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BUILDING RESILIENCE: ROLE OF ABSORPTIVE CAPACITY IN HIGH-PERFORMANCE WORK SYSTEMS: A STUDY ON IT SECTOR OF KARACHI, PAKISTAN

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KEYWORDS

High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS), Organizational Resilience (OR), Absorptive Capacity (AC), Knowledge Management, Crisis Management

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ABSTRACT

This research study will delve into the IT industry of Pakistan to explore the correlation between HPWS and organizational resilience while taking the absorptive capacity as a mediator. A deductive, quantitative approach is used with empirical research. The population targeted for this research is the information technology IT industry in Pakistan. The sample size for this research paper is 384, using convenient sampling. The study underscores standing of HPWS in boosting organizational resilience (OR) in Pakistan's IT sector. HPWS enhances workforce effectiveness & productivity, providing sustainable competitive advantage. Moreover, Adaptive Capacity (AC) mediates the relationship between HPWS and OR, allowing organizations to strategically leverage resilience. The findings advocate for the adoption of the HR systems that promote OR and empower employees through skill development & knowledge acquisition, illustrating how HPWS can enable firms to thrive amid challenges by fostering resilience and innovation. The study exclusively focuses on Pakistan IT sector and advocates resilience-building strategies in IT sector companies, enabling them to deploy HPWS, which can only be developed through enhancing the understanding and working capacities of their employees, thus becoming a competitive edge of any organization.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic and rapidly changing landscape, companies face unprecedented challenges as they strive to stay afloat and thrive amidst the chaos. With fierce competition and an ever-evolving market, businesses are constantly seeking to set themselves apart and gain an edge over their rivals to begin themselves as leader in their respective industries (Kizi & Rakhman, 2024). The pressure to

stay ahead of curve and be first to seize new opportunities is more intense than ever before (Fullan, Azorín, Harris & Jones, 2023), and companies must adapt and innovate to survive in this cut-throat environment (Adisa, Antona, Beauregard, Dickmann & Adekoya, 2022). Dynamic environment and technological advancement are sources pushing businesses to take certain quality measures to sustain competitiveness and survive in market. To benefit from competitive advantage, businesses are obliged to obtain ways to enhance their performance internally and externally (Azeem, Ahmed, Haider & Sajjad, 2021). No doubt, managing work and people, as Human Resource Management (HRM) (Wilton, 2022), is vital for organizations and significantly impacts performance (Mahapatro, 2021). HRM influences organizational performance (Tortia, Sacchetti & López, 2022), and with this, human resource practices are evolving (Stone, Cox, Gavin & Carpini, 2024) to cater to the needs of the organizations to outperform themselves with their desired goals and success (Aguilera, Massis, Fini & Vismara, 2024).

With rapid changes in HRM, High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS) are getting into limelight. A collection of strategic HRM efforts known as a "high-performance work system" aids businesses in decentralizing decision-making to boost productivity and profitability (Ahmed, Aleem, Mahmood & Mahboob, 2023). The goal of High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS) is to improve employee engagement, motivation, and knowledge through the comprehensive and integrated HR practices (Hameed, Khan, Siddiqui & Ali, 2024; Sarwar, 2021). According to Azeem, Ahmed, Haider and Sajjad (2021), these systems prioritize balancing the organizational goals, creating a positive work environment, and promoting the continuous improvement culture while also prioritizing individual goals. As HPWS gained attention, OR also got the limelight. In this linking, organizational resilience is the ability of organization to anticipate, prepare for, respond and adapt to incremental change and sudden disruptions to survive and prosper (Xiao & Cao, 2017). The main objective of this system is to enhance organizational performance together with innovation. In simple terms, organizational resilience is an organization's capacity to predict, be ready for, respond to, or face it, and adapt to various challenges and disruptions while maintaining its core functions as well as long-term ability to work successfully.

To successfully navigate through adversity, one must be proactive in detecting the risks, nimble in responding to changes, possess the variety of resources, cultivate collaborations, and possess strong leadership (Johnson & Walker, 2023). By acting as a mediator, absorptive capacity can enhance comprehension of HPWS and OR. "A firm's ability to identify, absorb, and commercialize the value of external knowledge is known as its absorptive capacity" (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). This idea emphasizes the organization's capacity to absorb information from outside sources and successfully use new information to incorporate innovation and enhance overall performance. Its main objective is to improves employees' ability to recognize and assimilate novel skills and relevant knowledge. The resource-based view theory supports it, which indicates that resource should be rare, valuable, inimitable, meaning it cannot be copied easily, and not substitutable to have viable advantage. This paper will focus on Pakistan IT industry to examine relationship between HPWS and organizational resilience with absorptive capacity as a mediator. In this connection, this research paper will delve into the IT industry of Pakistan to explore the correlation between HPWS as well as OR while taking AC as the mediator.

