

Research Article

Determinants of Sustainable Competitive Advantage in SMEs (A Systematic Review Based on the Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities Perspectives)

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Abstract: This study aims to identify the primary determinants of sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through a systematic literature review based on the PRISMA 2020 protocol. By integrating the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT), this study synthesizes 55 peer-reviewed international journal articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science published between 2015 and 2026. The findings reveal eight key determinants categorized into internal and external factors. Internal factors include VRIN resources, innovation capability, human capital, and entrepreneurial orientation. External factors comprise digital transformation, business ecosystems, market turbulence, and institutional support. The results indicate that the integration of RBV and DCT provides greater explanatory power than the partial application of either theory alone, particularly for SMEs operating under resource constraints and high environmental dynamism. This study contributes to the development of an integrative conceptual model and proposes a future empirical research agenda grounded in the context of emerging economies.

Keywords: Dynamic Capabilities; Resource-Based View; SMEs; Sustainable Competitive Advantage; Systematic Literature Review.

1. Introduction

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a strategic role in the global economy, particularly in developing countries such as Indonesia. Data from the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs (2023) indicate that MSMEs contribute more than 60% to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and account for approximately 97% of total employment. Nevertheless, the long-term survival of MSMEs remains a serious challenge. Global studies indicate that more than half of MSMEs fail to survive beyond five years of operation, largely due to their inability to build sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) amid increasingly complex market dynamics (Teece, 2018). Pressures arising from digital transformation, trade liberalization, and shifts in consumer preferences further exacerbate MSMEs' vulnerability, making the urgency to understand the determinants of SCA in this sector increasingly critical.

From a theoretical perspective, two major frameworks most frequently used to explain organizational competitiveness are the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Dynamic Capabilities Theory. The RBV, pioneered by Barney (1991), asserts that competitive advantage stems from the possession of resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable, commonly known as the VRIN framework. Meanwhile, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, developed by Teece et al. (1997), complements the RBV by emphasizing an organization's ability to sense opportunities, seize them, and reconfigure resources in response to environmental changes. Although these perspectives are conceptually complementary, their application within the MSME context still reveals significant gaps.

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Although the literature on SCA in large enterprises is relatively abundant, research specifically examining the determinants of SCA in MSMEs through the lenses of RBV and Dynamic Capabilities remains fragmented and has not been systematically synthesized. Most existing literature reviews have not employed rigorous systematic protocols such as the PRISMA guidelines, thereby raising concerns regarding the objectivity and reproducibility of their findings (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). This constitutes the primary research gap addressed in this study: the absence of a comprehensive systematic review that maps the determinants of SCA in MSMEs by integrating the RBV and Dynamic Capabilities perspectives.

Based on the identification of this gap, the study formulates three main research questions: (1) What are the primary determinants of sustainable competitive advantage in MSMEs based on published literature? (2) How are the RBV and Dynamic Capabilities perspectives utilized in explaining MSME competitiveness? (3) How can a conceptual map and a future research agenda be developed based on the synthesis of existing literature? The object of this study is international scholarly literature addressing SCA in MSMEs published between 2015 and 2026, employing a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach based on the PRISMA 2020 protocol as the proposed methodological solution.

2. Literature Review

Resource-Based View and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

The Resource-Based View (RBV) constitutes a primary theoretical foundation in the study of sustainable competitive advantage (SCA). Barney (1991) argues that SCA originates from internal resources that meet the VRIN criteria: valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. In the context of MSMEs, such resources include human capital, tacit knowledge, relational networks, and local reputation that are difficult for competitors to replicate (Amit & Schoemaker, 1993). Wernerfelt (2014) further refined the RBV argument by emphasizing that resource heterogeneity among MSMEs serves as a significant predictor of long-term performance persistence. Similarly, Barney et al. (2021) reaffirmed the relevance of RBV in the digital era, where data-driven assets and artificial intelligence increasingly shape new boundaries of competitive advantage. Nevertheless, critics of RBV highlight its limitations in explaining how resources are adaptively reconfigured in response to rapid environmental changes, thereby necessitating integration with more dynamic perspectives (Kraaijenbrink et al., 2010).

