

# Resilience and Sustainability in Organizations: A Conceptual Exploration

Maral Amanova

LUT Business School, LUT University, Lappeenranta, Finland

[maral.amanova@lut.fi](mailto:maral.amanova@lut.fi)

**Abstract:** In an age where unexpected and disruptive events are becoming more frequent, businesses must be resilient to allow for sustained success. Over the past four years, global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, large-scale warfare in Europe, and ongoing trade conflicts have significantly impacted European and global businesses, economies, and societies. In addition to long-term disruptions, short-term challenges like natural disasters also pose risks. Scholars suggest that the latter may become more frequent due to rising global temperatures and climate change. This brings sustainability into focus – a concept centered on conducting activities without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In this article, we look into organizational sustainability, an ability of businesses to operate with long-term success while balancing environmental, social, and economic factors. The aim of the article is to systematically explore and analyze the relationship between organizational resilience and organizational sustainability by reviewing existing literature. The study consists of a systematic review of 22 articles on organizational resilience and organizational sustainability, which resulted from a larger body of literature narrowed down to strictly relevant publications. The findings of this review reveal that the relationship between organizational resilience and organizational sustainability is multifaceted. Several studies indicate that sustainability enhances resilience by providing firms with the resources, knowledge, and adaptive practices needed to withstand crises, whereas others suggest that resilience contributes to sustainability by enabling organizations to maintain operations and achieve long-term goals. Some research highlights a bidirectional influence, where resilience and sustainability mutually reinforce each other, through continuous learning and knowledge-sharing mechanisms, whereas a few studies distinguish them as separate but interrelated components. Additionally, external factors, such as venture capital, knowledge networks, and digitalization are identified as influencing both resilience and sustainability.

**Keywords:** Organizational resilience, Organizational sustainability, Literature review, Conceptual model

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## 1. Introduction

In times when sudden and unprepared events seem to appear frequently, businesses need to be prepared to perform sustainably. In the previous four years, the world experienced different crises such as Covid-19, large-scale mechanized warfare, and trade conflicts, which all had severe repercussions on European businesses, economies, and societies. At the same time, two important overarching issues, namely worldwide climate change and demographic change in most industrialized societies, bring sustained challenges and external change to organizations. Apart from long-term challenges, there are also singular, disruptive events, for instance natural disasters, data losses through defects or hackers, terrorist attacks, sabotage, and many more. Some of the latter may occur in the near to medium-term future even more frequently as side effects of larger-scale crises. Clearly, organizations that want to sustain their operations and their success need to be able to cope with and adapt to all these challenges. Therefore, there seems to be a connection between organizational sustainability and resilience, although, as will be seen below, this connection is not yet particularly well researched, despite the relevance of sustainability and resilience in today's societal and research discourse. In contrast, these two concepts have been researched separately from one another in a significant number of research works (Winnard *et al.*, 2014). However, the above way of thinking is a great motivation to study these concepts together, because both may be required in order to not just survive but to flourish as an organization (Winnard *et al.*, 2014).

This work's research hypothesis is that, beyond the aforementioned connection that directly arises from definitions of the two terms, there is little research on the finer grained detail of the connection between the two. To test this hypothesis, this article aims to assess the state of the art regarding the connection between organizational resilience and organizational sustainability. The questions for the ensuing literature research are formulated as follows:

- What is the relationship between organizational resilience and organizational sustainability as discovered and shown in published research works?
- Which other concepts influence the interconnectedness of organizational resilience and organizational sustainability?

## 2. Background

Before conducting the actual literature review, it is important to first better define the terms organizational resilience and organizational sustainability in the meaning relevant to the work. This will also help to define keywords and suitable search strings as starting points for the systematic literature review, and it will give some theoretical hints on how connections between the two concepts may look like.

