

Network Capability in SMEs: State Of the Art and Future Research Directions

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to systematically review existing research on network capability which remains fragmented. This study aims to fill the gap in the literature by scientifically discussing the contributions and highlighting key issues with previous research findings regarding the dimensions that compose it, as well as the antecedents and consequences of network capability. This study analyzed research related to network capability from 1999-2024 with a total of 67 studies out of 200 in Scopus. The findings also show that existing research has found a number of antecedents and consequences to organizations. On the other hand, this study provides a comprehensive and critical systematization of the limited network capability academic literature. This study also offers opportunities for further research to address the limitations of empirical testing of network capability constructs, antecedents, moderators, mediators, and consequences from various studies.

INTRODUCTION

Competitive business competition requires SMEs to strengthen their ability to manage network capability (Readi & Sudarmiati, 2023). In the dynamic environment of SMEs, the skill of managing network capability is an important factor that affects business performance (Nkwini & Akinola, 2023). Network capability emphasizes the importance of providing clarity of definition to be a crucial element in SMEs (Carrera-Rivera et al., 2022). Network capability refers to the ability of SMEs to create added value. In the context of SMEs, network capability are an important foundation for expanding markets to be sustainable competitive (Yahaya & Nadarajah, 2023).

Amid increasingly fierce competition in SMEs, it is necessary to develop network capabilities to establish and manage productive relationships with customers, suppliers, and business partners (Dwi Hernanik et al., 2023). Network capability is an important factor in building sustainable competitive advantage. This context includes the challenges faced in reaching a wider market and accessing new knowledge and innovations (Sarwar et al., 2021). In addition, developments in the context of digitalization further strengthen the importance of expanding network capability (Noviana et al., 2024). Thus, network capability that are flexible in adapting to rapid market changes can effectively create sustainable value (Erdiaw-Kwasie et al., 2023).

In previous research Karimi & Iordanova, (2021) using SLR can provide illustrations that synthesize various research on network capability measured, understood, and applied. In research using SLR, it will be more consistent based on a variety of different studies. With the SLR method, it will be more structured and systematic, so that the research results are more generalizable to be applied in the context of SMEs

(Arham & Muhamad Dimyati, 2024). Research using SLR will provide broad insights into network capability (Arasti et al., 2022). With SLR, it can identify network capabilities that allow for enriching existing literature and improving the quality of research (Readi & Sudarmiatin, 2023). In contrast, research by Azinuddin et al., (2022) shows that when network capabilities are analyzed without using SLR, they tend to be unsystematic and do not cover the entire spectrum of existing knowledge, so the findings obtained are more limited and less accurate in developing theory or practical recommendations (Badiei et al., 2024).

This study makes several important contributions. First, according to Klarin, (2024), literature reviews are key to understanding existing knowledge and identifying new research directions. Investigating the gaps that exist in the network capability literature will motivate researchers interested in network capability to conduct future research (Arham & Muhamad Dimyati, 2024). Second, this researcher examines existing studies to determine how research has used various methods to achieve network capability status in various countries (Muna et al., 2022). Third, this study builds on previous studies with the Scopus base used as the world's largest database and citation that has a very high quality of research (Mubarrok et al., 2022). This study uses the antecedent and consequence framework, where the success factor model that focuses on antecedents in developing network capability initiatives is key (Arsawan et al., 2022).

Literature Review

Network capability

Network capability is the ability of SMEs to build, utilize, and maintain productive relationships with external partners, such as suppliers, customers, and business partners (Fang et al., 2019; McGrath & O'Toole, 2021). It is well recognized that business reform has two perspectives: a combination of business reform and digital reform, which enables businesses to react adaptively and successfully to changes in the business environment comes first (Solano Acosta et al., 2018; Soluk et al., 2023). This perspective is based on an application-based view of digital technologies that accommodate innovation (Pujianto et al., 2021). The second perspective, which is based on a digital perspective, strengthens the implementation of business changes in driving business success (Farida, 2021; Sasono et al., 2023). Network capability in a business context acts as a key facilitator to support business development (Wang et al., 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a systematic literature review conducted through a transparent literature search process that becomes a structured review. This review includes various aspects, including method, author, keywords, country, and affiliation. This research uses quantitative methods (Supriharyanti & Sukoco, 2023). Evaluation of biographical data includes the number of authors and published papers, bibliography, institutions, and countries that can contribute to research development (Fernandes, 2022). Data collection was carried out on the Scopus journal database (Mudzakkir et al., 2022). Scopus is used as the largest database and citation in the world which has a very high research quality (Mubarrok et al., 2022). Furthermore, the keyword criteria used in this research are “network capability”, the field of study is limited to “business management and economics”, document type “article”, source type “journal”, and language “English”. The keyword criteria used also include research or studies conducted from 1999 to 2024. And the results of the keyword search found 200 article documents, then of the 67 articles found, 133 articles were excluded because they were not relevant to the keyword criteria, and there were 67 articles found relevant and usable. The 67 articles were then downloaded using the RIS format and then re-analyzed using the VOSviewers tool. VOSviewers can map related keywords, journals that cover the topic, and more relevant by displaying co-authorships, co-citations, and co-occurrence of keywords. VOSviewer is also popular for analyzing relationships between keywords, publications, institutions, authors, and identifying the work of authors who have a major influence on keywords, as well as

