

Cognitive Determinants of Chinese Entrepreneurs' Intention to Adopt Marketing Approach in SMEs: A Case from Anhui, China

KashifUllah Khan¹ Prof Zhang Xuehe¹ Fouzia Atlas¹ Farhan Khan¹ Muhammad Hamayun¹
Ahmad Nawaz Zaheer¹ Muhammad Altaf² Fahad Ali³

1.School of Public Affairs, University of Science and Technology of China, 96-Jinzhai road, Hefei Anhui, P.R China

2.University of Engineering and Technology Texila, Pakistan

3.College of Economics, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou 310027, Zhejiang Province P.R China

Abstract

This paper examines the cognitive determinants of entrepreneurs regarding intentions to adopt/or not marketing approach in SMEs (small and medium enterprises) in Anhui, China. Ajzens (1991) model of predicting human and organization behavior i.e. TPB (Theory of planned behavior) was used to determine the cognitive behavior through attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control in addition with salient beliefs. Data was collected randomly across different industrial sectors with different levels of sales and number of employees. Results of 172 SMEs in Anhui, China show that attitude or behavioral beliefs, perception of entrepreneurs regarding advantages or disadvantages of the factors influencing entrepreneurs intentions to adopt marketing approach in their firms and subjective norms or normative beliefs, the social referents influencing entrepreneurs intention to adopt marketing approach i.e. corporate culture, seem to influence and considered to be the main determinants of Chinese SMEs entrepreneurs intention to adopt marketing approach. This research limitation includes the analyses and findings of this research study on limited sample of SMEs located in Anhui, China.

Keywords: SMEs (small and medium enterprises); Cognitive determinants; TPB (Theory of planned behavior); Marketing; Anhui, China.

Abstract

This paper examines the cognitive determinants of entrepreneurs regarding intentions to adopt/or not marketing approach in SMEs (small and medium enterprises) in Anhui, China. Ajzens (1991) model of predicting human and organization behavior i.e. TPB (Theory of planned behavior) was used to determine the cognitive behavior through attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control in addition with salient beliefs. Data was collected randomly across different industrial sectors with different levels of sales and number of employees. Results of 172 SMEs in Anhui, China show that attitude or behavioral beliefs, perception of entrepreneurs regarding advantages or disadvantages of the factors influencing entrepreneurs intentions to adopt marketing approach in their firms and subjective norms or normative beliefs, the social referents influencing entrepreneurs intention to adopt marketing approach i.e. corporate culture, seem to influence and considered to be the main determinants of Chinese SMEs entrepreneurs intention to adopt marketing approach. This research limitation includes the analyses and findings of this research study on limited sample of SMEs located in Anhui, China.

Keywords: SMEs (small and medium enterprises), Cognitive determinants, TPB (Theory of planned behavior Marketing, Anhui, China.

1. Introduction

1.1. SMEs in China

SME sector plays a key role in the economic growth of developing economies and is considered to be the backbone of the economy irrespective of the development stage of the country whether developed or developing. Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in China comprised of almost 60% of GDP, and account for 40% of tax revenue, consist of more than 60% of Chinese exports. Small and medium size enterprises in China represent 99% out of more than 42 million registered commercial and industrial SMEs, they help Chinese economy create more than 75% of the nation's jobs, account for more than 75% enterprises technological innovation, 66% of the country's patent applications and 80% of its new products (Cardoza & Fornes 1999; China Development Bank, 2007). The Chinese government has been in recent years issuing a series of policies and regulations and provide financial support to SMEs which shows the importance Chinese government places on SMEs these include tax breaks for small firms and decrease of other financial burdens (Jin, Preble, & Sesia, 2012; China Development Bank, 2012). According to China Development Bank, Bank increased its support to SMEs and micro enterprises by strengthening financing to enhance SMEs capabilities in business innovation and risk management. Total loans extended to SME sector at the end of 2014 amounted to RMB 2.47 trillion (China Development Bank, 2015; Cardoza & Fornes, 2012; Xiangfeng & Development, 2008).

Chen (2006) has categorized the development of SMEs in China into three main stages the first one,

from 1978 to 1992 when the government strongly supported and encouraged to collective and self-employed enterprises. The second stage includes from 1992 to 2002 characterized by state owned SMEs reforms while encouraging private sector. The third stage began after 2002 this is an important stage when Chinese government passed the SMEs promotion law.