Research Questions

1. What is the impact of HPWS on the absorptive capacity in Pakistan's information technology industry?
2. What is relationship between absorptive capacity and organizational resilience in Pakistan's IT industry?
3. What is relationship between HPWS and organizational resilience in Pakistan's information technology industry?
4. How does mediating role of absorptive capacity affect the relationship between HPWS and OR in IT industry?

LITERATURE REVIEW

High-Performance Work System & Organizational Resilience

While traditional HPWS research has focused on the organizational performance and HR outcomes (Mohsin, 2024), recent studies increasingly examine its relationship with organizational resilience (OR). Hanu and Khumalo (2023) work demonstrates how HPWS and employee resilience together enhance OR and employee well-being, mainly during crises. Their research highlights exploitative ambidexterity (balancing exploration and exploitation) as the crucial moderator that strengthens HPWS's positive effects on both OR and worker well-being. The structural model analysis confirms OR's vital role in supporting employee well-being during challenging periods, emphasizing HPWS's dual benefits for organizational and human capital resilience. The research demonstrates HPWS's critical role in enhancing the organizational resilience (OR) and employee well-being during crises. Zaman, Nawaz and Khan (2020) emphasizes resilience training and ambidexterity, while Cooke, Cooper, B., Bartram, Wang and Mei (2019) show how HPWS practices (performance management, training, employee involvement) build resilience over social resources in healthcare. Gürlek (2021) further confirms these practices strengthened OR during COVID-19 by empowering the employees to handle the crises.

Collectively, these findings indicate HPWS significantly improves OR by boosting engagement, performance, and well-being. Pakistan's IT industry is a crucial contributor to the nation's economy, bringing in money, increasing growth of employment, which is much needed for youth in Pakistan, and increasing technological advancements (Johnson & Walker, 2023). It plays a vital role in driving innovation, which can be innovative ideas or methods, enhancing efficiency, and boosting competitiveness in various sectors. The industry has the potential to attract foreign investment, raise the level of economic growth, and establish Pakistan as a technology services and solutions hub. It fosters social capital and shared understanding, making it easier to transform and apply the knowledge (Stone, Cox, Gavin & Carpini, 2024). Furthermore, the IT sector in Pakistan can help connect the digital divide, empower businesses, as well as create better opportunities for the skilled professionals in the digital landscape, which is continuously changing and evolving. In this regard, the organizations should implement HPWS to foster learning, empowerment, as well as positive work environments, creating workforces capable of overcoming challenges and sustaining performance in dynamic conditions.

H1: A high-performance work system relates to organizational resilience.

High-Performance Work Systems & Absorptive Capacity

The high-performance work systems are well-documented in organizational research (Das, 2024), direct studies on their link with the adaptive capacity remain scarce (Ali, Freeman, Shen, Xiong & Chudhery, 2024). Hanu and Khumalo (2023) research in South Africa mining sector demonstrates that HPWS practices like performance management, employee involvement, and training enhance absorptive capacity by equipping employees with skills to adapt and apply new knowledge. This finding highlights the HPWS's role in fostering the resilient, skilled workforce capable of navigating dynamic business challenges, ensuring long-term organizational sustainability. Research reveals a "black box" between HPWS and financial performance metrics (FFP & FII), with Wang, Chen and Lawler (2022) demonstrating that HPWS enhances the Adaptive Capacity (AC), enabling firms to absorb external knowledge and technology, thereby improving both financial flexibility as well as innovation. Gürlek (2021) further establishes that HPWS builds intellectual capital through fair appraisals, selective hiring, training, and equitable compensation. While HPWS may not directly improve adaptability, it indirectly strengthens learning capacity and flexibility through enhanced intellectual capital (human, structural, and relational capital), ultimately fostering innovation and organizational success.

H2: A high-performance work system relates to absorptive capacity.