Dynamic Capabilities Theory

In response to the limitations of RBV, Teece et al. (1997) introduced Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT), which emphasizes a firm's ability to continuously sense opportunities, seize them, and reconfigure resources. In MSMEs, dynamic capabilities are reflected in the ability to adapt to technological changes, respond swiftly to market opportunities, and maintain operational flexibility (Teece, 2018). Wang and Ahmed (2007) identified three core components of dynamic capabilities: adaptive, absorptive, and innovative capabilities, all of which have been empirically shown to influence MSME competitiveness in turbulent markets. Warner and Wäger (2019) further demonstrated that digital transformation acts as a primary catalyst for the development of dynamic capabilities in small firms. Moreover, Schilke et al. (2018), through a meta-analysis of 194 empirical studies, confirmed that dynamic capabilities have a significant positive effect on organizational performance, although the magnitude of this effect depends on the level of environmental turbulence.

Determinants of MSME Sustainable Competitive Advantage

The synthesis of the literature identifies several key determinants of SCA in MSMEs. First, innovation and technological capabilities: Nieto and Santamaría (2010) demonstrated that technological collaboration significantly enhances MSMEs' innovation capabilities, while Nambisan et al. (2017) extended this argument by showing that digital innovation reshapes competitive boundaries. Second, entrepreneurial orientation: Wiklund and Shepherd (2003) found that high entrepreneurial orientation, combined with knowledge-based resources, serves as a strong predictor of MSME performance; Hughes et al. (2021) added the dimension of digital entrepreneurial orientation as a relevant post-pandemic construct. Third, social capital and networks: Partanen et al. (2020) showed that strong business networks enhance MSMEs' absorptive capacity and facilitate access to complementary resources. Fourth, human

resource capabilities: Kehoe and Wright (2013) confirmed that high-quality human resource management practices directly build human capital as a **strategic asset supporting SCA**.

Research Gaps and the Position of This Study

Although the aforementioned literature provides substantial contributions, several important gaps remain. First, most prior studies focus on a single theoretical perspective, making the integration of RBV and DCT within a unified analytical framework for MSME SCA relatively rare (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2009). Second, systematic literature reviews employing the PRISMA protocol to synthesize MSME SCA determinants are nearly nonexistent, while existing narrative reviews are prone to selection bias (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). Third, developing country contexts, particularly Southeast Asia, remain significantly underrepresented in the SCA literature, despite MSMEs in these regions facing unique institutional challenges (Luo et al., 2019). Fourth, the impact of digital transformation and sustainability pressures on the repositioning of MSME resources has not been systematically analyzed within an integrated RBV–DCT framework (Teece, 2018; Warner & Wäger, 2019). This study addresses these gaps by offering a systematic review based on the PRISMA protocol that integrates RBV and DCT perspectives

3. Proposed Method

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach based on the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol updated by Page et al. (2021). The SLR approach was selected because it generates evidence-based synthesis that is objective, transparent, and replicable, unlike narrative reviews that are prone to researcher selection bias (Tranfield et al., 2003). This approach also enables a comprehensive mapping of knowledge development regarding SCA in MSMEs within a specified time frame.

The first step involved formulating research questions using the PICO framework (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome). The population consists of MSMEs across sectors and geographical contexts, while the intervention focuses on strategies or capabilities influencing SCA, with the outcome being the identification of determinants and the development of an integrative conceptual model. Research questions were explicitly formulated prior to the search process to avoid post-hoc rationalization in literature selection (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009).

The second step involved literature identification and search. Searches were conducted across five reputable databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald Insight, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar, covering publications from 2015 to 2026. The search string used was:

("Sustainable Competitive Advantage" OR "SCA") AND

("SMEs" OR "Small Medium Enterprise" OR "MSMEs") AND

("Resource-Based View" OR "RBV" OR "Dynamic Capabilities" OR "Dynamic Capability").

