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(AIJBES)www.aijbbs.comORGANISATIONAL RESILIENCE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL
ENTERPRISES DURING CRISES: A CASE STUDY OF
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Abstract:

This study investigates the organisational resilience of entrepreneurial enterprises in the face of crises, using the emerging Chinese coffee brand Saturnbird as a case example. Drawing on the three-stage model of organisational resilience (anticipation, coping, adaptation), the analysis reveals that Saturnbird demonstrated a high degree of strategic agility, digital capability, and user co-creation culture during the COVID-19 pandemic, effectively responding to market uncertainties. The findings confirm that organisational resilience is a dynamic capability that can be developed and transformed into competitive advantage, particularly for entrepreneurial enterprises. This research enriches the application of resilience theory in entrepreneurial contexts and provides practical insights for small and medium-sized enterprises operating in resource-constrained environments.

Keywords:

Organisational Resilience, Entrepreneurial Enterprises, Crisis Management, Case Study

Introduction

In recent years, with the increasingly volatile global economic and social environment, organisational resilience has become a key factor in determining the survival and development of enterprises, particularly entrepreneurial firms. Compared to mature enterprises,

entrepreneurial firms often operate with limited resources, incomplete systems, and lack of crisis management experience, making them more vulnerable to external shocks. However, some entrepreneurial enterprises are able to respond flexibly, recover quickly, and even achieve strategic breakthroughs during crises, demonstrating strong organisational resilience. This phenomenon raises important theoretical and practical questions: What factors shape the organisational resilience of entrepreneurial enterprises? How do such firms respond to crises, and how can resilience be systematically built?

Organisational resilience refers to an organisation's ability to anticipate, respond to, and adapt to disruption while maintaining continuous operations and strategic relevance (Duchek, 2020). In the entrepreneurial context, resilience is not only a mechanism of defence but also a capacity for transformation and reinvention. As the COVID-19 pandemic, economic downturns, and market shocks have repeatedly tested firms' limits, the strategic value of resilience for entrepreneurial enterprises has become more prominent. Entrepreneurial resilience enables firms not only to survive but also to grow through uncertainty by leveraging innovation, flexibility, and cultural alignment.

This study selects Saturnbird Coffee—a fast-growing Chinese start-up brand in the instant coffee industry—as a case study, and applies Duchek's three-phase resilience model to analyse its organisational response to the COVID-19 crisis. Through examining the company's behaviours across the phases of anticipation, coping, and adaptation, the study aims to explore how entrepreneurial firms build and leverage resilience under extreme pressure, and what implications this has for broader entrepreneurial practice and policy.

Literature Review

Definition and Core Dimensions of Organisational Resilience

Organisational resilience is broadly defined as the capacity of an organisation to withstand, respond to, and recover from adverse conditions, while maintaining its core functions and enabling future growth. Duchek (2020) conceptualises resilience as a dynamic capability that evolves through three sequential stages: anticipation, coping, and adaptation. Anticipation involves proactive risk detection and preparation; coping relates to responsive actions during crises; and adaptation refers to post-crisis learning and transformation. Other scholars have further unpacked resilience into capabilities such as resource integration (Williams et al., 2017), leadership flexibility (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011), and cultural cohesion (Van der Vegt et al., 2015). These capabilities work collectively to enhance the organisation's ability to absorb shocks and reconfigure operations during disruptions.

Organisational Characteristics and Resilience in Entrepreneurial Firms

Entrepreneurial firms typically operate in uncertain environments, facing constraints in capital, labour, and infrastructure. These limitations make the resilience-building process uniquely challenging yet strategically essential. Zhou et al. (2024) argue that entrepreneurial orientation, particularly innovativeness and proactiveness, plays a crucial role in shaping organisational resilience among small and medium-sized technology firms. Similarly, Li and Song (2024) emphasise inclusive leadership and knowledge management as resilience enhancers, particularly during turbulent periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Entrepreneurial firms, while lacking formal systems, often benefit from structural flexibility and agile decision-making, allowing them to pivot strategies quickly and seize emergent opportunities. These

traits suggest that resilience in entrepreneurial settings may derive more from cultural and behavioural attributes than from scale or resources.

Manifestations of Resilience under Crisis Conditions

The manifestation of resilience during crises can be observed through a firm's ability to respond rapidly, mobilise resources efficiently, and maintain stakeholder engagement. During public health crises such as COVID-19, firms that demonstrated operational agility, digital responsiveness, and employee coordination were more likely to sustain continuity (El Idrissi et al., 2023). In the retail and consumer sectors, Reznikov(2024) identified that resilient firms not only maintained operations but leveraged crises as catalysts for strategic realignment and innovation. These findings suggest that resilience is not merely a defensive capability but an adaptive strength that enables organisations to evolve through adversity.

