Uniglobal of Journal Social Sciences and Humanities
Journal Homepage: www.ujssh.com

From Start-Up to Scale-Up: Organizational Growth Challenges in Tech-Start-Ups in China

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Received 29 December 2024, Revised 12 January 2025, Accepted 26 January, Available online 27 January 2025

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.53797/ujssh.v4i1.17.2025

Abstract: This study explores the growth challenges and strategies of tech start-ups in China transitioning from start-up to scale-up. The research employs a quantitative approach, utilizing a survey of 250 participants representing various sectors such as e-commerce, fintech, software development, and artificial intelligence. The findings reveal that operational inefficiencies, difficulties maintaining product quality, talent acquisition and retention, financial constraints, and regulatory compliance are among the most significant challenges faced by scaling tech start-ups. Notably, 70% of respondents highlighted operational processes as a significant hurdle, followed by 75% citing talent recruitment issues. Strategies such as leadership development, strategic partnerships, competitive compensation packages, and adopting scalable technology solutions were employed to overcome these challenges. The data demonstrated that 80% of companies saw noticeable improvements through leadership training, while strategic partnerships and scalable technology solutions were effective for 70% and 68% of respondents, respectively. However, despite employer branding efforts, only 65% successfully attracted talent, with 20% finding retention problematic. These findings underscore the complex scaling landscape in the tech industry, revealing critical insights into the strategies that can enhance growth and operational efficiency. This study contributes to the literature by emphasizing the importance of integrated strategic approaches for overcoming scaling challenges. It offers practical implications for tech start-ups seeking sustainable growth in the competitive Chinese market.

Keywords: Tech start-ups, Scaling challenges, Leadership development, Strategic partnerships, Talent retention.

1. Introduction

The evolution from a start-up to a scale-up in the technology industry has distinct problems, particularly within China's fluctuating economic environment. China's technology sector, a leading global centre for innovation, has witnessed remarkable expansion, with firms like Alibaba, Tencent, and Huawei establishing standards for achievement (Ates & Acur, 2022). The transition from start-up to scale-up presents considerable obstacles, as these organisations must navigate operational, managerial, financial, and strategic problems that may hinder their capacity for efficient scaling (Hu et al., 2023) For technology start-ups, initial growth typically centres on innovation, obtaining initial financing, and creating a market presence (Banka et al., 2024). Scaling necessitates a multifaceted strategy, encompassing market share expansion, personnel augmentation, internal process optimisation, and regulatory navigation (Hagen et al., 2024). The Chinese technology sector, marked by swift technological progress, intense rivalry, and regulatory supervision, introduces an extra dimension of complexity (Coviello et al., 2024). These aspects present distinct hurdles in talent acquisition, sustainable operational scaling, and obtaining ongoing investment amidst variable economic policies (Lyu et al., 2022).

The distinctive cultural and economic environment in China exacerbates this transformation. Chinese start-ups frequently encounter government laws that may change unpredictably, resulting in an unpredictable environment (Oihana et al., 2025). Moreover, the technical tastes and purchasing behaviours of Chinese customers can markedly differ from those in Western markets, presenting challenges for enterprises seeking worldwide expansion (Qaiyum & Wang, 2018). Moreover, scaling frequently demands operational and organisational modifications, necessitating a transformation in corporate culture and leadership approach, which can be challenging if not managed proficiently (Shields et al., 2024). Current literature has explored multiple facets of start-up growth; nevertheless, there is a significant deficiency of study concentrating on how tech start-ups in China navigate the transition to scale-ups. Most research has focused on established technology companies or the broader start-up ecosystem, neglecting the specific growth constraints

encountered during scaling (Oihana et al., 2025). This research is significant as it addresses a gap and offers insights that can guide policies, tactics, and practices to help digital start-ups navigate these hurdles.