### 2.1 Organizational Resilience

Regarding organizational resilience, as is often the case for such seemingly intuitive notions, there is no single agreed-upon definition. Etymologically, resilience is derived from Latin *resilio*, which means “to jump back” (Klein, Nicholls and Thomalla, 2003). Thus, organizational resilience can be understood as the ability of organizations like companies, businesses, or state actors to bounce back from unexpected adverse events, to recover and renew as a response to disruptive events, and even to thrive as a result. More generally, organizational resilience can be understood as a capability, outcome, process or behavior (Hillmann and Guenther, 2021), which shows that there is no perfectly sharp yet universal definition of the term. Organizations need resilience in order to cope with adversities (Bachtar *et al.*, 2023). (Duchek, 2020) writes that resilience has stages: activation, response, and organizational learning. A possible sub-classification is to distinguish between proactive and reactive organizational resilience. While a reactive ability is very important, a proactive type of resilience can be crucial for sustained success (Raetze *et al.*, 2022). Proactive resilience consists of an organization’s internal capability to leverage its resources and capabilities not only for tackling change but also for emerging from challenges with a greater repertoire of actions.

One can also categorize resilience according to the organizational level that is in focus. On the macro level, the organization is inspected as a whole. On this level, resilience can be seen as the capability of an organization to quickly adapt and respond to disruptions while maintaining continuous operations and safeguarding its workforce, assets, and overall viability. On the meso-level, according to (Hartwig *et al.*, 2020), team resilience is an outcome or a capacity at a team level. The work (Hartmann *et al.*, 2020) states that team resilience can be understood as an emergent process that arises from interactions within the team and manifests as a higher-level phenomenon. Resilient teams are able to deal with challenges, overcome problems and resist adversity (Borg *et al.*, 2022). On the micro-level, there is individual resilience. Resilient individuals are characterized by a stable personality (Kossek and Perrigino, 2016) and their ability to overcome and withstand adversity (Shin, Taylor and Seo, 2012). Some researchers see individual resilience as a capacity, i.e., as a state-like attribute that, while stable over certain periods, can be altered in the long term (Hartmann *et al.*, 2020). And, indeed, literature suggests that understanding individual resilience is the first step in order to understand organizational resilience as both influence each other (Hillmann and Guenther, 2021).

### 2.2 Organizational Sustainability

Based on the literal meaning of the word, etymologically stemming from Latin *sustinere* (to keep up, maintain, support), sustainability can be defined as the capacity to maintain some entity, outcome or process over time (Basiago, 1998). Whereas this definition covers today’s usage in research and current debates, some attach a narrower meaning to it. For instance, in development literature, it usually explicitly refers to improving and sustaining a healthy ecological, social, and economical system for human development (Milne and Gray, 2013) and is, thereby, generally positively connoted. As such, in (Hák *et al.*, 2016) it is argued that making economy and society sustainable is one of the biggest tasks mankind faces today as it is connected to the planet’s fundamental limits. However, there is, again, no universal, sharp definition of organizational sustainability fully agreed upon in research. Like resilience, sustainability was also first used in the business context in the 1980s (Weber, 2023), and the term was defined as signifying “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987). Following this way of thinking, one can define organizational sustainability as when organizations can operate successfully in the long run while balancing environmental, social, and economic challenges and impacts (Weber, 2023). In this way of thinking, appearing often in today’s scientific and public discourse, there are three conceptual pillars that sustainability rests on: “economic sustainability”, “social sustainability”, and “environmental sustainability” (Purvis, Mao and Robinson, 2019).

Many authors use corporate social responsibility (CSR), a related business-focused concept, when they refer to social sustainability (Tang, 2018). It is a business approach that aims to positively impact society and the environment while enhancing a company’s brand image, encompassing four key areas: environmental impact, ethical responsibility, and financial obligations. Another, newer yet related, concept are ESG (Environmental,

Social, and Governance) criteria. ESG scoring can be seen as a framework to assess a company's sustainability and ethical impact by evaluating its environmental responsibility, social practices, and corporate governance standards. For instance, (Yan *et al.*, 2025) prefers ESG over CSR in their work because ESG scores are based on independent evaluations, making them more objective and less susceptible to bias. According to (Yan *et al.*, 2025), unlike CSR, which often consists of self-reported initiatives and voluntary disclosures, ESG provides quantifiable metrics that offer a more reliable and standardized assessment of a firm's sustainability performance.

