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Sustainable Innovation, Digitalization, and Economic Resilience: A Systematic Literature Review on SMEs

Sabil Sabil[1*], Lukman Hakim[2], Amin Setio Lestiningsih[3], Dwiyatmoko Puji Widodo[4], Sugiyah[5], Devy Sofyanty[6]
[1]Bina Sarana Informatika University, Jakarta, Indonesia, sabil.sbl@bsi.ac.id
[2]Bina Sarana Informatika University, Jakarta, Indonesia, lukman.lmh@bsi.ac.id
[3]Bina Sarana Informatika University, Jakarta, Indonesia, amin.asl@bsi.ac.id
[4]Bina Sarana Informatika University, Jakarta, Indonesia, dwiyatmoko.dpw@bsi.ac.id
[5]Bina Sarana Informatika University, Jakarta, Indonesia, sugiyah.sgy@bsi.ac.id
[6]Bina Sarana Informatika University, Jakarta, Indonesia, devy.dyy@bsi.ac.id

[*]Corresponding Author: sabil.sbl@bsi.ac.id[1]

Abstract: Digital transformation has become one of the main drivers of sustainable innovation in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), especially in the face of global disruption and the need to adapt to rapid market changes. This study aims to examine the relationship between sustainable innovation, digitalization, and the economic resilience of SMEs, with a focus on how digital transformation strategies can enhance competitiveness while supporting sustainable business practices. Using a systematic literature review approach, this article analyzes relevant scientific publications to identify patterns, trends, and key thematic categories emerging from the current literature. The findings reveal that digital transformation drives new, more adaptive business models, strengthens dynamic capabilities, and enhances SMEs' resilience in facing crises. Additionally, the literature emphasizes that digitalization plays a crucial role in accelerating innovation in products and services oriented toward sustainability, while also opening opportunities for SMEs to access global markets in a more inclusive manner. This research contributes conceptually by offering a synthesis framework on the role of digitalization in sustainable innovation and SME economic resilience, while also providing practical implications for business actors and policymakers in formulating strategies to strengthen SME competitiveness in the digital era. These findings also open up further research opportunities on contextual digital adoption models and mechanisms for implementing sustainable innovation across various industrial sectors.

Keywords: Innovation, Digitalization, Resilience, SMEs, Literature Review.

INTRODUCTION

Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) play a fundamental role in the global economy, particularly in developing countries, with significant contributions to job creation, social inclusion, and economic growth. In Indonesia, MSMEs account for more than 60% of

the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and absorb around 97% of the national workforce, making their sustainability a key determinant of both macro and microeconomic stability (Purwidianti & Rahayu, 2020). However, digital disruption, global market changes, and external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic have posed major challenges for SMEs, which are required to adaptively transform through sustainable innovation-based strategies (Mas'ud & Tenriyola, 2023). Digital transformation and consistent innovation are believed to strengthen the competitiveness of SMEs, both in domestic and international markets (Kljajić et al., 2022).

Although innovation has been extensively studied in the context of large companies, there remains an academic and practical gap regarding how sustainable innovation can be effectively implemented by SMEs, which often face limitations in terms of resources, access to technology, and managerial capacity (Sousa-Zomer, T. T., Neely, A., & Martínez, 2020). SMEs generally remain at a partial stage of digital adoption, such as using e-commerce for marketing, but have not yet integrated sustainable innovation strategies into their entire business chain (Okorie et al., 2023). This situation underscores the urgency of further examining relevant, efficient, and contextually appropriate innovation models for Indonesian SMEs to enable them to withstand the dynamics of fluctuating markets and future global crises (Ardito et al., 2021).

Conceptually, sustainable innovation is rooted in Schumpeterian innovation theory, which emphasizes the creative process in product, service, and business model renewal, and is expanded with a sustainability-oriented innovation approach that integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions (Del Río-González, P., Díaz-García, C., & Saiz-Alvarez, 2020). Within the framework of digitalization, digital transformation theory underscores the importance of leveraging information technology to enhance efficiency, expand markets, and build business resilience (Díaz-García et al., 2022). Thus, the integration of innovation theory, economic resilience, and digital transformation forms the primary conceptual foundation of this study, which seeks to explain the mechanisms through which sustainable innovation strategies can enhance the resilience of SMEs in the digital era (Hanafia, 2023).

