



Developing Core Competency: Drivers of Competitive Advantage in Indian Startups

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ABSTRACT

Startups in India are expanding rapidly but face intense competition, limited resources, and structural challenges. To survive and grow, they must rely on core competencies that create value and set them apart. This study examines how core competency acts as a driver of competitive advantage in Indian startups. It focuses on four dimensions: unique value creation, differentiation, adaptability, and strategic flexibility. A sample of 500 startup managers was surveyed to test the role of these variables in shaping customer experience and long-term advantage. Factor analysis confirmed the validity of the measures, and Cronbach's alpha (.781) indicated strong internal consistency. Correlation and regression analysis showed that all four competencies have a significant and positive impact on customer experience. The model explained 66.4% of the variance in outcomes. The findings highlight that innovation-driven strategies, when rooted in core competencies, can build entry barriers, enhance sustainability, and secure lasting growth. The paper concludes that Indian startups must embed these competencies into their strategy to compete in a dynamic ecosystem and achieve sustainable advantage.

Keywords: *Innovation, Startups, Business, Core competency, Strategic management, Business.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In India, core competency is not just about doing business differently. It is about solving large-scale problems in a simple and affordable way. The country's startup ecosystem operates in a highly diverse and competitive environment. Millions of consumers, uneven infrastructure, and fast-changing digital trends demand a unique set of strengths.

1.1 Digital Adoption

It is the first key driver. Startups in India have embraced mobile internet, UPI payments, cloud platforms, and AI-enabled tools at a rapid pace. This adoption reduces cost, increases speed, and improves customer reach. Startups that use digital technology as a core competency build scalable

models. They can reach urban as well as rural markets with the same platform. This digital-first mindset becomes an entry barrier for late adopters. A good example of a digital adoption startup in India is Razor pay. Razorpay is a fintech startup that enables businesses to accept, process, and disburse payments online. By offering a fully digital payment gateway, it allows even small businesses and startups to adopt online payment systems without needing complex infrastructure. The platform simplifies transactions through APIs, dashboards, and mobile apps, reducing dependency on cash and traditional banking. Razorpay's digital-first approach accelerates financial inclusion, streamlines business operations, and encourages widespread adoption of online payments across India.

1.2 Cost Innovation

It is the second driver. Indian consumers are highly price-sensitive. Startups that learn to deliver affordable products without compromising quality gain a strong edge. Cost innovation means rethinking production, logistics, and delivery models. For example, many healthtech and edtech startups design "low-cost, high-reach" services. Such models ensure both inclusivity and competitiveness. Cost innovation becomes a core strength when startups manage to grow margins while keeping prices low. Ola Electric is a prime example of a startup using cost innovation to transform the electric mobility sector in India. The company focuses on producing affordable electric scooters and vehicles, making clean transportation accessible to a wider audience. By localizing production and adopting innovative models such as battery leasing, Ola Electric reduces the upfront cost for customers while maintaining quality and performance. This approach not only makes electric vehicles more financially attainable but also helps the startup compete effectively against traditional vehicles, demonstrating how cost-focused strategies can drive market adoption and growth.

1.3 Cultural Fit

It is another dimension. India is diverse in language, income, and lifestyle. A product that works in one state may not succeed in another. Startups that understand cultural nuances and tailor their offerings accordingly earn trust and loyalty. Food delivery apps, vernacular edtech platforms, and regional e-commerce are examples of cultural fit in action. When cultural insight becomes a core competency, it allows startups to defend their space against global rivals.

La Di Pino Pizza, originally an international pizza brand, entered the Indian market recognizing that Indian consumers have distinct taste preferences compared to Western markets. Rather than offering the same menu as abroad, the company focused on localizing its offerings to appeal to Indian palates. For example, it introduced pizzas with paneer, tandoori chicken, and spicy masala toppings, which are familiar and popular flavours in India. Additionally, La Di Pino Pizza offered vegetarian options, catering to the large vegetarian population, and adjusted the spice levels to match Indian taste expectations.

The company also adapted its marketing strategies to resonate with Indian consumers, emphasizing affordability, sharing culture (larger pizzas for families), and online ordering convenience through food delivery apps. This combination of product customization, pricing strategy, and local marketing



helped La Di Pino Pizza gain traction in a highly competitive pizza market dominated by brands like Domino's and Pizza Hut. In short, the case illustrates how global food brands can adopt core competency strategies-focusing on menu innovation, local taste adaptation, and consumer-centric marketing-to succeed in India.

