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NAVIGATING DISRUPTION: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF SME ADAPTATION AND SURVIVAL

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Abstract:

The survival and adaptability of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are currently facing ongoing tests due to a modern business landscape frequently disrupted by market uncertainty and the rapid pace of technological change. Although SME resilience has received growing scholarly attention, the literature remains fragmented on the strategic and organisational mechanisms that enable SMEs to respond effectively to disruption. Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework, an advanced search was conducted across the Scopus and Web of Science databases using combinations of the keywords SMEs, resilience, and strategic adaptability. The study included research published between 2024 and October 2026 and used established screening and qualifying criteria to identify relevant primary studies. After a thorough screening and quality assessment, 29 main papers were included in the final synthesis. The thematic analysis identified three interconnected themes: (1) Digital Transformation and Technological Innovation, highlighting the role of digital technologies and innovation in strengthening SMEs' capacity to respond to disruption; (2) Leadership, Human Capital, and Strategic Preparedness, emphasising leadership capabilities, employee competencies, organisational readiness, and proactive preparation; and (3) Dynamic Capabilities, Bricolage, and Strategic Adaptation, demonstrating how SMEs reconfigure resources, improvise with available resources, and adapt strategies under changing conditions. Overall, the findings indicate that SME survival in disruptive environments is shaped not by a single resilience mechanism but by the interaction of technological, human,

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and strategic capabilities. The review provides an integrated foundation for understanding SME adaptation and identifies directions for future research on building more resilient and disruption-ready SMEs.

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Keyword:

Adaptability, Resilience, SME

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Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are acting as both a pillar and a socio-economic driver due to their significant contribution to local economic stability, innovation and especially job creation. However, SMEs are known for their constraints in financial, human, and technological resources. These make SME very vulnerable to disruptions. When disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, global war, supply chain crises, and climate change occur, they further expose the operational vulnerabilities of SMEs. This effect is usually more serious for SMEs than for large corporations, leading to rising bankruptcy rates and compelling SMEs to adopt rapid adaptation measures to sustain their businesses (Birkie et al., 2026; Pal et al., 2014). For instance, excessive bureaucracy, insufficient government support, difficulty in hiring specialists and obstacles related to advanced technology have all put more pressure on SMEs to adapt quickly. Their failure to adapt could be driven towards business collapse (Gamage et al., 2020; Ruiz, 2023).

Despite the various challenges faced, many SMEs have demonstrated resilience ability and have a high capacity to adapt to the uncertain and disruptive environment. Their business survival often relies on the ability to innovate, implement digital transformation, and adopt strategic risk management frameworks (Hiziroglu et al., 2024; Mtetwa & Kubheka, 2026; Prelipcean & Boscoianu, 2010). For instance, the swift adoption of digital technologies has enabled certain SMEs to sustain their business operations and even identify new avenues for growth during crises (Hiziroglu et al., 2024; Lamperti et al., 2024; Rismansyah et al., 2025). Today, SMEs have increasing awareness that resilience is a dynamic and multi-level capability. This involves not only organisational flexibility but also the development of strong customer relationships and collaborative networks (Malik & Terzidis, 2026; Tronvoll et al., 2021). Furthermore, SMEs that proactively develop disaster preparedness plans, diversify their supply chains, and foster a culture of continuous learning are better positioned to navigate uncertainty and recover stronger from disruption (Egbelakin et al., 2018; Mohamed Senin et al., 2024;

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Mtetwa & Kubheka, 2026). As the frequency and complexity of disruptions increase. The need of understanding the mechanisms that drive SME adaptability and survival becomes more important than ever. This is vital not only for the businesses themselves but also for the broader economic system that relies on their viability (Mtetwa & Kubheka, 2026; Zieba, 2024).



Figure 1: Conceptual Map

Literature Review

Market upheavals have forced SMEs to leave the traditional operating methods, necessitating a transition to more productive management approaches. SME adaptation and survival centres on resilience as a dynamic capability that has been described as a multidimensional process connecting conditions of crisis, preparedness and coping mechanisms and not only focusing on the one-off reaction. Therefore, this systematic review focused on a study around organisational resilience, SME-specific adaptive capabilities and supply-chain resilience (Koporcic et al., 2025; Nongnuch et al., 2026). This change is important as SMEs have to deal with recurring shocks such as pandemics, geopolitical instability, technological change and market disruption. They are structurally vulnerable due to limited resources, weaker diversification and dependence on a small number of customers or suppliers (Conz et al., 2026; Eggers, 2020; Malik & Terzidis, 2026; Marcazzan et al., 2022). Recent scholarship thus rejects a dichotomy of resilient and vulnerable firms, but rather emphasises heterogeneity in how SMEs prepare, respond, learn and renew over time (Conz et al., 2026; Herbane, 2018; Malik & Terzidis, 2026). The dominant theoretical lenses are the resource-based view and dynamic capabilities, complemented by crisis management, change management, and human-resource perspectives, which together explain why adaptation depends on sensing threats, seizing opportunities, and reconfiguring assets under uncertainty (Ko et al., 2022; Nongnuch et al., 2026). We conclude that survival is not only about recovery after disruption but about converting adversity into sustained competitiveness and organisational sustainability (Hortovanyi & Szepesi, 2026; Nongnuch et al., 2026).

The literature is strong on the theme that effective adaptation by SMEs requires anticipation and rapid response. Firms with previous crisis experience are more likely to engage in regular proactive but not formalised anticipation actions, rather than being purely reactive (Marcazzan et al., 2022). Examples of reducing vulnerability by anticipating threats include continuity planning, disaster recovery planning and proactive monitoring. Studies have found that during an unfolding crisis, immediate survival may depend upon defensive financial strategies such as deferring investment decisions and reducing labour costs and expenses whilst negotiating contractual arrangements without taking on additional commitments (Thorgren & Williams, 2020). This literature suggests that resilience involves finding a 'trade-off' between planning and adaptability. Specifically, a resilient organisation demonstrates a combination of planned preparedness together with the capacity for responsiveness, boldness and the ability to recognise patterns within chaos (Eggers, 2020; Iborra et al., 2020). The evidence provided by studies undertaken amongst manufacturing SMEs is consistent with these findings since they indicate that resilience is associated with both ambidexterity and strategic consistency, while case research on disruptive digital innovation finds that SMEs need to mitigate rigidity, develop innovative capability through adaptability, and manage the tension of ambidexterity under resource constraints (Chan et al., 2018; Iborra et al., 2020). In a recession, rather than taking dangerous financial risks through heavy borrowing, firms survive recessions far better by staying proactive and focusing on innovative solutions (Eggers, 2020).