Application of Case Studies in Resilience Research

Case studies provide a valuable methodological approach to exploring resilience, particularly in dynamic and context-dependent environments. Leitner (2023) utilised simulation-based case analysis to compare hierarchical and decentralised organisations, concluding that bottom-up structures tend to exhibit greater resilience in fast-changing environments. Park et al. (2021), in analysing Korea's pandemic response, introduced the concept of "digital resilience," where multi-stakeholder collaboration and real-time data systems enabled agile crisis management. Through rich, context-specific narratives, case studies reveal how abstract resilience concepts manifest in practice, and how different organisational configurations shape crisis outcomes.

Research Gaps

Despite the growing interest in organisational resilience, several gaps remain in the current literature. First, empirical studies on resilience in entrepreneurial enterprises remain limited, especially those examining bidirectional relationships between resilience and other organisational capabilities. While many studies explore how innovation enhances resilience, few investigate how resilience itself supports sustained innovation. Second, there is limited research on resilience in diverse cultural and institutional contexts, particularly in emerging economies such as China. Third, most existing studies are focused on single-dimensional outcomes; there is a need for integrative models that account for multiple factors—such as innovation, leadership, and organisational culture—interacting under crisis conditions. Addressing these gaps can offer richer insights into how entrepreneurial enterprises can not only survive but thrive in complex environments.

Methodology

This study adopts a single-case qualitative research design to explore how entrepreneurial firms demonstrate organisational resilience during crises. Saturnbird Coffee, an emerging Chinese startup in the specialty instant coffee sector, was selected as the research subject. The case study method is suitable for exploring complex, context-dependent organisational phenomena, particularly when theoretical models need to be validated or extended through rich empirical evidence.

Case Selection

Saturnbird was selected based on four main criteria. First, it exhibits clear entrepreneurial characteristics. Founded in 2015, the company operates with a lean, agile structure and high growth potential, typical of early-stage startups. Second, Saturnbird faced significant disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic, including distribution challenges, fluctuating

consumer demand, and market instability. These disruptions provide a fertile ground to examine resilience behaviours. Third, the company demonstrated notable resilience during the crisis, as evidenced by its rapid strategic adjustments, continuous innovation, and effective consumer engagement. Lastly, there is sufficient publicly available data on Saturnbird's operations, branding strategies, and crisis responses, making it a feasible and information-rich case for qualitative analysis.

Data Collection and Analytical Strategy

This study relies primarily on secondary data sources, complemented by content analysis techniques. The data corpus includes media coverage from platforms such as 36Kr, Jiemian News, and AMZ123, as well as official company releases, financial disclosures, and brand communications from Saturnbird's website and WeChat account. These materials provide insights into the company's strategic responses, organisational behaviours, and consumer engagement practices during and after the crisis.

The analysis is guided by Duchek's (2020) three-stage model of organisational resilience, which includes anticipation (pre-crisis awareness and preparation), coping (response strategies during crisis), and adaptation (post-crisis learning and innovation). All data were coded and categorised according to this framework. In addition, thematic analysis was applied to extract patterns relating to Saturnbird's strategic agility, innovation processes, digital transformation, and cultural mechanisms.

The analytical process also considers the firm's internal capabilities—such as decision-making speed, employee coordination, and organisational learning—as well as external-facing behaviours, including brand communication and customer relationship management. These dimensions enable a holistic understanding of how resilience operates in entrepreneurial settings under extreme uncertainty.

Case Analysis: Organisational Resilience of Saturnbird Coffee during Crisis

This chapter presents an in-depth analysis of Saturnbird Coffee's organisational response to the COVID-19 pandemic, using Duchek's (2020) three-stage model of resilience: anticipation, coping, and adaptation. The case reveals how the company navigated the pandemic through strategic agility, digital transformation, and cultural alignment—key dimensions of resilience for entrepreneurial enterprises.

Anticipation: Pre-crisis Readiness

Before the outbreak of the pandemic, Saturnbird had already demonstrated a forward-looking approach to market trends and consumer behaviour. Unlike many traditional coffee brands, the company adopted a primarily direct-to-consumer (DTC) strategy, leveraging online platforms, including a proprietary website, WeChat mini-programs, and social media channels, to build brand awareness and customer loyalty. This decentralised and digital-first approach allowed the company to establish multiple distribution channels and reduced reliance on physical retail spaces.