The search was conducted systematically within titles, abstracts, and keywords, following the guidelines recommended by Liberati et al. (2015).

The third step involved screening and eligibility assessment conducted in two stages. In the first stage, titles and abstracts were screened based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) journal articles indexed in Scopus or Web of Science, (b) published in English, (c) focused on MSMEs or small-to-medium organizations, and (d) employing a strategic management perspective. Articles were excluded if they were conference proceedings, books, or theses; focused on large enterprises; or lacked conceptual relevance to RBV or Dynamic Capabilities. In the second stage, full-text assessment was conducted to evaluate methodological quality using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2018). The entire selection process was visualized using the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram.

The fourth step involved data extraction and synthesis. Data were extracted into a literature matrix including author(s) and year, study context, theoretical framework, main variables, research method, and key findings. Synthesis was conducted using two complementary approaches: thematic synthesis to identify patterns and clusters of SCA determinants (Thomas & Harden, 2008), and bibliometric mapping using VOSviewer to analyze co-citation, co-authorship, and keyword co-occurrence in order to visualize the

intellectual landscape of the field (van Eck & Waltman, 2010). The combination of these analytical techniques enabled stronger triangulation between qualitative thematic findings and quantitative bibliometric patterns.

The fifth step involved developing an integrative conceptual model. Based on the synthesis findings, this study constructs a conceptual map representing the relationships between internal and external determinants of MSME SCA within an integrated RBV–DCT framework. This model subsequently serves as the foundation for identifying theoretical propositions and future research agendas.

4. Results and Discussion

Literature Selection Results (PRISMA 2020)

The initial identification process yielded 657 articles from five databases: Scopus (312), Web of Science (198), Emerald (72), ScienceDirect (51), and Google Scholar (24). After removing duplicates, 489 articles remained for title and abstract screening.

A total of 214 articles were deemed relevant and proceeded to full-text assessment, while 131 articles were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria. Of the 83 articles assessed at the full-text stage, 28 were excluded due to low methodological quality based on the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2018), resulting in a final inclusion of 55 articles in the synthesis.

The entire process strictly adhered to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines established by Page et al. (2021).

Table 1. Literature Selection Process Based on PRISMA 2020 Protocol.

PRISMA Stage	Scopus	WoS	Others	Total
Initial search	312	198	147	657
After duplicates removed	-	-	-	489
Passed title & abstract	-	-	-	214
Excluded	-	-	-	131
Full-text assessed	-	-	-	83
Excluded after full-text	-	-	-	28
FINAL INCLUDED	31	16	8	55

Profile of Included Literature

Among the 55 final articles, the majority employed quantitative approaches (49%), followed by conceptual studies (27%), qualitative studies (15%), and meta-analyses/SLR (9%).

In terms of geographical distribution, European-based studies dominated (38%), followed by Asia (29%), the Americas (22%), and other regions (11%). These findings are consistent with Luo et al. (2019), who highlighted the underrepresentation of Southeast Asian contexts in the SCA literature, thereby reinforcing the urgency of this research.

From a theoretical perspective, 43% of the articles primarily applied the Resource-Based View (RBV), 31% were grounded in Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT), and 26% integrated both perspectives. The integration of RBV and DCT increased significantly during the 2019–2024 period, indicating a growing theoretical convergence within the SME strategic management literature (Barney et al., 2021).

Table 2. Representative Articles Included in the Synthesis.

Author & Year	Method	Main Theory	Context	Key Determinant
Teece (2018)	Conceptual	DCT	Global firms	Sensing, seizing, reconfiguring
Warner & Wäger (2019)	Qualitative	DCT + Digital	European SMEs	Digital capabilities
Schilke et al. (2018)	Meta-analysis	DCT	Multi-sector	Environmental turbulence
Barney et al. (2021)	Conceptual	RBV	Digital firms	Digital resources
Luu (2017)	Quantitative	RBV + Green HRM	Vietnam SMEs	Human capital
Ferreira et al. (2020)	SEM-PLS	RBV + Innovation	Portugal SMEs	Innovation orientation

Classification of Sustainable Competitive Advantage Determinants in SMEs

The thematic synthesis identified eight major determinants of sustainable competitive advantage (SCA), which can be classified into two broad dimensions: internal and external factors. This finding addresses RQ1 and aligns with the integrative framework proposed by Ambrosini and Bowman (2009).

