

Article

Investigating the Dynamics of Trust Establishment Between Core Firms and Their Actors

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Highlights

Please indicate how your work links to systems science via your contributions to systems practice, theory, and or methodology.

- This study applies signaling theory to digital platform ecosystems and demonstrates that core firm reputation serves as a mediating mechanism linking core firms' constructive behaviors to actors' trust decisions.
- By adopting the perspective of ecosystem actors rather than that of core firms or the ecosystem as a whole, this study offers a deeper understanding of trust formation dynamics in power-asymmetric platform environments.

What are the implications of the main findings?

- The results show that core firms can enhance actors' trust intention by fostering ecological-niche creativity and by sharing key resources, although these effects are mediated by corporate reputation.
- While opportunism weakens the positive effect of reputation on trust, manipulation power unexpectedly strengthens it. In power-imbalanced ecosystems, actors' trust therefore appears to reflect pragmatic trust under limited alternatives rather than genuine confidence in the core firm's benevolence.

Abstract

The stability and collaborative development of digital platform ecosystems depend on the establishment and maintenance of harmonious interfirm relationships. However, extant research has paid limited attention to the processes through which trust is cultivated among platform participants or to the potential negative behaviours of core firms that may erode such trust. Adopting the perspective of ecosystem actors, this study specifically examines how trust in core firms is formed and how possible negative behaviours by core firms may influence this trust relationship. In doing so, it addresses a significant gap in the literature on the dynamics of core firm–subordinate firm (hereinafter referred to as “actors”) relationships in digital platform ecosystems. Drawing on signalling theory, this study examines whether and how the perceived ecological niche creativity and key resource sharing intention of core firms influence actors' trust intention through the reputation of core firms. It also incorporates the opportunistic behaviour and manipulation power of core firms into the model as important contextual moderators in order to examine whether these factors erode core firm–actor trust relationships within the ecosystem. Based on survey data from 347 actors operating in digital platform ecosystems, the results show that: (1) the ecological niche creativity and key resource sharing intention both significantly enhance actors' trust intention; (2) the reputation of core firms mediates both of these



Academic Editor: Jianhua Zhu

Received: 15 June 2026

Revised: 13 July 2026

Accepted: 24 July 2026

Published: 27 July 2026

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relationships; and (3) the opportunistic behaviour negatively moderates the relationship between the reputation of core firms and actors' trust intention, whereas the manipulation power of core firms positively moderates this relationship. Adopting the perspective of ecosystem actors, this study provides an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms through which trust relationships with core firms are established. This examination differs from the prevailing view in the literature that trust within digital platform ecosystems is primarily algorithmic in nature. In doing so, it extends the theoretical perspective of trust research in digital platform ecosystem relationships and offers useful implications for core firms in guiding and maintaining relationships among ecosystem participants and supporting the development of platform ecosystems.

Keywords: digital platform ecosystems; reputation of core firms; opportunistic behaviour; manipulation power; trust intention

1. Introduction

In the context of the digital economy, platform ecosystems have evolved into a key organisational form for integrating multi-party resources and promoting value co-creation and collaborative innovation [1–4]. Such platforms are typically centred on one or a small number of core firms. Through technological architectures, governance rules, and resource coordination capabilities, these core firms connect and organise large numbers of actors, forming network architectures characterised by shared goals, interdependence, and dynamic evolution. Core firms are not only ecosystem builders and leaders, but also play key roles in shaping the direction of ecosystem evolution, formulating collaboration rules, and providing infrastructure. Actors, by contrast, rely on platform interfaces, technical support, data resources, and market channels provided by core firms to secure their ecological position, survival, and development within the ecosystem [5–7]. In such collaborative networks, where structures are highly asymmetric and power and resources are unevenly distributed, the quality and sustainability of the relationship between core firms and actors are closely linked to the stability and sustainability of the entire ecosystem [8–11]. Nevertheless, prior research on digital platform ecosystems has rarely examined relationships among platform participants [12–14]. Research on how core firms and actors establish and maintain trust relationships remains particularly limited [15–17].

Moreover, corporate reputation is widely regarded as an important factor shaping trust in a firm [18–20]. Organisations that cooperate with highly reputable firms often gain external recognition of their own capabilities and are therefore better positioned to obtain future resources and opportunities [18,21]. In digital platform ecosystems, the high reputation of core firms functions not only as a form of credit guarantee and accelerator through which actors can obtain external trust, but also as a cornerstone of the ecosystem's internal trust structure. However, related studies suggest that corporate reputation may contribute only superficially to the formation of inter-firm trust, as such trust may stem from reputation-based dependence on highly reputable firms and thus give rise to a fragile relationship [22,23]. When highly reputable core firms engage in behaviours such as exploiting suppliers, arbitrarily changing rules, or abusing market dominance, the trust of actors in them may become highly instrumental and fragile. In such cases, actors may tend to trust the core firm's profit-generating ability—commonly termed algorithmic trust—rather than its fairness or benevolence. Actors may therefore exhibit outward compliance while retaining internal distrust [24–26].

In addition, extant research on platform ecosystems has mainly focused on the platform strategies, architectures, and ecosystem mechanisms of core firms [27–29]. However, relatively little research has examined the developmental trajectories and behaviours of actors that may affect the dynamics within business ecosystems [3,14,17,30–32]. More specifically, insufficient attention has been given to the formation of core firms' reputation and its influence on actors' trust intentions from the perspective of actors. In particular, while recent work has highlighted algorithmic trust as a distinct mechanism in digital platforms [33,34], the relational and reputational pathways through which actors assess core-firm trustworthiness can be further explored. This study addresses this gap by focusing on reputation as a behavioural signal rather than relying exclusively on algorithmic processes.

Building on the discussions above, this study examines—from the perspective of actors—the mechanisms through which trust is formed in digital platform ecosystems by treating the reputation of core firms as a mediating variable. It further investigates whether the self-interested behaviours of core firms affect the relationship between the reputation of core firms and the trust of actors and how the risk of superficial trust associated with corporate reputation can be avoided.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and outlines the theoretical foundations of the study. Section 3 develops the research hypotheses, while Section 4 presents the research design in detail. Section 5 reports the data analysis, and Section 6 discusses the empirical findings. Finally, Section 7 concludes the paper by summarising the main findings, outlining the theoretical and managerial implications, acknowledging the limitations of the study, and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Core Firm-Actor Relationships in Digital Platform Ecosystems

The dominant-subordinate relationships in digital platform ecosystems are primarily reflected in the interactions between core firms and actors. Within this relationship, relational quality—especially the trust intention of actors toward core firms—constitutes the psychological foundation that determines the efficiency of resource collaboration, collaborative innovation, and even the stability of the entire digital ecosystem [11,35]. The formation and evolution of this relationship involve a complex process of signal transmission, cognitive processing, and contextual interference.