In addition, Saturnbird had cultivated a participatory brand culture. Initiatives such as its "Return Voyage Plan," which encouraged consumers to return used packaging for recycling, built strong emotional connections with its community. These pre-crisis strategic orientations—digital readiness, environmental consciousness, and consumer engagement—laid the groundwork for organisational resilience when the pandemic struck.

Coping: Strategic Response during Crisis

When COVID-19 disrupted physical supply chains and consumption patterns, Saturnbird responded with speed and flexibility. The company reallocated inventory to focus on cities with fewer lockdown restrictions and enhanced coordination with logistics partners to ensure timely deliveries. At the same time, the brand launched campaigns tailored to the stay-at-home context, such as the “At-Home Coffee Plan” and content around coffee rituals in domestic spaces, which helped to reposition coffee consumption from the workplace to the home.

Saturnbird also maintained a fast product development cycle during the crisis. It continued releasing new flavours and limited-edition packaging, sustaining consumer interest and reinforcing brand visibility. These actions not only helped the company retain its core customer base during a time of reduced mobility but also generated media coverage and user-generated content that contributed to brand resilience.

Adaptation: Post-crisis Learning and Transformation

As the immediate effects of the pandemic subsided, Saturnbird did not revert to pre-crisis operations. Instead, it further strengthened its online ecosystem and introduced new business initiatives aimed at long-term sustainability. For example, it expanded its flagship e-commerce site and gamified the “Return Voyage” recycling programme, increasing consumer participation in brand-building efforts.

The company also pursued cross-industry collaborations, including co-branded products with fashion and lifestyle brands such as UNIQLO and The North Face. These partnerships extended Saturnbird’s brand influence beyond the coffee industry and solidified its identity as a cultural and lifestyle brand. Internally, the company enhanced employee training and encouraged cross-functional collaboration, reinforcing organisational learning and operational resilience.

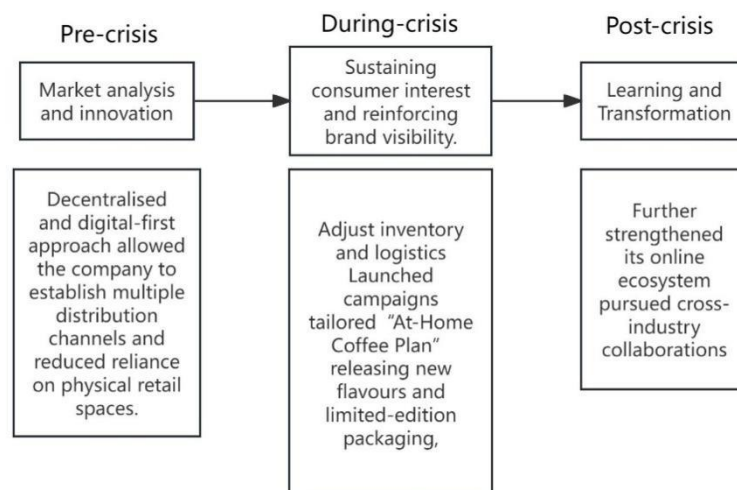


Figure 1: Organisational Resilience of Saturnbird Coffee Across Crisis Phases

Summary: Resilience as a Dynamic Capability

The case of Saturnbird Coffee illustrates that organisational resilience is not an ad hoc reaction but a set of dynamic capabilities embedded within the firm’s strategic, operational, and cultural structures. Through its proactive digital strategy, consumer engagement, innovation continuity, and sustainable practices, Saturnbird was able not only to withstand crisis but to emerge stronger—a process often referred to as “bouncing forward.” The company’s ability to

transform adversity into growth highlights the strategic importance of resilience for entrepreneurial firms operating in uncertain and volatile environments.

Discussion

The case of Saturnbird Coffee provides valuable insights into how entrepreneurial enterprises can build and leverage organisational resilience in the face of severe disruption. By mapping Saturnbird's responses to the COVID-19 crisis across the three stages of anticipation, coping, and adaptation, this study illustrates the dynamic and multifaceted nature of resilience as a strategic capability. It also reveals how such capability is developed not only through resources but also through culture, structure, and ongoing learning.