### 3. Methodology of Systematic Literature Review

Concerning the first step of this work's approach to the systematic literature review, Figure 1 shows the article selection protocol adopted. Regarding the sample selection, the articles for the literature review were retrieved from the Scopus and Web of Science databases, and the gathered information was last updated in February 2025. Scopus, a scientific research database by Elsevier, was chosen for this review due to its reputation as a high-quality resource with extensive coverage of authoritative and influential scientific journals (Vieira and Gomes, 2009). Web of Science is also one of the most established and reputable research databases, which offers a comprehensive collection of high-quality academic journals across various disciplines (Baas *et al.*, 2020).

The keyword search on the Scopus and Web of Science databases was conducted within article titles, abstracts, and keywords, and based around the search terms organizational resilience and organizational sustainability. Moreover, based on synonyms of the word "organization", such as firm, corporation, company, and enterprise, the search was augmented to look for combinations of these synonyms in combination with resilience and/or sustainability. Importantly, an appropriate use of the wildcard character (asterisk, \*) ensures that different grammatical constructions and different writings of the words (e.g., organizational vs. organizational in American vs. British English) are all covered. Purposefully, no forms of synonyms for the words "resilience" and "sustainability" were included in the search because the aim was to focus specifically on articles that directly address the core concepts of organizational resilience and organizational sustainability. The exact search string resulting from this and used in this work is depicted in Step 1 from Figure 1.

The first dated articles containing these terms in the databases are from 2003, so the systematic review looks at articles with publishing dates between 2003 and 2025. The search was then limited only to journal articles, i.e., excluding conference proceedings, books, and book chapters, and restricted to the following fields: Social Sciences; Business, Management and Accounting; Environmental Sciences; and Economics, Econometrics and Finance. The search results in Scopus showed 68 articles, whereas Web of Science found 41 articles, for a total of 109 articles. An Excel sheet was used to eliminate duplicates, where most duplicates could be eliminated automatically based on the given digital object identifier (DOI), and only a few had to be inspected by hand, e.g., when the DOI was missing. This way, 81 unique articles were obtained.

These 81 articles were then filtered according to a quality criterion, considering only articles from journals listed in the AJG ranking with a rating of 1 or higher or in the JUFO ranking with a rating of 1 or higher. This approach benefits the inclusion of articles of a certain quality standard by using widely accepted and reliable ranking methods. This selection reduced the number of articles from 81 to 44. To ensure that the sample included only articles relevant to our research question, which cannot be inferred from the keyword search alone, the abstracts were reviewed manually, and, when these did not yet allow to conclude definitely the relevance, the full articles. Based on this, only those articles that substantially addressed with their research the link between sustainability and resilience were selected, resulting in 15 articles.

A backwards and forwards search was carried out and a further three articles were added, yielding seven additional articles in total. These 22 articles were read in full, and all results were documented in an Excel spreadsheet, as discussed subsequently.

