiveness of tourism enterprises.

Conclusion

This study confirms that human capital, business networks, and organizational innovation play interconnected and mutually reinforcing roles in enhancing the success and resilience of tourism SMEs within the context of Zhejiang Province, China. Human capital—particularly digital literacy, adaptability, and leadership capability—constitutes a critical internal foundation that enables firms to remain competitive in an increasingly digitalized tourism environment. Business networks further strengthen this foundation by facilitating collaboration, promoting knowledge exchange, and enhancing digital integration among partners. Among the three factors, organizational innovation emerges as the most influential driver, functioning as a transformative mechanism that translates human capabilities and network-based collaboration into improved service quality, product innovation, and competitive performance.

In terms of knowledge contribution, this study develops an author-generated HC–BN–OI Synergy Model, which explains how organizational innovation serves as the central mechanism integrating human capital and business networks into sustainable competitive outcomes. The model, by elucidating the interconnected and mediating dynamics between individuals, networks, and innovation, builds upon existing scholarship that has typically analysed these elements in isolation when assessing the success of tourism SMEs.

From a strategic perspective, the findings underscore the importance of tourism SMEs investing in human capital, fostering collaborative business networks, and embedding innovation within organizational culture to enhance long-term sustainability and competitiveness. For policymakers and industry stakeholders, the results highlight the need to cultivate innovation-driven ecosystems that integrate skills development, digital collaboration, and supportive institutional frameworks, particularly in regions characterized by dense SME networks and advanced digital infrastructure, such as Zhejiang Province.

Nevertheless, this study is subject to several limitations. Its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias, while the geographic focus on Zhejiang Province may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Future research could address these limitations by adopting longitudinal designs, incorporating multi-source data, and conducting comparative analyses across different regions to further validate and extend the proposed framework.

Suggestions

1. The suggestions from the research

Based on the findings of the first objective, human capital—particularly digital skills, adaptive capability, and leadership—was found to play a critical role in enhancing the competitiveness of tourism SMEs. To translate this evidence into practice, universities, vocational institutions, and local government agencies should jointly design structured training programs that focus on digital literacy, service innovation, and leadership development. These programs should be aligned with tourism SMEs' operational needs and include measurable outcomes such as improved service quality, innovation adoption rates, and employee retention.

Regarding the second objective, the findings confirm that organizational innovation functions as a central mechanism linking human capital and business networks to sustainable SME performance. Accordingly, tourism associations, regional development offices, and policy agencies should promote innovation-oriented collaboration by establishing digital networking platforms, supporting cluster-based cooperation, and offering targeted incentives for innovation adoption. Such mechanisms can strengthen inter-firm learning, accelerate innovation diffusion, and enhance SMEs' ability to expand markets and respond to environmental change.

2. The suggestions for future research

2.1 Future research should use comparative or cross-regional methods to determine how the HC–BN–OI Synergy Model works in different Chinese provinces and in other countries. Comparative studies would help to broaden the applicability of the findings and clarify the influence of contextual factors.

2.2 Furthermore, longitudinal studies are recommended to track the changes and development of human capital, networks, and innovation capabilities in tourism SMEs over extended periods. This is especially important during times of crisis, recovery, and growth. This approach would allow for stronger causal conclusions and a more thorough understanding of the processes involved in developing dynamic capabilities.

2.3 Future research could enhance the model by including additional variables, such as digital leadership, a focus on sustainability, or performance measures related to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors. Moreover, using data from multiple sources and advanced methods, such as mixed methods or big data analytic, would help reduce common method biases and strengthen the empirical reliability of the findings.

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