Another key pillar of adaptation is digital transformation. Evidenced by its ability to introduce new opportunities and capabilities. However, this transformation also brings its own unique challenges. Quantitative studies on European SMEs indicate that digital transformation can enhance firm agility, particularly in addressing business challenges. Key challenges identified include concerns regarding customer access, competition, financing, input costs, external shocks, and regulatory changes (Škare et al., 2023). Digitalisation also highlights and brings attention to crucial issues, such as a shortage of competent personnel and inexperienced management. Failure to efficiently absorb technology developments can result in organisations losing their current competitive advantage (Škare et al., 2023). Process-based studies explain that the digital transformation of SMEs does not just improve internal efficiency, but also changes business models, strategies, culture, and strategic collaboration. As SMEs are unable to manage all requirements alone, this process is highly dependent on external platforms and partner support (Li et al., 2018).

Digital derivatisation provides a concrete route to renewal in disrupted manufacturing markets by guiding SMEs through capability assessment, external search, solution development, delivery and evaluation, while encouraging more open business-model configurations and collaboration when internal capabilities are insufficient (Lamperti et al., 2024). Related work in the digital agility field suggests that firms investing in risk-taking and change-oriented cultures are rewarded in the face of digital turbulence, as these capabilities enhance digital innovation, transformation maturity, competitiveness and ultimately survival (Ko et al., 2022). Through the crisis-response literature, it can be explained that the digital transformation of SMEs not only reshapes internal efficiencies, strategies, culture, and business alliances but also relies heavily on platforms and external partners due to the SMEs' limited internal resources. Evidence from post-COVID SME studies indicates that crisis response strategies mediate the effects of flexibility and digitalisation on later firm strategy, especially through business-model optimisation, new marketing channels, technological investment, diversification into new business areas, and supply-chain integration (Kahveci et al., 2024). A crisis does not just cause short-term damage. It forces SMEs to rethink their products, enter new markets, and build

partnerships, which then permanently changes their long-term growth and competitive edge for the better (Kahveci et al., 2024).

This long-term perspective is reinforced by qualitative evidence from global value chains regarding four forms of response, which are functional upgrading, chain upgrading, hybrid approaches, and passive reactions (Hortovanyi & Szepesi, 2026). This demonstrates that crises can serve as catalysts for upgrading and strategic autonomy when supported by management leadership and a willingness to learn (Hortovanyi & Szepesi, 2026). In addition to internal routines, organisational resilience depends heavily on social capital, locational advantages, and external relationships. This situation occurs because factors of proximity and networks of relationships determine the organization's access to information, support, and innovation opportunities (Conz et al., 2026; Herbane, 2018). Thus, SME resilience is an ecosystem-driven outcome sustained by both individual leadership and organisational capacity. While (individual-level) managerial foresight, entrepreneurial cognition and emotional intelligence empower leaders/top management to anticipate crisis impacts, firm-level innovation and IT-enabled ambidexterity allow the business to reconfigure, maintain performance and withstand operational stress (Conz et al., 2026; Malik & Terzidis, 2026; Trieu et al., 2023)

At the inter-organisational level, collaboration, having a range of suppliers, the use of cloud and online channels, global value-chain orchestration and ecosystem resilience increase the firm's ability to absorb shocks, even though these same connections may also spread vulnerability (Conz et al., 2026; Malik & Terzidis, 2026; Thukral, 2021). Government support is also seen on many occasions as an enabling factor, whether through policy responses during times of crisis or through more general initiatives aimed at strengthening entrepreneurial ecosystems and resilience capabilities (Thukral, 2021; Trieu et al., 2023). In summary, the body of work on “Navigating Disruption: SME Adaptation and Survival” reaches a clear conclusion: SMEs can survive disruption by combining anticipation, flexibility, digital and innovative reconfiguration and a collaborative positioning within the ecosystem, but the results are still uneven since resource limitations, a lack of skills and exposure to volatile networks prevent many firms from adapting fully (Koporcic et al., 2025; Nongnuch et al., 2026; Roblek et al., 2021).

Research Questions

Formulating the research questions (RQs) is a vital step in a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) as it is at this stage that the scope, focus and methodological approach of the review are defined. Well-defined research questions assist in systematically identifying, selecting and appraising the relevant studies to keep the literature search focused and in line with the aims of the review. Well-constructed research questions also provide a basis for organising and synthesising the evidence, allowing the identification of recurring patterns, emerging themes, research gaps and developments in the field. Furthermore, having clearly defined research questions increases the transparency, consistency and reproducibility of the review process by setting out clear limits for both the identification and synthesis of the evidence.

It is therefore seen as a vital activity when planning an SLR, as it has an impact on the later stages of the review methodology (Kitchenham, 2007). In the present study, the PICo framework developed by Lockwood et al. (2015) was used to formulate the research questions. This framework is a mnemonic consisting of Population (P), Interest (I) and Context (Co) and is especially suitable for use in qualitative evidence synthesis and exploratory reviews. It

enables the creation of well-focused research questions by specifying the population being studied, the phenomenon or area of interest, and the contextual conditions in which the phenomenon occurs. Using this framework provides a structured foundation for setting the boundaries of the literature search and for enhancing the relevance of the studies found. Accordingly, this study utilises the aforementioned review to examine how SMEs navigate disruptions through adaptation and survival. In the PICo framework, (P) is interpreted as referring to SMEs, while adaptation and survival mechanisms are represented by (I), and lastly (Co) refers to disruptive and rapidly changing business environments. The thematic synthesis of the retrieved literature further identified three major areas of interest: (i) Digital Transformation and Technological Innovation; (ii) Leadership, Human Capital, and Strategic Preparedness; and (iii) Dynamic Capabilities, Bricolage, and Strategic Adaptation. Accordingly, three research questions were formulated to guide the review, as presented below:

- **RQ1:** How do digital transformation and technological innovations facilitate the adaptation and survival of SMEs amidst disruptions?
- **RQ2:** How do leadership, human capital, and strategic preparedness shape SMEs' capacity to adapt and survive amid disruption?
- **RQ3:** How do dynamic capabilities, bricolage, and strategic adaptation enable SMEs to navigate disruption and sustain survival?

Material and Methods

Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA). To guarantee the rigour of the systematic literature reviews (SLRs), we followed the standardised methodology guidelines developed under the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Page et al., 2021). Specifically, these guidelines offer an already-established protocol that enhances transparency, methodological consistency, and reproducibility of the whole process of synthesising evidence. PRISMA is used throughout this paper and was adopted to provide a structured basis for identifying, screening, assessing, and selecting relevant studies, thereby reducing the potential for arbitrary study selection and strengthening the traceability of the review process. The literature search was conducted using Scopus and Web of Science as the primary bibliographic databases. These databases were selected because of their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed scholarly literature and established indexing standards, enabling the review to draw on a broad and academically credible evidence base.