evaluating research articles that have the highest citations (Pujianto et al., 2023). The flow design in this study is shown in Figure 1.

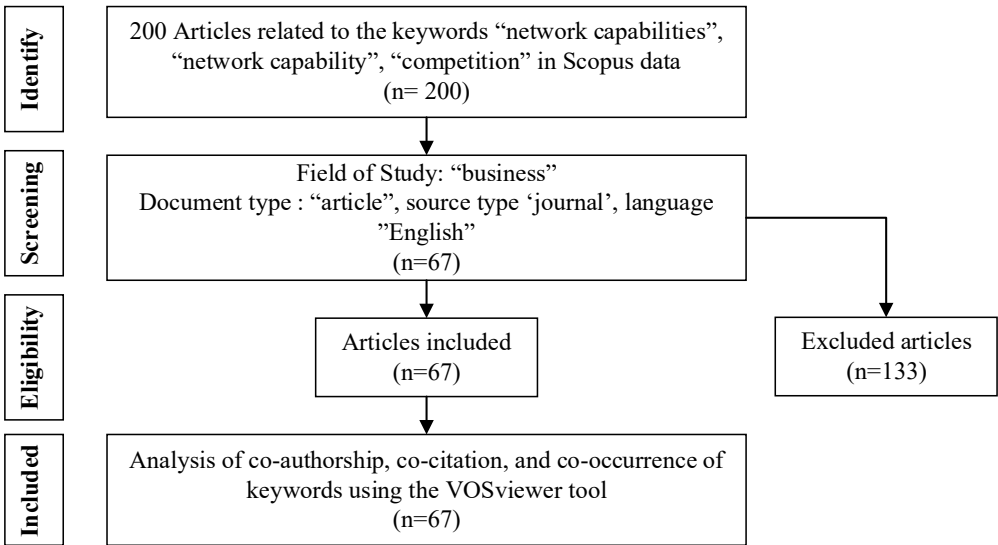


Figure 1. Research design

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the search results, 67 scientific papers from 1999-2024 contained the keyword “network capability” in the title, abstract, and keywords.

Number of publications, journal outlets, and publication sectors.

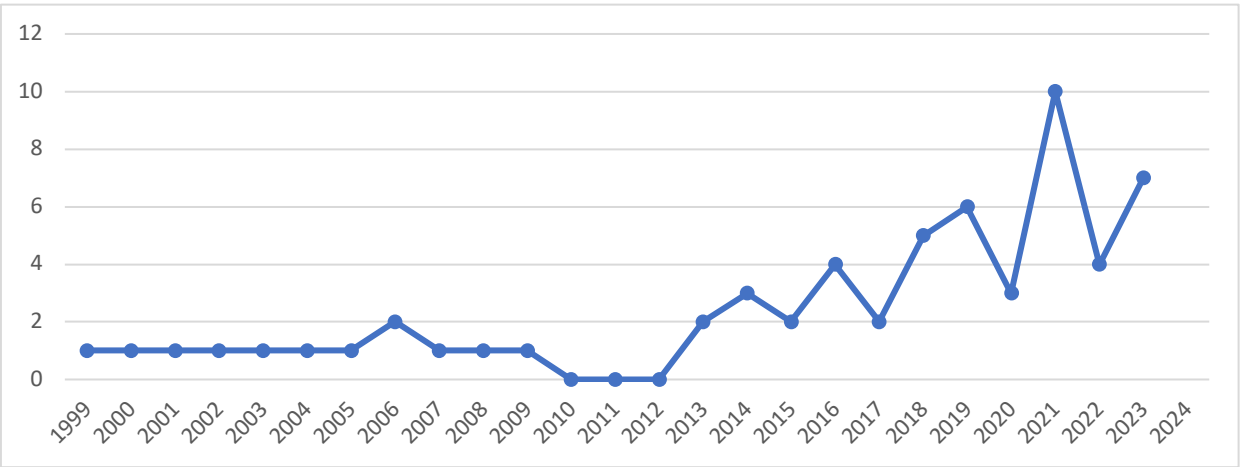


Figure 2. Publication of articles related to the keyword “network capability”

Figure 2. above shows that in the last 24 years, there are 200 articles related to the keyword “network capability” in the business sector published in the Scopus database from 1999-2024 Figure 2, It can also be shown that the publication of articles analyzed through the Scopus database shows that publications from 2001-2005 experienced instability. From the number of publications each year on the keyword “network capability” in the business sector.

