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Patent Quality with Open Innovation Breadth in Clean Technology Firms: Field Study

Louis T. Petit*, Camille Dubois

Faculty of Economics and Management, Université de Strasbourg, Strasbourg, Grand Est, France

Corresponding author: louis.t.petit@gmail.com

Abstract

The transition toward a sustainable global economy relies heavily on the rapid development and deployment of clean technologies. Due to the inherent complexity and interdisciplinary nature of these technologies, firms frequently engage in open innovation practices to source knowledge externally. This paper investigates the relationship between open innovation breadth and patent quality within the clean technology sector. Using a comprehensive field study involving archival patent data and in-depth survey metrics from a cross-section of clean technology enterprises, this research explores how the diversity of external knowledge sources impacts the technological value of resulting patents. The findings reveal an inverted U-shaped relationship, suggesting that while initial increases in open innovation breadth enhance patent quality by providing diverse recombinant materials, excessive breadth leads to integration challenges and cognitive overload that ultimately degrade patent quality. The study contributes to the literature on innovation management by providing empirical evidence from a critical, fast-growing sector and offers actionable insights for research and development managers aiming to optimize their external search strategies. The paper concludes by discussing the theoretical implications for recombinant search theory and outlines potential avenues for future research in open innovation dynamics.

Keywords: Open Innovation; Patent Quality; Clean Technology; Knowledge Recombination; Field Study

1. Introduction

1.1 Context of Clean Technology and Open Innovation

The contemporary industrial landscape is increasingly defined by the urgent need to address global environmental challenges, primarily climate change, resource depletion, and systemic ecological degradation. Clean technology has emerged as a fundamental pillar in the transition toward a sustainable global economy, encompassing a broad spectrum of products, services, and processes designed to reduce negative environmental impacts while simultaneously enhancing energy efficiency and sustainable resource management. The development of clean technology is inherently complex, requiring the integration of disparate scientific disciplines such as materials science, biotechnology, advanced manufacturing, and information technology [1]. Because of this profound technological complexity and the rapid pace of evolution in environmental standards, clean technology firms face unique research and development challenges. Relying solely on internal research capabilities is often insufficient to maintain competitive advantage or to achieve the technological breakthroughs required to disrupt incumbent carbon-intensive industries [2]. Consequently, these firms increasingly adopt open innovation strategies, deliberately expanding their organizational boundaries to systematically integrate external knowledge into their internal innovation processes.

Open innovation, a paradigm that assumes firms can and should use external ideas as well as internal ideas, has fundamentally transformed how technology-intensive companies operate. Within this paradigm, the concept of open innovation breadth is particularly significant. Open innovation breadth refers to the diversity or the number of different external sources that a firm utilizes in its innovation activities, ranging from academic institutions and public research organizations to suppliers, customers, and even direct competitors [3]. By casting a wide net, firms can access a heterogeneous pool of knowledge, which serves as the raw material for novel technological combinations. In the context of clean technology, where solutions often lie at the intersection of previously unconnected fields, sourcing knowledge from a broad array of external partners is theoretically advantageous [4]. However, the management of diverse external relationships introduces substantial organizational complexity. Firms must allocate significant resources to identify, evaluate, assimilate, and commercialize knowledge drawn from varied cultural and organizational contexts. The tension between the benefits of diverse knowledge access and the costs of knowledge integration forms the central empirical puzzle addressed in this research.

1.2 Research Objectives and Scope

Despite the growing recognition of open innovation as a critical driver of technological advancement, the existing literature exhibits significant gaps regarding its direct impact on the quality of the resulting innovative outputs, particularly within the specific domain of clean technology. Much of the prior research has focused heavily on innovation quantity, often operationalized merely as the total count of patents filed or new products introduced by a firm [5]. While patent counts provide a useful measure of overall innovative activity, they fall short of capturing the economic and technological significance of the innovations themselves. Patent quality, which reflects the fundamental novelty, utility, and subsequent technological influence of a patent, is a far more critical metric for assessing true innovative performance. High-quality patents in clean technology possess the potential to generate substantial economic rents for the firm and drive significant environmental benefits, whereas low-quality patents may represent incremental, defensive, or practically useless inventions.