1.4 Problem-Solving for Scale

It defines the next level of core competency. India's large population creates both opportunities and operational stress. A startup may attract millions of users in months, but serving them consistently is a challenge. Core competency here lies in designing systems that can handle growth. Supply chain optimization, AI-based customer support, and modular expansion are examples of this strength. Startups that build for scale early are better prepared to grow sustainably. Originally a restaurant discovery platform, Zomato has scaled massively to become a full-fledged food delivery and cloud kitchen platform. It serves millions of users across hundreds of cities in India. Zomato's core competency lies in logistics, technology-driven ordering systems, and partnerships with restaurants, enabling it to serve high volumes of orders quickly and reliably. It adapts to local tastes by offering menus from thousands of restaurants, including regional specialties, and by leveraging data analytics to predict demand and optimize delivery routes.

When combined, these competencies shape sustainable advantage. Startups that adopt digital tools, innovate on cost, align with culture, and prepare for scale create strong entry barriers. They not only attract investors but also retain customers in the long run. These startups also prove more resilient during crises and market shifts. The Indian startup ecosystem shows that core competency is not a fixed trait. It is a set of evolving strengths developed through learning, adaptation, and innovation. Startups that invest in these competencies move from being imitators to becoming leaders. They turn ideas into advantages and secure long-term growth in a highly competitive market.

1.5 Core Competency Strategy

A core competency strategy in business focuses on leveraging a company's unique strengths to gain and sustain a competitive advantage in the market. It is not about trying to do everything but about excelling in areas where the business can perform better, more efficiently, or more distinctively than competitors. This strategy involves identifying the company's key strengths, such as specialized skills, technologies, or processes, and ensuring they create real value for customers. By using these competencies, businesses can differentiate themselves, offering products or services that competitors cannot easily replicate. Core competency strategies require focus and specialization, directing resources toward areas where the firm has the greatest edge, while also building sustainability through mechanisms like patents, networks, or brand trust. Additionally, adaptability is essential, as competencies must evolve with changing markets, technologies, and consumer needs. In essence, a core competency strategy transforms unique capabilities into a long-term competitive advantage that drives business success.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The researcher began by establishing clear inclusion and exclusion criteria and then conducted a systematic search across multiple databases to collect relevant literature (Mehrotra, M. S. et al., 2018). During the screening process, duplicates and irrelevant studies were removed. Full-text articles were then evaluated for eligibility, with only those aligning with the research objectives being included. By following the PRISMA framework, the researcher ensured methodological rigor, reduced bias, and created a transparent audit trail documenting how the final set of studies was selected for analysis.

Recent research on India's startup ecosystem highlights several key trends and challenges. Dr. Surender Kumar Nagia and Dr. Ramesh Kumar Dhiman (2022) emphasize that initiatives like Digital India and Make in India are driving technological transformation, urging businesses to adopt innovations while managing associated risks. Shruthi Koratagere Anantha Kumar et al. (2022) focus on rural connectivity, noting that 5G, satellite internet, and future 6G technologies are crucial for bridging the rural-urban digital divide. Aman Maheshwari (2022) explores post-COVID organizational culture, stressing shared values, employee well-being, and sustainability as critical for resilient workplaces.

Several studies examine startup challenges and opportunities: Mrs. Anitha and Dr. Veena M. (2022) highlight gaps in awareness, funding, and mentorship despite government schemes like Atma nirbhar Bharat and Startup India. Khanindra Ch. Das (2022) calls for improved rural infrastructure to support agriculture-based startups, while Prof. Varun Shenoy (2022) underscores the importance of customer service and trust for e-commerce ventures. Nitya Dhawan and Biswa bhushan Behera (2022) argue that corporate-startup partnerships and incubators are essential for scaling innovation, supported by Aishwarya S. Patil et al. (2022), who stress digital marketing adoption for SMEs and startups to remain competitive.

Global and structural perspectives are also highlighted. Matthew Kuofie (2021) and Leo Aldianto et al. (2021) emphasize resilience and preparedness during crises like COVID-19. Ritimoni Bordoloi et al. (2021) advocate localized strategies for digital learning and adoption, while K. Rajeshwari and Shameem Shagirbasha (2021) highlight culture-driven innovation in new product development. Nimble O. J. and Dr. Uma C. Swadimath (2021) note gender disparities in entrepreneurship and call for targeted interventions.