Trust is the core psychological bond that determines the quality of dominant-subordinate relationships and shapes the depth of resource flows and collaborative innovation. Interorganisational trust is defined as a psychological state in which one party is willing to accept risk and expose its own vulnerability in cooperation on the basis of positive beliefs about the other party's ability, benevolence, and integrity [24,36,37]. In digital platform ecosystems, such trust mainly arises from long-term transactional relationships in which parties form perceptions of one another's ability, benevolence, and integrity. When core firms consistently display these attributes, they build reputation and thereby gain the trust and dependence of actors [8,20,38], thereby supporting the healthy operation and sustainable development of the ecosystem. However, owing to the distinctive attributes of digital platform ecosystems, recent research has increasingly advocated algorithmic trust as a central mechanism. Algorithmic trust refers to the confidence that individuals, organisations, and systems place in computer algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) to operate accurately, fairly, and safely [33]. It reflects users' willingness to rely on automated systems for data handling, decision-making, and recommendations, rather than on human judgment. This form of trust is typically constructed through the processing of user data, historical performance metrics, diversity and inclusivity indicators, contextual

information, and iterative feedback loops, which collectively inform algorithmic outputs and trust-related decisions [34,39]. Establishing algorithmic trust requires a multifaceted approach involving the appropriate selection and use of data, transparent communication of algorithmic functionalities, and ongoing user engagement. Overall, it aligns more closely with the rational and cognitive orientations of trust [40,41]. As this dimension lies beyond the primary focus of the present study, it will not be explored further in this paper.

However, long-term transactional relationships within platform ecosystems may also involve self-interested behaviours. For example, these behaviours include competition among actors for ecosystem niches [42,43], opportunistic behaviours between core firms and actors [44,45], and the tendency of actors to participate in multiple platforms [35,46,47]. Such behaviours can seriously undermine the sustainable development of platform ecosystems. Although ecosystem governance mechanisms may help restrain these behaviours, they also generate substantial maintenance costs. Moreover, excessive reliance on regulatory systems dominated by core firms may send signals of distrust and weaken harmony among ecosystem participants [8,26,48]. Therefore, fostering natural trust relationships within the ecosystem and enabling more efficient resource collaboration at a lower cost have become a priority for core firms.

2.2. Behaviours of Core Firms

The health and vitality of digital platform ecosystems fundamentally depend on the compatibility of ecosystem participants and the harmony of their relationships [1,2]. Among these factors, the behaviours of core firms play a decisive role in stabilising relationships among ecosystem participants and shaping the evolutionary development of the ecosystem [6,10,29]. Whether core firms can guide the development of digital ecosystems depends mainly on two aspects: first, their ability to shape external opportunity spaces, namely ecological niche creativity [1,7]; and second, their willingness to allocate key resources, namely key resource sharing intention [49,50]. These two dimensions can be regarded as key manifestations of the platform leadership of core firms in digital ecosystems. Specifically, they are reflected in the following ways.

Ecological niche creativity refers to the ability of core firms to create, expand, and maintain sustainable growth spaces for other members of the ecosystem. Originating in biology and subsequently introduced into management research, the concept describes the capacity of core firms to shape the structure and function of an ecosystem [1,6,29]. In digital platform practice, ecological niche creativity is reflected in the provision of standardised technical tools, internal and external ecological data information, and convenient market access channels. These mechanisms systematically reduce the innovation thresholds and operating costs of actors, thereby opening up distinctive and valuable positions for their survival and development [7,51]. Ecological niche creation is not a one-off activity; rather, it is a dynamic process of collaboration and resource integration that is especially important for sustainable cooperation and circular economy models [52,53]. By continuously investing resources to optimise ecosystem niches, core firms can consequently convert this creativity into productivity and diversity across the ecosystem network, thereby forming their own pathway of value creation [3].

Key resource sharing intention refers to the willingness of core firms to share strategic resources—such as technology, knowledge, data, and market channels—with dependent actors [40,54,55]. This is not merely a simple resource exchange, but a form of deep strategic empowerment. Its purpose is to stimulate positive network effects by promoting the effective flow and integration of resources within the ecosystem, thereby jointly enhancing overall ecosystem value [1,2,10]. Resource sharing helps actors reduce innovation costs, develop complementary products, increase their recognition of and dependence on core

firms, enhance the reputation of core firms, and thereby improve the overall attractiveness of the platform and the embeddedness of actors within it [45]. Excessive openness, however, may weaken the distinctive advantages of core firms and erode their strategic control [32,56]. Core firms should therefore adopt a prudent approach when sharing key resources.

In contrast to positive behaviours such as ecological niche creativity and key resource sharing intention, core firms in digital platforms may also display negative behaviours toward actors in order to maintain their ecosystem position and leadership. For instance, core firms may engage in opportunistic behaviours and exercise manipulative power to mitigate the potential threats and challenges posed by actors [27,57].

Opportunistic behaviour refers to the pursuit of self-interest with guile by one party to a transaction [9]. Within the specific dominant–subordinate relationships characteristic of digital platform ecosystems, core firms may—by virtue of their control over resources, information advantages, and architectural power—engage in various forms of opportunistic behaviours, such as selective information disclosure and violations of implicit contracts. Such behaviours essentially represent a clear departure from the principle of long-term cooperative reciprocity in pursuit of short-term self-interest. Opportunism severely erodes trust within the ecosystem and threatens its stability. It damages the foundation of interorganisational trust. Studies have shown that when actors perceive opportunistic behaviours on the part of core firms, their trust in those firms may be gradually eroded, potentially leading to the deterioration or breakdown of the relationship [24,58]. At the same time, opportunistic behaviour may have profound implications for the sustainability of the ecosystem as a whole and may even trigger cascading negative effects [35].

In digital platform ecosystems, manipulation power refers to the ability of core firms to intervene in, coordinate, and control actors by virtue of their resource advantages. Manipulation power can guide partner behaviour through information-flow regulation, rule resetting, and related mechanisms without imposing explicit penalties. For example, digital platforms may influence the visibility of actors and the efficiency of resource access through algorithmic adjustments, thereby exercising implicit control [59,60]. Drawing on their resource endowments and inherent capability advantages, core firms can exert manipulative influence over actors through technological means and ecosystem rules, thereby steering their evolution within the ecosystem in line with the core firms' intentions [28,61]. This imposes an invisible constraint on the development of actors within the digital ecosystem. Excessive manipulation may cause cognitive dissonance and loss of autonomy among actors [25,58,62], ultimately leading to a breakdown in the relationship between core firms and actors and negatively affecting the development of the digital platform ecosystem.