The primary objective of this paper is to rigorously examine the relationship between open innovation breadth and patent quality using a detailed field study of clean technology firms. By moving beyond simple patent counts and focusing on quality indicators derived from comprehensive citation analysis, this research aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of how external search strategies influence technological impact [6]. The study is specifically designed to test the hypothesis that the relationship between open innovation breadth and patent quality is nonlinear, reflecting the diminishing marginal returns and increasing coordination costs associated with excessively broad external search efforts. Furthermore, the field study approach allows for a granular investigation of the firm-level mechanisms that govern knowledge integration, providing rich contextual data that complements the quantitative analysis of patent records. The scope of this research is intentionally focused on clean technology enterprises, a sector that not only offers a fertile testing ground for theories of knowledge recombination due to its interdisciplinary nature but also holds paramount importance for contemporary industrial policy and global sustainability initiatives.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

2.1 Open Innovation Breadth and Recombinant Search Theory

The theoretical foundation of this research is deeply rooted in recombinant search theory, which posits that innovation is fundamentally a process of combining previously disparate elements of knowledge to create novel solutions. According to this perspective, the novelty and value of an innovation are largely determined by the diversity of the knowledge pool from which the recombined elements are drawn [7]. When a firm engages in a broad open innovation strategy, it exposes its research and development personnel to a wide variety of technological paradigms, problem-solving heuristics, and scientific principles. This exposure disrupts cognitive inertia and mitigates the risks of path dependency, which often constrain internal research teams that have worked within the same technological trajectory for extended periods [8]. By interacting with suppliers, the firm may gain insights into advanced materials or manufacturing constraints; by collaborating with universities, it may access cutting-edge fundamental science; and by engaging with customers, it can better align its technological development with latent market demands.

However, the benefits of increasing open innovation breadth do not accrue indefinitely. The literature on organizational learning and absorptive capacity emphasizes that firms have finite cognitive and administrative resources to dedicate to the processing of external knowledge [9]. As the number of external knowledge sources increases, the firm must manage an exponentially growing network of relationships, each characterized by distinct communication protocols, intellectual property arrangements, and strategic objectives. This phenomenon often leads to cognitive overload, where the sheer volume and diversity of incoming information overwhelm the firm's capacity to effectively evaluate and integrate it [10]. Consequently, researchers have suggested an open innovation paradox, wherein firms that search too broadly may actually experience a decline in innovative performance due to the escalating costs of coordination and the fragmentation of internal research efforts [11]. This theoretical tension between the recombinant benefits of diversity and the cognitive costs of integration is a focal point of contemporary innovation literature, yet empirical validations of this dynamic using robust measures of output quality remain scarce.

2.2 Patent Quality Indicators in Innovation Research

Evaluating the outcome of innovation processes requires robust metrics that capture more than just the occurrence of an invention. Patent data has long been a staple in innovation research due to its public availability and standardized format, but the limitations of simple patent counts are well-documented. A vast majority of patents yield minimal economic value, while a small minority account for the lion's share of technological impact and commercial return [12]. Therefore, scholars have developed various indicators to assess patent quality, primarily relying on the analysis of patent citations, claims, and family size. Forward citations, which measure the number of times a given patent is cited by subsequent patent applications, are widely considered the most reliable proxy for technological significance and quality [13]. A patent that receives a high number of forward citations is recognized as a foundational piece of knowledge upon which subsequent technological developments are built, indicating a high degree of novelty and utility.

In addition to forward citations, the number of claims within a patent document provides insight into the scope and breadth of the legal protection sought by the inventor. Patents with a higher number of claims are generally associated with more complex and valuable inventions, as the firm has invested significant legal resources to thoroughly delineate and protect the boundaries of its intellectual property [14]. Similarly, the patent family size, defined as the number of jurisdictions in which protection for the same invention is sought, reflects the firm's internal assessment of the invention's international commercial potential. Filing and maintaining patents in multiple countries is a costly endeavor; thus, firms only pursue large patent families for their highest-quality inventions [15]. By synthesizing these diverse indicators, researchers can construct a composite measure of patent quality that accurately reflects the multi-dimensional nature of technological value. This study utilizes such a comprehensive approach to ensure that the empirical assessment of innovation outcomes is both rigorous and reflective of true technological impact.

2.3 Knowledge Recombination in the Clean Technology Sector

The clean technology sector provides a uniquely appropriate context for studying the relationship between open innovation breadth and patent quality. Unlike traditional industries that often rely on established, cumulative technological trajectories, clean technology is characterized by radical shifts and the convergence of multiple scientific domains [16]. For example, the development of advanced photovoltaic cells requires deep expertise in semiconductor physics, materials engineering, and electrical grid integration. Similarly, innovations in biofuel production necessitate the synthesis of agricultural science, genetic engineering, and chemical processing. Because these requisite knowledge bases are broadly distributed across different types of organizations, clean technology firms are structurally compelled to search broadly for external knowledge [17]. The sector is therefore heavily populated by collaborative networks, joint ventures, and university-industry partnerships.