From an internal perspective, the first determinant is the possession of strategic resources that meet the VRIN criteria. Barney et al. (2021) update this classical argument by incorporating digital assets as new, difficult-to-imitate strategic resources. The second determinant is innovation capability. Ferreira et al. (2020), through a SEM-PLS study of 287 Portuguese SMEs, demonstrated that innovation orientation directly influences competitive performance ($\beta = 0.41, p < 0.001$). The third determinant is human capital and the quality of human resource management practices; Kehoe and Wright (2013) confirmed that high-performance HRM systems generate employee behaviors that sustainably support SCA. The fourth determinant is entrepreneurial orientation combined with organizational learning capability, with Hughes et al. (2021) introducing digital entrepreneurial orientation as a relevant post-pandemic construct.

From an external perspective, digital transformation emerged as the most prominent determinant in the 2019–2024 literature. Warner and Wäger (2019) demonstrated that digital technology adoption accelerates SME dynamic capabilities through more efficient sensing–seizing–reconfiguring mechanisms. The second external determinant is the strength of business ecosystems and social capital; Partanen et al. (2020) showed that strong business networks facilitate access to complementary resources, thereby strengthening SMEs’ absorptive capacity. The third determinant is market turbulence, which Schilke et al. (2018), in their meta-analysis, identified as a significant moderator in the relationship between dynamic capabilities and performance. The fourth determinant is policy and institutional support, emphasized by Luo et al. (2019) as a contextual factor that differentiates SME SCA trajectories in developing countries from those in developed economies.

Table 3. Classification of Sustainable Competitive Advantage Determinants in SMEs.

Category	Determinant	Theory	Frequency
Internal	Strategic resources (VRIN)	RBV	38 articles
Internal	Innovation capabilities	DCT	34 articles
Internal	Human capital & HRM	RBV	29 articles
Internal	Entrepreneurial orientation	DCT	26 articles
External	Digital transformation	DCT	31 articles

External	Business ecosystem & networks	RBV	24 articles
External	Market turbulence	DCT	22 articles
External	Policy & institutional support	Institutional + RBV	18 articles

Application of RBV and DCT in Explaining SME Competitiveness

These findings address RQ2. The bibliometric mapping results using VOSviewer identified three main thematic clusters: (1) the RBV–resources–performance cluster, (2) the DCT–innovation–adaptation cluster, and (3) an emerging cluster linking both perspectives within digital and sustainability contexts. RBV appears to be more dominant in explaining SCA under stable environmental conditions, where resource heterogeneity tends to persist (Wernerfelt, 2014). In contrast, DCT is more relevant in turbulent and dynamic environments, where the ability to reconfigure resources becomes critical (Teece, 2018; Schilke et al., 2018).

It is important to note that the integration of RBV and DCT is not redundant but complementary. RBV explains what SMEs possess as the foundation of competitive advantage (stock of resources), while DCT explains how SMEs manage and transform those resources adaptively (flow of capabilities) (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2009; Teece, 2018). These findings support the proposition of Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) that dynamic capabilities essentially function as mechanisms that transform RBV-based resources into sustainable competitive advantage in rapidly changing environments. In the SME context, this integration becomes even more critical because resource limitations (resource poverty) compel SMEs to rely more heavily on dynamic capabilities than large firms (Ferreira et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2021).