Table 1. List of journal outlets

Scopus Index	Journal Name	Total
Q1	<i>International Business Review</i>	1
	<i>Journal of Operations Management</i>	1
	<i>Journal of Product Innovation Management</i>	1
	<i>Entrepreneurship and Regional Development</i>	1
	<i>Service Business</i>	1
	<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>	6
	<i>Management Decision</i>	4
	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	4
	<i>IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management</i>	2
	<i>International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship</i>	1
	<i>Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing</i>	2
	<i>Journal of Management</i>	1
	<i>Journal of World Business</i>	1
	<i>Journal of Knowledge Management</i>	1
	<i>Eurasian Business Review</i>	1
	<i>International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management</i>	1
	<i>International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal</i>	1
	<i>Industrial Management and Data Systems</i>	1
	<i>International Journal of Production Economics</i>	1
	<i>Journal of Technology Transfer</i>	1
	<i>Journal of Small Business Management</i>	1
	<i>International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management</i>	1
	<i>British Food Journal</i>	1
	<i>Creativity and Innovation Management</i>	1
	<i>British Journal of Management</i>	1
	<i>International Journal of Operations and Production Management</i>	1
	<i>Social Enterprise Journal</i>	1
	<i>Journal of Air Transport Management</i>	1
	<i>Journal of Business Venturing</i>	1
	<i>International Journal of Production Research</i>	1
Q2	<i>Scandinavian Journal of Management</i>	2
	<i>Journal of Management & Organization</i>	1
	<i>Journal of Distribution Science</i>	1
	<i>Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship</i>	1
	<i>Journal of Industrial Engineering and Engineering Management</i>	1
	<i>Journal of Promotion Management</i>	1
	<i>Technology Analysis and Strategic Management</i>	2
	<i>European Journal of Training and Development</i>	1
	<i>Engineering Management in Production and Services</i>	1
	<i>Journal of Global Scholars of Marketing Science: Bridging Asia and the World</i>	1
Q3	<i>International Journal of Business and Society</i>	1
	<i>International Journal of Business Innovation and Research</i>	3
	<i>International Journal of Customer Relationship Marketing and Management</i>	3

Q4	<i>Journal of Organizational and End User Computing</i>	1	
	<i>International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation Management</i>	1	
	<i>International Journal of Knowledge Management Studies</i>	1	
	<i>Jane's Defence Weekly</i>	1	2
	<i>International Journal of Computing and Digital Systems</i>	1	

Source: Process Data 2024

Table 1. Shows journals that publish articles related to “network capability” categorized based on the Scopus ranking index. In assessing these journals, Scopus categorizes the quality of journals with the term “Quartile”, with four quartiles namely: Q1, Q2, Q3, and Q4. Q1 is the highest and most important cluster in journal quality with (43 articles), followed by Q2 (12 articles), Q3 (10 articles), and Q4 (2 articles).

Table 2. Bibliometric search results by research sector

Sector	F	Presentation
Business, Management and Accounting	37	55.4%
Decision Sciences	8	11.6%
Engineering	6	9.1%
Economics, Econometrics and Finance	5	8.3%
Sosial Sciences	5	5.8%
Computer Science	4	5.0%
Environmental Science	1	1.7%
Psychology	1	1.7%
Arts and Humanities	0	0.8%
Algitulcural Science	0	0.8%

Source: Process Data 2024

Furthermore, table 2 shows that the business and management sector has conducted the most research on “network capability” in SMEs from 1999 to 2024. This shows that research analysis related to “network capability” is often used by researchers to analyze network capability in the business, management and accounting sectors.