Following the PRISMA guideline, the systematic review went through four stages sequentially: Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion. The identification phase involved designing and implementing a systematic search strategy aimed at retrieving possibly relevant publications from selected databases. Subsequently, retrieved records were subjected to a pre-set list of criteria regarding their inclusion and exclusion from consideration. During the screening process, we discarded duplicates and clearly non-relevant items while further examining those left behind in depth (the Eligibility Phase). The remaining studies underwent full-text assessment during the eligibility stage. Finally, after going through the entire eligibility process, works matching all necessary qualifications were added to the final selection pool for subsequent data extraction and integration. Key information from the selected studies was systematically extracted, organised, and compared to identify recurring themes, relationships, research patterns, and gaps within the existing body of knowledge. This structured process

provides an auditable pathway from literature retrieval to evidence synthesis, strengthening the methodological consistency and credibility of the findings and providing a systematic foundation for identifying directions for future research.

Identification

The identification stage represents the initial phase of the SLR. This phase needs to be done to collect a significant amount of relevant literature using a structured search strategy. In accordance with the PRISMA framework, the present review conducted an advanced literature search across Scopus and Web of Science (WoS). The search strategy was developed around the core concepts of SMEs, resilience, and strategic adaptability, reflecting the review's focus on how SMEs respond to disruption, uncertainty, and changing business environments (as per Table 1). The search identified 562 records from Scopus and 1,110 records from WoS, resulting in a combined total of 1,672 records at the identification stage. These records constitute the initial evidence base before the application of screening and eligibility criteria. The relatively large number of retrieved records indicates that SME resilience and adaptation have received substantial scholarly attention, while also suggesting considerable conceptual and empirical diversity within the literature.

The difference in retrieval volume between the two databases is also justifiable. WoS produced almost twice as many records as Scopus, which may reflect differences in database coverage, indexing practices, journal inclusion, and the way the search terms were matched across bibliographic fields. At this stage, the 1,672 records should not be interpreted as the number of relevant studies, since identification intentionally prioritises search sensitivity to minimise the risk of prematurely excluding potentially valuable evidence. Subsequent PRISMA stages are therefore necessary to remove duplicate records and studies that do not satisfy the predefined inclusion criteria. This systematic progression strengthens the transparency and reproducibility of the review by demonstrating how the initial body of literature was progressively refined into studies directly aligned with the review objectives.

Table 1: The Search String.

Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ((resilience OR "adaptive capacity" OR "adaptive resilience" OR "organizational resilience") AND ("small and medium enterprises" OR SMEs OR "small enterprises" OR "medium enterprises" OR "SME") AND (adaptability OR "adaptation" OR "flexibility" OR "agility")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , "2024") OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , "2025") OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , "2026")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE , "j")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE , "final")) AND (LIMIT-TO (OA , "publisherfullgold")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "BUSI")) **Date of Access: Oct 2026**

WoS	(resilience OR "adaptive capacity" OR "adaptive resilience" OR "organizational resilience") AND ("small and medium enterprises" OR SMEs OR "small enterprises" OR "medium enterprises" OR "SME") AND (adaptability OR "adaptation" OR "flexibility" OR "agility") (Topic) and Article (Document Types) and 2026 or 2025 or 2024 (Publication Years) and Open Access and Open Access and Article (Document Types) and Business Economics (Research Areas) and English (Languages) and Article (Document Types) and Business Economics (Research Areas) **Date of Access: Oct 2026**

Screening

Following the identification stage, the retrieved records underwent systematic screening based on predefined eligibility criteria to ensure alignment with the scope and objectives of the review. A total of 1,507 records were excluded because they did not meet one or more of the specified criteria, namely language (non-English), publication period (before 2024), document type (other than journal articles), publication status (in press), subject area (outside Business, Management and Accounting), and access type (outside Gold Open Access). These criteria were applied to establish a focused and comparable evidence base while maintaining relevance to the study context. Following this screening process, 165 records remained, comprising 61 records from Scopus and 104 from Web of Science. The relatively substantial reduction at this stage reflects the intentionally restrictive criteria used to align the literature with the review's temporal, disciplinary, and publication requirements. Subsequently, 26 duplicate records were removed, resulting in 139 unique records proceeding to the next stage of the PRISMA process. The removal of duplicates is necessary to prevent the same study from being evaluated more than once and to ensure that subsequent eligibility assessment is based on distinct scholarly contributions.

Table 2: The Selection Criteria for Searching

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Non-English
Timeline	2024 – 2026	< 2024
Literature type	Journal (Article)	Beside Journal (Article)
Publication Stage	Final	In Press
Subject Area	Business, Management and Accounting	Besides Business, Management and Accounting
Open Access	Gold	Besides Gold

Eligibility

Following the screening process, the remaining 139 records were subjected to a detailed eligibility assessment based on their relevance to the review objectives and the predefined selection criteria. At this stage, studies were evaluated through their titles, abstracts,

disciplinary relevance, and availability of full-text content. A total of 109 articles were excluded because they were outside the defined research field, their titles did not demonstrate sufficient relevance to the review scope, their abstracts did not address the study objectives, or full-text access was unavailable. This substantial reduction reflects the application of more stringent relevance criteria at the eligibility stage, where the emphasis shifts from broad retrieval to substantive alignment with the research questions. Following this assessment, 29 studies were retained for qualitative synthesis, representing approximately 21.6% of the 139 records assessed for eligibility. The resulting evidence base provides a focused set of studies directly relevant to the review, while the systematic exclusion of studies with insufficient topical alignment or inaccessible full texts helps maintain the analytical consistency of the synthesis. Importantly, the selection process establishes a transparent pathway from the initial literature pool to the final body of evidence, allowing the subsequent qualitative analysis to be grounded in studies that demonstrate sufficient relevance to the review's research objectives.

Data Abstraction and Analysis

An integrative analysis approach was employed in this study to systematically examine and synthesise evidence derived from multiple qualitative research designs. This method facilitated the identification of key themes and subthemes relevant to the study objectives. The thematic development process began with a comprehensive data collection stage, during which the authors carefully reviewed and analysed a total of 29 selected publications (details shown in Table 3). As illustrated in Figure 2, each article was examined to identify findings, arguments, and evidence related to SMEs' adaptation and survival.