2.3. Reputation of Core Firms

The reputation of core firms is defined as a strategic asset that reduces complexity and serves as a key antecedent signal in trust judgements [20,63,64]. It performs important signalling and risk-reduction functions under conditions of information asymmetry. In terms of its formation mechanisms, corporate reputation mainly derives from third-party evaluations or public relations, as well as from accumulated evidence of a firm's actual capabilities and behavioural tendencies [65,66]. The former relies primarily on external publicity. Although this type of reputation can be built rapidly, its foundations are relatively fragile. Research shows that trust based on externally publicised reputation tends to remain superficial. Such reputation-based trust and perceptions may quickly unravel when the firm engages in negative behaviours [22,24,67]. The latter derives from actual capabilities and benevolent tendencies accumulated through long-term practice. Reputation grounded in verifiable behaviours can become an intangible asset for a firm, enabling it to attract numerous external collaborators. These collaborators may, in turn, gain addi-

tional opportunities or resources by virtue of their association with such a highly reputable firm [68–70]. It also provides actors with a reliable basis for judging the predictability of the future behaviour of core firms and becomes a prerequisite for building deeper and more resilient trust relationships [21,38]. In digital platform ecosystems, the constructive behaviours displayed by core firms through ecological niche creativity and key resource sharing are important means of fulfilling ecosystem leadership responsibilities and accumulating reputational capital. A strong reputation can attract more external firms into the ecosystem, enhance ecosystem heterogeneity, and promote the expansion of ecosystem boundaries [10,18,71]. At the same time, while enhancing the heterogeneity of the digital ecosystem, core firms should also attend to the balance among heterogeneous actors and to possible free-riding behaviour associated with high reputation, thereby laying a solid foundation for the sustainable development of digital platform ecosystems.

2.4. Signalling Theory

Signalling theory was proposed by Spence [72] to explain how individuals or organisations convey unobservable attributes through observable behaviours under conditions of information asymmetry. The theory suggests that information-advantaged parties transmit hidden information about their quality, intentions, or capabilities to information-disadvantaged parties through costly or difficult-to-imitate behaviours, thereby influencing the latter's cognition and decision-making. Signal effectiveness depends on two key conditions. First, signals must involve separation costs, meaning that high-quality signal senders can bear costs that low-quality signal senders find prohibitively difficult to imitate. Second, signals must be observable, so that receivers can accurately capture and interpret them [73–75].

However, signalling theory still has several notable limitations. For instance, traditional signalling theory cannot fully prevent misinterpretations that may arise during signal transmission. Furthermore, signal transmission is often subject to delays and differential assessments, which may fail to accurately reflect the sender's true situation—such as the current value of a brand or product. In addition, signalling theory tends to oversimplify real-world interactions by portraying signal transmission as a unidirectional “sender–receiver” process, whereas in practice it constitutes a complex, bidirectional interaction. For example, a receiver's reinterpretation of a signal may significantly alter the sender's original intent. Finally, because both parties rely heavily on signals, they may overlook other critical factors that influence the actual value and behaviour of individuals or organisations [76,77].

The rise of digital ecosystem platforms is gradually transforming the ways in which enterprises transfer knowledge and establish cooperative relationships [78]. Accordingly, the present study argues that applying signalling theory within the context of digital ecosystem platforms can effectively address the aforementioned limitations. For example, information transmission on digital ecosystem platforms can enhance transparency and facilitate information sharing among core firms and other actors. Digital information systems, evaluation mechanisms, and algorithms within these platforms can intuitively assess the niche-creating capabilities of core firms. Moreover, high-frequency digital communication and information sharing among actors can reveal core firms' willingness to share key resources, thereby more accurately reflecting their true value and reputation. Real-time digital feedback, iterative processes, and mutual verification among actors further subject core firms' signals—such as their reputation—to scrutiny within the broader ecosystem network. False signals are likely to deteriorate rapidly under the collective supervision of numerous actors, while authentic signals can accrue a premium through sustained inter-ecosystem cooperation and repeated verification, ultimately fostering stronger trust between core firms and other actors. Finally, this study considers opportunism and the

manipulative power of core firms as important factors that may influence their actual value. By addressing the potential shortcomings of signalling theory, the analysis also examines how these factors affect the reputation value generated by core firms in the context of digital ecosystem platforms.

3. Research Hypotheses

Drawing on signalling theory, this study develops an integrative theoretical model to reveal the internal mechanisms and boundary conditions through which the positive behaviours of core firms shape actors' trust intentions in digital platform ecosystems.

3.1. Ecological Niche Creativity of Core Firms and Trust Intention

In digital platform ecosystems, interfirm trust is crucial for maintaining core firm–actor relationships [35,79,80]. The ecological niche creativity of core firms—that is, their ability to create development spaces and opportunities for actors [1,81]—satisfies one of the three core conditions of trust formation proposed by this study [24] and represents an important antecedent of actors' trust intentions. This is mainly reflected in the fact that ecological niche creativity signals the capability-based trustworthiness of core firms, as it provides direct evidence of their superior competence in technological leadership, market expansion, and ecosystem governance [6,8,82]. As resource-dependent actors, their survival and development within the ecosystem are closely tied to the capabilities of core firms. When actors perceive strong ecological niche creativity on the part of core firms, their concerns about future uncertainty are reduced, which in turn supports the formation of capability-based trust beliefs [24,83]. Consistent with this argument, research on sharing-economy platforms shows that the ability of platform firms to orchestrate resources and provide access to them is central to building sustainable ecosystems and securing partners' trust [50].

Furthermore, strong ecological niche creativity sends a signal that core firms possess the capacity to guide the continuous improvement of digital ecosystems, thereby generating dependence, future confidence, and ability-based cognitive trust among actors. In platform ecosystem contexts, core firms send signals of long-term leadership potential by continuously investing resources to optimise ecosystem structures and expand spaces for innovation. The observability and stability of such capabilities provide an important basis for actors to develop long-term trust [7]. Therefore, this study proposes:

H1. *The ecological niche creativity of core firms has a significant positive effect on the trust intention of actors.*

3.2. Key Resource Sharing Intention of Core Firms and Trust Intention

In digital platform ecosystems, the key resource-sharing intention of core firms captures their willingness to provide actors with access to strategic resources, including technology and knowledge [49], thereby signalling cooperative goodwill. When core firms demonstrate a willingness to actively share key resources, they clearly communicate to actors a relationship orientation based on reciprocity and mutual benefit rather than unilateral extraction. Their continued investment of resources to optimise the ecosystem objectively empowers all participants and can be regarded as a benevolent act of fulfilling platform responsibilities [84–86]. Research shows that intensive and sincere constructive behaviours can directly improve external partners' attitudes, generate positive relational perceptions, and establish initial trust [28].