Based on this conceptual framework, this study explicitly formulates the main question: how can sustainable innovation strategies be effectively applied by MSMEs to improve economic resilience in the digital age? This question is broken down into two main hypotheses: first, sustainable innovation strategies based on the use of digital technology enhance the competitiveness of SMEs in facing global economic uncertainty; second, the simultaneous implementation of sustainable innovation in business processes, products, and digital marketing contributes to the sustainability of SMEs. The objective of this study is to analyze and formulate sustainable innovation strategies that can be adopted by Indonesian SMEs to maintain business continuity amid digital transformation and evolving global challenges (Akpa, Victoria O, Asikhia, 2021).

The novelty of this research lies in the integration of the latest literature on sustainable innovation, economic resilience, and digital transformation in the context of Indonesian SMEs, which has previously been rarely studied comprehensively. Additionally, this research offers practical contributions in the form of implementable strategy recommendations that can be used by SME actors and policymakers to enhance competitiveness through innovation that is not only economically oriented but also focused on long-term sustainability (Aboelmaged & Hashem, 2019). Thus, this article is expected to provide scientific contributions to academic literature as well as practical contributions to the development of a resilient, adaptive, and sustainable SME-based national economy.

The theory of continuous innovation is the main conceptual framework for understanding how MSMEs can adapt to the dynamics of the digital era. Sustainable innovation originated from Joseph Schumpeter's thinking, which emphasized the process of creative destruction as the engine of economic growth. However, in its development, this theory has been expanded

to include incremental, adaptive, and consistent innovation with the organization's long-term goals (Cillo, V., Rialti, R., Bertoldi, B., & Ciampi, 2019). In the context of SMEs, sustainable innovation is not only about creating new products but also includes transforming business models, integrating digital technology, and enhancing organizational capabilities to adapt to external changes (Clauss, T., Breier, M., Kraus, S., Durst, S., & Mahto, 2020). The relevance of this theory is further strengthened when linked to the concept of economic resilience, which emphasizes the ability of business entities to withstand shocks, whether caused by economic crises or technological disruptions, while maintaining business sustainability (Pereira, C. R., Barbosa-Póvoa, A. P., & da Silva, 2022).

Previous studies have examined the relationship between innovation, digitalization, and SME resilience. For example, research by (Kraus, S., Roig-Tierno, N., & Bouncken, 2020) shows that the adoption of digital technology plays a significant role in enhancing the flexibility and competitiveness of SMEs amid market uncertainty. Another study emphasizes that the implementation of digital marketing strategies helps SMEs expand their market reach while reducing their dependence on traditional distribution channels (Matarazzo, M., Penco, L., Profumo, G., & Quaglia, 2021). Additionally, the findings of Gupta et al. (2020) reveal that technology-based product innovation contributes to SMEs' ability to survive during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study highlights that sustainable innovation is one of the key determinants in strengthening the economic resilience of SMEs.

Despite numerous studies on innovation and digitalization in SMEs, there remain research gaps that have not been comprehensively addressed. Most previous studies have focused on aspects of technology adoption or product innovation, but few have examined the simultaneous relationship between sustainable innovation across various dimensions—product, business processes, and digital marketing—and the long-term economic resilience of SMEs (Martínez-Caro, E., Cegarra-Navarro, J. G., García-Pérez, A., & Fait, 2020). Furthermore, research limitations are also evident in the lack of focus on the context of developing countries, particularly Indonesia, where structural factors such as limited access to capital, digital literacy, and policy support also influence the innovation capacity of SMEs (Borges, A. F., Laurindo, F. J. B., Spínola, M. de M., Gonçalves, R. F., & Mattos, 2021). This highlights the urgency of research to address this gap.

This article positions itself to address this gap by contributing an integrative analysis of how sustainable innovation strategies can enhance the economic resilience of SMEs in the digital era. Using a literature review approach, this study synthesizes empirical and conceptual findings from various recent studies to formulate applicable strategies for SMEs. The focus on integrating product, business process, and digital marketing aspects provides a more holistic perspective compared to previous studies that tended to be partial (Sousa-Zomer, T. T., Neely, A., & Martínez, 2020). Thus, this study is expected to enrich the literature on the relationship between sustainable innovation and SME resilience, as well as provide practical implications for policymakers and business actors.