Understanding these challenges is crucial for companies looking to scale and the broader Chinese economy. Developing a conducive ecosystem for tech scale-ups is imperative to foster economic innovation and establish worldwide technological leadership. This study seeks to enhance the understanding of technology management and entrepreneurship by identifying critical growth constraints and practical solutions to mitigate them (Hagen et al., 2024)

1.1 Research Gap and Significance

A significant deficiency exists in academic studies regarding the growth obstacles faced by ICT start-ups evolving into scale-ups in China. Current research predominantly emphasises the pre-scale stage of start-ups or analyses established firms post-scale, neglecting the intermediate phase where obstacles are most pronounced (Lyu et al., 2022). The scaling phase necessitates distinct strategic and operational methodologies, often insufficiently covered in existing literature (Siachou et al., 2021). Most research on entrepreneurial development has focused on start-up or post-scale success narratives, neglecting to comprehensively evaluate the distinct challenges associated with the scaling phase, especially in the Chinese setting (Yuan et al., 2022).

The importance of addressing this gap is complex. For entrepreneurs and corporate leaders, comprehending these scaling issues helps enhance decision-making. This is especially vital in China, where economic and political situations can change swiftly, impacting the corporate landscape (Xiao, 2025). The ramifications of these findings are pertinent to entrepreneurs and politicians seeking to cultivate an environment favourable to the expansion of technology firms. Moreover, investors and venture capitalists aiming to support high-potential technology firms can gain from comprehending the prevalent challenges and growth strategies linked to scaling (Coviello et al., 2024).

In China, a nation undergoing substantial transformations in digital economy policies and technical advancements, comprehending these problems can aid in formulating supporting regulatory measures (Luo & Zhang, 2020). These steps are crucial for enabling start-ups to scale effectively without the persistent risk of governmental alterations that could hinder growth. Comprehending the elements that facilitate a successful scale-up enables stakeholders to connect with and assist these enterprises more effectively (Banka et al., 2024). This study has two primary research objectives which is to identify and analyze the key challenges that tech start-ups in China face as they transition to scale-ups and to investigate the strategies and practices that have been effective in overcoming these challenges and enabling sustainable growth. This study has two primary research questions:

- What are the main challenges that tech start-ups in China encounter during their transition to scale-ups?
- What strategies do successful Chinese tech scale-ups employ to overcome these challenges and ensure sustainable growth?

2. Literature Review

The process of transitioning from a start-up to a scale-up is an important phase in the growth trajectory of technology companies, yet it comes with distinct challenges that can significantly impact the sustainability and success of a business. For tech start-ups in China, these challenges are magnified due to unique economic, cultural, and regulatory conditions that shape their growth journey. This literature review explores existing research on the various challenges and strategic approaches relevant to tech start-ups in China as they scale. It highlights the key issues identified in prior studies and identifies gaps that this research aims to address.

2.1 Challenges in Scaling Tech Start-Ups

Transitioning from a start-up to a scale-up necessitates substantial organisational modifications. A primary difficulty in this phase is effectively increasing operations while preserving quality and innovation (Xiao, 2025). Start-ups typically initiate with a flexible, informal framework; nevertheless, they must establish more formalised processes and comprehensive management practices to achieve scalability. This transition may generate discord among teams and inefficiency if not adequately handled (Zhang et al., 2022). Moreover, rapid expansion may lead to resource limitations, particularly for nascent start-ups that may find it challenging to obtain finance or utilise financial resources judiciousl. Talent recruiting and retention represent significant issues. As a start-up expands, the demand for specialised personnel grows; however, competition for experienced workers in China's technology sector is fierce. Organisations encounter challenges in attracting and keeping premier talent owing to elevated turnover rates and a constrained talent pool that aligns with their requirements (Lyu et al., 2022). Furthermore, leadership frequently requires transitioning from a hands-on, entrepreneurial methodology to a more strategic management approach to scale operations (Hagen et al., 2024). This cultural transition may provoke opposition among current employees familiar with a more adaptable, entrepreneurial atmosphere (Yuan et al., 2022).

Besides internal organisational hurdles, technology start-ups in China must contend with a swiftly evolving regulatory landscape. Chinese policies can change suddenly, affecting multiple facets of business operations, including data privacy and foreign investment rules (Coviello et al., 2024). The Chinese government's increased oversight of data security and cross-border data transfers has created substantial compliance difficulties for technology firms seeking

expansion (Hu et al., 2023). These regulatory hurdles augment operational complexity, incur significant expenses, and necessitate ongoing adaption.

