

Human Resources Management as a Catalyst for SME Competitiveness

Muhammad Ramdhan^{1*}, Muhamad Ridwan²

^{1,2}Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi Ganesha

Email: ramdhan@stieganisha.ac.id*

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Muhammad Ramdhan,

Muhamad Ridwan

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Abstract

Research Purpose: This study aims to examine the role of Human Resource Management (HRM) in enhancing the competitiveness of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Cianjur by exploring how HRM practices contribute to employee performance and business sustainability in rural SMEs.

Method or Approach: This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation involving SME owners, managers, and employees. Data were analyzed descriptively to identify HRM practices and their influence on organizational competitiveness.

Research Findings: The findings reveal that HRM practices in SMEs are predominantly informal and integrated into daily operational activities. Recruitment is mainly based on personal relationships, while employee development occurs through on-the-job learning. Performance management relies on direct supervision and verbal feedback, whereas motivation is supported by flexible working arrangements and informal incentives. These practices positively affect employee productivity, adaptability, and work quality. SME competitiveness is reflected in customer retention, product innovation, and market expansion through digital platforms.

Recommendations or Novelty: The study highlights that effective informal HRM practices can strengthen SME competitiveness. The novelty lies in its contextual analysis of adaptive and sustainable HRM strategies in rural SMEs within the digital era.

Abstrak

Tujuan: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji peran Manajemen Sumber Daya Manusia (MSDM) dalam meningkatkan daya saing Usaha Mikro, Kecil, dan Menengah (UMKM) di Cianjur dengan menelaah kontribusi praktik MSDM terhadap kinerja karyawan dan keberlanjutan usaha pada UMKM pedesaan.



Metode: Penelitian ini menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi, dan dokumentasi yang melibatkan pemilik, manajer, dan karyawan UMKM. Data dianalisis secara deskriptif untuk mengidentifikasi praktik MSDM dan pengaruhnya terhadap daya saing organisasi.

Hasil Penelitian: Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa praktik MSDM pada UMKM masih bersifat informal dan terintegrasi dalam aktivitas operasional sehari-hari. Rekrutmen dilakukan berdasarkan hubungan personal, sedangkan pengembangan karyawan dilakukan melalui pembelajaran langsung di tempat kerja. Manajemen kinerja diterapkan melalui pengawasan langsung dan umpan balik verbal, sementara motivasi kerja didukung oleh fleksibilitas kerja dan insentif informal. Praktik tersebut berkontribusi terhadap produktivitas, kemampuan adaptasi, dan kualitas kerja karyawan. Daya saing UMKM tercermin dari loyalitas pelanggan, inovasi produk, dan perluasan pasar melalui platform digital.

Rekomendasi/Kebaruan: Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa praktik MSDM informal yang efektif mampu memperkuat daya saing UMKM. Kebaruan penelitian terletak pada analisis kontekstual mengenai strategi MSDM yang adaptif dan berkelanjutan pada UMKM pedesaan di era digital.

INTRODUCTION

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) play a vital role in supporting local economic development, particularly in suburban and rural areas such as the Cianjur Regency. These enterprises contribute significantly to employment generation, income distribution, and the cultivation of regional economic resilience. However, in an increasingly dynamic and uncertain business environment, the sustainability of SME competitiveness is frequently hindered by classic barriers. Limited access to capital, low technological adoption, and a lack of market information are often cited as the primary obstacles. Yet, a fundamental internal variable the strategic management of human resources is frequently overlooked by both business owners and policymakers.

Human Resource Management (HRM) is theoretically recognized as a crucial driver of organizational effectiveness. In the context of SMEs, structured HRM practices such as competency development, motivation stimulation, performance management, and leadership—can serve as a powerful catalyst for productivity and innovation (Salameh-Ayanian, 2025). Nevertheless, empirical evidence indicates that HRM practices in rural SMEs tend to be informal, unstructured, and highly reactive (Pou, 2024). Centralized decision-making (*owner-centric* leadership) and a heavy reliance on kinship networks without objective key performance indicators (KPIs) often prevent rural SMEs from converting their human capital into a sustainable competitive advantage (Sugiyanto, 2024).