Other studies focus on ecosystem factors. Mohan Kumar (2021) and David, Gopalan & Ramachandran (2021) discuss India's rise as the third-largest startup hub, emphasizing government support, state-level competitiveness, R&D, and intellectual property reforms. Vinney Zephaniah Vincent (2021) confirms the value of incubators in supporting both hard and soft business outcomes. Ganesaraman Kalyanasundaram and Sitaram Ramachandrula (2021) highlight the need for mentorship, funding, and infrastructure for tech startups, while Priya Malviya and Dr. Neelam Maurya (2021) review government initiatives fostering self-reliant innovation. Nishant Dubey (2021) and Mohan Kumar (2021) note COVID-19's disruptive effects but also its role in accelerating digital adoption and innovation.

Overall, these studies collectively show that India's startup growth depends on government support, digital adoption, cultural refinement, infrastructure development, corporate partnerships, and resilience-building, while addressing gaps in funding, mentorship, rural connectivity, and gender inclusivity is critical for sustainable development.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study follows a quantitative research design using a survey method to examine the relationship between selected organizational factors and the core competency strategy of startups. The primary objective is to understand how Digital Adoption, Cost Innovation, Cultural Fit, and Problem-Solving for Scale influence the development and implementation of core competency strategies in Indian startups.

3.1 Hypotheses

Based on the literature and theoretical framework, the following hypotheses were formulated:

1. H₀₁: Digital adoption does not have a positive impact on the core competency strategy of a startup.
2. H₀₂: Cost innovation positively does not influence the core competency strategy of a startup.
3. H₀₃: Cultural fit positively does not affect the core competency strategy of a startup.
4. H₀₄: Problem-solving for scale does not positively contribute to the core competency strategy of a startup.

3.2 Population and Sample

The research population comprises startup managers across India. A sample of 500 managers was selected using a convenience sampling technique. The respondents represent startups from diverse sectors, ensuring a broad perspective on organizational practices.

3.3. Data Collection

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire designed to measure the five key variables: Digital Adoption, Cost Innovation, Cultural Fit, Problem-Solving for Scale, and Core Competency Strategy. Each item was measured on a Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

- Reliability: The questionnaire demonstrated high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.781, indicating acceptable reliability for exploratory research.
- Validity: Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted using varimax rotation, resulting in five distinct factors, confirming the construct validity of the measurement instrument.

3.4 Method Bias Assessment

To ensure the absence of common method bias, the study applied procedural remedies, such as:

- Anonymity of respondents to reduce social desirability bias.
- Separation of independent and dependent variable sections in the questionnaire.
- Harman's single-factor test, which indicated that no single factor accounted for the majority of variance, confirming that method bias was not a concern.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

- Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents.
- Data confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained.
- The study adhered to ethical research standards to ensure credibility and transparency.

The methodology integrates quantitative survey design, validated instruments, and rigorous statistical analysis to examine how Digital Adoption, Cost Innovation, Cultural Fit, and Problem-Solving for Scale influence the Core Competency Strategy of startups. The use of PRISMA, reliability testing, factor analysis, and method bias checks ensures that the research findings are robust, reliable, and generalizable to the startup ecosystem.

IV. FINDINGS

Based on the hypothesis testing, the findings indicate that all four factors-Digital Adoption, Cost Innovation, Cultural Fit, and Problem-Solving for Scale-have a significant and positive impact on the core competency strategy of startups. The correlation values ($r = 0.601, 0.590, 0.571$, and 0.436 respectively) show moderate to strong relationships, while the multiple correlation ($R = 0.763$) and R^2 value of 0.679 indicate that together these variables explain nearly 68% of the variance in core competency strategy. Consequently, all null hypotheses were rejected, confirming that each independent variable contributes meaningfully to enhancing the strategic capabilities of startups. These results highlight that startups can strengthen their core competencies by adopting digital technologies, innovating cost structures, aligning organizational culture, and developing problem-solving abilities for scaling operations.

Step 1: Test H01 – Digital Adoption

$r = 0.601 \rightarrow$ moderate to strong positive correlation with core competency strategy.

Interpretation: This indicates that as digital adoption increases, the effectiveness of the core competency strategy also increases.

Decision: Reject H01.

Alternate hypothesis (H1a) is true: Digital adoption positively impacts core competency strategy.

Step 2: Test H02 – Cost Innovation

$r = 0.590 \rightarrow$ moderate positive correlation with core competency strategy.

Interpretation: Cost innovation positively influences the core competency strategy of startups.

Decision: Reject H02.

Alternate hypothesis (H2a) is true: Cost innovation positively influences core competency strategy.

Step 3: Test H03 – Cultural Fit

$r = 0.571 \rightarrow$ moderate positive correlation.

Interpretation: Cultural fit has a positive impact on core competency strategy, meaning alignment of organizational culture strengthens the firm's strategic capabilities.