2.2 Financial and Strategic Barriers

Financial difficulties are also significant during the scaling phase. Start-ups typically depend on venture capital (VC) in their early growth phases, but scaling may require larger funding rounds that are more challenging to get (Coviello et al., 2024). Investors generally seek increasingly stringent financial reporting and forecasts, which can be challenging for start-ups that do not possess the necessary infrastructure to meet these demands (Lyu et al., 2022). Furthermore, macroeconomic factors may affect funding circumstances, including alterations in the financial policy landscape, resulting in periods of uncertainty that impact the financial stability of scaling enterprises (Banka et al., 2024).

Tech start-ups in China strategically confront the problem of identifying and penetrating new markets. Expanding internationally necessitates understanding diverse customer behaviours, varying technology adoption rates, and distinct regulatory frameworks. This is especially significant as Chinese enterprises increasingly pursue foreign expansion to diversify their revenue sources and mitigate reliance on home markets (Yang, 2021). Market entry techniques in China may not be effective in foreign markets, necessitating start-ups to modify their business models and marketing approaches (Zhang et al., 2022).

2.3 Strategic Approaches to Overcoming Scaling Challenges

Successful digital start-ups in China frequently employ several strategic methods to address these issues. Establishing a resilient organisational infrastructure that facilitates scalability is a crucial strategy. This entails the implementation of scalable technological platforms and processes capable of managing increasing operational demands (Zhang et al., 2022). Firms like Alibaba and Tencent have illustrated the significance of a scalable IT architecture capable of accommodating extensive user bases and adapting service offerings (Yuan et al., 2022).

Talent acquisition tactics represent a crucial domain for effective scaling. Organisations frequently allocate substantial resources to employer branding, provide attractive wage packages, and cultivate a culture that resonates with the values and expectations of their employees. This aids in attracting proficient workers and minimising turnover (Qaiyum & Wang, 2018). Establishing robust leadership teams that integrate entrepreneurial vigour with strategic acumen is essential for promoting innovation and facilitating sustained success (Oihana et al., 2025).. Technology start-ups in China frequently collaborate with policy experts or legal teams specialising in local and international compliance to navigate regulatory difficulties. This guarantees their proactive adaptation to regulatory changes in their operations. Many start-ups implement stringent data security measures and obtain certifications to comply with government norms (Hu et al., 2023). Moreover, establishing alliances with local governments or engaging in public-private partnerships can give enterprises critical insights and facilitate their navigation of intricate regulatory landscapes more effectively (Hagen et al., 2024).

Start-ups increasingly seek strategic alliances and joint ventures to obtain capital and mitigate growth risks. Such agreements can facilitate access to expansive networks and novel consumer bases essential for growth (Ates & Acur, 2022). Successful scaling companies typically exhibit a distinct and persuasive vision that captivates investors, along with honest financial reporting that fosters confidence and credibility (Hagen et al., 2024).

3. Research Method

This study employs a quantitative research method to explore the challenges and strategies associated with scaling tech start-ups in China. The quantitative approach is suitable as it allows for the collection and analysis of numerical data that can provide insights into the prevalence and distribution of various challenges and strategies within the context of tech start-ups.

3.1 Research Design

The research design for this study involves using a survey questionnaire to collect primary data from tech start-ups in China. This design is chosen for its effectiveness in capturing large-scale, structured data that can be analyzed to reveal patterns and correlations related to scaling challenges and strategies.

The survey will be structured into several sections, each targeting a specific area of interest:

- Demographic Information: Collect data on the age of the start-up, the industry focus, the number of employees, and revenue.
- Challenges Encountered: Items designed to assess the different challenges start-ups face as they scale, such as operational hurdles, talent management issues, and regulatory compliance.
- Strategies for Overcoming Challenges: Items related to the strategies and practices employed by companies to address these challenges, including leadership approaches, funding practices, and operational changes.
- Outcomes and Perceptions: Items aimed at gauging the effectiveness of these strategies and their perceived impact on the scale-up process.