The results of data analysis based on Scopus database searches show that there are authors with the most contributions in research related to “network capability”. The author's contribution is measured by the number of writings per year and the number of derivative articles that cite the author's name as a research citation. Table 3 shows that the authors with the most contributions to research related to “network capability” are McGrath, H. O'Toole, T. With seven published articles, Parida, V. Partanen, J. Kohtamäki, M. and Patel, P, C with six published articles, O'Toole, T and McGrath, H with six published articles, Wincent, J, Cenamor, J. and Parida, V with four published articles, Kohtamaki, M. Partanen, J. Parida, V. and Wincent, J with three published articles, Yousaf, Z. Majid, A. Yasir, M. and Qudratullah, H. with three published articles, Bai, W. Holmström-Lind, C. and Johanson, M with two published articles and Coviello, N. Chen, Y. and Ranaweera, C with two published articles.

Tabel 3. Penulis teratas

No	Penulis	Publikasi	Kutipan	Jurnal
1.	Parida, V. Partanen, J. Kohtamäki, M. and Patel, P, C.(Kohtamäki et al., 2013)	6	255	Industrial Marketing Management (2013)
			130	Journal of Small Business Management (2015)
			59	Journal of Business Research (2016)

			102	Entrepreneurship and Regional Development (2017)
			487	Journal of Business Research (2019)
			101	International Journal of Production Economics (2020)
2.	Wincent, J, Cenamor, J. and Parida, V. (Wincent et al., 2019)	4	255	Industrial Marketing Management (2013)
			59	Journal of Business Research (2016)
			102	Entrepreneurship and Regional Development (2017)
			487	Journal of Business Research (2019)
3.	Kohtamäki, M. Partanen, J. Parida, V. and Wincent, J (Kohtamäki et al., 2013)	3	255	Industrial Marketing Management (2013)
			59	Journal of Business Research (2016)
			101	International Journal of Production Economics (2020)
4.	McGrath, H. and O'Toole, T. (McGrath & O'Toole, 2013)	7	255	Industrial Marketing Management (2013)
			37	Industrial Marketing Management (2014)
			5	Action Learning: Research and Practice (2016)
			33	Industrial Marketing Management (2018)
			17	International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship (2018)
			53	Industrial Marketing Management (2019)
			11	Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing (2021)
5.	O'Toole, T and McGrath, H (McGrath & O'Toole, 2013)	6	69	Industrial Marketing Management (2013)
			37	Industrial Marketing Management (2014)
			5	Action Learning: Research and Practice (2016)
			33	Industrial Marketing Management (2018)
			17	International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship (2018)
			11	Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing (2021)
6.	Yousaf, Z. Majid, A. Yasir, M. and	3	47	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management (2019)

	Qudratullah, H. (Yousaf et al., 2019)		23	Management Decision (2021)
			23	Eurasian Business Review (2021)
7.	Bai, W. Holmström-Lind, C. and Johanson, M. (Bai et al., 2018)	2	32	Scandinavian Journal of Management (2018)
			34	Journal of World Business (2022)
8.	Coviello, N. Chen, Y. and Ranaweera, C. (Coviello et al., 2021)	2	19	Journal of Product Innovation Management (2021)
			15	Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing (2021)

Source: Process Data 2024

Furthermore, when viewed from the number of citations used in the research conducted by the two authors, the research conducted by Parida, V. Partanen, J. Kohtamäki, M. and Patel, P, C. And Wincent, J, Cenamor, J. and Parida, V. there are 6 and 4 published journals having the most citations 487 citations., then Kohtamaki, M. Partanen, J. Parida, V. and Wincent, J from 3 published journals have as many as 255 citations, McGrath, H. and O'Toole, T. have 7 and 6 published journals from 255 and 69 citations respectively, then Yousaf, Z. Majid, A. Yasir, M. and Qudratullah, H published 3 and had 47 citations, Bai, W. Holmström-Lind, C. and Johanson, M. published 2 and had 34 citations, and Coviello, N. Chen, Y. and Ranaweera, C. published 2 and had 19 citations.