However, the integration of these disparate knowledge bases in clean technology is exceptionally challenging. The epistemic distance between a software engineer developing smart grid algorithms and a biochemist designing algae-based fuels is vast, creating significant barriers to effective communication and knowledge assimilation [18]. When clean technology firms attempt to source knowledge from too many disparate domains simultaneously, they risk failing to achieve the deep integration necessary for high-quality, systemic innovations. Instead, they may produce superficial combinations of technologies that fail to meet the rigorous performance and reliability standards required for commercial deployment in critical energy and environmental infrastructure. Thus, the clean technology sector not only exemplifies the necessity of broad open innovation but also dramatically highlights the managerial challenges and potential pitfalls associated with excessive external search, making it an ideal laboratory for exploring the complex dynamics of patent quality prediction.

3. Methodology and Field Study Design

3.1 Research Context and Sample Selection

To rigorously test the theoretical propositions concerning open innovation breadth and patent quality, this research employs a carefully designed field study focusing on a representative sample of clean technology firms. The field study methodology was selected because it allows for the simultaneous collection of rich, firm-level behavioral data regarding open innovation practices and objective, archival data regarding subsequent patenting outcomes [19]. The research context is situated within the European clean technology sector, a region globally recognized for its stringent environmental regulations, robust public support for sustainable innovation, and highly active technological ecosystems. Focusing on a specific geographic and regulatory environment helps to control for macro-level institutional factors that could otherwise confound the relationship between innovation strategies and patent quality.

The target population for the sample selection comprised independent, technology-driven firms that derived the majority of their revenue from products, processes, or services explicitly designed to mitigate environmental impact. To construct the sampling frame, a comprehensive database of clean technology enterprises was compiled using industry association directories, governmental grant registries, and specialized financial databases. From this initial pool, a stratified random sampling technique was applied to select firms across various clean technology sub-sectors, including renewable energy generation, energy efficiency, waste management, and sustainable transportation. The final sample consists of two hundred and forty distinct firms. This sample size is sufficiently large to provide statistical power for the quantitative analysis while remaining manageable for the administration of the detailed field survey and subsequent archival data matching. Great care was taken to ensure that the selected firms exhibited a history of patenting activity, as the dependent variable relies on the availability of patent records.