1.2. Marketing in SMEs

SMEs got quite unique characteristics and attributes that is why marketing in SMEs is different from structured and conventional marketing prevalent in large scale organizations (Hills, Hultman, & Miles, 2008; McCartan-Quinn & Carson, 2003) because most of the SMEs are owned, managed and organized by entrepreneurs, therefore behaviors and characteristics of the entrepreneurs including size and stage of development of the firms determine these characteristics and features of the SMEs, some advantages include greater flexibility, innovation and lower overhead costs whereas disadvantages include attributes such as scarce resources (e.g. financial problems, time and marketing knowledge and education), the entrepreneurs lack the specialist expertise and limited market power (Gilmore, Carson, & Grant, 2001; Motwani, Jiang, & Kumar, 1998) these obstacles hamper marketing planning and execution (Huang & Brown, 1999). Most of the literature recently has focused on the important role of marketing especially characterized by the increasing attention of the consumers to the intangible factors (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), these factors include the consumers empowerment, different kinds of social and relational nature of consumption patterns and practices (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and by the increasing level of consumers knowledge and awareness (Öztamur & Sarper, 2014; Bettiol, Di Maria, & Finotto, 2012). Marketing, as a result of information and communication technology, responsible for the empowerment of ultimate consumers (Harrison, Waite, & Hunter, 2006), has been conceived as interactive and distributed instead of unidirectional and completely managed and controlled by firms (Holt, 2002; Moorman & Rust, 2013; Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004).

Research studies have identified that small firms can get competitive advantage while successfully executing marketing function i.e. the ability of the firm to identify and operate in market niche that enable small firms to exploit a range of specialization and being competitive compare to large firms (Walsh & Lipinski, 2009). Many studies have discussed marketing in large scale organizations and only a limited inquiry is available on marketing function in SMEs. Some of the studies have discussed the outcomes of marketing and define marketing for SMEs, Carson (2001) discussed evolution of marketing, developed hypothetical and empirical models for SMEs, (Siu, Fang, & Lin, 2004) showed strategic marketing practices and SMEs performance, (Becherer, Halstead, & Haynes, 2003) examined internal environmental factors especially the background and decisions processes of entrepreneurs/CEOs of small firms. (Fillis, 2002) have discussed market orientation a key factor for SMEs performance. Gilmore et al., (2001) discussed the importance of networking (e.g. networking with competitors, suppliers and customers) for SMEs marketing. Businesses can be successful provided they successfully determine and satisfy the needs, wants and aspiration of the target customers and markets, all these concepts are considered to be part of marketing function of the firm and this marketing orientation leads to superior performance for the business as well as long term profitability (Becherer et al., 2003; Simpson & Taylor, 2002). Large scale organizations use formal and mechanistic hierarchical structure in decision making whereas decisions in small firms tend to be influenced by the entrepreneur's/owner's attributes, personality traits, attitudes, managerial style and behaviors because of the increasing involvement of the owner/manager (Sadler-Smith, Hampson, Chaston, & Badger, 2003).

2. Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Marketing Approach:

Theory of planned behavior (TPB) in the field of social psychology is a well-known expectancy value model of attitude-behavior relationships and has successfully used to predict various behaviors (Ajzen & Driver, 1991; Ajzen, 1996; Godin & Kok, 1996). TPB tells about the determinants of an individual's decision to perform a particular behavior. In this research we assume the individual's decision as decisions taken by managers or entrepreneurs in SMEs to adopt or not the marketing approach. This theory is also appropriate and can be applied to investigate behaviors in organizational contexts as shown by (Elliott & Jobber, 1995; Engle et al., 2010). According to TPB individuals (Managers) make behavioral decisions (decision to adopt/or not marketing approach) based on careful considerations of available information and sources. (Ajzen, Icek Netemeyer & Ryn, 1991) TPB model assumes that intentions represent an individual motivation regarding his/her deliberate plan or decision to exert effort to enact the behavior thus intention is the best predictor of actual behavior (e.g. intention to adopt a marketing approach). Intentions indicate how hard people are willing and how much effort they exert in order to perform a particular behavior (Conner & Armitage, 1998). TPB postulates that intention is the result of three conceptually independent determinants of intention. The first one is *Attitude* toward the specific behavior which is a person subjective predisposition i.e. favorable or unfavorable appraisal of the behavior; *Subjective norm*, which is perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform that particular behavior on the perceiver. These are the relevant and important people who play a key role in decision making; *perceived*