While previous literature has extensively documented the positive correlation between HRM practices and organizational performance, most studies exhibit structural and geographic biases. The majority of research focuses on large corporations or urban-based enterprises (Rachmi, 2023; Sugiyanto, 2024). A critical empirical research gap emerges when these urban-centric findings are generalized to rural SMEs. Prior studies often overlook how

local sociocultural variations, limited supporting infrastructure, and the operational informalities of rural environments affect how workers internalize HRM practices (Pou, 2024; Thasi, 2025). Consequently, there is theoretical uncertainty regarding whether formal urban HRM models can be effectively replicated in regions characterized by strong collective sociocultural dynamics like Cianjur.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how HRM acts as a catalyst for enhancing SME competitiveness in Cianjur, Indonesia. The primary novelty of this study lies in its contextualized theoretical approach to HRM, which integrates rural sociocultural dynamics with the lived experiences of local SME actors a dimension largely ignored by formalistic, urban-centric HRM models. By exploring these dynamics, this research not only critically maps the informality of non-urban HRM practices but also reconstructs a localized, culturally adaptive HRM model. Theoretically, this study enriches the HRM literature in underexplored regional contexts, while practically offering actionable insights for SME owners and policymakers to design adaptive human capital strategies in rural settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Human Resource Management in SMEs

Human Resource Management (HRM) is increasingly recognized as a strategic function in SMEs, particularly in shaping workforce capabilities and organizational adaptability. Recent studies highlight that SMEs tend to adopt flexible and adaptive HRM practices due to limited resources and dynamic business environments (Aït Razouk & Quemener, 2025; Cooke et al., 2023; Nguyen & Bryant, 2020; Sheehan & Garavan, 2022; Singh & Pandey, 2024). These practices often emphasize employee engagement, informal training, and relational management approaches.

In rural contexts such as Cianjur, HRM practices are frequently embedded in social and cultural interactions, making them distinct from formalized systems found in larger firms. While such practices allow SMEs to remain agile, they may also limit scalability and long-term strategic development (Cooke et al., 2022). Therefore, examining HRM in SMEs requires a contextualized understanding of how these practices evolve in specific environments.

HRM as a Driver of Competitiveness

Recent literature emphasizes that HRM contributes significantly to SME competitiveness by enhancing human capital and organizational performance. Strategic HRM practices such as continuous learning, employee empowerment, and performance management are key drivers of innovation and adaptability (Alola & Alafeshat, 2021; Delery & Shi, 2026; K. Jiang et al., 2022; La Bella & Santoro, 2025; Papa et al., 2020). These practices enable SMEs to respond effectively to market changes and maintain competitive positioning.

From a resource-based perspective, human capital is a critical intangible asset that can generate sustainable competitive advantage when managed effectively (Carpenter et al., 2012). In SMEs, even simple HRM initiatives such as skill development and motivation systems can significantly enhance productivity and innovation. Thus, HRM acts as a catalyst that accelerates competitiveness and organizational growth.

Challenges of HRM Implementation in Rural SMEs

Despite its strategic importance, HRM implementation in SMEs continues to face challenges, particularly in rural settings. Limited financial resources, lack of HR expertise, and reliance on informal employment systems remain significant barriers (Khan et al., 2022; Mura et al., 2021; Ndzi, 2025; Otoo, 2020; Ram et al., 2022). These constraints often result in inconsistent HRM practices and limited investment in employee development.

Additionally, socio-cultural factors influence HRM practices in rural SMEs, where trust-based relationships and familial ties often shape employment decisions. While these factors can strengthen organizational cohesion, they may also hinder the adoption of formal HRM systems (Ram et al., 2022). Consequently, there is a need to understand how HRM practices are adapted within these constraints.

Research Gap

Although recent studies have examined HRM and organizational performance, there is still limited research focusing on rural SMEs and context-specific HRM practices (Bamberger et al., 2021; Cooke et al., 2023; Gheyoh Ndzi, 2023; D. Jiang et al., 2022; Santoro et al., 2021). Most studies emphasize formal HRM systems and larger organizations, leaving a gap in understanding how HRM operates in resource-constrained and informal environments.