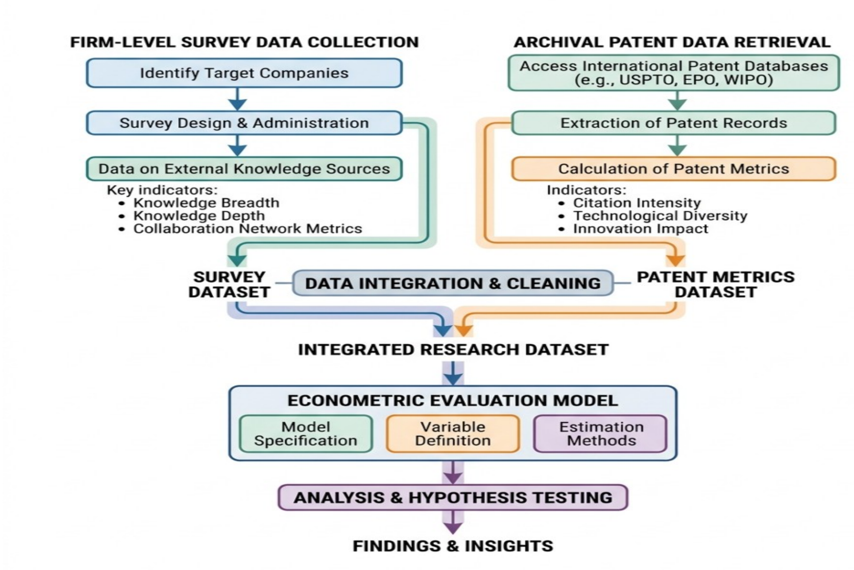

Figure 1: Research Methodology and Data Integration Framework

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

The data collection for this study was executed in two distinct, sequential phases to capture both the independent variables relating to organizational behavior and the dependent variables relating to technological output. The first phase involved the deployment of a structured survey instrument administered to key informants within the sampled clean technology firms. The target informants were Chief Technology Officers, R&D Directors, or senior innovation managers, as these individuals possess the most comprehensive and accurate understanding of their respective firms' external knowledge sourcing strategies [20]. The survey was rigorously pre-tested with a small panel of academic experts and industry practitioners to ensure clarity, validity, and relevance. It was designed to elicit detailed information regarding the firms' open innovation activities over a specific three-year observation window. Specifically, the respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which their firms utilized various distinct types of external knowledge sources, such as universities, specialized suppliers, lead users, and competing firms. To maximize the response rate and ensure data quality, the survey administration was accompanied by follow-up telephone interviews, which also provided valuable qualitative context regarding the specific mechanisms of knowledge integration employed by the firms.

The second phase of data collection involved the retrieval and processing of archival patent data. For each firm that completed the field survey, comprehensive patent portfolios were extracted from global patent databases, focusing on patents applied for in the years immediately following the survey observation window. This temporal lag is critical for establishing a causal direction, as it accounts for the natural gestation period between the initiation of an open innovation search strategy and the subsequent filing of a patent application [21]. The archival data collection focused on extracting raw data necessary for computing the patent quality indicators, including backward citations, forward citations accrued over a five-year window post-publication, the number of independent and dependent claims, and the geographic breadth of the patent family. The integration of the survey-derived behavioral data with the objectively measured patent data forms a robust, multi-level dataset that uniquely positions this study to uncover the nuanced relationships between external search breadth and the technological value of innovation outcomes.

4. Measurement Variables and Data Analysis Strategy

4.1 Dependent and Independent Variables

The dependent variable in this study, patent quality, is a multifaceted construct that requires a composite measurement approach to accurately reflect technological and economic value. Drawing upon established bibliometric methodologies, patent quality is operationalized using a weighted index combining three distinct indicators: forward citations, claim scope, and patent family size. Forward citations are calculated as the total number of citations received by a focal patent within the first five years subsequent to its publication. The claim scope is measured by the total number of claims formally granted in the patent document. The patent family size is determined by the number of distinct national patent offices where the invention is protected. To create a unified dependent variable for the firm-level analysis, these three indicators are standardized and aggregated for all patents filed by the focal firm during the observation period, resulting in a firm-level average patent quality score. This approach ensures that the dependent variable captures the average technological impact of the firm's innovative output rather than merely reflecting the presence of a single outlier patent [22].

The primary independent variable, open innovation breadth, is derived directly from the field survey responses. Based on the theoretical framework of external search, the survey identified eight potential sources of external knowledge: suppliers, clients or customers, competitors, commercial laboratories or R&D consultants, universities, government research institutes, industry associations, and venture capital networks. Respondents indicated their firm's reliance on each source using a standardized scale. Open innovation breadth is calculated as a count variable, representing the number of distinct external sources that the firm reported using consistently for its innovation activities. Consequently, this variable ranges from zero, indicating a completely closed, internally focused innovation strategy, to eight, indicating an extremely broad, highly open external search strategy. To isolate the effect of open innovation breadth, several control variables are included in the analysis. Firm size is controlled for by the logarithm of the total number of employees, as larger firms generally possess greater resources for both patenting and managing external relationships. R&D intensity, measured as the ratio of research expenditures to total sales, controls for the firm's internal technological capability and absorptive capacity [23]. Finally, firm age is included to account for potential learning curve effects and accumulated organizational routines.

Table 1: Variable Definitions and Descriptive Measurement Parameters

Variable Category	Variable Name	Measurement Description	Data Source
Dependent	Patent Quality Index	Standardized composite of citations, claims, and family size	Archival Patent Data
Independent	Open Innovation Breadth	Count of distinct external knowledge sources utilized (0 to 8)	Field Survey
Control	Firm Size	Logarithmic transformation of total employee headcount	Field Survey
Control	R&D Intensity	Ratio of annual R&D expenditure to total annual sales revenue	Field Survey
Control	Firm Age	Years elapsed since the formal establishment of the enterprise	Field Survey
Control	Past Patent Stock	Cumulative number of patents granted prior to the observation window	Archival Patent Data

4.2 Analytical Models

Given the nature of the data and the theoretical propositions being tested, the data analysis strategy relies on advanced econometric modeling techniques suitable for cross-sectional, firm-level data. Because the dependent variable, the patent quality index, is a continuous, strictly positive variable derived from underlying count data (citations, claims, family size), ordinary least squares regression provides a baseline analytical framework. However, to account for the distributional properties typical of bibliometric data, which often exhibit significant right skewness and overdispersion, robust standard errors are applied across all model specifications. The primary analytical objective is to test for a nonlinear relationship between open innovation breadth and patent quality. Therefore, the regression models are constructed hierarchically.