Organizational Resilience & Absorptive Capacity

Current research highlights the critical yet understudied relationship between OR and AC. Khin and Rakthin (2022) seminal work demonstrates how absorptive capacity (ACAP), when combined with networks, social capital, leadership dynamics, and organizational learning significantly boosts OR development. Their study particularly emphasizes how ACAP interacts with Social Integration Mechanisms (SIM) to strengthen cognitive capabilities, resilience, and organizational performance. While this connection represents a vital research area, the empirical investigations remain limited, suggesting need for further exploration of the AC-OR nexus and its mediating factors. in this regard, research on SME resilience reveals important cross-cultural insights, with Asare, Appienti, Bonsu and Ackah (2023) demonstrating how absorptive capacity significantly enhances organizational resilience in Ghanaian small and medium enterprises by facilitating external knowledge integration, although organizational reconfiguration showed limited mediating effects amid entrepreneurial attitudes and resilience.

Complementing these findings, García, Jacobo and Flores (2023) employed the covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) to identify four critical dynamic capabilities – innovation, coordination, sensing & knowledge absorption as fundamental prerequisites for building resilience in the Mexican commercial SMEs. These studies collectively highlight knowledge absorption as a universal resilience factor while revealing contextual differences in developing economies, with the Ghanaian research emphasizing absorptive capacity's mediating role and the Mexican study presenting a broader framework of interdependent dynamic capabilities. The research suggests adaptive capacity mediates the HPWS-organizational resilience (OR) relationship through indirect evidence. Thus, both investigations empirically validate distinct but complementary pathways to organizational resilience in SME contexts, underscoring the importance of knowledge integration as

well as the multifaceted organizational capabilities for sustaining competitiveness in the dynamic business environments.

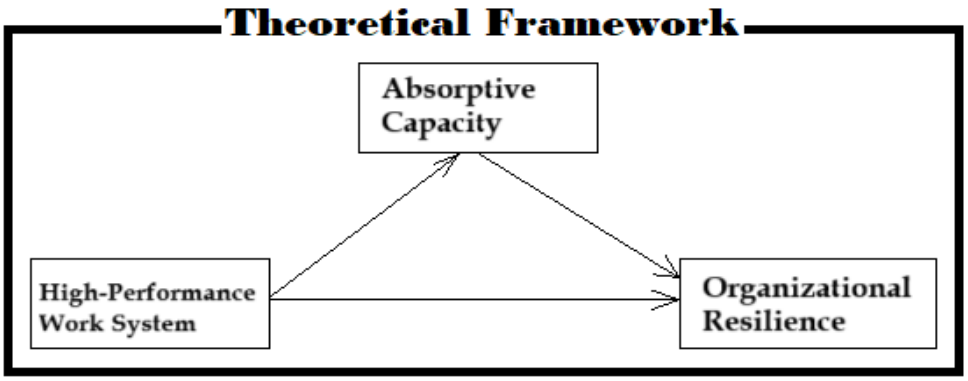
H3: Organizational resilience relates to absorptive capacity.

Mediating Role of Absorptive Capacity

While existing research explores various factors influencing OR, few studies directly examine the relationship between HPWS, OR, and AC (Paeffgen, 2022). The OR enables organizations to recover from disruptions efficiently (Ciasullo et al., 2024), while AC involves absorbing & applying external knowledge. HPWS boosts OR by improving employee skills, motivation, and engagement through integrated HR practices (Al-Taweel, 2021). By fostering continuous development, a positive work environment, and goal alignment (Riaz et al., 2021), HPWS drives higher performance and long-term competitiveness (Adama et al., 2024). Over strategic HR styles, HPWS boosts productivity, employee motivation, and overall organizational success. It validates how knowledge absorption abilities foster OR, while George & Odubo (2024) confirm HPWS's role in resilience building. The resource-based view (Asare-Kyire et al., 2023; Gürlek, 2021) supports mediation, as AC represents critical knowledge-processing capability that converts HPWS investments into resilient outcomes (Malhotra et al., 2024; Jørgensen & Danieli, 2024). This framework positions AC as the mechanism enabling organizations to transform HR practices (HPWS) into the sustained operational continuity during disruptions.

H4: Absorptive capacity as mediator relates to HPWS and organizational resilience.

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research approach used in this paper is deductive and quantitative in the nature because the hypotheses are based on existing theory. Primary data was collected to measure variables, conduct statistical analysis, and test hypotheses to draw the conclusions based upon empirical evidence. The information technology (IT) sector in Pakistan is the target population for this study article. The population data was obtained from PASHA, a functional trade body and registered association for the IT industry in Pakistan. The sample size for this research paper is 384 (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970), and the sampling technique used is convenient sampling because it will give this research freedom to get more responses and help get a better understanding of the research question (Obilor, 2023).