First, the findings support the view that organisational resilience is a dynamic capability, rather than a fixed resource. Saturnbird's ability to quickly shift logistics, reposition consumption scenarios, and maintain product innovation during the pandemic was not improvised. Rather, it was enabled by the company's pre-existing digital infrastructure, user engagement mechanisms, and agile organisational structure. This aligns with Ducheck's (2020) model, which conceptualises resilience as a sequential process requiring foresight, responsiveness, and learning capacity. In Saturnbird's case, each stage reinforced the next—anticipatory investments in digitalisation enabled rapid coping, and post-crisis innovations were informed by experiential learning during the disruption.

Second, the case confirms that entrepreneurial firms can convert structural disadvantages into sources of resilience. While resource constraints are a recognised vulnerability for start-ups, Saturnbird leveraged its small size and flat organisational hierarchy to make fast decisions and mobilise teams across functions. The company's decentralised communication model and employee empowerment culture enabled rapid experimentation and feedback loops, enhancing its responsiveness to shifting conditions.

Third, the findings highlight the role of soft assets—particularly organisational culture and stakeholder relationships—in resilience formation. Saturnbird's participatory brand model, environmental sustainability efforts, and open engagement with its consumer base created a supportive ecosystem that buffered the impact of crisis. This illustrates that resilience is not only operational but also relational, rooted in trust, identity, and shared values.

Lastly, the Saturnbird case suggests that resilience and innovation are mutually reinforcing, rather than isolated domains. The firm's ability to innovate through adversity—by developing new products, exploring alternative channels, and embracing co-branding strategies—demonstrates how resilient organisations not only recover from crises but use them as springboards for transformation. This expands the conventional understanding of resilience from mere recovery to adaptive growth or “bouncing forward.”

Together, these insights underscore that resilience is not simply about surviving crises but about turning turbulence into opportunity. For entrepreneurial firms, which are inherently exposed to volatility, resilience may be the most essential capability for long-term sustainability and competitiveness.

Conclusion and Implications

This study examined the organisational resilience of entrepreneurial enterprises during crises, using Saturnbird Coffee as a representative case. Through the lens of Duchek's (2020) three-stage resilience model, the research illustrated how Saturnbird anticipated disruption, coped with immediate shocks, and adapted to emerge stronger post-crisis. The analysis demonstrates that organisational resilience is a dynamic and constructible capability that can significantly enhance the sustainability and competitiveness of entrepreneurial firms in volatile environments.

The findings confirm that resilience in entrepreneurial firms is built through strategic foresight, structural flexibility, stakeholder engagement, and continuous learning. More importantly, resilience enables not only crisis survival but also innovation and transformation during periods of disruption. Saturnbird's success in navigating the COVID-19 crisis was not based on sheer resources, but on its ability to integrate agility, culture, and consumer-centred innovation into a coherent organisational response.

Practical Implications

Based on the case findings, this study proposes three key strategies for enhancing organisational resilience in entrepreneurial enterprises:

Proactive preparedness and strategic flexibility: Entrepreneurial firms should develop early-warning systems and scenario planning capabilities to better anticipate potential disruptions. Building flexibility into operations, supply chains, and decision-making structures can enable swift response when crises occur.

Cultivation of a participatory and innovation-oriented culture: Creating an internal environment that encourages employee initiative, cross-functional collaboration, and continuous learning is essential. Externally, engaging consumers in co-creation and building trust-based relationships can buffer external shocks and sustain demand during volatility.

Institutionalisation of resilience as a strategic capability: Resilience should be embedded in the firm's long-term strategy, not treated as a short-term response. Entrepreneurial firms should invest in systems and processes that strengthen resilience over time, including knowledge management, digital platforms, and feedback mechanisms.

Contributions and Future Research

Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on organisational resilience by applying it to the entrepreneurial context, highlighting how soft assets such as culture and agility function alongside structural elements. The case also advances understanding of resilience–innovation interplay, suggesting that resilience may be an enabler, rather than an outcome, of sustained innovation.

Practically, the research provides a reference model for entrepreneurial firms seeking to strengthen their crisis response capabilities. It also offers policy implications for institutions supporting SMEs, suggesting that resilience training and infrastructure support can be as important as innovation grants.

However, the study has limitations. It is based on a single case study, which limits generalisability. Future research could use comparative case designs or large-scale empirical

surveys to validate the findings. It would also be valuable to explore resilience-building in different cultural and industry contexts, and to examine other potential moderating factors such as leadership styles, institutional support, and digital maturity.

In conclusion, organisational resilience is not only a defensive mechanism but a strategic capability essential for entrepreneurial survival and growth. By proactively cultivating resilience through adaptive strategies, stakeholder engagement, and a culture of continuous innovation, entrepreneurial enterprises can navigate uncertainty and transform crises into opportunities for sustainable development.

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