The first model specification includes only the control variables, establishing a baseline for the variance in patent quality explained by fundamental firm characteristics such as size, age, and internal R&D investment. The second model introduces the linear term for open innovation breadth to test whether a simple, monotonic relationship exists between external search diversity and innovation quality. The critical third model introduces the squared term of open innovation breadth. This quadratic specification is specifically designed to test the central hypothesis of an inverted U-shaped relationship. A positive and statistically significant coefficient for the linear term, coupled with a negative and statistically significant coefficient for the squared term, would provide strong empirical support for the proposition that there is an optimal level of open innovation breadth, beyond which the marginal costs of cognitive overload and coordination failure outweigh the benefits of diverse knowledge recombination. Multicollinearity among the variables is assessed using variance inflation factors, and appropriate data centering techniques are employed prior to generating the squared terms to ensure the stability and interpretability of the econometric estimates.

5. Empirical Results and Discussion

5.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

The initial phase of the empirical analysis involved a thorough examination of the descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for all variables included in the study. The analysis of the sample reveals that clean technology firms are highly active in external knowledge sourcing, with the average firm reporting the utilization of approximately four distinct external sources. The most frequently cited partners include specialized suppliers, universities, and lead customers, highlighting the critical role of both upstream supply chain technical knowledge and downstream market application requirements in clean technology development. The dependent variable, the patent quality index, exhibits the expected high degree of variance, confirming that while some firms produce highly cited, widely protected inventions, many others generate patents of relatively marginal technological significance.

An examination of the correlation matrix provides preliminary insights into the relationships between the variables. As anticipated, internal R&D intensity and firm size exhibit strong positive correlations with the patent quality index, confirming that dedicated internal resources and structural scale remain fundamental drivers of high-value innovation [24]. The linear correlation between open innovation breadth and the patent quality index is positive and statistically significant, initially suggesting that broader search strategies are generally beneficial. Crucially, the diagnostic tests for multicollinearity indicate that the variance inflation factors for all variables remain well below the conventional threshold of concern, ensuring that the subsequent multivariate regression analyses will not be compromised by redundant explanatory variables. These descriptive foundations set the stage for the rigorous testing of the nonlinear theoretical propositions.

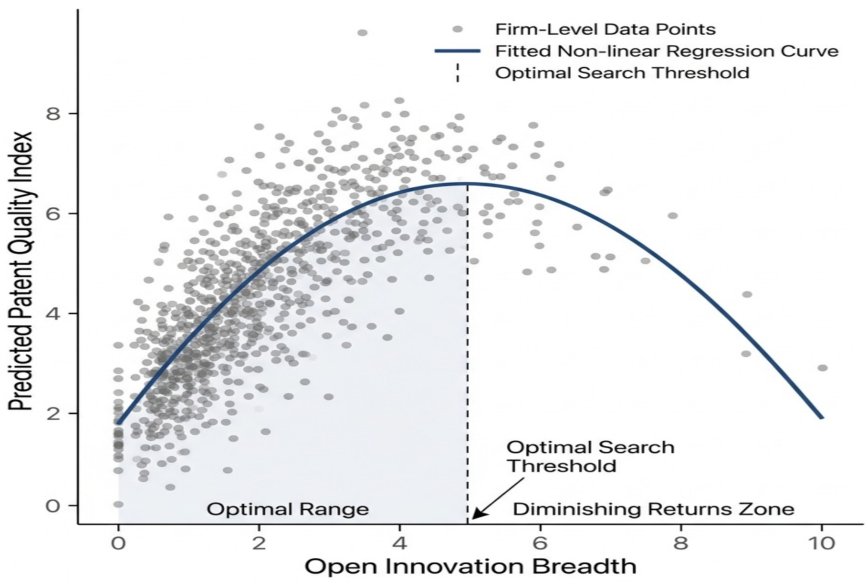

Figure 2: Statistical Output and Nonlinear Regression Curve

5.2 Hypothesis Testing and Discussion

The core of the empirical analysis involves the hierarchical regression models designed to predict patent quality based on varying levels of open innovation breadth. The baseline model, containing only control variables, demonstrates that firm size and R&D intensity are robust positive predictors of patent quality. When the linear term for open innovation breadth is introduced in the second model, it yields a positive and significant coefficient, indicating that, on average, firms that source knowledge from a wider array of external partners produce higher quality patents than those that rely narrowly on internal capabilities or a single external source. This finding strongly supports the recombinant search theory, confirming that access to heterogeneous knowledge pools provides the essential raw materials for generating novel, impactful clean technology solutions.