behavioral control is an individual's perception of how easy or difficult is to perform the behavior, which shows individual's past experience and expected obstacles in decision making. If attitude toward a specific behavior and subjective norms are favorable with greater perceived behavioral control, individual intention to perform the behavior (intentions to adopt marketing approach) tends to be stronger.

Components of intentions i.e. attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control also have determinants sometimes referred to as indirect determinants of intentions. TPB assumes that behavior is a function of salient information, or beliefs relevant to the behavior called salient beliefs (Ajzen, Icek Netemeyer & Ryn, 1991). These three kind of salient beliefs include *behavioral beliefs* a determinant of attitude represent perceived outcomes or attributes of the behavior. *Normative beliefs* constitutes subjective norms represent perceptions of specific significant others preferences about one should or should not engage in a specific behavior. And the third salient beliefs include *control beliefs*, the perception of factors likely to facilitate or hinder the performance of the behavior (Conner & Armitage, 1998). These factors can be internal (e.g. market information, organization policies, personal skills, abilities and experiences, both strengths and deficiencies etc.) or external factors (e.g. market opportunities, threats, government regulations, competition etc.). When managers/entrepreneurs perceive that there are market opportunities and they have the requisite resources (financial, human and technological resources) to perform specific behavior (to adopt marketing approach) they are likely to have high degree of PBC and intentions to perform that particular behavior (Ajzen, Icek Netemeyer & Ryn, 1991).

While following expectancy value conceptualization/models these beliefs can be quantified for by multiplying perceived likelihood of the behavior (expectancy) and evaluation of that outcome of the behavior (value). According to this approach the subjective value of the attitude is direct proportion to the strength of the belief i.e. subjective probability of the occurrence of the behavior and the corresponding evaluation (value) of such a behavior.

$$A \propto \sum bi.ei \quad (1)$$

A= Attitude

b= salient belief

e= beliefs attribute

n= number of salient beliefs

Subjective norm SN is directly proportional to the sum of the products of the subjective probability of each normative belief (n) and person (managers) motivation to comply with or not with the referent (m) across n salient referents (people or group of people important in decision making)

$$SN \propto \sum ni.mi \quad (2)$$

SN= Subjective norm

n=salient normative beliefs

m=number of social referents

Similarly each control belief (c) is multiplied by the subjective evaluation of that particular control factor (p) and the products are then summed across n salient control beliefs to obtain perceived behavior control.

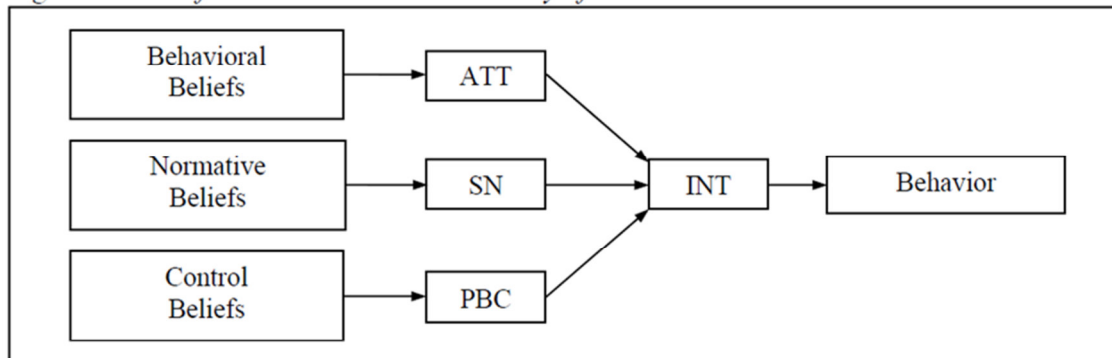
$$PBC \propto \sum pi.ci \quad (3)$$

PBC= Perceived behavioral control

P=salient control beliefs

c=number of control beliefs

Figure 1: *The Influence Patterns in the Theory of Planned Behavior*



Note: ATT = Attitude; SN = Subjective Norm; PBC = Perceived Behavioral Control; INT = Intention to perform a specific behavior (i.e., the intention to adopt a marketing approach).