Furthermore, empirical evidence from localized settings such as Cianjur remains scarce. The unique socio-economic and cultural characteristics of rural SMEs may influence how HRM contributes to competitiveness. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by providing context-specific insights into HRM practices and their role in enhancing SME competitiveness.

Conceptual Framework

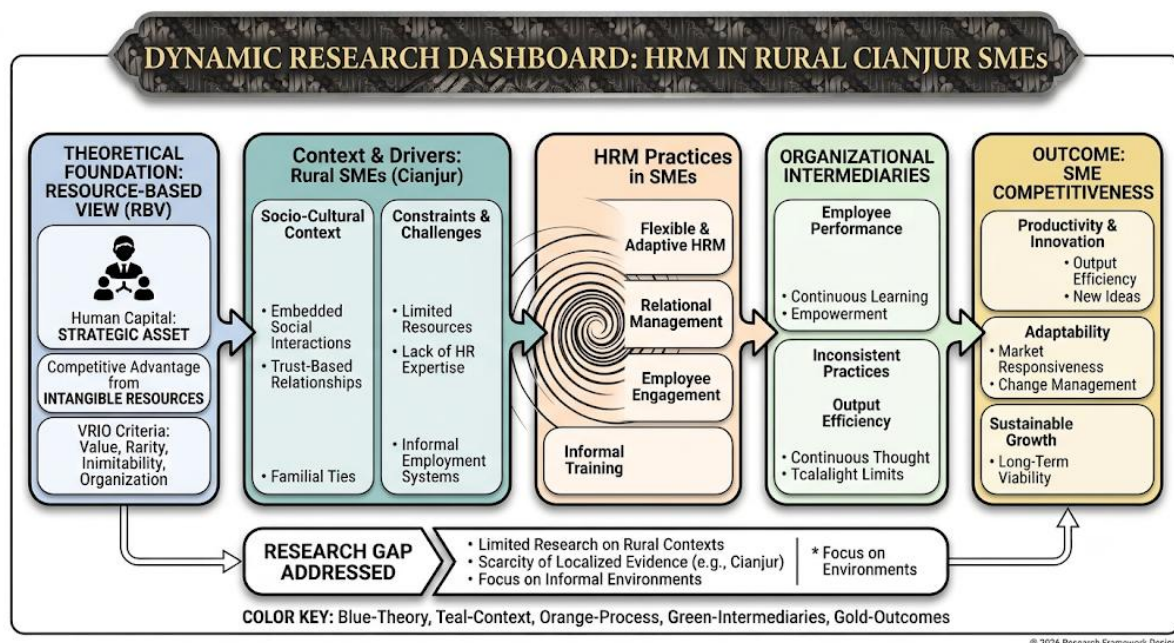


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of HRM in Rural Cianjur SMEs.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the conceptual framework maps the operational dynamics of HRM in rural settings through a structural pathway grounded in the Resource-Based View

(RBV). The socioeconomic reality of rural SMEs creates a unique interplay between socio-cultural drivers (trust-based relationships) and severe constraints (resource scarcity). These factors dictate the adoption of flexible, highly informal, and contextual HRM practices. Through the RBV lens, these relational practices act as an organizing mechanism that enhances employee performance and productivity. Ultimately, despite the inherent risks of inconsistency and scalability limits, this pathway serves as the primary driver for generating sustainable competitive advantage and adaptability for rural SMEs.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the role of Human Resource Management (HRM) as a catalyst for SME competitiveness. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of HRM practices, experiences, and perceptions within their real-life context. The study adopts an exploratory design to capture the complexity of HRM implementation in SMEs, particularly in rural settings like Cianjur.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants of this study consist of SME owners, managers, and employees located in Cianjur. A purposive sampling technique was used to select informants who have direct experience and knowledge of HRM practices within their organizations. The sample includes:

1. SME owners responsible for strategic decision-making and personnel management.
2. Employees involved in daily operational activities who experience the direct impact of HRM practices.
3. Key informants with at least 2 years of working experience in the respective SME to ensure sufficient contextual knowledge.