However, the most critical findings emerge from the third model, which incorporates the quadratic term for open innovation breadth. The results reveal a statistically significant positive coefficient for the linear term and a highly significant negative coefficient for the squared term. This specific configuration provides definitive empirical confirmation of an inverted U-shaped relationship between open innovation breadth and patent quality in the clean technology sector. The shape of this curve indicates that at lower levels of external search, expanding the breadth of open innovation yields substantial improvements in patent quality. The firm benefits greatly from synthesizing insights from suppliers, universities, and customers. Yet, as the firm continues to add disparate external sources—moving beyond the optimal threshold—the trajectory reverses. The negative quadratic term illustrates the onset of the open innovation paradox. At high levels of breadth, the firm's absorptive capacity is overwhelmed. R&D personnel expend disproportionate time and energy managing complex external relationships, negotiating intellectual property agreements across different institutional contexts, and attempting to reconcile conflicting technical standards [25]. Consequently, the firm's ability to deeply integrate this diverse knowledge degrades, leading to superficial technological combinations and a subsequent decline in the quality and impact of the resulting patents.

6. Conclusion and Implications

6.1 Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This research makes several significant contributions to the academic literature at the intersection of open innovation, patent bibliometrics, and environmental sustainability. Theoretically, the study advances recombinant search theory by providing robust, large-sample empirical evidence of the nonlinear boundaries of external knowledge sourcing. By utilizing a composite index of patent quality rather than relying on crude patent counts, this paper demonstrates that the cognitive costs of knowledge integration ultimately constrain the benefits of diverse knowledge access. It confirms that the open innovation paradox is not merely a theoretical construct but a measurable phenomenon that directly impacts the technological value of a firm's innovative output. Furthermore, by situating the study within the complex, interdisciplinary domain of clean technology, the research highlights how industry-specific characteristics—such as the necessity for systemic technological convergence—amplify the tensions between knowledge search and knowledge integration.

From a practical perspective, the findings offer vital, actionable insights for technology managers and corporate strategists operating within clean technology and similarly complex sectors. The persistent industry narrative often suggests that maximum openness is always desirable. However, this study empirically demonstrates that an unconstrained, overly broad approach to open innovation can be actively detrimental to the quality of a firm's technological portfolio. R&D managers must therefore approach external knowledge sourcing with strategic precision rather than merely casting the widest possible net. The objective should be to identify and maintain an optimal portfolio of external partners that provides sufficient technological diversity without overwhelming the firm's internal absorptive capacity. Firms must continuously evaluate the coordination costs associated with each new external relationship and invest simultaneously in building robust internal mechanisms for knowledge synthesis and cross-disciplinary communication.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides rigorous insights, it is subject to several limitations that present valuable opportunities for future research. Primarily, the reliance on a cross-sectional field study design limits the ability to make absolute causal claims. Although temporal lags were incorporated between the observation of innovation search behavior and the measurement of patent outcomes, longitudinal data tracking changes in a firm's open innovation strategy over multiple years would provide a stronger foundation for dynamic causal inference. Additionally, the geographic focus on the European clean technology sector, while beneficial for controlling institutional variables, may restrict the generalizability of the findings. The optimal threshold for open innovation breadth may differ significantly in regions with different intellectual property regimes, venture capital landscapes, or cultural attitudes toward inter-organizational collaboration.

Future research should seek to replicate and extend these findings across diverse geographical contexts and other high-complexity industries, such as advanced biotechnology or artificial intelligence. Furthermore, subsequent studies could explore the moderating variables that might shift the inverted U-shaped curve. For instance, investigating how specific internal organizational structures, digital knowledge management systems, or the presence of highly experienced boundary-spanning personnel might increase a firm's absorptive capacity, thereby allowing it to manage a broader array of external sources before experiencing diminishing returns. By continuing to dissect the intricate mechanisms of knowledge recombination, scholars can further refine the strategic paradigms necessary to accelerate high-quality technological innovation in critical domains.

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