Moreover, resource-sharing intention reduces actors' perceived relational risk. In ecosystems characterised by power asymmetry, a clear willingness to share resources func-

tions as a relationship-specific investment. It demonstrates the cooperative commitment of core firms and helps stabilise actors' expectations about the future [87–89]. This reduction in perceived risk directly translates into a higher level of relational security and trust intention. In interpersonal trust research, when one party demonstrates capability and benevolent intention, it tends to generate favourable feelings and trust from the other party [24,90]. Similarly, in brand trust research, when a brand demonstrates reliability and benevolent intention, it elicits consumer trust.

Therefore, this study proposes:

H2. *The key resource sharing intention of core firms has a significant positive effect on the trust intention of actors.*

3.3. The Mediating Role of the Reputation of Core Firms

In digital platform ecosystems with relatively asymmetric power structures, actors often struggle to continuously and accurately evaluate the complex and dynamic strategic behaviours of core firms [21,38,84]. Under these conditions, the trust of actors' decisions depends more heavily on a comprehensive signal that is relatively stable, observable, and rich in historical information. The reputation accumulated by core firms through long-term ecological niche creation and key resource sharing goes beyond any single behaviour. It integrates the ability, benevolence, and reliability of core firms into a generalised cognitive label, thereby providing actors with a key basis for evaluating the predictability of the future cooperative behaviour of core firms.

This mediating mechanism has been verified in other studies of interorganisational relationships. For example, in examining the pathway through which green intellectual capital affects firm performance, a study [71] identified business reputation as a key mediator. That study shows that firms' strategic advantages must first be transformed into stable reputational capital before they can be effectively recognised and trusted by external partners and then influence their decisions and interactions. Similarly, in digital platform ecosystems, the value and credibility of the ecological niche, creativity and resource-sharing intention of core firms need to be supported by corporate reputation. Only then can these positive behaviours be consistently perceived by actors and ultimately shape deeper trust intention [23,91,92].

Thus, reputation serves as an important link between the specific strategic behaviours of core firms and the trust of actors. Therefore, this study proposes:

H3a. *The reputation of core firms mediates the relationship between their ecological niche creativity and the trust intention of actors.*

H3b. *The reputation of core firms mediates the relationship between their key resource sharing intention and the trust intention of actors.*

3.4. The Moderating Role of the Opportunistic Behaviour of Core Firms

The reputation of core firms is an important basis for the trust intention of actors, but this positive relationship is moderated by specific relational behaviours. The formation and evolution of inter-organisational trust constitute a dynamic co-evolutionary process [15,37,78], and its formation depends strongly on the quality of interactions within the relationship. Opportunistic behaviour may directly damage the foundation of inter-organisational collaboration [4,93,94]. When actors perceive opportunistic behaviour by core firms, this negative signal creates cognitive conflict with the positive signal conveyed by reputation. Actors may therefore question whether the favourable reputation of a firm,

accumulated through past behaviour, remains a reliable indicator of its future conduct when that firm displays opportunism in current interactions. This doubt may reduce the extent to which actors rely on reputation-based information when forming trust judgements. Moreover, the effectiveness of inter-organisational collaboration depends on the level of trust between the parties [42,87,95]. Opportunistic behaviour sends actors a clear signal of relational risk. Even when core firms have a strong historical reputation, actors may reduce their trust investment because of perceived cooperation risks [58,96,97]. Such negative behaviour interferes with the effective transmission of reputation signals and weakens their role as a basis for trust, thereby affecting ecological coordination. This study proposes:

H4. *The opportunistic behaviour of core firms negatively moderates the relationship between the reputation of core firms and the trust intention of actors.*

3.5. The Moderating Role of the Manipulation Power of Core Firms

The translation of the reputation of core firms into trust is shaped not only by behavioural consistency, but also by structural power conditions embedded in the relationship. Power dynamics are central to understanding the formation and evolution of interorganisational trust [25,98,99]. In digital platform ecosystems, where relationships are inherently characterised by power asymmetry, the way core firms use their power advantages directly shapes how actors interpret signals and make trust judgements.

First, deliberate manipulation by core firms may trigger cognitive dissonance among actors. For example, when actors perceive that core firms rely on manipulative practices to secure undue benefits, even a strong historical reputation may fail to sustain positive interpretations of their motives. Actors may therefore question whether the benevolence signalled by that reputation is genuine [60,75]. Second, excessive reliance on manipulative practices for self-interested gain may compromise the perceived fairness of relational governance within digital platform ecosystems. When actors view such practices as procedurally unfair, their confidence in the future conduct of core firms, and in the digital platform ecosystem more broadly, is likely to decline, thereby eroding their trust in core firms [58,62].

Therefore, this study proposes:

H5. *The manipulation power of core firms negatively moderates the relationship between the reputation of core firms and the trust intention of actors.*

Figure 1 shows the framework of the theoretical model developed in this study.

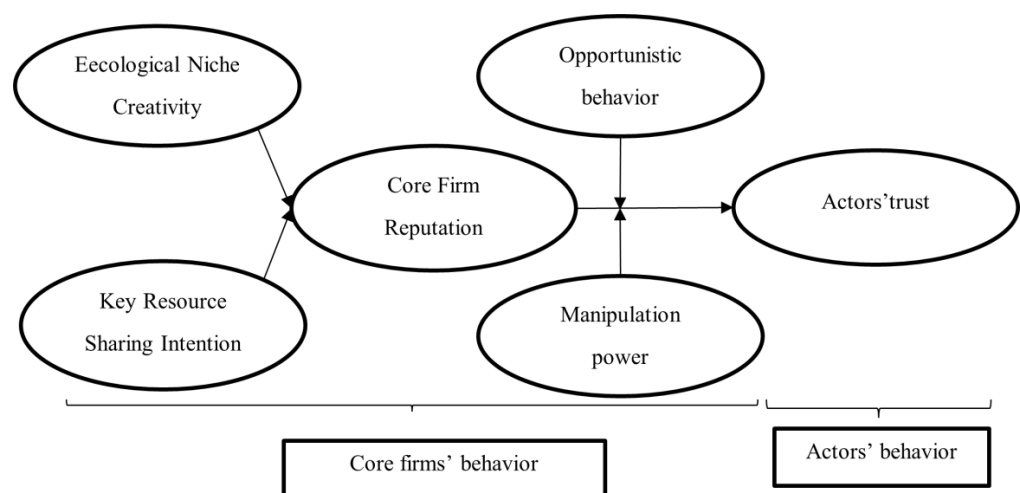


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

4. Research Design

This study investigates high-tech Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) operating within related niche fields in digital platform ecosystems. A target sample of 500 high-tech enterprises was randomly selected from the list of “specialized and innovative SMEs” published by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of China, referred to as Chinese Specialized “Little Giant” enterprises.