This selection ensures that the collected data reflects diverse perspectives regarding HRM practices and their impact on competitiveness.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews as the primary instrument. This method allows flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while maintaining consistency across key research themes. The interview guide was developed based on HRM dimensions, including recruitment, training, performance management, and employee motivation, anchored in the Resource-Based View (RBV) framework. To ensure data richness and credibility through triangulation, supporting data were obtained through:

1. Observation of daily workplace practices, employee interactions, and operational workflows.
2. Documentation, including available organizational records, attendance sheets, and written or unwritten informal HR procedures.

Data Collection Process and Data Saturation

The data collection process was conducted in several stages. First, the researcher identified and contacted potential participants through local business networks and SME associations in Cianjur. After obtaining informed consent, interviews were scheduled and

conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participant availability. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participant's permission. Field notes were also taken during observations to capture critical contextual insights.

To ensure the depth of the qualitative inquiry, data collection continued until data saturation was achieved. Saturation was determined operationally when three consecutive interviews yielded no new codes, themes, or significant conceptual insights regarding how informal HRM influences employee performance and competitiveness, indicating that further data collection would be redundant.

Data Analysis and Coding Technique

The collected qualitative data were analyzed systematically using Thematic Analysis, following the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke. The analysis process was executed through the following structured phases:

1. Familiarization with Data: The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were read repeatedly alongside field notes to obtain a comprehensive overview of the narrative.
2. Generating Initial Codes: Open coding was performed line-by-line using qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo or ATLAS.ti). Initial codes were assigned to meaningful units of text related to resource constraints, cultural influences, and informal HR practices.
3. Searching for Themes: The generated codes were grouped and categorized into broader sub-themes (e.g., "trust-based recruitment" or "informal mentorship").
4. Reviewing and Defining Themes: The sub-themes were mapped against the total data set and refined into overarching themes aligned with the conceptual framework (e.g., *Socio-cultural Drivers*, *Contextual HRM Enablers*, and *Intangible Competitive Advantages*).
5. Producing the Report: The finalized themes were synthesized with direct quotes from informants to build a robust qualitative narrative.

Data Validation and Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness, credibility, and reliability of the findings so that the study can be comprehended and replicated by other researchers, a rigorous triangulation strategy was implemented:

1. Source Triangulation: The researcher cross-referenced perspectives from different levels of informants within the SMEs—comparing the strategic views of SME owners with the operational lived experiences of their employees.
2. Methodological/Technical Triangulation: The primary data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were cross-checked and verified against the behavioral data gathered via direct workplace observations and the structural data retrieved from internal SME documentation.
3. Member Checking: Preliminary summaries of the interview transcripts and emerging themes were shared back with selected informants to verify that the researcher's interpretations accurately reflected their actual experiences and meanings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Respondents

This study involved SME actors in Cianjur, consisting of business owners, managers, and employees. Each group contributed different perspectives on how Human Resource Management (HRM) practices are implemented within SMEs.

Table 1. Composition of Respondents

Category	Number	Percentage
Owners	6	30%
Managers	4	20%
Employees	10	50%
Total	20	100%

The data indicate that SME owners play multiple roles, combining managerial and operational responsibilities. This reflects a simple organizational structure where formal managerial separation is limited.

"I handle everything, from managing employees to overseeing production, because the business is still small." (Owner 3)

"There is no specific manager, so I directly supervise employees every day." (Owner 1)

These findings show that decision-making and HRM implementation are centralized in the hands of business owners, while employees contribute primarily at the operational level.

This subsection describes the characteristics of SMEs and participants involved in the study. The businesses are predominantly engaged in food and beverage, handicraft, and retail sectors, with a relatively small workforce.

Table 2. Business Characteristics

Business Type	Number of SMEs	Avg. Employees
Food and Beverage	9	8
Handicraft	6	6
Retail	5	5

The data show that SMEs operate with limited human resources, requiring employees to perform multiple roles. Work experience varies, with most employees having between 2–5 years of experience.

"We only have a few employees, around 5–6 people, so everyone has to handle multiple tasks." (Owner 5)

"Sometimes I help with production, and sometimes I serve customers." (Employee 2)

These findings indicate that job roles are flexible and not rigidly defined, reflecting the adaptive nature of SMEs in managing limited resources.