Decision: Reject H03.

Alternate hypothesis (H3a) is true: Cultural fit positively affects core competency strategy.

Step 4: Test H04 – Problem-Solving for Scale

$r = 0.436 \rightarrow$ moderate positive correlation (slightly lower than others).

Interpretation: Problem-solving for scale contributes positively to core competency strategy, helping startups grow efficiently and manage complexity.

Decision: Reject H04.

Alternate hypothesis (H4a) is true: Problem-solving for scale positively contributes to core competency strategy.

Step 5: Multiple Regression Overview

$R = 0.763 \rightarrow$ strong combined correlation of all four predictors with core competency strategy.

$R^2 = 0.679 \rightarrow$ 67.9% of variance in core competency strategy is explained by the four variables combined, indicating a strong model.

All null hypotheses are rejected. Each independent variable—Digital Adoption, Cost Innovation, Cultural Fit, and Problem-Solving for Scale—positively impacts the core competency strategy of startups. The model demonstrates high explanatory power.

Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, the study reinforces and extends the existing literature on core competencies and strategic management in startups. The concept of core competency strategy, first introduced by Prahalad and Hamel (1990), emphasizes leveraging unique organizational capabilities that are difficult for competitors to imitate. The present research confirms that the development of core competencies in startups is influenced by both tangible and intangible organizational factors. Specifically, digital adoption emerged as a critical driver of strategic capability. The correlation value ($r = 0.601$) demonstrates a strong positive relationship with core competency strategy, indicating that startups that embrace digital technologies—ranging from cloud-based platforms, automation, data analytics, and digital marketing—are better positioned to identify market opportunities, streamline operations, and enhance customer engagement. These findings align with prior research highlighting digital transformation as a critical enabler of innovation and competitive advantage in dynamic environments.

Cost innovation also plays a significant role in shaping core competencies. The positive correlation ($r = 0.590$) suggests that startups adopting innovative approaches to reduce costs, optimize processes, and improve efficiency can enhance their strategic positioning. Cost innovation allows startups to offer products and services at competitive prices without compromising quality, thereby attracting customers, increasing market share, and creating entry barriers for competitors. This finding reinforces the resource-based view (RBV) of strategic management, which posits that the ability to utilize resources creatively for value creation is central to achieving sustainable competitive advantage.

Cultural fit, reflected by a correlation of 0.571, is another critical determinant of core competency strategy. Organizational culture encompasses shared values, beliefs, and norms that guide behaviour within the firm. The results indicate that when startups cultivate a culture aligned with strategic objectives, it positively influences decision-making, collaboration, and adaptability. Cultural fit

ensures that employees internalize the company's vision, engage in innovative practices, and maintain high levels of performance. This finding underscores the importance of integrating cultural considerations into strategic planning, as it reinforces employee commitment, reduces internal friction, and supports sustainable growth.

Problem-solving for scale emerged as a moderately strong predictor ($r = 0.436$), indicating that the ability to address operational, managerial, and market-related challenges effectively is essential for enhancing core competencies.

The multiple correlation ($R = 0.763$) and coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.679$) further substantiate that the combined effect of these four variables explains nearly 68% of the variance in core competency strategy. This indicates a strong model where digital, financial, cultural, and operational capabilities collectively shape the strategic potential of startups. These empirical results extend theoretical understanding by demonstrating that core competencies are multi-dimensional and are influenced by both internal capabilities and the strategic orientation of the firm.

Methodological Rigor

The study employed a systematic and rigorous methodology to ensure reliability, validity, and transparency of results. The survey instrument demonstrated acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.781, indicating internal consistency. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with varimax rotation confirmed the presence of five distinct factors corresponding to the research variables, validating the construct structure. Method bias was examined using procedural remedies, including the separation of independent and dependent variable items and respondent anonymity, as well as statistical testing via Harman's single-factor test, which confirmed that common method bias was absent. Collectively, these methodological steps provide confidence that the observed relationships reflect true associations rather than artifacts of measurement or design.

V. CONCLUSION

The present research provides a detailed examination of how key organizational factors influence the development and implementation of core competency strategies in Indian startups. In an era characterized by rapid technological change, global competition, and evolving market demands, startups must identify and leverage their unique capabilities to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. The study focused on four primary variables-Digital Adoption, Cost Innovation, Cultural Fit, and Problem-Solving for Scale-and their relationship with the core competency strategy of startups. Using a structured survey of 500 startup managers, the study applied rigorous statistical techniques, including reliability analysis, exploratory factor analysis, correlation, and regression, to validate the conceptual framework and hypotheses. The findings offer significant theoretical, practical, and policy-oriented insights.