The survey questionnaire is adopted from (a) high-performance work systems (HPWS) measured over 14-item adopted from (Fu et al., 2017) (b) organizational resilience measured through 12-item adopted from (Kantur & Say, 2015), (c) absorptive capacity measured over 16-item adopted from (Flatten et al., 2011).

In this linking, all variables were measured via a 5-point Likert scale, which includes five levels of points, including 1- strongly disagree to 5- strongly agree (Hutchinson & Chyung, 2023). Thus, the electronic questionnaires are formed with the help of Google Forms and sent to the employees working in the IT sector to get as many responses as possible and to gather the data. The study used Smart PLS 4 and SEM for analysis, employing PLS algorithm and bootstrap testing for hypotheses. Reliability was assessed via Reflective Indicator loadings and Cronbach's alpha, while Convergent Reliability (AVE) and Composite Reliability confirmed internal consistency. Therefore, discriminant validity was checked using HTMT, and R-squared analysis measured predictive power. These tests ensured robust evaluation of the variable relationships, validating the model's structural as well as measurement accuracy.

RESULTS OF STUDY

Table 1 Respondent Profile

Criteria	Distribution	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	256	66.60%
	Female	128	33.30%
Age	20-29	207	54%
	30-39	105	27.20%
	40-49	58	15.20%
	50 & above	14	3.60%
Education	Intermediate	102	26.60%
	Postgraduate	42	10.80%
Working Experience	01-03 years	134	35%
	04-06 years	84	21.90%
	07-09 years	88	22.90%
	10- 12 years	50	12.90%
	13 & above	28	7.30%

Table 2 Summary of Reliability Analyses

Variable	CA	CR (RHO_A)	CR (RHO_C)	AVE
AC	0.917	0.917	0.929	0.501
HPWS	0.783	0.787	0.852	0.535
OR	0.898	0.9	0.916	0.522

Table 3 Hetertrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT)
HPWS <-> AC	0.777
OR <-> AC	0.885
OR <-> HPWS	0.796

Table 4 Summary of Fornell-Lacker Criterion

	AC	HPWS	OR
AC	0.708		
HPWS	0.663	0.732	
OR	0.606	0.678	0.722

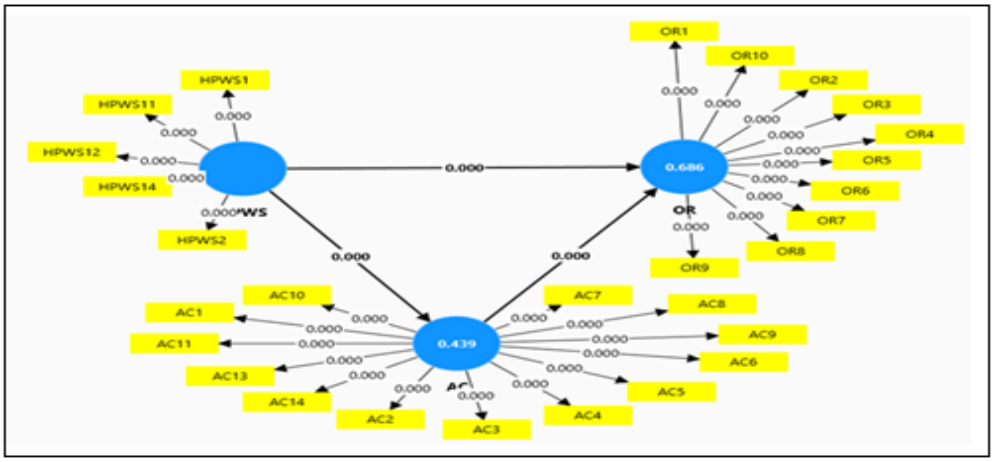
Table 5 Summary of R-Square

	R-square	R-square adjusted
AC	0.439	0.437
OR	0.686	0.684

Table 6 Summary of Hypothesis through Path Coefficient

	OS (O)	SM (M)	SD	T-Statistics	P values
AC -> OR	0.635	0.635	0.045	14.058	0.000
HPWS -> AC	0.663	0.663	0.041	16.125	0.000
HPWS -> OR	0.257	0.256	0.049	5.264	0.000