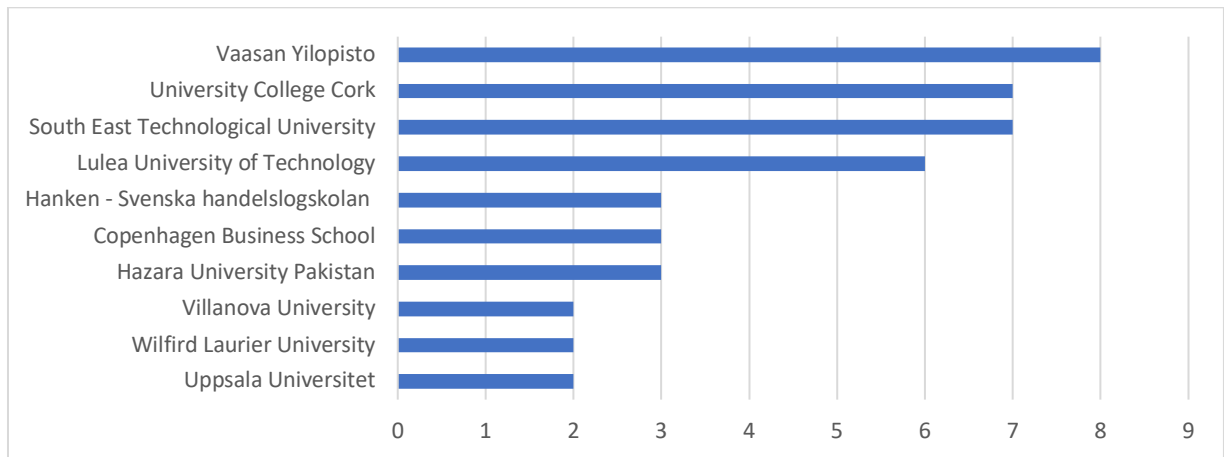
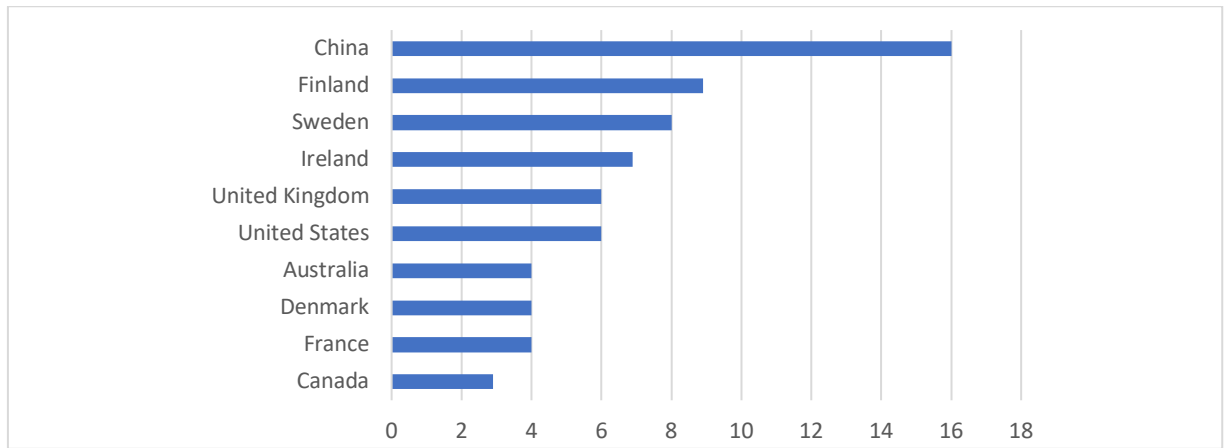


Figure 3. Affiliation

Figure 3 above shows that the most research related to “network capability” was conducted or written by researchers from Vaasan Yilopisto with a total of eight published articles, followed by University College



Cork and South East Technological University with seven published articles each.

Figure 4. Country

Based on Figure 4 above, shows that the country with the constitution of research related to “network capability” in the SME sector mostly carried out or written by researchers from China with a total of sixteen published articles, followed by Finland with nine published articles, while in Sweden with eight published articles.

Keywords that appear together

Keywords in a published study indicate the most frequently used words in a study. Based on the results of the VOSviewer analysis, words were found from the title and abstract with 267 Co-occurrence connections through 22 clusters and a total link strength of 1544, shown in Figure 5 visualization.