Subsequently, this study conducted an in-depth evaluation of the selected studies, focusing on their research methodologies, analytical approaches, and principal findings. The thematic structure was then developed collaboratively among the authors to ensure that the emerging themes accurately reflected the evidence and context of the reviewed literature. Throughout the analysis process, detailed records were maintained to document interpretations, analytical insights, reflections, and emerging ideas that contributed to data interpretation. Finally, the authors compared and refined the identified themes to ensure consistency and coherence across the review. Any discrepancies or differing interpretations were resolved through discussion and consensus among the research team, thereby enhancing the reliability and rigour of the thematic analysis.

Quality of Appraisal

Following the systematic review guidelines proposed by Kitchenham and Charters (Kitchenham, 2007), the methodological quality of the included primary studies was assessed to establish the strength and reliability of the evidence synthesised in this review. Quality assessment is a critical component of systematic reviews because the validity of the review findings is inherently dependent on the methodological quality of the studies from which the evidence is derived (Abouzahra et al., 2020; Kitchenham, 2007). Accordingly, the quality assessment framework developed by Anas (Abouzahra et al., 2020) was adopted, comprising six quality assessment (QA) criteria relevant to evaluating the methodological and reporting quality of the included studies. Each criterion was assessed using a three-point scoring scale. A Yes (Y) response was assigned a score of 1, indicating that the study fully satisfied the specified criterion. A Partly (P) response received a score of 0.5, reflecting partial compliance where the criterion was addressed but certain limitations or deficiencies remained. A No (N)

response was assigned a score of 0, indicating that the criterion was not satisfied or that sufficient evidence was unavailable to demonstrate compliance. This structured scoring procedure enabled the methodological quality of the selected studies to be assessed consistently and provided a transparent basis for comparing the strength of the evidence included in the subsequent synthesis.

QA1. Is the purpose of the study clearly stated?
QA2. Is the interest and the usefulness of the work clearly presented?
QA3. Is the study methodology clearly established?
QA4. Are the concepts of the approach clearly defined?
QA5. Is the work compared and measured with other similar work?
QA6. Are the limitations of the work clearly mentioned?

The quality assessment (QA) process was conducted using a set of predefined evaluation criteria. Each selected study was independently assessed by three experts, who evaluated the study against each criterion and assigned one of three ratings: Yes (Y), Partly (P), or No (N). The scores assigned by the experts were subsequently aggregated to obtain an overall quality score for each study. To ensure the inclusion of high-quality studies, a study was considered eligible for the subsequent stage of the review only if its total aggregated score, calculated from the assessments of all three experts, exceeded 3.0. This threshold was established to maintain the methodological rigour and reliability of the studies included in the review.

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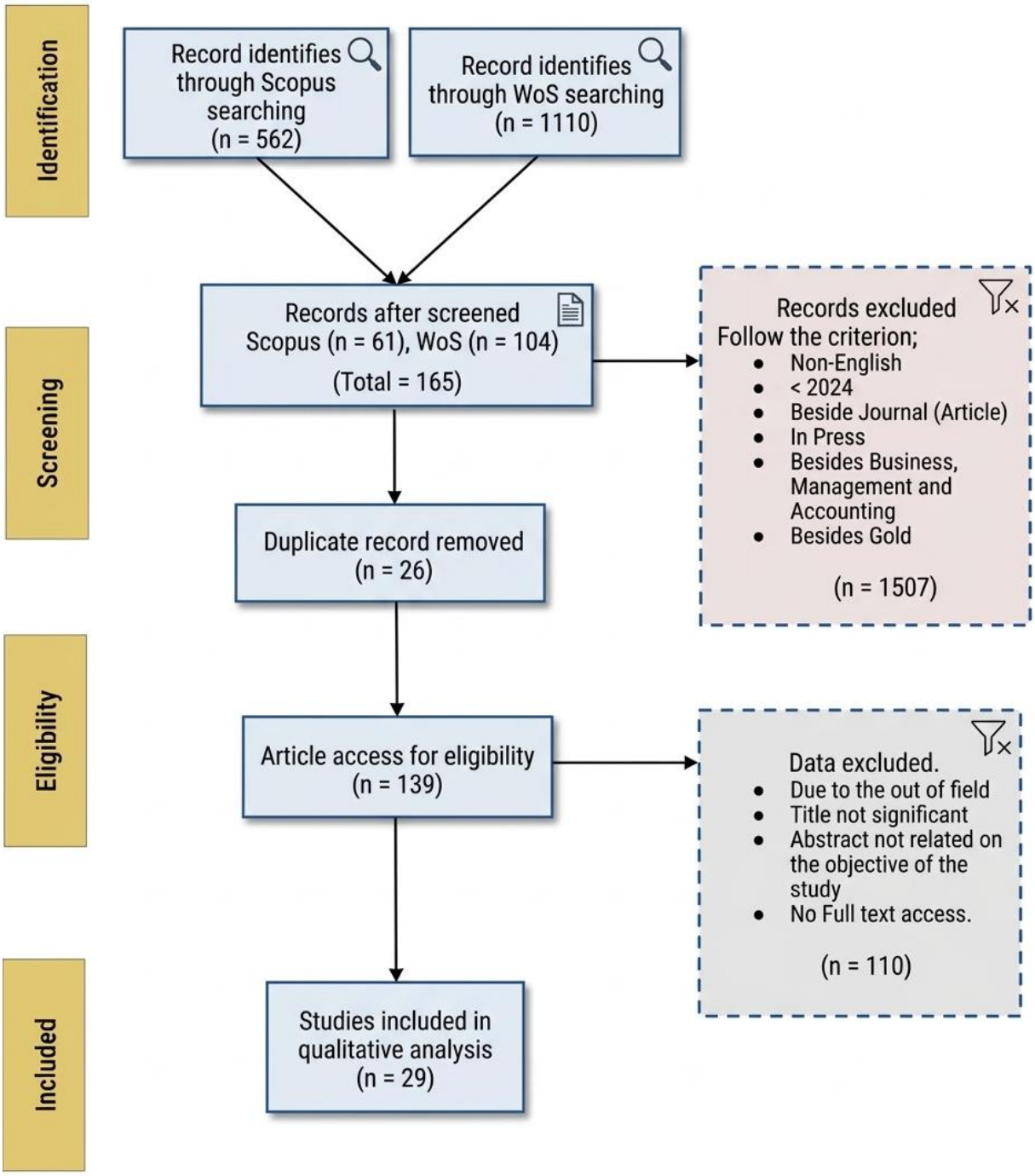


Figure 2: Flow Diagram Of The Proposed Searching Study

Source: (Moher D, Liberati A, Tetzlaff J, 2009)

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices
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Quality Assessment Analysis

The quality assessment of the 29 selected studies indicates a high overall standard of research rigour, with total evaluation scores ranging between 75.0% and 100.0%. Across all reviewed papers, the foundational aspects of academic quality were consistently strong: every study clearly articulated its research purpose (QA1) and thoroughly demonstrated the practical and theoretical usefulness of the work (QA2). Furthermore, key theoretical concepts and operational constructs were defined with clarity (QA4). Most studies established well-defined quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods methodologies (QA3), utilising robust analytical tools such as PLS-SEM, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the Gioia methodology, and Firth logit modelling. While many articles explicitly addressed their study limitations (QA6)-acknowledging constraints related to sample size, non-probability sampling, cross-sectional designs, or geographic concentration - the primary area where performance varied slightly across the dataset was QA5, as several papers focused primarily on contextual or empirical model testing rather than providing direct, comparative benchmarking against other existing approaches. Overall, the synthesis reflects a robust body of evidence that effectively advances understanding across organisational resilience, crisis adaptation, and enterprise strategy.

