

# How is the Theory of Optimal Differentiation Refined?

## —Origin, Development and Influence

Eric Yanfei Zhao

(Saïd Business School, St Hugh's College & New College, University of Oxford)

**Abstract:** The concept of optimal distinctiveness has gained significant traction in management research, shaping scholarly dialogue across domains such as organization theory, strategic management, entrepreneurship, and international business. In this reflective essay, I recount the intellectual journey behind my 2017 *Strategic Management Journal* (SMJ) article, “*Optimal Distinctiveness: Broadening the Interface between Institutional Theory and Strategic Management*”, tracing its origins, development, and the rigorous review process that shaped its final form. I discuss the theoretical inspirations and debates that motivated the paper, the challenges encountered during its evolution, and the key insights that emerged along the way. Additionally, I reflect on how the paper's publication catalyzed a growing body of research on strategic positioning of organizations and markets in competitive environments. By sharing these reflections, I hope to offer both an inside look at the process of developing influential research and insights for scholars navigating similar academic journeys.

**Key Words:** optimal distinctiveness; strategic management; organization theory; positioning; competition

# Optimal Distinctiveness Theory: Its Theoretical Origins, Core Principles, and Advancement

Zhixue Zhang<sup>1</sup> Lanbing She<sup>1</sup> Jun Gu<sup>2</sup>

(1. Department of Organization and Strategic Management, Guanghua School of Management, Peking University;

2. Health and Wellbeing Research Unit, Macquarie Business School, Macquarie University)

**Abstract:** Developed by Marilynn Brewer in 1991, the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT) posits that, when navigating social groups and identities, individuals are driven by two opposing fundamental needs: the need for inclusion, which reflects the desire for belonging to and assimilation into certain social groups, and the need for differentiation, representing the pursuit of distinctiveness and uniqueness to others. The dynamic interplay between the dual needs compels individuals to seek and identify with specific social groups that can simultaneously satisfy their needs for belonging and uniqueness. ODT synthesizes the intricate and dynamic balancing mechanisms of social identity formation into a concise and compelling framework and has significantly shaped the development of modern social psychology research through its robust explanatory and predictive capabilities. Recent research has creatively applied ODT in strategic management to elucidate firm behaviors, highlighting this theory's potential to inspire novel inquiries across various management disciplines where the interplay between uniqueness and assimilation is pivotal. To provide Chinese scholars with a comprehensive and authoritative resource for the future utilization of ODT, we have systematically reviewed its origins, theoretical principles, and successful trajectory in social psychology research. Moreover, we conducted an in-depth interview with Professor Marilynn Brewer, the originator of ODT, to gain further first-hand insights.

**Key Words:** Optimal Distinctiveness Theory; need for inclusion; need for differentiation; social identity

# A Review of Optimal Distinctiveness Theory

## Research in China

### —Progress, Problems, and Prospects

Yanlong Zhang   Jiani Wang

(Guanghua School of Management, Peking University)

**Abstract:** This systematic review investigates the application of Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT) in China, aiming to address a notable gap in the existing literature by synthesizing current research and identifying directions for future exploration. ODT, which examines how organizations balance conformity with differentiation to achieve optimal performance, has gained traction across various domains such as business strategy, entrepreneurship, and organizational behavior. Despite its increasing relevance, no comprehensive review has yet consolidated the progress, challenges, and potential of ODT within China's unique cultural and institutional landscape. Filling this gap is critical because China's distinct environment—characterized by collectivist values, strong governmental influence, and rapidly shifting market dynamics—offers a rich context for testing and expanding ODT. Understanding how this theory applies in China not only enhances its theoretical robustness but also provides actionable insights for organizations navigating this complex market, contributing to both local practices and the global discourse on organizational behavior.

The study employs a systematic literature review methodology, analyzing 38 Chinese-language articles sourced from academic journals, conference proceedings, and other scholarly publications. By integrating theoretical perspectives from institutional theory, resource-based theory, and competitive strategy theory, the review provides a multi-faceted examination of ODT's evolution and application in China. This approach ensures a thorough assessment of how ODT interacts with China's institutional and cultural frameworks, drawing on diverse and credible data to map the theory's current state and pinpoint areas needing further investigation. The selection process prioritized articles explicitly engaging with ODT, ensuring focus and relevance, while the use of multiple theoretical lenses enriches the analysis by uncovering interconnections with broader strategic and organizational concepts.