Figure 5. Visualization of keyword occurrence

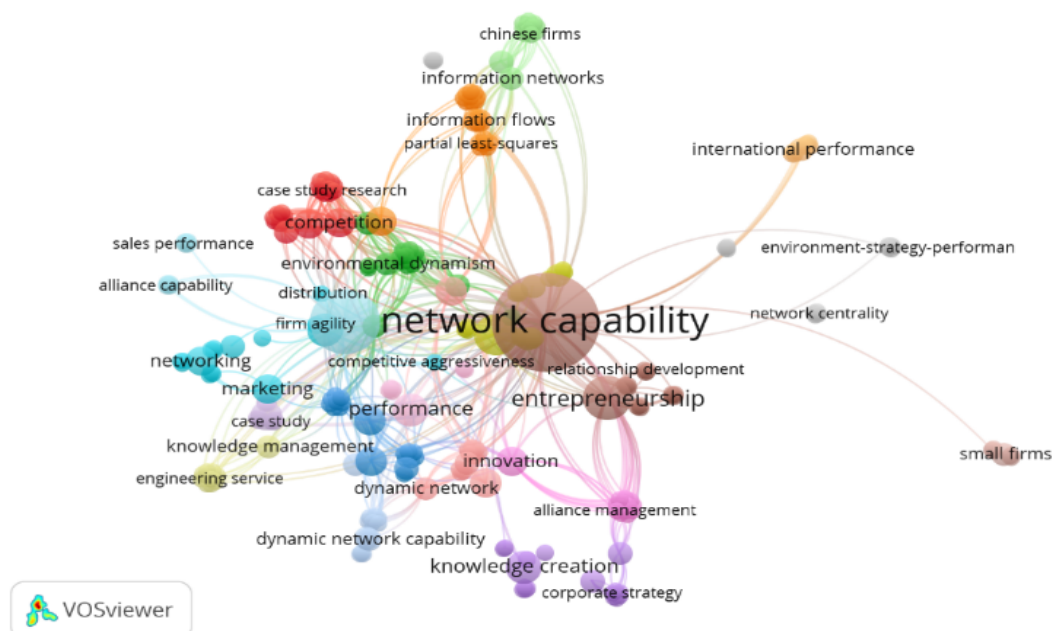


Table 4. Favorite keywords

Rating	Keywords	Total Link Strenght	Occurrences
1	Network capability	232	34
2	Network capabilities	102	3
3	Competition	44	3
4	Manufacture	44	3
5	Entrepreneurship	41	7
6	Innovation performance	39	3
7	Dynamics capability	39	3
8	Innovation	33	3
9	Performance	30	4
10	Relational capabilities	30	3
11	Knowledge management	29	2
12	Supply chain management	26	2
13	Marketing	24	3
14	Small and medium-sized entrepreneur	24	2
15	Information flows partial least-squares	22	2
16	Information network	22	2
17	Dynamic network	22	1
18	New product development	20	3
19	Environmental dynamism	20	2
20	Economics and environmental	17	1
21	Alliance management	16	1
22	Entrepreneur	16	1

Source: Process Data 2024

The visualization above shows that “network capability” has been used as a research topic. Table 4 shows that there are twenty-two (22) favorite keywords related to other keywords, namely: network capability, network capabilities, competition, manufacture, entrepreneurship, innovation performance, dynamics capability, innovation, performance, relational capabilities, knowledge management, supply chain management, marketing, small and medium-sized entrepreneur, information flows partial least-squares, information, network, dynamic network, new product development, environmental dynamism, economics and environmental, alliance management and entrepreneur. As explained in table 4. These keywords are the most used terms analyzed in the study.

Tabel 5. Rarely used keywords

Score	Keywords	Total Link Strenght	Occurrences
1	Engineering service	13	1
2	Information management	13	1
3	New ventures	12	3
4	Methodology bisnis	12	1
5	Social media	12	2
6	Complex products	11	1
7	Major innovation	11	1
8	Technical environment	11	1
9	Economics development	8	1
10	Compcumtion behavior	8	1
11	Competitive aggressiveness	5	1
12	Entrepreneurial marketing	4	1
13	Network analysis	4	1
14	Network centrality	4	1
15	Alliance capability	4	1
16	CSR	4	1
17	Architectural innovation	4	1
18	Innovation climate	4	1
19	Distribution	3	1

Source: Process Data 2024

Furthermore, Table 5. Shows that nineteen (19) keywords are least frequently used but affect keyword relationships, namely: engineering service, information management, new ventures, business methodology, social media, complex, products, major innovation, technical environments, economics development, compcumtion, behavior, competitive aggressiveness, entrepreneurial marketing, network analysis, network, centrality, alliance capability, CSR, architectural innovation, innovation climate, and distribution, as described in table 5.