International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices IJEMP
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Volume 9 Issue 36 (December 2026) PP. 69-94

Table 3: Number and details of Primary Studies Database

	Author/Reference	Title and year	QA1	QA2	QA3	QA4	QA5	QA6	Total Mark	(%)	Source
1	Badran et al.	Resilience Factors of Entrepreneurship Amid Economic Crisis: Evidence from Lebanon (2026)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	1
2	Garcia-Vidal et al.	Strategic adaptation speed as a resilience mechanism: Linking market uncertainty to SME survival in emerging economies (2026)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	2
3	Sagala & Őri	Resilience and Digital Transformation: a Small to Medium Enterprise Resilience Framework (2026)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	3
4	Rietdijk et al.	Discovery-driven Capabilities in SMEs: A Kirznerian Perspective on Firm-level Opportunity Discovery and Adaptation (2026)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	4
5	Woldesenbet Beta Kassa & Gezahegn	Entrepreneurial Leadership and MSME Performance in Resource-constrained Uncertain Contexts: Insights from Ethiopia (2025)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	5
6	Madhavika et al.	Navigating Economic Crisis: Factors Shaping Resilience in Sri Lankan Construction SME Supply Chains (2025)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	6
7	Ssewagudde Jjagwe et al.	'Weathering the storm'. Resilience and small and medium-sized enterprises in Uganda (2026)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	7
8	Giacomin & Romagnoli	How Do SMEs Respond to Deglobalization? Insights from Italian SMEs in the Interwar Period (1936–1943) (2025)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	8
9	Weber & Kokott	Organizational Resilience and the Attention-Based View of the Firm-Empirical Evidence from German SMEs (2024)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	9
10	Awad & Martín-Rojas	Digital transformation influence on organisational resilience through organisational learning and innovation (2024)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	10

11	Loury Okoumba	Exploring the link between supply chain resilience and organisational performance (2025)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	11
12	Elhassan et al.	The Influence Of Creative Leadership Dimensions On Financial Crisis Management Through The Mediating Role Of Conflict Prevention And Internal Control: Case of SMEs in North Lebanon (2025)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	12
13	Kawane et al.	Digitization as an Adaptation and Resilience Measure for MSMEs amid the COVID-19 Pandemic in Japan: Lessons from the Food Service Industry for Collaborative Future Engagements (2024)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	13
14	Alshebami	Crisis Management and Customer Adaptation: Pathways to Adaptive Capacity and Resilience in Micro- and Small-Sized Enterprises (2025)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	14
15	Carrazco-Escalante et al.	Productivity and Resilience of Small and Medium-Sized Aquaculture Enterprises During COVID-19: Evidence from Mexico and Colombia (2025)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	15
16	Grčić Fabić et al.	Entrepreneurial Bricolage And Resilience: Surviving And Thriving of Micro And Small Businesses (2026)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	16
17	Dinh, Nguyen, & Nguyen	Social Capital and Corporate Resilience: The Case of Small and Medium Enterprises in Vietnam (2024)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	17
18	Novita et al.	Family Capital for Business Resilience during the COVID-19 Crisis (2025)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	18
19	Kusumawijaya et al.	Building Human Capital And Dynamic Managerial Capability To Elevate Organizational Agility And Performance: A Strategic For SME Resilience (2026)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	19
20	Demir et al.	Design Thinking in Practice: Lessons from Context-Sensitive Implementation in SMEs (2026)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	20

21	Msomi & Olarewaju	Evaluating Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises' Resilience in South Africa (2024)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	6	100%	21
22	Setyaningrum et al.	A slack-based MSME development model: a strategic solution to improve business performance and growth (2026)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	P (0.5)	Y (1)	5.5	91.67%	22
23	Zirar et al.	Smart Contracts and SME Resilience: Business Model Adaptation and International Considerations (2026)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	P (0.5)	Y (1)	5.5	91.67%	23
24	Kušnirová et al.	Digitalization and Crisis Adaptation of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises: Evidence from Czech Enterprises During the COVID-19 Pandemic (2026)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	P (0.5)	5.5	91.67%	24
25	Shahzad et al.	Innovation as a resilience-building strategy in micro-, small-, and medium sized enterprises: An interpretative phenomenological analysis (2026)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	P (0.5)	Y (1)	5.5	91.67%	25
26	Bux et al.	Enhancing Organizational Agility Through Knowledge Sharing and Open Innovation: The Role of Transformational Leadership in Digital Transformation (2025)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	P (0.5)	5.5	91.67%	26
27	Hidayat et al.	Synergising competitiveness and technological innovation to enhance micro, small and medium enterprise resilience through entrepreneurial orientation in the digital era (2025)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	P (0.5)	5.5	91.67%	27
28	Dligach	Economic transformation and the institutional environment for entrepreneurship in times of change, using Ukraine as an example (2026)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	N (0)	5	83.33%	28
29	Dinh, Nguyen, & Thanh Nguyen	Constructing a Resilience Measurement Model For Small And Medium-Sized Enterprises In Vietnam: A Pls-Sem Approach (2024)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	Y (1)	N (0)	5	83.33%	29

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Thematic Analysis

To synthesise the key findings across the selected literature on organisational resilience and strategic adaptation in SMEs, a comprehensive thematic analysis was conducted across all 29 articles. By examining recurring theoretical paradigms, methodological frameworks, empirical settings, and research gaps, the literature was categorised into three distinct, conceptually strong major themes that serve as foundational pillars for systematic SLR discussions. These themes delineate how SMEs prepare for, respond to, and navigate external environmental disruptions: first, by establishing structural resilience through crisis management and supply chain agility; second, by reconfiguring dynamic resources and leveraging digital transformation; and third, by deploying strategic leadership and adaptive capabilities under high managerial uncertainty.