Findings indicate that ODT is widely utilized in China, particularly in business strategy, where it aids firms in managing the tension between legitimacy and uniqueness. The review confirms ODT's core premise—that optimal performance arises from balancing conformity and differentiation—and highlights how China's institutional rules, cultural norms like collectivism, and dynamic market conditions shape this balance. For example, firms often align with government policies to secure legitimacy while pursuing differentiation through innovation or niche positioning. Studies have also identified mechanisms such as integrative orchestration (blending strategies seamlessly) and compensatory orchestration (offsetting weaknesses with strengths), though their complexity and evolution over time remain under-explored. Moreover, the influence of diverse stakeholders—such as local versus global customers—and the temporal dynamics of ODT strategies have received limited attention, revealing significant gaps in the current research landscape.

This review stands as the first systematic synthesis of ODT research in China, offering a structured framework that delineates

both achievements and shortcomings. Its originality lies in providing a comprehensive overview of how ODT adapts to China's distinct context, bridging fragmented studies into a cohesive narrative that clarifies the theory's local relevance. By identifying methodological weaknesses, such as reliance on static analyses, and theoretical gaps, like insufficient attention to institutional complexity, the paper lays a foundation for more rigorous and holistic research. This contribution is vital for tailoring ODT to China's specific needs while enriching its global applicability, setting the stage for future scholarship to build upon.

The practical implications of this review are substantial, offering businesses strategies to navigate China's evolving market by balancing conformity with differentiation effectively. However, limitations include its exclusive focus on Chinese-language studies, potentially missing broader insights, and the methodological diversity of reviewed papers, which may affect consistency. Looking forward, future research directions are paramount. Mixed-method approaches, combining qualitative case studies with quantitative surveys, are essential to capture both the depth of individual firm experiences and the breadth of generalizable trends. For instance, pairing in-depth analyses of firms adapting to regulatory shifts with large-scale data could yield richer insights. Longitudinal studies are equally critical to track how ODT strategies evolve over time, especially amidst market transitions or policy reforms, revealing adaptive patterns that static studies overlook. Exploring stakeholder diversity—examining how local communities, global partners, or regulators influence ODT—offers another promising avenue, as does conducting cross-cultural comparisons to contrast China's collectivist tendencies with individualistic settings elsewhere. These directions could investigate, for example, how multinational firms adjust ODT strategies across borders or how stakeholder expectations shape differentiation in varied cultural contexts. Such research would deepen ODT's theoretical precision and practical utility, ensuring its relevance in China's dynamic environment and beyond. By pursuing these avenues, scholars can address current shortcomings, respond to emerging challenges, and solidify ODT as a versatile framework for understanding organizational behavior in complex settings.

**Key Words:** Optimal Distinctiveness Theory; enterprise strategic management; coordination mechanism; dynamic management

# How Do Specialized New “Little Giant” Enterprises Realize Technological Leapfrogging?

## —A Longitudinal Case Study from the Perspective of Organizational Vicarious Learning

Dandan Hu<sup>1</sup> Sen Xu<sup>2</sup> Zhong Yang<sup>3</sup>

(1. Journal Editorial Department, Nanjing Institute of Technology;

2. School of Economics and Management, Nanjing Tech University;

3. Business School, Nanjing University)

**Abstract:** SMEs are influential forces to realize the strategy of the world leader in science and technology in the new era. As the outstanding group among SMEs, Specialized New “Little Giant” enterprises continuously used R&D investments to breach core technology and enact the leading role in the niche market. However, little is known about how Specialized New “Little Giant” enterprises realize technological leapfrogging and its underlying mechanism.

Our study used a longitudinal single case study design and coactive vicarious learning theory to trace Jingcheng Numerical Control limited company in No. 1 manufacturing country Jiangyin in analyzing how it became the leading firm in the field of bearings and investigating how Specialized New “Little Giant” enterprise grew from a technological follower to a technological leader and its underlying mechanism. Our findings indicate that Specialized New “Little Giant” enterprise experienced four stages from technological catch-up to technological leapfrogging; Vicarious learning mode depicted a dynamic nature with the evolution of the Specialized New “Little Giant” enterprise’s technological capacity. Based on the characteristics of interaction and relations between learning learners and recipients, our study identified three patterns of vicarious learning: single-direction independent mode, two-way tight coupling mode, and “equally mutual learning and meaning co-construction” mode. Specialized New “Little Giant” enterprise can enhance its technological innovation capacity based on various modes of vicarious learning in different phases of technological development. “Equally mutual learning and meaning co-construction” mode is the key mechanism to build new technological tracks and realize breakthroughs in core technology.