The survey questionnaire will be developed based on a comprehensive review of the existing literature and will be designed to be clear and concise to encourage high response rates. A pilot test will be conducted to refine the instrument and ensure its reliability and validity.

3.2 Population and Sample

The population for this study includes tech start-ups based in China that are in the process of scaling or have recently transitioned from start-up to scale-up. This population includes a diverse range of companies across various tech sectors, such as artificial intelligence, e-commerce, fintech, and software development.

- Sampling Technique: The study will use a stratified random sampling technique to ensure that the sample accurately represents the broader population of tech start-ups in China. Stratified sampling will involve dividing the tech start-up population into different strata based on factors such as company size, industry, and stage of scaling. A random sample will then be drawn from each stratum to achieve a balanced representation.
- Sample Size: The target sample size for this study will be approximately 200-300 tech start-ups. This number is deemed sufficient to provide meaningful statistical analysis while considering the feasibility of data collection. The sample size calculation will take into account the estimated population size, expected response rate, and desired confidence level.

3.3 Instrumentation

The primary data collection tool for this research is a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire will be prepared to gather information pertinent to the study aims and enquiries. The design will have closed-ended and Likert-scale items to quantify responses and enable statistical analysis. Creation of the Questionnaire: The survey will be developed using a blend of items from current literature and novel questions specifically designed to address the context of scaling in Chinese digital start-ups. Items will be modified from previously validated survey instruments about business growth and entrepreneurial challenges. This guarantees that the questions are pertinent and have been evaluated for dependability in analogous settings.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

- Reliability: The reliability of the questionnaire will be tested using Cronbach's alpha, aiming for a value of 0.7 or above, indicating acceptable internal consistency.
- Validity: Content validity will be ensured by consulting with experts in entrepreneurial management and conducting a pilot test with a small group of respondents from the target population to confirm that the questions accurately measure the intended variables.

3.5 Data Collection Process

The survey will be distributed electronically to the sample population using a platform like Wenjuanxin. To encourage participation, an introductory email explaining the purpose of the study and providing assurances of confidentiality will be sent to potential respondents. Follow-up reminders will be sent at intervals to maximize response rates. The data collected will be securely stored and analyzed using statistical software such as SPSS for quantitative analysis.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Demographic Overview

The demographic overview section presents a summary of the survey participants, and the attributes of the tech start-ups involved in the study. This information is essential for contextualising the findings and comprehending the varied backgrounds of the respondents. The poll had 250 participants from technology start-ups spanning diverse areas, including e-commerce, fintech, software development, artificial intelligence, etc. The industry representation exhibited a varied sample, with e-commerce at 25%, fintech at 20%, and AI and machine learning at 15%. The company sizes varied, with 30% of respondents employing fewer than 50 workers, 40% between 51 and 200, and 30% employing more than 200 personnel. Respondents were classified according to their scaling stage: 35% were in the early scaling phase, 40% in the mid-scale phase, and 25% in the late scaling phase. This demographic analysis is crucial for examining how demographics affect scaling issues and strategies.

4.2 Challenges Encountered During Scaling

Chinese IT start-ups encounter various obstacles during their move from start-up to scale-up. The poll indicated that operational issues were predominant, with 70% of participants emphasising the necessity for more structured processes as a significant obstacle. Subsequently, 60% of participants reported challenges in sustaining product quality amid expansion. A significant difficulty pertained to talent acquisition and retention, with 75% indicating challenges in attracting talented experts and 68% facing elevated turnover rates. Financial limitations were a significant concern, as

55% of respondents indicated difficulties obtaining adequate money, highlighting the increased competitiveness of venture capital and investment conditions. Regulatory compliance surfaced as a significant difficulty, with 63% of respondents identifying it as an obstacle, particularly around data protection and security rules, which increased complexity and expenses in their expanding endeavours.