The research team contacted each enterprise individually by telephone and email. To refine the sample, two screening criteria were applied: (1) active participation in a well-known domestic digital platform ecosystem while occupying a specialized niche position; and (2) an affirmative response to the question, “In the digital platform ecosystem, do you perceive opportunistic behaviour by the core firm yet still choose to remain in the ecosystem?” Firms satisfying both criteria constituted the final sample. Respondents who had experienced opportunistic behaviour and manipulation by core firms were expected to offer particularly rich insights into the research questions. This approach enables a deeper understanding of how trust is maintained under adverse conditions and provides valuable insights into the mechanisms of trust preservation within digital platform ecosystems. As the study focused on Chinese specialised “little giant” enterprises, the role of marketing and R&D managers in the strategic decision-making of these firms needed to be considered. Prior research indicates that the recommendations of marketing and R&D managers could significantly influence strategic decision-making in Chinese “specialised and innovative SMEs” [99–102]. Moreover, marketing and R&D managers are likely to have a comprehensive understanding of collaborative projects and a broader awareness of the role of co-development in their respective firms, which is highly consistent with the ecosystem concept [32,103,104]. Accordingly, managers from the marketing and R&D departments of these enterprises were invited to complete the questionnaire and received a small incentive for their participation.

The questionnaire was originally developed in English and was independently translated in parallel by two doctoral lecturers who are native English speakers from the United Kingdom and the United States, respectively. After review and finalisation, a professional translation company back-translated the questionnaire into English. Two English lecturers from the School of Foreign Languages and two native English-speaking lecturers jointly ensured the accuracy of the translation process. In addition, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with 16 ecosystem participants to eliminate ambiguity and improve validity.

From an ethical perspective, participation was entirely voluntary, respondents’ privacy was protected, and approval was obtained from the researchers’ school confirming the academic purpose of the survey. The questionnaire included items based on established scales, adapted to the specific research context. It covered perceived ecological niche creativity of core firms, key resource sharing intention, the reputation of core firms, opportunistic behaviour, manipulation power, trust intention of actors, and background information.

To control for potential external influences, this study included three control variables: (1) cooperation duration (CD); (2) industry tenure (IT); and (3) level of industry competition (LIC). These variables are grounded in prior trust research as plausible confounders [35,83,87]. Their inclusion did not substantively alter the significance or direction of the hypothesised paths, indicating robust results. In total, 347 valid responses were collected, yielding an effective response rate of 87%.

This sampling strategy necessarily excludes actors who exited the ecosystem due to opportunism or manipulation and thus captures a specific subset of participants—those with sufficient tolerance for power imbalance or dependence to remain. The findings should therefore be interpreted as reflecting the trust formation mechanisms of retained actors rather than those of all ecosystem participants.

5. Data Analysis

5.1. Descriptive Analysis

This study employed structural equation modelling and used SPSS 26.0 and Mplus 7.4 to estimate and test the relevant models [8,42,44]. First, descriptive statistics for the characteristics of the surveyed firms are reported, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the surveyed enterprises.

Statistical Variables	Categories	Frequency	Ratio (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Cooperation Duration (CD)	Less than 1 year	13	3.7	3.7
	1–2 years	28	8.1	11.8
	2.1 *–3 years	75	21.6	33.4
	3.1–4 years	88	25.4	58.8
	4.1–5 years	51	14.7	73.5
	>5 years	92	26.5	100.0
Industry Tenure (IT)	<3 years	7	2.0	2.0
	3–5 years	35	10.1	12.1
	5.1–7 years	60	17.3	29.4
	7.1–9 years	62	17.9	47.3
	9.1–11 years	55	15.9	63.1
	>11 years	128	36.9	100.0
Level of Industry Competition (LIC)	Not intense at all	1	0.3	0.3
	Not very intense	3	0.9	1.2
	Normal	32	9.2	10.4
	Somewhat intense	225	64.8	75.2
	Very intense	86	24.8	100.0

Note: Sample size = 347; Cooperation Duration: CD; Industry Tenure: IT; Level of Industry Competition: LIC.

* 2.1 years: 2 years and 1 month, with the remaining durations following the same format.

In terms of sample characteristics, the distribution of cooperation duration indicates that firms cooperating with core firms for more than five years account for the largest proportion of the sample (26.5%). This is followed by firms with a cooperation duration of 3–4 years (25.4%) and those with a duration of 2–3 years (21.6%). Overall, the sample covers all categories of cooperation duration, indicating diversity in the stages of core firm–actor relationships. With regard to industry tenure, firms that have operated in their respective industries for more than 11 years represent the largest proportion (36.9%). Firms with an industry tenure of 7–9 years account for 17.9%, followed by those with 5–7 years (17.3%) and 9–11 years (15.9%). This suggests that the sample is mainly composed of relatively mature firms, while still covering firms at different stages of development. In terms of the perceived intensity of industry competition, most firms reported relatively strong competitive pressure: 64.8% described industry competition as “somewhat intense”, and 24.8% as “very intense”, whereas only a small proportion reported low or moderate levels of competition. Taken together, the surveyed firms are broadly distributed in terms of cooperation duration, industry tenure, and perceived industry competition. This distribution broadly corresponds to the actual composition of actors in platform ecosystems, indicating a reasonable degree of representativeness and providing an appropriate basis for the subsequent empirical analysis.

5.2. Measurement Model

First, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted using SPSS 26.0, after which the measurement scales were refined. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was then per-

formed using Mplus 7.4 to assess the reliability and validity of the measurement scales [105]. The CFA results indicated a good model fit: ($\chi^2/df = 1.73$, CFI = 0.935, TLI = 0.927, RMSEA = 0.050, SRMR = 0.051, and PCLOSE = 0.000). Overall, the fit indices satisfied the recommended criteria, suggesting that the measurement model fitted the data well [106].