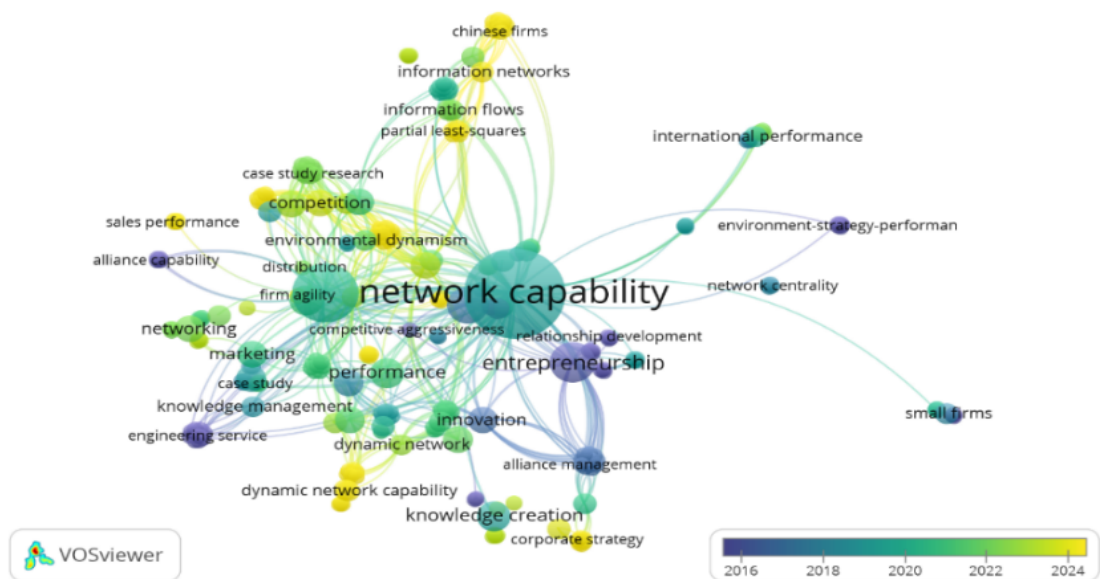


Figure 6. Keyword overlay visualization

Figure 6 shows that the more yellow the color of a keyword, the less frequently it is used in research. It shows that nineteen (19) keywords are the least used in research related to “network capability” in the business sector identified from 2000 to 2024: engineering services, information management, new ventures, business methodology, social media, complex, products, major innovation, technical environments, economics development, compcution, behavior, competitive aggressiveness, entrepreneurial marketing, network analysis, network, centrality, alliance capability, csr, architectural innovation, innovation climate, and distribution. Future research can use research variables based on the nineteen (19) least used keywords which indicate that the issue is still rarely discussed in research.

CONCLUSION

Antecedents and consequences of network capability

After discussing the conceptual definition, research framework, and methodological applications, this study provides reviewed empirical evidence regarding the factors that influence NC and the impact of NC on performance in the context of this study. In addition, this paper discusses moderating and mediating variables that may influence the mechanism by which NC affects outcomes. These findings were obtained from 67 empirical studies identified in the literature review. Before the discussion, the outline in Figure 2 provides an overview of the findings. Antecedents and consequences of network capability.

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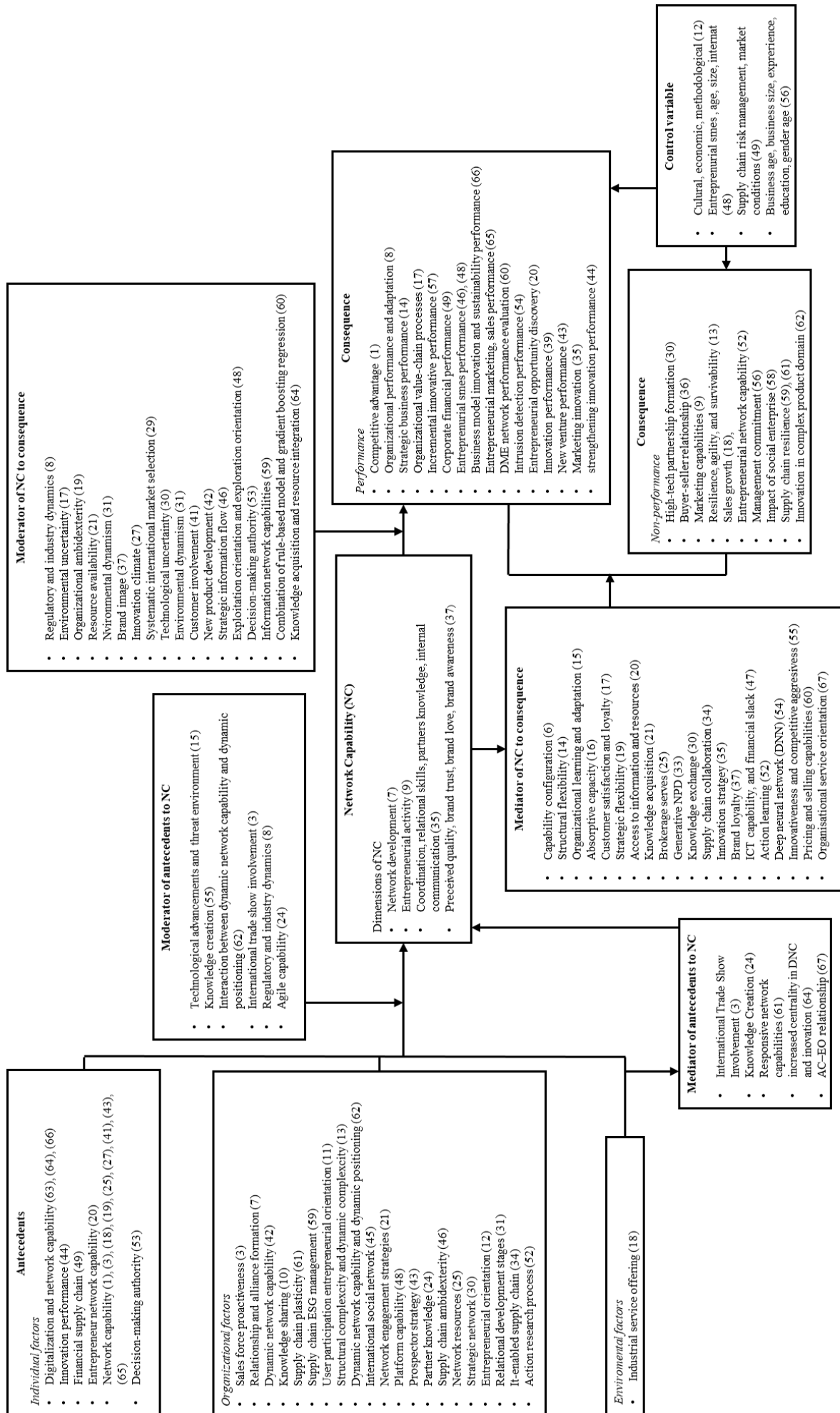