From a methodological perspective, previous research trends show a shift from quantitative survey-based studies toward mixed methods or literature reviews to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of SME innovation issues (Lungu, A. E., Gavriluță (Vatamanu), A. F., & Hurbean, 2021). A systematic approach in literature reviews is also increasingly used to identify common patterns and unanswered research gaps, particularly regarding the role of digital transformation in strengthening SME competitiveness (Annarelli, A., Battistella, C., Nonino, F., Parida, V., & Frishammar, 2021). Additionally, recent studies emphasize a sustainability perspective, not only in terms of profitability but also the contribution of SMEs to social and environmental aspects as part of sustainable business practices (Del Giudice, M., Scuotto, V., Garcia-Perez, A., & Petruzzelli, 2021).

Based on this theoretical and empirical mapping, the conceptual synthesis in this study focuses on the integration of sustainable innovation theory, the concept of economic resilience, and the digital transformation approach. Sustainable innovation is understood as a long-term strategy that involves product renewal, business process optimization, and the use of digital technology to achieve efficiency and competitiveness. The concept of economic resilience is used as a framework to assess the extent to which such innovation strategies contribute to the ability of SMEs to withstand external shocks. Meanwhile, digital transformation serves as a mediating variable bridging the relationship between innovation and resilience, particularly in the fast-paced digital economy era. This synthesis will serve as the methodological foundation for exploring in greater depth how SMEs can implement sustainable innovation strategies as part of efforts to strengthen economic resilience in Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) approach as its primary strategy. This approach was chosen because it aligns with the research objective of integrating and analyzing empirical and conceptual findings related to sustainable innovation, economic resilience, and digital transformation in SMEs. The SLR method enables a structured investigation of relevant literature by ensuring transparency in the process of searching, selecting, and synthesizing information, thereby minimizing bias and enhancing the replicability of results. As such, this study prioritizes accuracy, consistency, and traceability in the literature review process.

The data sources in this study come from secondary literature in the form of reputable international scientific journal articles indexed in the Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect databases. The types of data examined include empirical research results (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods) as well as conceptual articles focusing on the topics of sustainable innovation, SMEs, economic resilience, and digital transformation. The publication timeframe is limited to 2018–2023 to ensure relevance to the contemporary context. The literature obtained covers various disciplines such as management, entrepreneurship, technology, and organizational studies to provide a holistic understanding.

Data collection techniques were conducted through a literature search protocol using a combination of keywords: “sustainable innovation,” “SMEs,” “economic resilience,” and “digital transformation.” The search was conducted using Boolean operators (AND, OR) to expand or narrow the search results. This search protocol followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) standards to ensure transparency in reporting the process of identifying, screening, and selecting articles (Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., ... & Moher, 2021). The articles obtained were then downloaded and their data extracted for further analysis.

The inclusion criteria for literature in this study were articles that: (1) were published in peer-reviewed journals, (2) were written in English, (3) explicitly discussed the relationship between sustainable innovation, MSMEs, economic resilience, or digital transformation, and (4) were available in full text. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria include: (1) articles in the form of proceedings, editorials, or non-academic reports, (2) publications with a scope prior to 2018, and (3) articles that only discuss innovation in large companies without mentioning the SME context. The screening process was conducted in two stages: selection based on titles and abstracts, followed by a full review of the article content.

The unit of analysis in this study is scientific journal articles that meet the inclusion criteria, not individuals or organizations. Each article is treated as an information unit containing conceptual variables, empirical results, and relevant strategic recommendations. This approach allows researchers to thoroughly examine the conceptual and methodological

patterns that emerge from previous studies, while identifying research gaps that can be followed up.

The data analysis technique used is thematic synthesis with the stages of coding, categorization, and grouping of main themes. This process was conducted to identify relationships between variables, methodological trends, and practical implications from the reviewed literature. The analysis was performed manually with the assistance of Mendeley reference management software to compile citations and NVivo 12 to support the coding and grouping of themes. Thematic synthesis was chosen because it can accommodate the diversity of methodologies and conceptual approaches in the literature while facilitating the formation of a comprehensive conceptual model (Braun, V., & Clarke, 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the findings from a systematic review of 65 journal articles that met the inclusion criteria based on the PRISMA protocol. The articles were published between 2018 and 2023 and represent literature from various regions, including Europe (25%), Asia (40%), the Americas (20%), and Africa and Australia (15%). In terms of discipline, 45% of the articles were from the field of management and entrepreneurship, 30% from the field of technology and innovation, and the remainder related to organizational studies and development economics. Methodologically, 42% used a quantitative approach, 27% used a qualitative approach, 18% used mixed methods, and 13% were conceptual articles or literature reviews (Bican, P. M., & Brem, 2020); (Kraus, S., Palmer, C., Kailer, N., Kallinger, F. L., & Spitzer, 2022).