The results of the measurement model indicate that most standardised factor loadings exceeded 0.70 and that the average variance extracted (AVE) values were above 0.50, indicating satisfactory convergent validity [105]. The composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.83 to 0.90, while Cronbach's α coefficients ranged from 0.69 to 0.86, suggesting acceptable reliability of the measures (see Table 2). The full measurement items for all constructs are provided in Appendix A (Table A1).

Table 2. Results for reliability and convergence validity in CFA.

Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
OPTBH1	0.73	0.84	0.88	0.52
OPTBH2	0.69			
OPTBH3	0.73			
OPTBH4	0.74			
OPTBH6	0.78			
OPTBH7	0.70			
OPTBH8	0.69			
ACENP1	0.79	0.70	0.84	0.63
ACENP2	0.79			
ACENP4	0.81			
KRCSI1	0.83	0.86	0.90	0.65
KRCSI2	0.83			
KRCSI3	0.82			
KRCSI4	0.81			
KRCSI5	0.75			
MANPW1	0.79	0.84	0.89	0.62
MANPW2	0.81			
MANPW3	0.82			
MANPW4	0.75			
MANPW5	0.77			
TRVIP4	0.78	0.80	0.86	0.56
TRVIP5	0.77			
TRVIP6	0.76			
TRVIP7	0.75			
TRVIP9	0.67			
CFREP1	0.75	0.69	0.83	0.62
CFREP2	0.80			
CFREP3	0.81			

Note: ACENP represents Ecological Niche Creativity; KRCSI represents Key Resource Sharing Intention; CFREP represents Core Firms Reputation; TRVIP represents Actors' Trust intention; OPTBH represents Opportunism of Core firms; MANPW represents Manipulation Power of Core firms.

In addition, to assess discriminant validity among the variables, this study compared the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each latent construct with its correlations with the other constructs. As shown in Table 3, the values on the diagonal are greater than the absolute values of the corresponding inter-construct correlations, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity among the constructs. Taken together, the results demonstrate that the data exhibit acceptable reliability and validity, thereby providing a sound basis for the subsequent structural model analysis.

Table 3. Correlation matrices and the square root of AVE.

	ACENP	KRCSI	CFREP	OPTBH	MANPW	TRVIP
ACENP	0.79					
KRCSI	0.56 **	0.81				
CFREP	0.51 **	0.36 **	0.79			
OPTBH	−0.28 **	−0.24 **	−0.25 *	0.72		
MANPW	0.00	−0.10	0.05	0.26 **	0.79	
TRVIP	0.51 **	0.57 **	0.44 **	−0.33 **	−0.16 **	0.75

Note: * indicates $p < 0.05$, ** indicates $p < 0.01$; ACENP represents Ecological Niche Creativity; KRCSI represents Key Resource Sharing Intention; CFREP represents Core Firms Reputation; TRVIP represents Actors' Trust intention; OPTBH represents Opportunism of Core firms; MANPW represents Manipulation Power of Core firms.

5.3. Cmb Test

To address the potential for common method bias (CMB), a concern in studies that utilise the same measurement method for multiple variables [106,107], both procedural and statistical remedies were implemented.

Procedural Remedies: Respondent anonymity and confidentiality were assured to reduce evaluation apprehension. The questionnaire also emphasised that there were no correct or incorrect answers, thereby reducing social desirability pressures.

Statistical Remedies: Harman's single-factor test was conducted to assess whether a single factor could account for the majority of the variance among all measured variables [108,109]. The single-factor model yielded a poor fit to the data ($\chi^2/\text{df} = 6.38$, CFI = 0.50, TLI = 0.46, RMSEA = 0.13, SRMR = 0.13), indicating that no single dominant factor emerged and that common method bias is unlikely to be a serious concern.

Taken together, these procedural and statistical safeguards suggest that CMB is unlikely to seriously threaten the validity of the findings.

5.4. Main Effect Analysis

First, the main effects of ACENP and KRCSI on TRVIP were examined. The structural model showed an acceptable fit to the data: ($\chi^2/\text{df} = 1.66$, CFI = 0.923, TLI = 0.915, RMSEA = 0.044, SRMR = 0.063, and PCLOSE = 0.000). The results indicate that ecological niche creativity has a significant positive effect on actors' trust intention, thereby supporting H1. The key resource sharing intention also has a significant positive effect on actors' trust intention, thereby supporting H2 (see Table 4).

Table 4. Main-effect path test results.

Hypothesis	Path	Standardized Path Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Value	p-Value	Significance
H1	ACENP-TRVIP	0.549	0.097	5.653	0.00	***
H2	KRCSI-TRVIP	0.251	0.099	2.546	0.013	*

Note: ACENP represents Ecological Niche Creativity; KRCSI represents Key Resource Sharing Intention; TRVIP represents Actors' Trust intention. * indicates $p < 0.05$, *** indicates $p < 0.001$.

5.5. Mediation-Effect Path Test

To test the mediating effect of the reputation of core firms in the relationships between the ecological niche creativity of core firms, key resource sharing intention, and actors' trust intention, this study employed a bootstrapping procedure. As a non-parametric resampling technique, bootstrapping can effectively address potential non-normality in the sampling distribution of indirect effects, thereby improving the robustness of mediation testing.

First, the model testing the mediating role of CFREP between ACENP and TRVIP (H3a) showed an acceptable overall fit: ($\chi^2/\text{df} = 1.69$; CFI = 0.92; TLI = 0.91; RMSEA = 0.04;

SRMR = 0.06; PCLOSE = 0.00). The bootstrapping results showed that the indirect effect of ACENP on TRVIP through CFREP was 0.046 ($p < 0.001$), with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval [0.21, 0.31] that did not include zero. The total effect was 0.76 ($p < 0.001$), and the direct effect remained significant after including the mediator (0.71, $p < 0.001$), indicating partial mediation. Therefore, H3a was supported.

Second, the results of the hypothesised mediation model testing the mediating role of CFREP between KRCSI and TRVIP (H3b) indicated a satisfactory overall fit: ($\chi^2/df = 1.80$, CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.05, and SRMR = 0.07; PCLOSE = 0.00). The bootstrapping results showed that the indirect effect of KRCSI on TRVIP through CFREP was 0.151 ($p < 0.001$), with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval [0.02, 0.28] that did not include zero. The total effect was 0.69 ($p < 0.001$), and the direct effect remained significant after including the mediator (0.53, $p < 0.001$), indicating partial mediation. Therefore, H3b was supported.