Figure 1 Bootstrap Framework



DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis (H1) posits a significant relationship between High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS) and Organizational Resilience (OR). Prior research, including Hanu and Khumalo (2023b), validates this link, highlighting HPWS's role in enhancing the employee well-being and OR during crises. Their earlier study (Hanu & Khumalo, 2023a) further confirms HPWS's positive impact on OR, moderated by the exploitation-exploration ambidexterity. Kim et al. (2024) and Khan (2024) reinforce HPWS importance in fostering resilience amid disruptions. Specifically, HPWS strengthens both bounce-back and bounce-forward resilience, enabling adaptability and recovery critical for Pakistan uneven environment. By fostering trust and flexibility, HPWS helps organizations navigate crises effectively (Hanu & Khumalo, 2023; Khan, 2024). The second hypothesis (H2) confirms a positive link between the High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS) and Adaptive Capacity (AC),

showing that HPWS enhances creativity, knowledge sharing, and an organization's ability to absorb and apply new information.

The strong HPWS fosters higher AC, improving performance and competitive advantage. The study provides the valuable insights for HR professionals and leaders seeking to strengthen the workforce adaptability through the strategic HR practices. Research (Kim et al., 2024) supports that HPWS promotes continuous learning, helping organizations adapt quickly to market changes. By inspiring employee engagement and knowledge exchange, HPWS strengthens AC, key for thriving in the dynamic environments. This synergy drives innovation and long-term success, aligning with prior studies that connect HPWS to sustainable growth through the improved adaptive capabilities. The absorptive capacity enhances the effectiveness of HPWS by enabling organizations to better utilize the knowledge and skills developed through these systems. The third hypothesis (H3) confirms that Adaptive Capacity (AC) strengthens Organizational Resilience (OR). HPWS boosts performance by developing employee capabilities along with transformational leadership & well-being. Therefore, AC helps firms quickly adjust to market and tech changes, spot the innovation opportunities early, and reduce risks.

This adaptability builds a more resilient organization, enabling proactive responses to disruptions and long-term competitiveness. Essentially, AC acts as a foundation for the OR, helping businesses thrive in uncertain environments. The fourth hypothesis (H4) confirms that Adaptive Capacity (AC) partially mediates the HPWS-Organizational Resilience (OR) relationship, though with a modest effect size ($\beta=0.142$, $p<0.05$). Thus, this suggests AC explains only 30.2% of the variance ($R^2=0.302$), implying other unexamined factors (e.g., leadership, culture) also influence this link. Rosiana et al. (2024b) support this, showing that AC allows HPWS-driven risk management, attractive disruption response abilities. George and Odubo (2024) further validate AC mediating role, demonstrating how it bridges HPWS practices to the OR through improved risk awareness. While HPWS directly bolsters resilience, AC amplifies effect by fostering learning and adaptation, highlighting the need for holistic approaches combining systemic HR practices with the dynamic capabilities for optimal resilience outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Organizations can boost performance by implementing HPWS that help employee engagement, continuous learning, and innovation. Key strategies include conducting job analyses to clarify roles, offering ongoing training to keep skills current, establishing mentorship program for career growth, and introducing incentive systems like profit-sharing to align employee and organizational goals. These measures collectively enhance the adaptability, resilience, and long-term competitiveness in changing markets. To boost resilience, organizations should implement strong risk management systems and foster adaptable, responsive cultures. Regular cross-department collaboration enables diverse problem-solving and novelty discussions, helping companies leverage collective expertise to anticipate and adapt to disruptions. This approach enhances absorptive capacity, improving crisis preparedness and operational flexibility. Organizations should implement structured systems for collecting and utilizing the data effectively while proactively adopting innovative technologies to stay competitive.

Encouraging the employee creativity through flexible HR policies and decision-making autonomy fosters innovation and ownership. The continuous evaluation and adaptation of High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS) based on employee feedback ensure alignment with evolving needs. This study shows that HPWS builds organizational resilience (OR) by improving adaptive capacity (AC), helping businesses handle disruptions and stay competitive. PWS are valuable, rare, and inimitable resources. Absorptive capacity helps exploit these HR resources effectively. While findings focus on Pakistan's IT sector, future research should test these relationships across different industries and countries, using longer-term studies and mixed methods. Examining the factors like leadership and company culture could provide deeper insights into how HPWS drives resilience. In this regard, the stronger HR systems that promote learning and adaptability can help the organizations thrive in uncertain environments.

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