Human Resource Management Practices in SMEs

This subsection presents the implementation of HRM practices within SMEs. The findings show that core HRM functions recruitment, training, performance management, and motivation are present but implemented informally.

Table 3. HRM Practices in SMEs

HRM Function	Implementation in SMEs
Recruitment	Referral-based, family/relative hiring
Training	On-the-job training, peer learning
Performance Control	Direct supervision, verbal feedback
Motivation	Flexible working hours, informal incentives

Recruitment practices rely heavily on trust and social relationships rather than formal selection procedures.

"I usually recruit employees from relatives or acquaintances because they are more trustworthy." (Owner 2)

Training is conducted through direct experience and interaction with senior workers.

"We learn directly at work, guided by more experienced employees." (Employee 4)

Performance management is carried out through daily supervision without formal documentation.

"If there is a problem, I just give direct feedback; there is no written evaluation." (Owner 6)

These findings show that HRM practices are embedded in daily interactions and rely on informal mechanisms rather than structured systems.

Employee Performance and Productivity

This subsection describes employee performance based on observable indicators such as productivity, quality, flexibility, and attendance.

Table 4. Employee Performance Indicators

Indicator	Observed Condition
Productivity	Increased output during peak demand
Quality	Consistent product/service quality
Flexibility	Ability to perform multiple tasks
Attendance	Stable attendance and punctuality

The data indicate that employees demonstrate high adaptability, particularly in handling multiple responsibilities.

"When it gets busy, I can handle production and serve customers at the same time." (Employee 7)

Productivity levels fluctuate depending on demand but show significant increases during peak periods.

"During peak seasons, production can double." (Owner 4)

These findings highlight that employee performance is reflected through practical outcomes and direct involvement in operational activities.

SME Competitiveness

This subsection presents indicators of SME competitiveness based on field observations and participant responses. Competitiveness is reflected through customer retention, product innovation, market expansion, and business growth.

Table 5. SME Competitiveness Indicators

Aspect	Observed Evidence
Customer Retention	Repeat customers
Innovation	New product variations
Market Expansion	Use of online platforms
Growth	Increased revenue

Customer retention is evident through repeated transactions and long-term relationships.

"Most of my customers come back regularly because they already know the product."
(Owner 1)

Innovation is implemented through incremental changes in products.

"We try new product variations so customers don't get bored." (Owner 5)

Market expansion is supported by the use of digital platforms.

"Now I also sell through WhatsApp and social media." (Owner 2)

These findings show that SMEs maintain competitiveness through practical strategies that align with their operational capacity.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight that Human Resource Management (HRM) in SMEs operates through informal, flexible, and relationship-based practices. Rather than relying on structured systems, SMEs embed HRM into daily interactions and operational routines. This pattern reflects the contextual nature of HRM in small-scale enterprises, where resource limitations and organizational simplicity shape managerial approaches. Such findings are consistent with recent studies emphasizing that SMEs tend to adopt adaptive HRM practices instead of formalized systems (Cooke et al., 2022; Singh & Pandey, 2023).

One of the most significant insights is the central role of business owners in managing human resources. The absence of formal managerial structures leads to a high degree of centralization, where decision-making and employee supervision are concentrated in the owner. This finding aligns with the notion that SMEs often rely on owner-manager dominance, which influences the way HRM is designed and implemented (Nguyen & Bryant, 2020). While this approach allows for quick decision-making and close monitoring, it also indicates limited delegation and formalization of HR functions.

The study also demonstrates that social capital plays a crucial role in HRM practices, particularly in recruitment and employee management. Trust-based hiring and interpersonal relationships serve as the foundation for workforce management. This supports previous research suggesting that informal HRM practices in SMEs are deeply embedded in social and relational contexts (Ram et al., 2022). Such practices strengthen internal cohesion but may simultaneously restrict access to external talent and reduce organizational diversity.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that employee performance is closely linked to flexibility and adaptability. Employees are expected to perform multiple roles and respond to changing operational demands. This observation supports the resource-based view, which highlights

human capital as a key driver of organizational performance and competitiveness. In this context, the ability of employees to adapt and multitask becomes a critical organizational asset.