In summary, the reputation of core firms plays a significant mediating role in the relationships between the ecological niche creativity of core firms, key resource sharing intention, and actors' trust intention. Accordingly, H3a and H3b were both empirically supported (see Table 5).

Table 5. Mediation-effect test results.

Hypothesis	Path	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Standardized Path Coefficient	Confidence Interval	p-Value	Significance
H3a	ACENP → CFREP → TRVIP	0.76	0.71	0.046	[0.21, 0.31]	0.00	***
H3b	KRCSI → CFREP → TRVIP	0.69	0.53	0.151	[0.02, 0.28]	0.00	***

Note: ACENP represents Ecological Niche Creativity; KRCSI represents Key Resource Sharing Intention; CFREP represents Core Firms Reputation; TRVIP represents Actors' Trust intention. *** indicates $p < 0.001$.

5.6. Moderating-Effect Path Test

This study primarily employed the Latent Moderated Structural Equations (LMS) method to analyze moderating effects. Given that the LMS model does not produce traditional model fit indices or provide variance explained for latent interactions, a comparison was made between the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) of a non-nested baseline model and a nested model that incorporates moderating variables. Lower values of AIC and BIC suggest a reduced discrepancy between the hypothesized (nested) model and the true (non-nested) baseline model, indicating that the nested model offers superior fit and parsimony [32,110–112].

The baseline non-nested model, lacking moderating variables, demonstrates acceptable fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 706.497/445 = 1.59$, CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.04, SRMR = 0.06, and PCLOSE = 0.00. Notably, the AIC and BIC values for the nested model that includes moderating variables are lower than those of the baseline model (AIC = 35,678.74; BIC = 36,548.76) (see Table 6). Consequently, the nested models that incorporate moderators (H4 and H5) exhibit improved model fit and parsimony.

Mplus 7.4 was used to test the moderating effects of the opportunistic behaviour of core firms and manipulation power on the relationship between the reputation of core firms and trust intention [110,111] (see Table 7). The test results are as follows. For the CFREP → TRVIP path with OPTBH as the moderator, the interaction term coefficient was -0.24 ($p < 0.05$), indicating a significant negative moderating effect of opportunistic behaviour. In other words, as opportunistic behaviour increases, the positive effect of the reputation of core firms on actors' trust intention is weakened. Therefore, H4 was supported. For the CFREP → TRVIP path with MANPW as the moderator, the interaction

term coefficient was 0.41 ($p < 0.05$), indicating a significant positive moderating effect of manipulation power. This finding suggests that the power imbalance and intermittent reinforcement between the core firm and ecosystem actors may generate pragmatic trust under limited alternatives. Therefore, H5 was not supported.

Table 6. Comparison of information criterion indices for the baseline model and moderation effects models (H4–H5).

Model Type	Akaike (AIC)	Bayesian (BIC)
Baseline Model:	35,678.74	36,548.76
Moderation Effects Models (H4–H5):		
H4: CFREP → TRVIP (OPTBH)	35,655.28	36,352.01
H5: CFREP → TRVIP (MANPW)	35,636.82	36,333.54

Note: CFREP represents Core Firms Reputation; TRVIP represents Actors' Trust intention; OPTBH represents Opportunism of Core Firm; MANPW represents Manipulation Power of Core firm.

Table 7. Moderating-effect test results.

Hypothesis	Path	Moderation Variables	Interaction Terms	Control Variables	Results
H4	CFREP → TRVIP (OPTBH)	OPTBH: −0.07 (−0.44)	CFREXOPTB: −0.24 * (−2.14)	CD 0.024 a (0.653) IT −0.077 * (−2.396) LIC −0.134 a (−1.512)	Supported
H5	CFREP → TRVIP (MANPW)	MANPW: −0.39 (−3.22)	CFREXMANP: 0.41 * (2.54)	CD 0.031 a (0.839) IT −0.067 * (−2.135) LIC −0.078 a (−0.854)	Unsupported

Note: CFREP represents Core Firms Reputation; TRVIP represents Actors' Trust intention; OPTBH represents Opportunism of Core firms; MANPW represents Manipulation Power of Core firms; Cooperation Duration: CD; Industry Tenure: IT; Level of Industry Competition: LIC. * 2.1 years: 2 years and 1 month, with the remaining durations following the same format. * indicates $p < 0.05$ and a: $p > 0.05$.

The non-significant effects of cooperation duration and perceived industry competition suggest that these factors do not account for the observed relationships between reputation, opportunism, manipulation power, and trust intention. Notably, industry tenure exhibited a modest negative effect, implying that more experienced actors may be more cautious in their trust evaluations. Overall, the main results remained stable after controlling for these variables.

6. Discussion

The empirical results of this study show that both ecological niche creativity and key resource sharing intention positively influence actors' trust intention. These findings support recent studies on the role of strategic enabling behaviours in promoting inter-organisational trust [31,113,114]. Specifically, by creating development spaces and facilitating actors' access to key resources, core firms can significantly enhance actors' confidence in collaboration. In addition, this study confirms the mediating role of the reputation of core firms in the relationships between ecological niche creativity, key resource sharing intention, and actors' trust intention. This further suggests that, in platform ecosystems, specific positive behaviours need to operate through the reputation of core firms before they can be effectively recognised and translated into stronger trust among actors [20,115,116]. This finding verifies the signalling role of reputation in inter-organisational relationships [38,91], echoes empirical research that positions reputation as a mediating mechanism between specific behaviours and trust [18,71], and extends the application of reputation signalling theory to the context of digital platform ecosystems [21,26].

The results also show that the opportunistic behaviour of core firms negatively moderates the relationship between reputation and trust intention, indicating that opportunistic

behaviour weakens the positive effect of reputation on trust. This finding is consistent with existing research on the negative effects of opportunistic behaviour. For example, Wathne and Heide [9] argue that opportunistic behaviour undermines the foundation of inter-organisational trust; Mysen et al. [44] further demonstrate its erosive effect on trust in business relationships; and Zhou et al. [117] find that opportunistic behaviour obstructs collaborative relationships in sustainable innovation processes. By contrast, the manipulation power of core firms positively moderates the relationship between reputation and trust intention, which is inconsistent with our original hypothesis. Traditional research suggests that when firms perceive themselves, or the relationship in which they are embedded, as being manipulated and their interests as being harmed, they may regard themselves as occupying an unfair position in the relationship or transaction, develop distrust towards their relational counterpart, and may even terminate the sustainability of the relationship [62,116].