Analysis of publication characteristics reveals a trend of increasing research linking sustainable innovation with digital transformation in the SME context since 2020, with a peak in publications in 2022. This was driven by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, which prompted SMEs to adapt through digitalization while integrating sustainability principles (Seetharaman, 2020). The findings also show that most studies link the economic resilience of SMEs to the use of digital technologies such as e-commerce, big data, and cloud computing, alongside environmentally friendly innovation practices such as energy efficiency and the circular economy (Del Giudice, M., Scuotto, V., Garcia-Perez, A., & Petruzzelli, 2021). The thematic synthesis yielded four main categories. First, the role of sustainable innovation in enhancing SME competitiveness. Studies indicate that the adoption of sustainability-based innovations, such as the use of environmentally friendly materials or supply chain efficiency, contributes to improved business reputation and market access (Dangelico, R. M., & Pujari, 2021). Second, the contribution of digital transformation to economic resilience, where digitalization has proven to expand market reach, improve operational efficiency, and increase flexibility in facing crises (Guo, H., Yang, Z., Huang, R., & Guo, 2020). Third, the synergy between sustainable innovation and digital transformation, which shows that both complement each other in supporting adaptive business models for SMEs (Nambisan, S., Wright, M., & Feldman, 2020). Fourth, the structural challenges faced by SMEs, including capital constraints, digital literacy gaps, and regulations that do not fully support them (Li, L., Su, F., Zhang, W., & Mao, 2021).

In terms of methodological patterns, quantitative studies tend to measure the impact of digitalization and sustainable innovation variables on business performance and resilience using regression models or structural equation modeling (Chen, J., Wan, D., & Wang, 2021). Meanwhile, qualitative research emphasizes the exploration of SME practitioners' experiences in implementing innovation, using in-depth interviews or case studies (Kraus, S., Roig-Tierno, N., & Bouncken, 2020). Mixed-methods articles focus on triangulating survey data with interviews to strengthen findings, while conceptual articles emphasize the development of new

theoretical frameworks to explain the relationship between sustainability, digitalization, and resilience (Raimo, N., Zito, M., & Vitolla, 2023).

Further analysis of the contextual dimension reveals regional differences in research focus. Studies in developed countries emphasize the integration of environmentally friendly innovation and digital technology into value-added business models, while research in developing countries highlights structural barriers such as resource constraints and policy support (Abubakar, A. M., Behravesh, E., Rezapouraghdam, H., & Yildiz, 2019). Additionally, research in Asia shows significant attention to the role of government and local innovation ecosystems in strengthening the digital transformation of SMEs, while in Europe there is an emphasis on circular economy practices as part of sustainable innovation strategies (Scuotto, V., Beatrice, O., Valentina, C., & Nicotra, 2021).

The final synthesis reveals a pattern where the literature consistently highlights sustainable innovation and digital transformation as key factors in enhancing the economic resilience of SMEs. However, most studies emphasize that the success of integrating both depends heavily on external factors such as public policy, financial support, and digital infrastructure, in addition to internal factors such as innovation capabilities, organizational culture, and digital skills of the workforce (Del Río-González, P., Díaz-García, C., & Saiz-Alvarez, 2020). Thus, these results form the basis for the development of a conceptual framework that will serve as a foundation for further analysis and discussion.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm that sustainable innovation and digital transformation are two complementary key factors in improving the economic resilience of MSMEs. This is in line with the research objective of exploring how these two dimensions interact in strengthening the competitiveness of MSMEs, especially in the face of market disruption and global crises. A literature synthesis indicates that most studies position digitalization as an adaptive tool enabling the integration of sustainable practices, while sustainable innovation expands the strategic value of digitalization through the creation of competitive advantages based on social and environmental responsibility.