In terms of competitiveness, the study indicates that SMEs achieve sustainability through incremental innovation, customer retention, and gradual market expansion. These findings reinforce the argument that HRM contributes to competitiveness by enabling employees to support innovation and maintain service quality (Santoro et al., 2021). Even in the absence of formal HR systems, effective people management practices can enhance organizational resilience and market positioning.

However, the study also reveals a discrepancy between formal HRM theories and practical implementation in SMEs. While the literature often emphasizes structured HR systems and standardized practices, SMEs in Cianjur tend to adopt informal and context-specific approaches. This suggests that existing HRM frameworks may not fully capture the realities of SMEs, particularly in rural settings. Therefore, there is a need to develop more context-sensitive HRM models that accommodate the unique characteristics of SMEs.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that HRM can act as a catalyst for SME competitiveness through informal yet effective practices. It highlights the importance of contextualizing HRM theories to better reflect the operational realities of SMEs, especially in rural and resource-constrained environments.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

This study explores the strategic role of Human Resource Management (HRM) as a catalyst for competitiveness in rural Indonesian SMEs. Grounded in the Resource-Based View (RBV), the findings conclusively demonstrate that SME competitiveness in resource-constrained environments like Cianjur is achieved not through formalized HR systems, but through highly contextual, flexible, and relational HRM practices.

SME owner-managers leverage social capital, trust-based relationships, and informal training as organizing mechanisms to transform local human capital into a valuable and inimitable strategic asset. While severe financial and structural constraints dictate this high degree of informal centralization, the resulting workforce flexibility, multitasking capabilities, and close workplace cohesion directly drive the incremental innovation, adaptability, and resilience necessary to sustain market competitiveness.

Scientific Contributions

This study bridges a critical gap in the existing literature by shifting the prevailing bias away from large-firm, formalized HRM models toward resource-constrained, rural enterprise realities.

1. Theoretical Expansion of RBV: It expands the Resource-Based View by empirically demonstrating how socially complex, informal, and relational mechanisms can successfully fulfill the VRIO (*Valuable, Rare, Inimitable, Organized*) criteria to generate sustainable competitive advantage.

2. Context-Sensitive Frameworks: It provides concrete, localized empirical evidence from an Indonesian rural hub (Cianjur), establishing a foundational benchmark for developing context-sensitive HRM frameworks tailored to developing economies.

Practical Implications

For SME owners, managers, and policymakers, this study offers several actionable pathways:

1. Strategic Delegation: While owner-manager dominance ensures rapid operational choices, owners should gradually implement basic, semi-formalized HR documentation (e.g., simple role descriptions) to prevent operational bottlenecks and facilitate long-term business scalability.
2. Structured Networks for Recruitment: To mitigate the lack of organizational diversity stemming from trust-based hiring, SMEs should actively partner with local vocational schools and community associations to broaden their talent pool without losing the essence of mutual trust.
3. Targeted Government Interventions: Policymakers and local SME cooperatives should move away from imposing generic, corporate-style HR templates. Instead, they must design tailored training programs that enhance informal mentorship, relational performance management, and basic digital HR tools optimized for rural micro-enterprises.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its deep qualitative insights, this study possesses structural limitations that open clear avenues for future scholarly inquiry:

1. Geographical and Sectoral Constraints: The empirical focus was restricted exclusively to SMEs within the rural ecosystem of Cianjur. Future research should implement cross-regional comparative designs (e.g., comparing rural vs. peri-urban clusters) to validate the broader applicability of these informal HRM configurations.
2. Methodological Scope: As a purely qualitative study capturing lived experiences, the conceptual pathways cannot be statistically generalized. Future researchers are encouraged to deploy mixed-method or quantitative approaches to measure the exact statistical impact of informal HRM dimensions on quantitative performance metrics.
3. Long-Term Scalability Risks: While informal networks sustain current operations, they may hinder rapid growth. Future longitudinal studies should trace how rural SMEs dynamically transition from purely informal relational management to semi-formal systems as their organizational scale expands.

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