Adopted from (Ajzen, Icek Netemeyer & Ryn, 1991).

3. Objective and Methodology of the research:

Entrepreneurs/managers play a key role in the success or failure of the firms because they are responsible for most of the decisions taken, similarly marketing is also important for the success of small firms, the main objective of this research is to investigate the determinants of the intention of the entrepreneur to adopt or not the marketing approach in SMEs in Anhui, China while applying Ajzen's (1991) TPB.

A structured questionnaire was designed on seven-point Likert scale consisting four parts, first part consisted questions in order to measure the entrepreneur's attitude toward the adoption of marketing approach; half of which regarding the subjective probability of the occurrence of the behavior (i.e. advantages or disadvantages) whereas the remaining half represent the subjective evaluation of the advantages or disadvantages. Ten questions were used to investigate subjective norm i.e. relevant people important to the entrepreneurs to approve or disapprove the adoption of marketing approach. Five of which regarding the subjective probability of the approval or disapproval of the adoption of marketing approach whereas the remaining half regarding the subjective probability of the evaluation (value) of their motivation to comply or not with the relevant others. In order to evaluate perceived behavioral control twenty items were included ten of which were used to measure the subjective probability of the occurrence of the events that facilitate or impede the adoption of marketing approach whereas remaining ten were used to evaluate the subjective evaluation of the importance of such events influencing the adoption of marketing approach. In the end two items were used to evaluate managers/entrepreneurs' intention to adopt/or not a marketing approach. The final part of the questionnaire consisted of questions regarding socio demographic data (i.e. industry, number of employees, level of sales (revenue)).

In order to measure and investigate the main objective of our research (i.e. cognitive determinants of entrepreneur's intention to adopt/ or not marketing approach) in Anhui Province, China, data was collected from a sample of 200 SMEs entrepreneurs located in Anhui province, China. Initially questionnaire was written in English but later translated into Chinese in order to facilitate data collection. SMEs were chosen from different industrial sectors, mainly from five industrial sectors (i.e. Food, Construction, Engineering, Textile and clothing, Wholesale). Number of employees include (1-20, 21-50, 50 and more), with level of sales/revenue (0-25 thousands Yuan, 25-50 thousands Yuan, 50-250 thousands Yuan, 250-500 thousands Yuan, 500-750 thousands Yuan, 750-1000 thousands Yuan and more than 1000 thousands Yuan). The main sample was reduced to 160 due to some discrepancies in filling the questionnaire and lack of cooperation of entrepreneurs. (Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of the main sample).

Table No: 01 Salient belief of entrepreneurs of SMEs in Anhui, China.

Behavioral beliefs
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Potential to promote both firms and products' images 2. Improvements in firm's production and sales 3. Need for employing highly skilled human resources 4. Possibility to better understand the existing markets 5. Possibility of developing new markets 6. Further difficulties in rising funds 7. Possibility to better understand the competitors 8. Cost efficiency (i.e. the possibility of rationalizing costs) 9. Risk of making mistakes 10. Wastes of time and other resources
Normative Beliefs
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Top management 2. Customers 3. Financiers 4. Employees 5. Competitors
Control Beliefs
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A market growth 2. An increase in disposable financial resources of the firm 3. Development of the marketing knowledge within the organization 4. The necessity to modify firm's existing strategies 5. Subsidies and interventions by banks and the Government 6. A markets' crisis 7. Difficulties in employing marketing experts 8. An enhancement of tax pressure 9. Unexpected difficulties in rising funds 10. Organizational inertia

Table No: 02 Descriptive statistics of main sample

Industrial Sector	%	Number of Employees	%	Sales/Revenue *1000	%
Food	6.9	1 to 20	18.6	0 to 25	8.7
Construction	15.6	21 to 50	26.2	25 to 50	8.7
Commercial whole sale	6.3	More than 50	55.2	50 to 250	11
Engineering	18.8			250 to 500	4.7
Textile/clothing	9.4			500 to 750	4.7
others	43			750 to 1000	8.7
				> 1000	29.1
				No Answer	24.4
Total	100	Total	100	Total	100