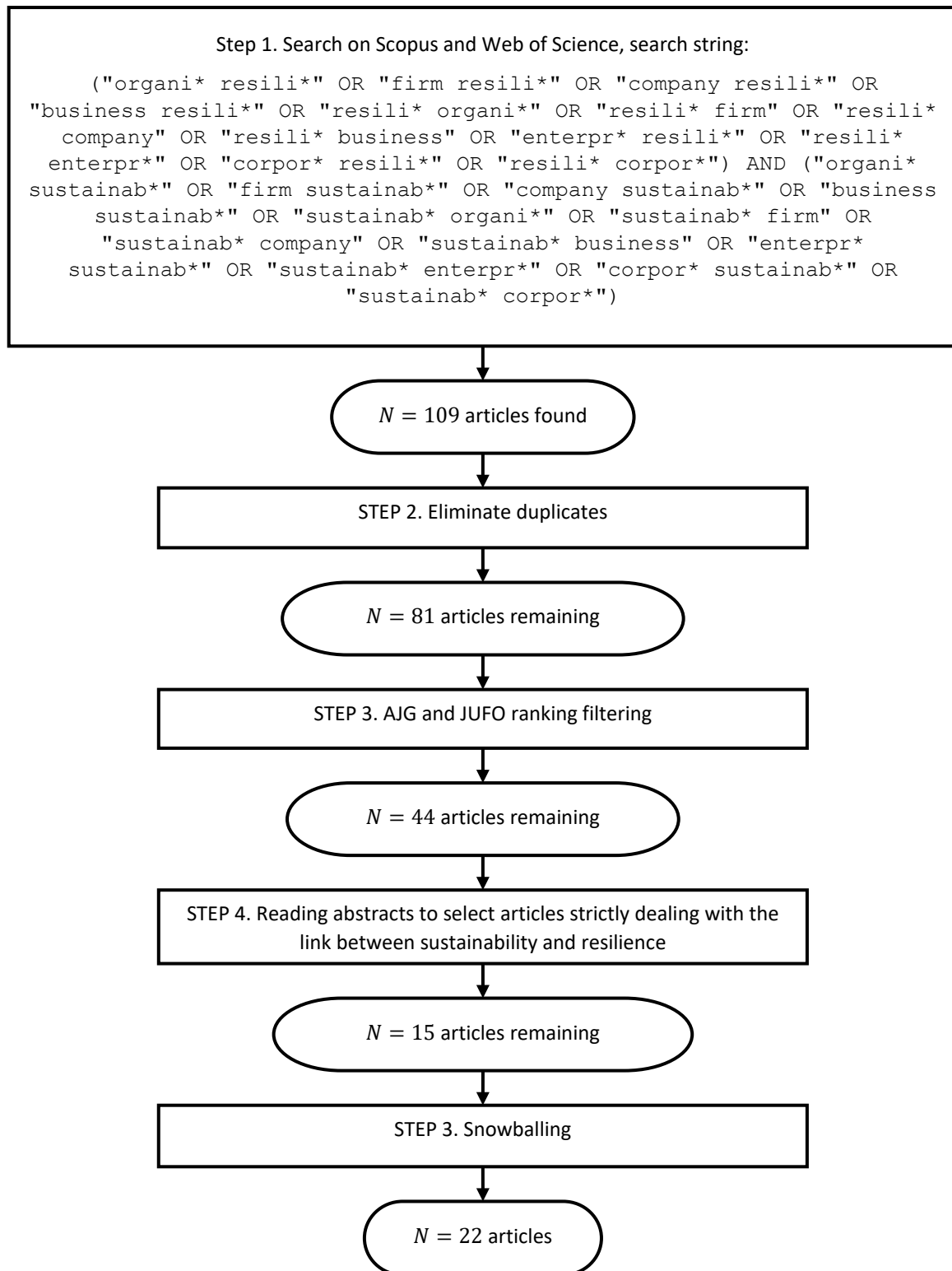


Figure 1: Article selection protocol and initial, intermediate, and final numbers of candidate articles