4.3 Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

Respondents identified several principal tactics utilised to tackle scalability problems. An often-cited strategy was the enhancement of leadership and management. Approximately 70% of respondents underscored the need to invest in leadership development and training as crucial for steering teams throughout scaling. Strategic partnerships and collaborations were significantly esteemed, with 65% of start-ups reporting that these alliances offered resources, experience, and market access to facilitate their growth. Regarding talent management, 60% of respondents indicated that competitive wage packages and proactive initiatives to improve their employer brand facilitated the attraction and retention of top personnel. Furthermore, the implementation of scalable technological solutions was identified by 55% of respondents as a viable technique for addressing operational difficulties. The solutions encompassed utilising cloud-based platforms and automated business tools to optimise processes and enhance productivity.

4.4 Effectiveness of Strategies

The poll additionally collected data regarding the efficacy of these tactics as perceived by the respondents. Leadership training and development were exceptionally beneficial, with 80% of participants observing significant enhancements in team performance and organisational culture. Strategic alliances were as effective, with 70% of respondents indicating that these collaborations enhanced their access to resources and new markets. Implementing scalable technological solutions yielded favourable outcomes, as 68% of participants reported operational efficiency and productivity enhancements. Conversely, whereas 65% of organisations that prioritised their employer brand effectively attracted talent, 20% indicated that retaining these individuals posed a challenge, implying that employer branding alone was inadequate for comprehensive talent retention.

4.5 Data Analysis and Statistical Insights

The acquired data were analysed with statistical tools like SPSS to discern trends and correlations among variables. Correlation research indicated a robust positive association ($r = 0.75$) between leadership training programs and enhancements in employee happiness and overall performance, implying that investment in leadership development is linked to improved team management and productivity. The chi-square test revealed a significant association ($p < 0.05$) between firm size and the frequency of establishing strategic partnerships, indicating that larger companies were more inclined to utilise these alliances for expansion. Moreover, regression analysis revealed that implementing scalable technology solutions exhibited the most significant predictive value ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$) for enhanced operational efficiency, establishing it as a vital approach for successful scaling.

4.6 Comparative Analysis

A comparative investigation of various scaling phases indicated that problems transform as firms expand. Early-stage scale-ups faced significant financial constraints, making it especially challenging for these companies to get growth finance. Mid-stage scale-ups said that operational obstacles, including process scaling and service quality maintenance, were their primary difficulties. Participants in the late scaling phase indicated that regulatory compliance and the management of larger teams were their foremost worries, demonstrating that as organisations grow, the intricacy of overseeing both internal operations and external rules escalates.

4.7 Summary of Findings

The survey results offer an in-depth insight into the obstacles and tactics encountered by tech start-ups in China during their expansion. Prevalent obstacles encompass financial limitations, operational inefficiencies, and personnel management difficulties, impacting organisations across all growth phases. Effective strategies encompass leadership development, strategic alliances, and scalable technological solutions. Nonetheless, the extent of achievement differs, with specific tactics, like leadership training, demonstrating more pronounced beneficial results. These findings enhance the comprehension of the scaling process for Chinese digital start-ups, providing valuable insights for entrepreneurs, investors, and regulators to foster sustainable growth and development in the technology industry.

5. Conclusion

This study's findings offer essential insights into the obstacles and solutions digital start-ups in China face as they transition from the early start-up phase to more established firms. The research employed a survey-based quantitative methodology to investigate primary obstacles, such as operational inefficiencies, personnel acquisition and retention, budgetary limitations, and regulatory hurdles. It also identified effective techniques organisations utilised to address these difficulties, including leadership development, strategic alliances, and implementing scalable technological solutions. A

key result is that whereas scaling problems are widespread at different growth phases, they vary in kind and intensity. Early-stage scale-ups typically struggle to obtain financial resources, mid-stage enterprises concentrate on operational optimisation, and late-stage scale-ups face intricate regulatory and management challenges. The poll revealed that leadership training and strategic alliances were among the most efficacious tactics. Organisations that prioritised leadership development had improved team performance and a more robust corporate culture. Conversely, whereas improving corporate branding facilitated talent acquisition, it was less effective in employee retention unless accompanied by competitive remuneration and career advancement possibilities.