4. Results

The main research objective of this study is to identify cognitive determinants/psychological factors of the entrepreneurs' intention to adopt/or not a marketing approach in their firms while applying theory of planned behavior TPB Ajzen (1991). In order to obtain our objective TPB Ajzen's 1991 model was implemented while applying multiple linear regression analysis, *entrepreneurs' intention to adopt a marketing approach* was considered as a dependent variable, whereas *attitude, subjective norm* and *perceived behavioral control* were treated as independent variables.

Salient beliefs (i.e. *behavioral, normative* and *control beliefs*) were calculated through their weighted sum in order to obtain *attitude, subjective norm* and *perceived behavioral control*.

4.1. Behavioral Beliefs:

Table 03 shows the means, standard deviations and confidence interval of behavioral beliefs of entrepreneurs i.e. perceived advantages and disadvantages result from adoption of a marketing approach. Results showed that entrepreneurs' perceived advantages associated with adoption of a marketing approach i.e. "*improvement in firm's products and sales*" with mean M= 33.4 and standard deviation SD=14.60 and "*Need to employ highly skilled and experienced human resources*" (M=32.66 and SD=14.09) whereas entrepreneurs' confidence results show that first variable confidence interval is between 30.76 and 35.32 and for second variable it was between 30.46 and 34.86 tend to impact more than others on entrepreneurs attitude towards adoption/or not a marketing approach. They think that higher costs (M=17.31 and SD=13.48) and wastes of time and other resources (M=15.51 and SD=13.16) are the disadvantages that impede the adoption of marketing their firms.

Table No: 03

Behavioral beliefs	M	SD	CI	
			Min	Max
1. Improvements in firm's production and sales	33.04	14.60	30.76	35.32
2. Need for employing highly skilled human resources	32.66	14.092	30.46	34.86
3. Further difficulties in rising funds	31.21	14.459	28.95	33.46
4. Possibility of promoting both firms and products' images	29.58	16.543	26.99	32.16
5. Possibility of developing new markets	28.74	14.499	26.47	31.00
6. Possibility of a better understanding of competitors	27.23	14.766	24.93	29.54
7. Possibility of a better understanding of existing markets	25.26	14.092	23.06	27.46
8. Risk of making mistakes	24.45	15.321	22.06	26.84
9. Cost efficiency (i.e., the possibility of rationalizing costs)	17.31	13.487	15.20	19.41
10. Waste of time and other resources	15.51	13.168	13.46	17.57

Note: M=mean, SD= standard deviation and CI= confidence interval Min=Minimum, Max=Maximum

4.2. Normative Beliefs:

Normative beliefs constitute subjective norms represent perceptions of specific significant others preferences about one should or should not engage in a specific behavior. Table show that subjective norm i.e. "Top management" (M=34.11 and SD=16.04) and "Competitors" (M=32.71 and SD=15.53) influence more than other people important in entrepreneurs intentions regarding adoption of a marketing approach.

Table No: 04

Normative Beliefs	M	SD	CI	
			Min	Max
1. Top management	34.11	16.044	31.60	36.61
2. Competitors	32.71	15.532	30.28	35.13
3. Financiers	31.88	14.256	29.66	34.11
4. Customers	31.54	13.456	29.44	33.64
5. Employees	14.19	13.91	12.02	16.36

Note: M=mean, SD= standard deviation and CI= confidence interval Min=Minimum, Max=Maximum

4.3. Control Beliefs

Control beliefs are the perception of factors likely to facilitate or impede the performance of the behavior (Conner & Armitage, 1998). These factors can be internal (e.g. market information, organization policies, personal skills, abilities and experiences, both strengths and deficiencies etc.) or external factors (e.g. market opportunities, threats, government regulations, competition etc.). Our results depict that internal factors include “Development of the marketing knowledge” (M=30.98 and SD=13.45) and “the necessity to modify firms existing strategy” (M=28.56 and SD=14.00), as well as external factors such as “market growth” (M=28.26 and SD=16.30) and “subsidies and interventions by banks and the Government” (M=26.8 and SD=13.69) influence entrepreneurs intention to adopt or not a marketing approach in their firms.