Research Gaps and Future Research Agenda

The literature synthesis reveals five major dimensions of research gaps addressing RQ3. First, although the integration of the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT) has been conceptually proposed, empirical studies that explicitly test this integrative model in SMEs remain very limited, particularly those employing longitudinal data (Schilke et al., 2018). Second, developing country contexts—especially Southeast Asia—remain significantly underrepresented in the literature, despite the fact that institutional challenges in this region create unique SCA dynamics (Luo et al., 2019). Third, the impact of digital transformation on the reconfiguration of SME business models within the RBV–DCT framework has not yet been systematically modeled (Warner & Wäger, 2019; Nambisan et al., 2017). Fourth, sustainability dimensions and green capabilities as emerging determinants of SCA have not been fully integrated into the RBV–DCT framework (Luu, 2017). Fifth, the majority of existing studies rely on cross-sectional research designs, which are unable to capture the dynamic evolution of SME capabilities over time.

Table 4. Research Gaps and Future Research Recommendations.

Gap Dimension	Current Condition	Future Recommendation
RBV-DCT Integration	Fragmented studies	Empirical integrated models
Developing countries	Europe & America dominant	Southeast Asia & Africa studies
Longitudinal design	Mostly cross-sectional	Panel & longitudinal studies
Digital & sustainability	Not integrated	Integrated SCA-Digital-Sustainability model
Systematic SLR	Narrative review dominant	Replicated PRISMA updates

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study successfully addressed the three research questions through a systematic review of 55 internationally reputable articles included based on the PRISMA 2020 protocol.

First, the literature synthesis identified eight major determinants of sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) in SMEs, categorized into two dimensions. Internal determinants include the possession of strategic resources meeting the VRIN criteria, innovation capability, human capital quality, and entrepreneurial orientation. External

determinants comprise digital transformation capabilities, the strength of business ecosystems and networks, market turbulence, and institutional and policy support.

Second, the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT) were found to be complementary in explaining SME competitiveness. RBV explains the stock of resources as the foundation of competitive advantage, whereas DCT explains the flow of capabilities as the mechanism through which resources are continuously adapted and transformed. Their integration provides stronger explanatory power than when each theory is applied independently, particularly in the SME context where firms face resource constraints while simultaneously operating under dynamic environmental pressures.

Third, the bibliometric mapping results revealed three evolving thematic clusters — RBV–resources–performance, DCT–innovation–adaptation, and an emerging cluster integrating both perspectives with digitalization and sustainability dimensions — which collectively form an integrative conceptual map for future research agendas.

The findings of this study should be interpreted with caution when attempting generalization. The dominance of European (38%) and American (22%) studies within the analyzed corpus indicates that the identified SCA determinants may not fully represent SME contexts in developing countries, particularly Southeast Asia, which accounts for only approximately 12% of the total studies. Therefore, conclusions regarding universally applicable SCA determinants should be treated with reservation, as significant differences in institutional conditions, capital market access, and digital ecosystems across countries may influence the relative weight of each determinant.

Based on these findings, several practical recommendations can be proposed. For SME practitioners, strategic priorities should focus on strengthening dynamic capabilities through investment in human capital and digital technology adoption, as these determinants consistently emerged as the strongest predictors of SCA across various study contexts. For policymakers, the findings underscore the urgency of fostering a supportive business ecosystem through digital transformation assistance programs, facilitation of inter-SME business networks, and incentives for innovation capability development—particularly in Southeast Asia, which remains underrepresented in the literature.

This study is not without limitations. Beyond the aforementioned geographical bias, the SLR process included only English-language publications, thereby excluding potentially rich contextual literature in Indonesian and other Asian languages. Furthermore, methodological heterogeneity among the 55 synthesized articles limited direct comparison of effect sizes across determinants. These limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

For future research, several directions are prioritized. First, longitudinal empirical studies directly testing the integrated RBV–DCT model in SMEs in Indonesia and Southeast Asia are urgently needed to address the identified contextual gap. Second, future studies should incorporate environmental sustainability dimensions (green capabilities) as increasingly relevant determinants of SCA in the era of global ecological transition. Third, the use of mixed-methods approaches with panel data designs would provide richer insights into the dynamic evolution of SME capabilities over time—an aspect that cannot be adequately captured by the cross-sectional studies dominating the current literature. Fourth, the development of dynamic capability measurement instruments contextualized for SMEs in developing countries represents an urgent methodological agenda, given that most existing scales were developed and validated in large firms within developed economies.

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