Within the framework of the resource-based view theory, these findings suggest that digital capabilities and sustainable innovation can be viewed as dynamic capabilities that strengthen SMEs' ability to adapt to rapidly changing environments (Teece, 2018). Additionally, from the perspective of innovation ecosystem theory, the integration of both shows how SMEs do not only rely on internal resources but also on external collaboration with actors within the digital and sustainability ecosystem (Autio, E., Nambisan, S., Thomas, L. D. W., & Wright, 2018). This shows that the economic resilience of SMEs cannot be separated from the interaction between internal factors such as digital capabilities and innovation, and external factors such as regulatory support, policies, and business networks.

The findings of this study align with research showing that digitalization strengthens business resilience through operational efficiency, diversification of distribution channels, and flexibility in responding to external shocks (Matarazzo, M., Penco, L., Profumo, G., & Quaglia, 2021). Similarly, sustainable innovation has been proven to enhance market legitimacy and corporate reputation, which in turn strengthens the competitive position of SMEs in the global market (Rodríguez-García, M., Álvarez-García, J., & González-Alonso, 2019). However, the literature also highlights some differences. For example, research in developed country contexts tends to find a consistent positive relationship between digitalization and sustainable performance (Liu, Y., Chen, Y., & Zhou, 2022), while research in developing countries shows more varied results due to infrastructure limitations and access to capital (Haseeb, M., Hussain, H. I., Ślusarczyk, B., & Jermsittiparsert, 2019). This contradiction underscores that regional

context plays a significant role in determining the extent to which digitalization and sustainable innovation can be effectively implemented.

From a scientific contribution perspective, this article reinforces the understanding that the synergy between sustainable innovation and digital transformation cannot be understood separately, but must be viewed as a hybrid model that generates long-term economic resilience. This enriches the theoretical discourse by emphasizing the importance of integrating sustainability frameworks with digital entrepreneurship theory, an area that is still evolving in the literature (Akhter, N., Khan, R. A., & Dey, 2022). Its practical contribution is to provide a conceptual foundation for SMEs to design adaptive business strategies that combine digitalization and sustainability practices, thereby better preparing them to navigate market uncertainties.

However, this research also has limitations that must be acknowledged. First, there are limitations in the scope of the literature reviewed, where the majority of publications originate from European and Asian contexts, resulting in an imbalance in regional representation. Second, although the systematic literature review approach provides a comprehensive mapping, this method does not allow for direct empirical verification of SME practices in the field. Third, methodological variations between studies may introduce bias in the synthesis, especially when quantitative and qualitative results are not fully aligned.

The implications of this research are important for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. For policymakers, these findings emphasize the need for stronger regulatory support for the integration of sustainability and digitalization, such as tax incentives for MSMEs that adopt environmentally friendly technologies. For MSME practitioners, these results highlight the importance of investing in digital capabilities while integrating sustainability principles as part of core business strategies. For researchers, there is still room to expand cross-country empirical studies, test integrative models linking digitalization, sustainable innovation, and resilience in the context of multidimensional crises, and explore the role of mediating variables such as managerial capabilities and digital literacy.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the integration of sustainable innovation and digital transformation plays a crucial role in strengthening the economic resilience of MSMEs. The literature synthesis shows that digital capabilities not only serve as a means of adaptation to market dynamics, but also as a lever that accelerates the implementation of sustainable business practices. Conversely, sustainable innovation expands the benefits of digital transformation through the creation of long-term value based on economic, social, and environmental sustainability. The interconnection between the two enables MSMEs to be more responsive, resilient, and adaptive to external pressures, whether from global market changes or multidimensional crises.

The main contribution of this research lies in sharpening the conceptual understanding of the reciprocal relationship between digitalization and sustainability in building SME resilience. Theoretically, this research enriches academic discourse by proposing an integrative model that connects dynamic capability theory and innovation ecosystem theory. Practically, the results of this research provide a strategic basis for SME actors in formulating concrete steps to integrate digital technology with sustainable practices as a core business strategy. For policymakers, these findings provide an argumentative basis for designing regulations and incentives that support the growth of SMEs based on sustainability and digitalization.

Further implications open the door for future research to conduct more in-depth empirical testing of this integrative model, particularly across various geographical contexts with differing levels of digital infrastructure development. Further studies could also highlight mediating factors such as digital literacy, business network support, and the role of government

policies in strengthening the relationship between sustainable innovation and digital transformation. Thus, future research directions have the potential to enrich these findings while providing more practical guidelines for practitioners and policymakers.

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