Table 4: Thematic Analysis

Theme	Focus Area	Main Research Direction
1. Digital Transformation & Technological Innovation	Digital transition, smart contracts, open innovation, process automation, and digital agility.	Evaluates how digital technologies and smart systems act as moderators, mediators, and direct enablers of operational agility, innovation, and business continuity during crises.
2. Leadership, Human Capital, & Strategic Preparedness	Dynamic managerial capability, creative/transformational leadership, and social/family capital.	Identifies micro foundations (leadership vision, cognitive flexibility, social networks, crisis preparedness) that drive organizational learning, agility, and financial resilience.
3. Dynamic Capabilities, Bricolage, & Strategic Adaptation	Kirznerian alertness/ responsiveness, bricolage and supply chain agility.	Examines how SMEs reconfigure resources, leverage bricolage, accelerate adaptation speed, and adjust supply chain structures to survive deglobalization, war, and economic turmoil.

Digital Transformation and Technological Innovation

The review for this theme was found in the empirical investigation of Czech enterprises conducted by Kušnirová et al. (2026). The study finds that the transition of business activities into the online environment emerged as the main statistically significant predictor of the acceleration of digitalisation (quantitative logistic regression), thus making digitalisation almost three times more probable compared with other scenarios (odds ratio = 2.827, p = 0.0071). This finding demonstrates that digitalisation during crises functions not as a generic modernisation effort, but as an immediate practical necessity to sustain customer communication, sales, and administration. Furthermore, Kawane et al. (2024) also complement this analysis. In the context of Japan's food service industry, Kawane et al. (2024) reveal how localised digital ordering and delivery platforms such as Gotanda Eats and Yamagata Eats have transformed traditional physical dining operations into collaborative e-commerce networks amid pandemic-related restrictions while simultaneously ensuring critical revenue continuity and maintaining customer relationships at no additional cost due to non-prohibitive charges from third-party platforms. Therefore, the integration of digital transformation and

technological innovation serves as a crucial operational enabler for SME adaptation, business continuity, and survival during severe environmental disruptions.

Furthermore, Zirar et al. examine advanced digital transaction architectures, utilising an integrated interpretive structural modelling framework to establish that smart contracts appended to blockchain technology enhance digital resilience by improving transparency, traceability, and trust, while identifying technical limitations and human errors as foundational driver challenges that must be managed to prevent hacking and fraud. In contexts characterised by prolonged institutional collapse and banking sector failure. A reduction in operational shocks is directly achieved through the transition from traditional channels to an agile digital structure. This is evidenced by the study conducted by Badran et al. (2026) on Lebanese firms, which found that digital capabilities and support for digital transformation significantly enhanced business opportunities, financial stability, and market positioning amidst credit market disruptions.

Beyond immediate operational continuity, technological adoption enhances organisational resilience by strengthening dynamic managerial capabilities, organisational learning, and knowledge management systems across enterprise structures. Awad & Martín-Rojas (2024) evaluate Spanish SMEs using regression models, demonstrating that digital transformation exerts a direct positive effect on organisational learning (beta = 0.445) and organisational innovation (beta = 0.460), which sequentially expand organisational memory and enable adaptive decision-making under market turbulence. Expanding upon this structural linkage, Bux et al. (2025) analyse Chinese enterprises through partial least squares structural equation modelling, establishing that internal knowledge sharing acts as a fundamental driver of digital transformation (beta = 0.671), which subsequently facilitates open innovation (beta = 0.102) and drives organisational agility (beta = 0.811). The structural framework developed by Sagala & Őri (2026), which considers current competencies including the application of virtual collaboration tools, digital marketing, and enterprise resource planning, further substantiates this assertion. This underscores the importance of digital transformation for ensuring that businesses are equipped with the right digital tools necessary for their ability to demonstrate flexibility in times of crisis. Collectively, these results reaffirm how essential the integration of both technological tools and organisational continuous learning is in enabling SME's to foresee potential disruptions and sustain their competitive position. These data illustrate that while there is much evidence to support the proposition that digital transformation drives operational agility, its successful translation into organisational success requires a holistic approach characterised by transformational leadership, knowledge exchange, and dynamic capability building.

To avoid wasting digital investments and to establish long-term resilience, technology must be integrated with proper management, workflow changes, and proactive leadership. Hidayat et al. (2025) examine Indonesian micro, small, and medium enterprises using structural equation modelling, demonstrating that technological innovation does not exert a direct effect on business resilience, but operates entirely through the mediating role of entrepreneurial orientation (path to entrepreneurial orientation beta = 0.569; path to resilience beta = 0.465). This empirical result underlines that digital tools require a strategic posture characterised by proactiveness, risk-taking, and continuous experimentation to translate technological potential into concrete adaptive outcomes. In alignment with this strategic perspective, Kušnirová et al. (2026) propose a condensed five-step framework for digital crisis adaptation - encompassing risk mapping, digital focus setting, workflow redesign, online activity shifting, and continuous

measurement - showing that managerial experience and firm market tenure facilitate higher adaptation performance when combined with structural flexibility and process reengineering. Further highlighting this, Sagala & Őri (2026) state that the success of digital transformation relies on various organisational-level antecedents such as frugal innovation, strategic alignment, ambidexterity, and cross-sectoral collaboration to ensure that resource waste does not occur among resource-constrained enterprises. Badran et al. (2026) support these statements by asserting that proactive strategic orientation coupled with assistance provided through different ecosystem members such as non-governmental organisations, incubators, and other informal networks can create an ideal trajectory towards achieving maximum resilience amidst severe crises. Thus, the literature confirms that technological innovation represents a strategic capability that requires holistic alignment between internal leadership, digital literacy, external ecosystem collaboration, and flexible business model innovation to guarantee long-term firm survival.

Leadership, Human Capital and Strategic Preparedness

SME have high survivability in unpredictable market changes if they first invest in strong leadership and dynamic management skills. The development of leadership skills and dynamic management competences must serve as the cornerstone to strengthen SMEs' resilience. In an empirical analysis of Ethiopian enterprises, Woldesenbet Beta Kassa & Gezahegn (2025) demonstrate through hierarchical regression that entrepreneurial leadership creativity (beta = 0.047, $p < 0.05$) and opportunity-seeking behaviour (beta = 0.138, $p < 0.05$) account for 21.1% of the variance in enterprise effectiveness within institutional voids, whereas traditional vision and structured decision-making exert non-significant effects. Complementing these insights in Lebanon, Elhassan et al. (2025) apply structural equation modelling to prove that inspiring leadership vision directly influences financial crisis management (beta = 0.154, $p = 0.005$), while creative leadership dimensions operate through parallel mediators where conflict prevention (beta = 0.704, $p < 0.001$) and internal control mechanisms (beta = 0.640, $p < 0.01$) provide critical structural governance. Furthermore, in an empirical investigation of Balinese enterprises, Kusumawijaya et al. (2026) establish via partial least squares structural equation modelling that dynamic managerial capability strongly drives organisational agility (beta = 0.696, $p < 0.001$) and organisational performance (beta = 0.605, $p < 0.001$), with organisational agility acting as a vital mediating conduit (beta = 0.304, $p < 0.001$). These empirical models are corroborated by Ssewagudde Jjagwe et al. (2026) in Uganda, who show that effective leadership practices, including task delegation, role clarification, and goal articulation (mean = 4.27 to 4.42), establish the indispensable managerial foundation required to translate organisational resilience into sustained firm survival during severe environmental disruptions. Thus collectively, these studies reiterate how leadership dynamism and formalised governance controls enable SMEs to anticipate market shocks, address internal friction and ensure strategic alignment.