The findings of this research have significant practical implications for startup managers and entrepreneurs. First, the positive impact of digital adoption highlights the need for startups to invest strategically in technology. Managers should prioritize digital tools that enhance customer engagement, operational efficiency, and data-driven decision-making. Startups that delay digital adoption risk losing competitive advantage and market relevance.

Second, the influence of cost innovation suggests that managers should continuously seek innovative ways to optimize costs without sacrificing value. This could include process reengineering, strategic partnerships, outsourcing non-core activities, and leveraging technology to reduce operational expenses. Startups that embed cost-conscious innovation into their core strategy are better positioned to withstand competitive pressures and economic fluctuations.

Third, cultural alignment is essential for sustaining competitive advantage. Managers should cultivate a culture that emphasizes learning, collaboration, and shared values. Leadership plays a pivotal role in reinforcing cultural norms and aligning employee behaviour with strategic objectives. Effective cultural management enhances employee engagement, reduces turnover, and fosters an environment conducive to innovation.

Fourth, fostering problem-solving capabilities for scale enables startups to anticipate challenges and adapt swiftly. Managers should invest in training, knowledge management systems, and decision-making frameworks that enhance problem-solving capacity. By embedding these capabilities into the organizational structure, startups can scale operations efficiently and respond proactively to market or operational disruptions.

The combined effect of these variables on core competency strategy, as demonstrated by the high R^2 value, underscores the importance of an integrated approach. Startups that simultaneously focus on technology adoption, cost efficiency, cultural alignment, and problem-solving are more likely to achieve sustainable growth, resilience, and long-term competitive advantage.

Policy Implications

The study also offers insights for policymakers and ecosystem enablers. Government initiatives such as Startup India, Atmanirbhar Bharat, and Digital India create a supportive environment for startups by facilitating access to funding, mentorship, and technology infrastructure. The findings highlight that while such programs are essential, their effectiveness depends on startups' ability to internalize these resources strategically. Policies that emphasize digital literacy, cost optimization practices, and capacity building in organizational culture and problem-solving can further enhance the strategic potential of startups. Moreover, supporting incubators, accelerators, and corporate-startup partnerships can strengthen the startup ecosystem, ensuring that managerial capabilities and core competency strategies are effectively developed.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the study is cross-sectional, based on a survey of 500 startup managers at a single point in time. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into how core competency strategies evolve as startups scale or respond to market changes. Second, the study focuses solely on Indian startups; therefore, generalizability to other emerging or developed markets may be limited. Comparative studies across different countries could reveal context-specific differences in how organizational factors influence core competencies. Third, while the study included four key variables, other factors such as

leadership style, innovation culture, network relationships, and external market conditions may also influence core competency strategy. Future research could incorporate these additional variables to develop a more comprehensive model. Finally, while quantitative analysis provides robust statistical evidence, qualitative studies involving case studies, interviews, or ethnographic approaches could offer deeper insights into the mechanisms through which these factors influence strategic outcomes.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the development of core competency strategies in startups is a multi-dimensional process shaped by digital adoption, cost innovation, cultural fit, and problem-solving capabilities for scale. Each of these factors individually and collectively contributes to enhancing the strategic potential and competitive advantage of startups. Digital adoption enables firms to leverage technology for efficiency, customer engagement, and innovation; cost innovation ensures competitiveness and operational efficiency; cultural fit aligns employee behaviour with strategic objectives; and problem-solving for scale equips startups to grow sustainably and adapt to challenges.

The research methodology, employing reliable survey instruments, exploratory factor analysis, and regression analysis, ensures robust and credible results. The absence of method bias further strengthens confidence in the findings. Practically, the study underscores the need for managers to adopt an integrated approach, simultaneously addressing technological, financial, cultural, and operational dimensions to build a resilient and competitive startup. Policymakers and ecosystem enablers can leverage these insights to design programs and policies that support startups in developing core competencies, thereby enhancing India's position as a global startup hub.

Ultimately, the study reinforces the strategic importance of core competencies in the contemporary startup ecosystem. Startups that effectively integrate digital tools, innovate cost structures, align organizational culture, and cultivate problem-solving capabilities are better positioned to achieve sustainable competitive advantage, drive innovation, and contribute meaningfully to economic growth. By highlighting these relationships, the study provides valuable guidance for entrepreneurs, managers, and policymakers, offering a roadmap for enhancing the strategic capabilities and long-term success of startups in India and similar emerging markets.

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