#### 4. Findings

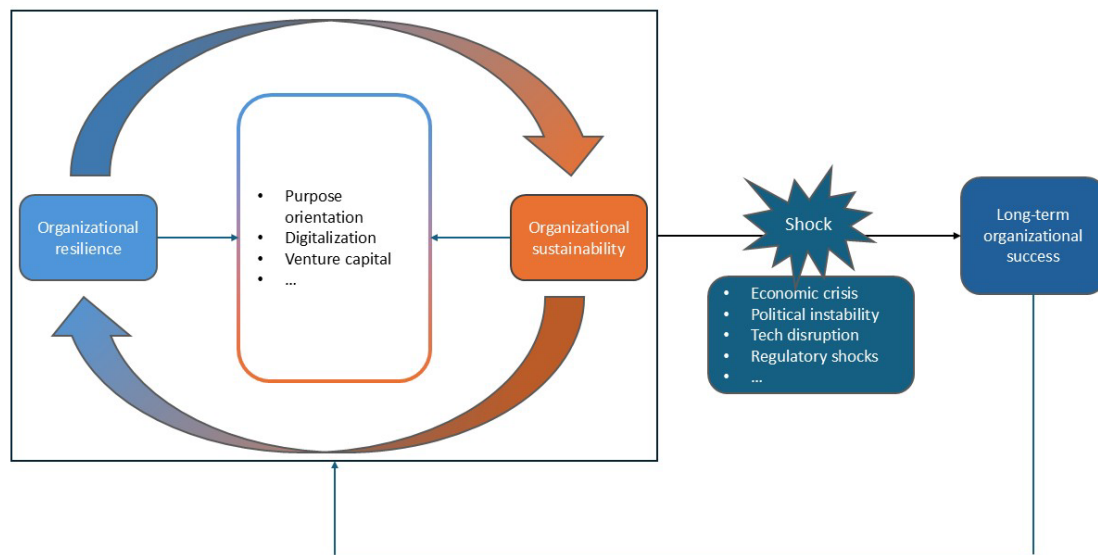
Table 1: Findings

| Document                                | Document Type | Sustainability contributes to resilience | Resilience contributes to sustainability | Other components contributing to resilience and/or sustainability |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Souza <i>et al.</i> (2017)              | empirical     |                                          | x                                        |                                                                   |
| Bachtiar <i>et al.</i> (2023)           | empirical     |                                          | x                                        | Digitalization                                                    |
| Kato (2024)                             | theoretical   | x                                        |                                          | Venture Capital                                                   |
| Freze <i>et al.</i> (2023)              | empirical     |                                          |                                          | Separate Concepts                                                 |
| Mohy-ud-Din <i>et al.</i> (2024)        | empirical     | x                                        |                                          |                                                                   |
| Vallet-Bellmunt <i>et al.</i> (2024)    | empirical     |                                          |                                          | Separate Concepts                                                 |
| Winnard <i>et al.</i> (2014)            | theoretical   | x                                        | x                                        |                                                                   |
| Florez-Jimenez <i>et al.</i> (2024)     | theoretical   | x                                        | x                                        |                                                                   |
| Damiano <i>et al.</i> (2023)            | theoretical   | x                                        |                                          |                                                                   |
| Yahya (2023)                            | empirical     | x                                        |                                          |                                                                   |
| Hossain <i>et al.</i> (2022)            | empirical     | x                                        |                                          |                                                                   |
| Cardillo <i>et al.</i> (2023)           | empirical     | x                                        |                                          |                                                                   |
| Ortiz-de-Mandojana <i>et al.</i> (2016) | empirical     | x                                        |                                          |                                                                   |
| Rai <i>et al.</i> (2021)                | empirical     |                                          | x                                        |                                                                   |
| Derissen <i>et al.</i> (2011)           | empirical     | x                                        | x                                        | Separate Concepts                                                 |
| Marchese <i>et al.</i> (2018)           |               | x                                        | x                                        |                                                                   |
| Parra-Requena <i>et al.</i> (2024)      | empirical     |                                          | x                                        | Purpose Orientation                                               |
| Yan <i>et al.</i> (2025)                | empirical     | x                                        |                                          |                                                                   |
| Ciasullo <i>et al.</i> (2024)           | theoretical   | x                                        | x                                        |                                                                   |
| DesJardine <i>et al.</i> (2019)         |               |                                          |                                          |                                                                   |
| Golicic <i>et al.</i> (2017)            | empirical     | x                                        | x                                        |                                                                   |
| Espiner <i>et al.</i> (2017)            | empirical     |                                          | x                                        | Separate Concepts                                                 |
|                                         | theoretical   | x                                        | x                                        |                                                                   |

Based on a review of 22 academic articles, the relationship between organizational resilience and sustainability can be categorized into four types: sustainability enhancing resilience, resilience supporting sustainability, mutual influence, and the role of external factors impacting both. Studies like (Winnard *et al.*, 2014) highlight that reducing uncertainty and promoting knowledge within firms can improve both resilience and sustainable performance. Table 1 presents the findings from the analysis of the selected 22 research articles. Apart from technical publication details, the table distinguishes between empirical and theoretical works and outlines the key arguments of each article, specifically whether the respective article suggests that sustainability contributes to resilience, resilience contributes to sustainability, and if other factors are identified or claimed to influence either concept. Notably, some articles, such as (Espiner, Orchiston and Higham, 2017), which is a theoretical study, propose that resilience contributes to sustainability and vice versa, but that they are still markedly separate and distinct notions.

Numerous empirical studies demonstrate how sustainability practices, such as CSR and ESG, contribute to resilience by helping firms withstand crises like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic (Mohy-ud-Din, Shahbaz and Du, 2024). Evidence from diverse contexts, including U.S. firms, Nordic countries, and Chinese manufacturers, shows that responsible environmental and social practices enhance financial stability, flexibility, and long-term survival (Yan *et al.*, 2025). Conversely, resilience is also shown to drive sustainability outcomes. For instance, resilience mediates the link between a company's purpose orientation and its sustainability performance, as seen in tourism and manufacturing sectors across Spain and India (Parra-Requena *et al.*, 2024). Resilience is found to influence various stages of organizational growth and help maintain social and economic values during crises (Rai, Rai and Singh, 2021).