Next, SMEs' adaptation is fundamentally driven by three core internal capabilities, which are human capital, organisational learning, and relational capital networks. In the Balinese enterprise study, Kusumawijaya et al. (2026) reveal that employee human capital significantly enhances organisational agility (beta = 0.282, $p < 0.001$), although its direct effect on firm performance remains non-significant (beta = 0.053, $p = 0.260$), indicating that the latent potential of workforce skills can only yield high performance if supported by agile structured pathways. Investigating resource deployment in Indonesian manufacturing, Setyaningrum et al. (2026) show through structural equation modelling that resource slack directly elevates

organisational performance (beta = 0.554, p < 0.001) and indirectly fosters sustainable logistics innovation (beta = 0.329, p < 0.001), while organisational learning significantly strengthens the positive impact of slack resources on organisational resilience (beta = 0.438, p < 0.001).

These relationships are extended in family-owned businesses by qualitative findings from Novita et al. (2025), which show that social capital serves as an unofficial safety net by offering flexible credit terms and customer referrals. While human capital in which is demonstrated by intergenerational knowledge transfer, role flexibility, and digital re-skilling will acts as the primary driver of adaptive capacity. Similarly, the Vietnam social capital investigation by Dinh, Nguyen, & Nguyen (2024) demonstrates using variance-based structural equation modelling that internal social capital positively impacts organizational agility (beta = 0.482, p < 0.001), anticipation (beta = 0.460, p < 0.001), and flexibility (beta = 0.299, p = 0.007), whereas external social capital drives adaptability (beta = 0.488, p < 0.001). Additionally, Ssewagudde Jjagwe et al. (2026) validate that structured human capital management practices (mean = 4.18 to 4.34) reinforce employee situational awareness and emotional adaptability during crisis recovery.

The prevention of organisational failure and the effectiveness of crisis management are highly dependent on key operational drivers, namely strategic preparedness, attentional focus shifts, and a pragmatic management framework. Utilising an Attention-Based View framework among German SMEs, Weber & Kokott (2024) demonstrate through moderated mediation structural equation modelling that crisis-induced sales shocks trigger a statistically significant shift in managerial attention toward working capital management (beta = 0.050, p < 0.05), which subsequently drives a strong positive focus shift toward organisational resilience (beta = 1.555, p < 0.001). Importantly, Weber & Kokott (2024) find that individual cognitive flexibility negatively moderates this relationship (beta = -0.384, p < 0.001), indicating that highly flexible decisionmakers anticipate disruptions consciously without relying on reactive financial focus shifts. In an empirical study of Yemeni micro enterprises, Alshebami (2025) proves that crisis management preparedness significantly elevates adaptive capacity (beta = 0.327, p < 0.001) and entrepreneurial resilience (beta = 0.218, p < 0.001), while customer-centric adaptation directly enhances adaptive capacity (beta = 0.438, p < 0.001) and resilience (beta = 0.218, p < 0.001), with adaptive capacity partially mediating these paths. Addressing practical implementation barriers, Demir et al. (2026) apply the Gioia methodology across expert consultant interviews to establish that successful design thinking adoption requires early managerial commitment and cross-functional collaboration, characterised by pragmatic adaptations such as shortened workshop modules distributed over weeks and low-cost rapid prototyping. Furthermore, Woldesenbet Beta & Gezahegn (2025) observe that environmental dynamism positively moderates the leadership-effectiveness relationship (beta = 0.298, p < 0.05), confirming that strategic preparedness and flexible adaptation frameworks allow small firms to navigate institutional voids successfully (Rietdijk et al., 2026).

Dynamic Capabilities, Bricolage, and Strategic Adaptation

The theoretical development of dynamic capabilities, entrepreneurial bricolage, and strategic adaptation speed explains how SMEs maintain operational viability under market uncertainty. Grounded in Austrian economics, Rietdijk et al. (2026) introduce a Kirznerian framework of discovery-driven capabilities - alertness, responsiveness, and resilience—demonstrating through qualitative analysis of Dutch manufacturing enterprises that resource-constrained small firms rely on practice-based opportunity discovery and real-time trial-and-error learning rather than Schumpeterian resource reconfigurations. In emerging markets, Garcia-Vidal et al.

(2026) apply structural equation modelling across 385 Ecuadorian enterprises to establish that perceived market uncertainty directly accelerates strategic adaptation speed (beta = 0.780, $p < 0.001$), which drives business survival, with adaptation speed mediating 77.24% of the total effect of uncertainty on firm longevity. Furthermore, Grčić Fabić et al. (2026) evaluate 640 micro and small businesses in Croatia, demonstrating via structural equation modelling that entrepreneurial bricolage exerts a positive direct effect on performance (beta = 0.212, $p < 0.001$) and resilience (beta = 0.534, $p < 0.001$), with resilience acting as a partial mediator (beta = 0.134, $p < 0.001$). The success of small firms in navigating environmental crises to ensure survival confirms the role of strategic adaptation as a dynamic capability. This is clearly evidenced by the historical experience of Italian companies during the interwar era of autarky (Giacomin & Romagnoli, 2025), when small businesses shifted their focus from global niches to domestic mass markets and aligned their operations with the national agenda. Collectively, these perspectives prove that strategic adaptation operates as a dynamic capability.