Figure 7. Antecedents and consequences of NC

Antecedents

As shown in figure 7, this study has identified a number of relevant antecedents divided into three factors including individual level, organizational level, and environmental level. A total of 67 articles proposed 5 antecedents on individual factors, 21 articles examined organizational factors, and 1 article examined environmental factors. However, almost all research on organizational factors is related to business. Most articles were found with organizational factors, which are the antecedents of NC. However, the three factors on antecedents can develop a comprehensive strategy to strengthen NC and utilize external relationships as a source of competitive business.

Consequences

NC consequences are divided into two categories, namely performance and non-performance. The performance and non-performance consequences of NC in the business context have a significant impact on business performance. Based on the results of performance consequences, it shows that it can increase operational efficiency, improve the innovation process, and expand market share through effective collaboration. Based on the non-performance consequences of NC, it shows that when businesses are less successful in managing the complexity of network capability relationships it leads to the risk of over-reliance on strategic knowledge.

Mediating effects

Vesalainen & Hakala, (2014) found that both dimensions of NC have a positive and strong effect on the development of business performance capabilities. Studies on mediation at the individual level are still limited, namely: international trade show involvement, knowledge creation, responsive network capabilities, increased centrality in DNC and innovation, and AC-EO relationships that affect the main results of the organization. It would be interesting if further research could enrich this field with the study of individual-level mediating variables, such as change support behavior. Consistent with the findings of Parida & Örtqvist, (2015) NC affects organizational performance indirectly through specific capabilities and activities that are generated, modified, and updated.

Moderating effects

Researchers have identified relevant moderators of the effects of antecedent variables on NC and moderators of NC on consequences or outcomes of articles respectively. The moderator variables in the relationship of antecedent variables with NC proposed by Liao & Li, (2023) are external factors and internal factors. In the NC and consequence relationship, moderator variables are included in individual, organizational, and environmental factors. NC as a moderating variable has been studied in the research of Wegner et al., (2023) who proposed NC as a moderator variable of entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance.

State of the art and future research directions

Based on various literature and journals that discuss network capability, according to the keywords, there are several that are suggested for further research related to network capability, namely: completion behavior, competitive aggressiveness, entrepreneurial marketing, network centrality, and alliance capability. Several keywords were suggested related to antecedents including: digitalization and network capability, innovation performance, and decision-making authority. Some suggested keywords related to mediators include: regulatory and industry dynamics, organizational ambidexterity, and resource availability. Some suggested keywords related to moderators include: organizational learning and adaptation, deep neural network (DNN), increased centrality in DNC, and innovation. Some suggested keywords related to consequences include: competitive advantage, incremental innovative performance,

and high-tech partnership formation. By using these keywords, future research can enrich the literature on network capability, strengthen the theory, and broaden insights into increasingly complex SMEs.

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