Our findings extend the research context of vicarious learning and enrich research on Specialized New “Little Giant” enterprises technological leapfrogging process mechanism. Also, our findings enrich the concept connotation and models of vicarious learning, add to a perspective of interactive evolution in vicarious learning. In addition, our study provides practical implications for how China develops Specialized New SMEs and constructs a self-reliance innovation system.

**Key Words:** specialized new “little giant” enterprises ; technological leapfrogging; manufacturing SMEs; vicarious learning; case study

# Ageism in the Age of AI: The Mediating Role of Perceived Person–Job Fit and the Moderating Role of Growth Mindset

Xiang Zhou<sup>1</sup> Yuewei Yao<sup>2</sup> Luyuan Jiang<sup>3</sup> Hansen Zhou<sup>2</sup> Xin Qin<sup>2</sup>

(1. College of Management, Shenzhen University; 2. School of Business, Sun Yat-sen University;

3. School of Economics and Management, China University of Mining and Technology)

**Abstract:** As artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly introduced into the workplace, people's work content and process have undergone tremendous changes (Einola & Khoreva, 2023; Pereira et al., 2023). However, our current understanding of whether and how AI affects ageism is very limited. Existing research on ageism mainly focuses on traditional work context, and explored peoples' stereotypes and perceptions, behavioral intentions, and discriminatory behaviors toward older workers, the influence of social, organizational, and individual factors on age discrimination (Jones et al., 2017; Hebl et al., 2020; Liu Xiaoqian, 2022), and interventions on reducing age discrimination (Burnes et al., 2019; Apriceno & Levy, 2023). While these studies point out that ageism prevents older people from obtaining and maintaining employment (Wood et al., 2008), existing research provides limited insight into whether and how AI affects ageism, and how to address it (for theoretical discussion, see Chu et al., 2022; Stypinska, 2023). Therefore, based on stereotype fit theory (Heilman, 1983; Dipboye, 1985), this paper investigates whether and how old (vs. young) job applicants are discriminated by AI-related jobs (vs. control), and explored interventions to mitigate this age discrimination phenomenon.

To test our hypotheses, we conducted one pilot study and two experimental studies, and the results supported our theoretical model. In pilot study, we selected young and old job applicants' photos that similar in perceived attractiveness but different in perceived age (around 30 vs. 40 years old). Based on these photos, in Study 1, we found that compared to young job applicants, participants perceived old job applicants as having significantly lower perceived person–job fit for an AI-related gender-neutral job (i.e., AI-oriented training manager), which further leads to lower hirability ratings; while for other gender-neutral job (i.e., marketing-oriented training manager), both young and old job applicants received similar perceived person–job fit and hirability ratings. In Study 2, we found that participants who underwent growth mindset intervention perceived young and old job applicants as having similar perceived person–job fit and hirability on AI-related gender-neutral job, while participants in the control group still perceived old job applicants as having lower perceived person–job fit and hirability than young job applicants.

As predicted, we found that old (vs. young) job applicants indeed received age discrimination on AI-related jobs (vs. control), such that old job applicants received significantly lower perceived person–job fit and hirability ratings than young job applicants for AI-related jobs, but were perceived as similar in perceived person–job fit and hirability for other jobs. We also found that growth mindset intervention was effective in reducing this type of age discrimination such that old job applicants were perceived as having a similar degree of perceived person–job fit and hirability for AI-related jobs as younger job seekers.

This paper makes several contributions to the ageism literature by exploring age discrimination in AI-related jobs. First of all, this article expands the context where ageism occurs. Different from previous studies that focus on traditional workplaces, this paper takes the lead in exploring the discrimination faced by the elderly in AI-related jobs and expands the research scenarios. In addition, this paper focuses on the relatively “younger” elders (around 40 years old). In contrast to the positive stereotypes toward this age group found in previous research (such as high status, North & Fiske, 2013), we found these people are negatively discriminated when applying for AI-related work, verifying the “younger” age discrimination trend brought about by AI. Finally, this paper proposed and tested growth mindset as an effective intervention to reduce ageism in AI-related job, while current research on ageism intervention mainly focuses on how to improve people’s attitudes and knowledge about aging to alleviate age discrimination (Burnes et al., 2019). Overall, our research extends current literature on ageism and provides implications for how to promote equality of opportunity for old people and facilitate social justice.