The success and performance of an economic sector is influenced by the extent to which strategic resource allocation, organisational agility, and supply chain resilience are practised. Analysing supply chain management professionals in South Africa, Loury Okoumba (2025) proves through structural equation modelling that supply chain resilience enablers—robustness (beta = 0.451, $p < 0.001$), alertness (beta = 0.319, $p < 0.001$), and velocity (beta = 0.177, $p = 0.031$)—explain 73.4% of variance in supply chain agility, which exerts a positive impact on performance (beta = 0.767, $p < 0.001$, $R2 = 0.589$). In Sri Lankan construction enterprises, Madhavika et al. (2025) reveal through multiple regression analysis that collaboration (beta = 0.341, $p < 0.05$), entrepreneurial orientation (beta = 0.268, $p < 0.05$), internal integration (beta = 0.260, $p < 0.05$), and strategic outsourcing (beta = 0.150, $p < 0.05$) account for 42.3% of the variance in supply chain resilience. Evaluating Vietnamese enterprises, Dinh, Nguyen, & Thanh Nguyen (2024) establish a formative resilience index demonstrating that operational agility (weight = 0.396) and risk anticipation (weight = 0.345) constitute primary structural drivers of resilience. Furthermore, Msomi & Olarewaju (2024) demonstrate in South Africa that customer relationship management (beta = 0.85, $p < 0.001$) and technology adoption account for 94.5% of variance in enterprise resilience. In Latin American aquaculture, Carrazco-Escalante et al. (2025) observe a strong correlation between contingency strategies and productivity ($r = 0.91$, path coefficient = 0.95), reinforcing that rapid operational adjustments cushion disruptions. Together, these findings establish that supply chain agility and customer-centric adaptation form indispensable operational pillars for enterprise productivity.

The review finds that the interaction between the institutional environment, ecosystem support, and the severity of the crisis will determine the survival trajectory of small businesses operating in this unstable environment. In a study of Lebanese enterprises navigating sovereign debt default and banking collapse, Badran et al. (2026) establish via Firth logit regression that credit market failures severely undermine organisational continuity, as bank loan constraints reduce the odds of resilience by 84% to 98%. However, Badran et al. (2026) also show that receiving targeted ecosystem assistance from local non-governmental organisations, donor programs, and informal diaspora networks elevates the odds of business resilience nearly threefold (odds ratio = 2.6 to 3.0, $p < 0.05$), while a proactive strategic posture enhances adaptive capacity. Examining macroeconomic transformation in Ukraine, Dligach (2026) documents through monthly diffusion index tracking that business activity experienced a severe contraction in 2022 (index = 29.82) before recovering in 2023 (index = 38.92), driven by relocation to safer western regions, state deregulation, and flexible business model adaptation. Historical evidence

from Giacomin & Romagnoli (2025) reinforces these structural insights, proving that small Italian firms during interwar deglobalization sustained commercial continuity by mobilising formal institutional networks and export representatives rather than relying on weak informal connections. Therefore, it is evident that firm survival in emerging markets stems from a combination of proactive internal adaptation speed, pragmatic bricolage, and strategic alignment with the external support ecosystem.

Conclusion

This SLR examined how SMEs are able to adapt and survive under current disruptive challenges. It concentrated on papers published between 2024 and October 2026. We used previously defined inclusion and exclusion criteria to select the literature obtained from Scopus and Web of Science. After carrying out the identification, screening, eligibility and quality assessment steps according to the PRISMA guidelines, 29 studies were included in the final qualitative synthesis. Using the PICo framework, the review found three research questions relating to the role of digital transformation and technological innovation, leadership, human capital and strategic preparedness; and dynamic capabilities, bricolage and strategic adaptation in aiding SME adaptation and survival. In order to deal with the fragmented state of the existing research, the review brings these different aspects together into a single understanding of SME resilience.

Findings show that SMEs' ability to adapt and survive in this disruptive environment is due to the interaction between their managerial, human, technological, organisational, and external capabilities. Three main themes came out of the analysis, which are: (1) digital transformation and technological innovation serve as key means of ensuring business continuity, enhancing operational agility, aiding innovation, and improving market responsiveness when disruptions happen. However, technology alone does not provide resilience. Its significance is determined by leadership, digital knowledge, organisational learning, strategic alignment, and business model adaptation. (2) Leadership, human capital, and strategic preparedness constitute important bases for organisational adaptation. Through effective leadership, employee skills, social capital, and crisis preparedness, SMEs are able to translate changing and unexpected circumstances into appropriate solutions. (3) Dynamic capabilities, bricolage, and strategic adaptation are key for SMEs to leverage limited resources to revamp supply chains, respond to uncertainty, and accelerate operational adaptation when the existing routines are no longer suitable.

This review expands SME resilience literature by bringing together earlier fragmented ideas into a multifaceted picture of adaptation and survival. This perspective opens up new aspects by viewing resilience as an ongoing process rather than merely a static organisational trait or simply the ability to bounce back from a crisis. The ongoing process mentioned refers to resource reconfiguration, learning, anticipation, response, and strategic renewal. The synthesis also points out that an organization's internal capabilities and the external ecosystem are complementary. Collaboration with various stakeholders and digital platforms, alongside institutional support, can indeed enhance the SMEs' adaptability. However, financial constraints, a lack of skilled labour, and limited resources often act as obstacles. In reality, the survival of SMEs is a multi-phased journey that depends not only on a company's internal strengths but also on the surrounding ecosystem.

Next, practical implications for SME development. SME operations or SME top management should not wait for a crisis to strike before approaching adaptation but should proactively build their core capabilities. These refers to the enhancement of preparedness, digital capability, employee skills, flexible business models, and mechanisms for continuous learning. Establishing these before a crisis occurs is vital for business survival. Besides that, when investing in technology, SMEs must develop competencies to effectively integrate digital technologies, emphasising leadership, staff development, and aligned strategies. Resource-constrained firms should enhance resilience through collaboration, partnerships, and external support rather than depending exclusively on internally available resources. At the institutional level, support programmes should offer long-term assistance by improving digital literacy, managerial skills, innovation capacity, networking, and access to entrepreneurial ecosystems.

However, this review itself has limitations. It is derived from a relatively restricted search limited to Scopus and Web of Science, which may have excluded relevant studies indexed in other databases. The selection criteria were also limited to English-language journal articles, Gold Open Access publications, Business, Management and Accounting-related studies, and publications from 2024 to 2026. These restrictions provide a focused and comparable evidence base but may reduce the geographical, disciplinary, and methodological breadth of the review. Furthermore, since the publication period in question is relatively recent, some emerging areas of research may not yet have enough empirical evidence. Future research should therefore aim to broaden the coverage of databases, look at the evidence from different languages and regions, and examine how SMEs adapt to different types of disruption rather than focusing mainly on crises.

In summary, these systematic synthesised findings indicate that SME survival and adaptation are not merely about 'firefighting' during a crisis, but rather a continuous process. Resilient SMEs typically combine technology, strong leadership, staff skills, collaborative networks, and the ability to reconfigure resources to navigate volatile markets. By integrating these various perspectives, this study establishes a solid foundation for future research into how SMEs can sustain, thrive, and adapt in increasingly disruptive business contexts.

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