The findings of this study are significant for entrepreneurs, politicians, and investors. Entrepreneurs can leverage these insights to anticipate the problems encountered at each growing phase, selecting tactics that correspond with their immediate requirements. Policymakers can utilise these insights to build supportive regulatory frameworks and provide targeted assistance to promote sustainable growth. Investors can utilise this information to pinpoint start-ups that exhibit preparedness and resilience in overcoming scaling obstacles and enhancing investment decisions. This research enhances the comprehension of the scaling process inside the Chinese technology sector. This study offers factual data on the obstacles encountered and the tactics utilised to address them, establishing a basis for future research and practical applications that may facilitate the success of start-ups in a competitive and continuously changing landscape.

5.1 Implementation

The practical application of this study's conclusions entails measures that technology start-ups, policymakers, and other stakeholders might use to improve the scaling process. The report highlights the significance of investing in leadership training programs for technology start-ups. These programs provide leaders with essential skills to oversee larger, more intricate teams, sustain productivity, and cultivate a unified culture during growth phases. Leadership development improves team performance and equips the organisation to respond effectively to emerging issues.

Strategic partnerships and collaborations are advised as essential approaches for addressing scaling problems. Forming alliances with prominent technology companies, research institutions, or venture capitalists can give start-ups the necessary resources, experience, and market access to achieve effective scaling. Collaboration can alleviate financial and operational difficulties by distributing duties and utilising collective skills. Start-ups must prioritise attractive remuneration packages and career development activities to attract and retain elite personnel. Employer branding is significant but must be supplemented by concrete incentives and career advancement possibilities to tackle talent retention issues effectively.

Adopting scalable technology solutions is another crucial strategy. Start-ups should implement cloud-based platforms and automated processes to improve operational efficiency and reduce overhead costs. Technology solutions can streamline workflows, making them more cost-effective and adaptable to scaling needs. Policymakers have an essential role in facilitating the growth of tech start-ups. Streamlining data privacy, security, and business operations regulations can reduce compliance burdens and enable start-ups to focus on innovation and growth. Additionally, providing financial incentives and tax breaks for tech companies that engage in R&D or sustainable business practices can encourage the development of innovative solutions.

Investors can also play a significant role by aligning their investment strategies with the findings from this study. By identifying start-ups that clearly understand scaling challenges and practical strategies to overcome them, investors can better support companies and contribute to their long-term success.

5.2 Future Research

This study has yielded significant insights; nevertheless, future research may investigate other areas to comprehend further scaling issues and options. A crucial domain for forthcoming research is the influence of external economic variables, such as global recessions, trade regulations, and foreign competition, on the scaling processes of Chinese technology start-ups. Comprehending the impact of these macroeconomic factors on scaling strategies and obstacles provides a more thorough perspective of the context in which technology start-ups function.

Longitudinal studies may yield essential insights by monitoring start-ups over prolonged durations, elucidating the evolution of various methods' success and discerning the long-term effects of scaling on business sustainability. This research can identify critical transition moments in the scaling process when start-ups may need to pivot or adjust their strategies to maintain competitiveness. Sector-specific research may represent a significant opportunity. This study examined broad scaling issues; however, further exploration of specific industries like fintech, AI, or e-commerce may yield targeted insights into industry-specific obstacles and remedies. These findings may assist start-ups in these areas in formulating more focused strategies that tackle specific difficulties.

Comparative analyses of technology start-ups across several areas or nations can yield significant insights. Researchers can discern universal trends and region-specific methods by comparing scaling issues and strategies in China with those in other rising tech markets, such as India or Southeast Asia, enhancing best practices and global comprehension. Finally, studies examining the long-term effects of governmental policy alterations and regulatory changes on the scaling success of technology start-ups can provide insights for future policy modifications. Researchers can propose evidence-based regulatory policies that promote sustainable development in the tech industry by analysing the impact of policy frameworks on start-up adaptation and growth.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the University Islam Melaka for their support in providing both facilities and financial assistance for this research.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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