Several theoretical studies emphasize that resilience and sustainability are deeply interrelated and interdependent (Ciasullo, Chiarini and Palumbo, 2024). They are sometimes viewed as complementary or even inseparable in ensuring long-term organizational success. Additionally, external factors like sustainable investment strategies, technological innovation, and pioneering orientation influence both resilience and sustainability. Some researchers suggest that resilience alone may not be enough unless supported by a strong sustainability orientation (Parra-Requena *et al.*, 2024), whereas others caution that not all resilient firms can tackle disruption and sustainability challenges simultaneously.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Long-Term Organizational Success Through the Interplay Between Organizational Resilience and Sustainability**

The conceptual model illustrates the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between organizational resilience and organizational sustainability, as identified through the analysis of 22 articles. It demonstrates that sustainability can strengthen resilience by enabling firms to function effectively over time, while resilience can, in turn, support sustainability by allowing organizations to adapt, withstand shocks, and maintain continuity in their sustainable practices. This mutual reinforcement is central to long-term organizational viability and has been emphasized across various theoretical and empirical studies.

Embedded within this relationship are dynamic capabilities such as purpose orientation, digitalization, and venture capital, which act as internal drivers that enhance both resilience and sustainability. These capabilities help organizations respond more effectively to challenges and align their strategic direction with long-term goals. The framework also recognizes that external shocks, such as economic crises, political instability, technological disruptions, and regulatory changes, pose significant risks to organizational systems. In the face of such shocks, sustainability can serve as a stabilizing force that enhances an organization's ability to endure and recover, while resilience equips the firm to adapt and evolve through the crisis.

Ultimately, the interaction between resilience and sustainability contributes to long-term organizational success. This success is presented not only as a result of overcoming external shocks but also as an outcome of

the strategic integration of sustainable and resilient practices. The model suggests that the experience of navigating challenges and maintaining performance feeds back into strengthening resilience, thereby creating a continuous cycle of adaptation, learning, and improvement. In this way, the model presents resilience and sustainability as interconnected, evolving constructs that are crucial for building organizations capable of thriving in an increasingly uncertain environment.

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

This systematic literature review analyzed in depth 22 articles, chosen from a larger set of candidate articles, to explore the relationship between organizational resilience and sustainability, as well as other influencing concepts within an organizational context. The findings revealed that sustainability contributes to resilience, with numerous studies supporting this claim. However, some articles also argued that resilience enhances sustainability. Furthermore, many studies suggested that sustainability and resilience share a bidirectional relationship, mutually reinforcing each other. Some articles examined these concepts separately, highlighting their distinct yet interconnected roles in organizational development. Additionally, various factors influence one or both concepts simultaneously, including digitalization, venture capital, purpose orientation, knowledge networks and technology.

To synthesize and visualize these findings, a conceptual model was developed. This model illustrates the dynamic interplay between organizational resilience and sustainability, positioning them as interdependent forces that collectively drive long-term organizational success. The model also integrates external mediating and moderating variables identified across the reviewed literature.

However, this conceptual model, like the review itself, is not without limitations. It is derived from a relatively small body of literature, and as such, may not capture the full spectrum of interactions or contextual nuances between the two constructs. Organizational resilience and sustainability are both broad and evolving constructs, and their interaction is likely shaped by a wide array of sectoral, geographical, and temporal factors not fully accounted for here.

Still, these limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted cautiously, until more inclusive future research on this topic can be conducted. Comparing the relative numbers of articles solely written on the two distinct concepts with those containing both concepts reveals that, in relative terms, the limited state of the art may indeed require more research to more objectively understand the finer-grained detail of the relationship between organizational resilience and organizational sustainability, confirming this article's initial hypothesis.

**Ethics declaration:** No ethical clearance was needed for the research referred to in this article.

**AI declaration:** DeepL Write was used to check for grammatical errors in the manuscript manually and locally for some individual sentences. Discovered errors were corrected manually and up to the author's decision and taste.

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