**Key Words:** artificial intelligence; ageism; perceived person-job fit; hirability; growth mindset

# A Meta-analysis of the Relationship between Creativity and Innovation

Tao Su   Chengxin Ji   Yuxin Wu   Jianning Li   Wencong Ma

(School of Management, Guangdong University of Technology)

## Abstract:

**Purpose:** Creativity serves as the root of innovation, which is key to the future development of organizations. Increasing research has focused on how to stimulate creativity and promote innovation at various levels. In fact, creativity emphasizes the generation of ideas, while innovation focuses on the implementation and outcomes of those ideas; both are closely related but not synonymous. However, creativity and innovation are often “bundled” together as a single construct in existing research. While a few studies have paid attention to the relationship between creativity and innovation, they have not taken this relationship as the core focus of research. Therefore, the strength of their relationship has not yet been clearly defined or reached a unified conclusion. These empirical studies also provide the possibility to explore the relationship between creativity and innovation through meta-analysis. Secondly, the transformation between creativity and innovation occurs not only at the individual level, but also at the team and organizational levels. Research at different levels, there are unique, scattered motivations and theoretical perspectives, in which creativity is a common and key element at different levels. Therefore, it is necessary to start from the key perspective of creativity, and find consistent patterns of the “creativity-innovation” relationship across different levels within a unified theoretical framework. Furthermore, different situations or characteristics are involved in the transformation of creativity and innovation at different levels, the conclusions are difficult to be universal when focusing solely on the specific boundary conditions at a single level. Therefore, clarifying the overall effects of moderating factors across three levels from overall perspective can provide more theoretical foundations and practical guidance for promoting innovation at the individual, team, and organizational levels.

**Design:** Based on job demands-resources model (JD-R model), this article conducts a meta-analysis of 117 independent empirical studies to examine the relationship between creativity and innovation. Specifically, it systematically evaluates the relationship between creativity and innovation, and draws conclusions with minimal second-order sampling error. Second, it explores the differentiated impact of creativity on innovation at three levels (individual, team and organization). Third, it examines the moderating effects of situational factors and subject characteristics on the relationship between creativity and innovation. Situational factors include national differences (macro level), industry types (meso level) and innovation types (micro level); The subject characteristics encompass individual demographic characteristics, team size and establishment duration, organization size and establishment duration.

**Findings:** This article indicates that creativity significantly promotes innovation, which weakened in sequence of individual, organizational, and team levels. The moderating effects of situational factors and subject characteristics are highly consistent across these three levels. On the one hand, the direction of the moderating effect of situational factors is consistent in regulating the relationship between creativity and innovation at the individual, team, and organizational levels. The relationship between creativity



## 第 1 卷

and innovation is stronger in low-tech industries (compared with high-tech industries), especially in the process innovation (compared with product innovation) in China (compared with America). On the other hand, subject characteristics at different levels do not affect the relationship between creativity and innovation, and this relationship is not affected by individual demographic characteristics, team or organizational size, and establishment duration of the team and organization.

**Value:** This article focuses on the relationship between creativity and innovation at three levels, as well as the moderating effects of various situational factors and subject characteristics on this relationship. From a theoretical perspective, firstly, the article introduces the JD-R model to provide a new theoretical perspective for comprehensively exploring the relationship between creativity and innovation at three levels. Secondly, the article looks at situational factors from the perspective of job demand in JD-R model, and explores the regulation rules of situational factors (national differences, industry types, and innovation types) in the three levels from the overall theoretical perspective. Moreover, based on the perspective of job demand in JD-R model, the article makes an overall analysis of the corresponding subject characteristics at three levels, which not only responds to the important question of “how individual and team characteristics affect the relationship between creativity and innovation”, but also deepens the understanding of boundary conditions at different levels. In terms of practical implications, on the one hand, the article shows that Enterprises should attach importance to the role of individuals in creativity-innovation in China. On the other hand, it should pay attention to the innovation of low-tech industries, which it is importance to the development of process innovation in low-tech industries.

**Suggestions for future research:** Firstly, the article failed to detect the process mechanism between creativity and innovation at the three levels of individual, team and organization. Future research can focus on the mediating mechanism between creativity and innovation based on more samples. Secondly, there are many factors that affect the national differences, the article only makes a general comparative analysis of China and America. Future research can compare more countries or regions, or carry out more detailed comparative analysis of national differences from different aspects. For example, it can analyze the influence of different countries and regions on the relationship between creativity and innovation from the six dimensions model of national culture by Geert Hofstede. Finally, the complex process of creativity-innovation transformation will not only be affected by various job demands within situational factors, but also by specific job resources at different levels. Future research can explore from the perspective of job resources. For example, the organization culture, human resource management; leadership style in the team; the personality characteristics of the individual, etc.

**Key Words:** creativity; innovation; boundary conditions; meta-analysis