Table No: 05

Control Beliefs	M	SD	CI	
			Min	Max
1. Development of the marketing knowledge	30.98	13.458	28.87	33.08
2. The need to modify firm’s existing strategies	28.56	14.000	26.37	30.74
3. A market growth	28.26	16.306	25.72	30.81
4. Subsidies or interventions by banks or the Government	26.08	13.693	23.94	28.22
5. An increase in disposable financial resources	24.92	14.942	22.59	27.25
6. Unexpected difficulties in rising funds	21.73	13.345	19.64	23.81
7. Difficulties in employing marketing experts	20.80	13.606	18.68	22.92
8. Increasing tax pressure	20.13	13.083	18.09	22.17
9. A markets’ crisis	19.31	12.766	17.32	21.31
10. Organizational inertia	18.92	14.133	16.71	21.13

Note: M=mean, SD= standard deviation and CI= confidence interval Min=Minimum, Max=Maximum

5. Discussion

All these three salient beliefs (behavioral, normative and control beliefs) were added in order to obtain aggregate amount of attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control respectively. Multiple linear regressions were used to measure that the Ajzen’s (1991) model of TBP appropriate to explain the entrepreneurs’ intentions to adopt a marketing approach in their firms. Results showed that the multiple linear regression analysis is appropriate and capable of explaining the entrepreneurs’ intention to adopt marketing approach in their firms ($R^2=.135$ and $Adj.R^2=.119$) (See table 06 below). *Attitude* ($\beta=.286$, $p=.028$ i.e. $p<.05$) and *Subjective norm* ($\beta=.256$, $p=.028$ i.e. $p<.05$) (see table below), were found to be significant determinants of the entrepreneurs intention to adopt a marketing approach whereas *perceived behavioral control* was the only insignificant determinant ($p>.05$) and have little or no impact on the intention of entrepreneurs’ to adopt marketing approach in their firms.

Table No:06

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t-value	p-value	Confidence Interval	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1 (Constant)	3.745	.513		7.298	.000	2.731	4.759
<i>Att</i>	.286	.129	.228	2.216	.028	.031	.541
<i>SN</i>	.256	.119	.232	2.143	.034	.020	.492
<i>PBC</i>	-.107	.102	-.099	-1.047	.297	-.309	.095

Note: N= 160. Dependent Variable: intention to adopt marketing approach, *Att*= Attitude, *SN*= Subjective norm and *PBC*= perceived behavioral control $R=.368$, $R^2=.135$ and $Adj R^2=.119$

6. Summary and Conclusions:

The main objective of this research study was to determine the cognitive determinants influencing entrepreneurs' intention to adopt marketing approach through TPB (Ajzen 1991) model which according to our results appropriate to explain entrepreneurs behaviors to adopt marketing approach. Intention to adopt marketing approach was taken as dependent variable whereas attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control were taken as independent variables. Multiple linear regression analysis was used. Results showed that *Attitude* and *subjective norm* exert significant impact on entrepreneurs' intention to adopt marketing approach. In terms of behavioral beliefs the entrepreneurs intention to adopt marketing approach depend on perceived advantages of the behavior (i.e. "*Improvements in firm's production and sales*" and "*Need to employ highly skilled human resources*") as well as normative beliefs which represent the corporate culture where decision are influenced by others' social pressure inside and outside the organization (e.g. "*Top management*" and "*Competitors*") because in most of the SMEs in Anhui, China, the top management consist of the owner himself or herself, whereas competitors also influence their decision in the same industry due to increased competition in the market. Only *perceived behavioral control* or *control beliefs* were found to exert no significant influence on entrepreneurs' intention to adopt marketing approach i.e. external factors such as the occurrence of specific events that facilitate or hinder such a behavior.

SME sector play a vital role in the economic growth of China, the total number of SMEs in Anhui province increasing each year due to rapid expansion of the regional economy and being the capital city of the Anhui province. The sample size of the SMEs chosen for this research across different industrial sectors for analyses is relatively small and in the future large sample of SMEs will be needed especially in comparisons with evidence from other cities and provinces to develop more robust theoretical frameworks.

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