However, exploratory interviews with actors revealed a complex pattern: despite experiencing manipulation, participants remained in the relationship due to intermittent rewards and perceived ecosystem value. We suggest that this counterintuitive finding reflects pragmatic trust under limited alternatives. In power-imbalanced ecosystems, actors may express trust not out of genuine belief in the core firm's benevolence, but because exit costs outweigh the perceived risks of staying [35,87]. This aligns with research showing that weaker partners may continue cooperation out of perceived necessity rather than trust per se [25,98].

7. Conclusions and Future Research

7.1. Research Conclusions

Drawing on signalling theory, this study examined how ecological niche creativity and key resource-sharing intention influence actors' trust intention through the reputation of core firms, and further investigated the moderating roles of opportunistic behaviour and manipulation power. The findings address gaps in prior research and confirm the applicability of signalling theory in the context of digital platform ecosystems.

More specifically, the findings show that constructive behaviours by core firms—such as expanding spaces for innovation and providing actors with access to key resources—can effectively reduce actors' perceived uncertainty and establish a basis for trust grounded in capability and benevolence. In the context of digital platform ecosystems, these results reinforce prior research on the antecedents of trust. Regarding the reputation of core firms, this study argues that it functions as a signal through which the positive behaviours of core firms are communicated, thereby shaping actors' trust intention. This also offers a means to address the problem of “superficial trust” or fragile trust arising from corporate reputation based primarily on public word of mouth or third-party promotion. In addition, this study confirms that the opportunistic behaviour of core firms in digital platform ecosystems undermines actors' trust intention, which is consistent with common theoretical and practical expectations. Notably, manipulation power strengthens the relationship between the reputation of core firms and actors' trust intention—a finding that differs from much of the existing literature. One possible explanation is the existence of pragmatic trust under limited alternatives.

7.2. Theoretical Implications

The core contribution of this study is to clarify the mechanisms through which trust relationships between core firms and actors are established in digital platform ecosystems, thereby addressing the gap in prior research on core firm–actor trust relationships within such ecosystems. The findings suggest that the ecological niche creativity and key resource-

sharing intention of core firms enhance actors' trust intention through the mediating role of core firm reputation.

Furthermore, concerning the issue of "superficial trust" derived from public reputation among core firms within the current digital ecosystem, this study confirms that the reputation of core firms—built on capabilities and intentions for sharing key resources—serves as a mediating variable and represents the only proven and genuine foundation for establishing true trust among actors. Our findings provide compelling evidence to support the argument that reputations of core firms generated based on public opinion or third-party promotion are inherently fragile. However, this kind of reputation of the core firm can serve as a cognitive shortcut (heuristic) for nascent actors or firms outside the ecosystem, thereby reducing complexity in contemporary business environments.

Moreover, given the limited attention paid in platform ecosystem research to the developmental trajectories and behaviours of actors, this study adopts the perspective of actors to examine how core firms should act in order to gain their trust and what behaviours core firms should avoid so as to prevent the erosion of such trust relationships. Unlike prior studies that analyse platform ecosystems mainly from the perspective of core firms or the ecosystem as a whole, this study focuses on the many less powerful participants within digital ecosystems. This perspective enables a more balanced understanding of the real problems embedded in digital ecosystems and provides practically grounded recommendations for the development of digital platform ecosystems.

Finally, our empirical model suggests that signalling theory can be validated within digital platform ecosystems, while also addressing its inherent limitations at two levels. Technically, digital platforms enhance information transparency and real-time feedback, thereby reducing signal misinterpretation and transmission lags. Actors collectively assess core firm reputation through distributed evaluation, rather than relying solely on sender cost-bearing. Theoretically, this modifies three core assumptions: (1) signal transmission shifts from unidirectional to bidirectional; (2) credibility is verified through collective ratings, not merely sender costs; and (3) information asymmetry, which is taken as given in classical theory, is partially dissolved by platform transparency. The inclusion of opportunism and manipulation power as moderators further compensates for signalling theory's neglect of contextual factors. Together, these modifications imply that trust in platform ecosystems is sustained through qualitatively different processes of distributed validation.

7.3. Managerial Implications

For core firms, first, they should continue to strengthen their ecological niche creativity by expanding opportunities for technological innovation and market access, thereby generating sustainable development prospects for other actors. Second, they should enhance the transparency of their intention to share key resources, enabling actors to genuinely perceive their willingness to collaborate. In addition, when building corporate reputation, core firms should place greater emphasis on the authentic trust generated by their ecological niche creativity and their intention to share key resources. They should also be cautious about relying excessively on public promotion and third-party evaluations, as such reliance may produce only "superficial trust" and leave the ecosystem vulnerable to collapse in the face of external crises. Furthermore, core firms should strictly constrain opportunistic behaviour to prevent the erosion of long-term trust. Finally, core firms should exercise manipulative tendencies with caution to avoid fostering pragmatic trust under limited alternatives among ecosystem actors. We recommend that they avoid such practices, thereby enhancing the credibility of reputation signals and strengthening foundational trust within the digital platform ecosystem.

For actors, first, when assessing the ecological niche creativity of core firms, they should focus on whether core firms continuously expand spaces for innovation, rather than merely responding to short-term visibility or momentum. Second, when evaluating the intention to share key resources, actors should examine the actual effects and stability of resource access to determine whether core firms demonstrate a genuine willingness to empower them. Third, when identifying opportunistic behaviour, actors should remain vigilant regarding possible self-interested actions by core firms and avoid overlooking current negative signals due to excessive reliance on historical reputation. Finally, when responding to manipulative tendencies, ecosystem actors should relinquish any idealized perceptions of the core firm and break free from cycles of abuse interspersed with intermittent acts of kindness. On this basis, actors should continue to enhance their own core capabilities and expand multi-platform collaboration.

7.4. Limitations and Future Research

Although this study makes meaningful progress in examining the mechanisms through which the positive behaviours of core firms influence actors' trust intention, it also has several limitations that point to directions for future research.

First, this study adopts a single perspective, namely that of actors, and examines their perceptions of the behaviours and reputation of core firms, as well as the mechanisms through which trust is formed. However, within the complex interactions of digital platform ecosystems, the strategic intentions of core firms, their resource constraints, and the flow of digital information may also shape the dynamic evolution of core firm–actor relationships. Future research could incorporate the perspective of core firms and use surveys or in-depth case studies to examine, in a more systematic manner, cognitive differences and dynamic alignment mechanisms between the two parties in the process of trust building.

Second, this study focuses on a general analysis of digital platform ecosystems and does not fully account for the potential influence of contextual factors such as industry type and stage of platform development. Resource dependence structures across industries, governance priorities at different stages of platform development, and the degree of power asymmetry generated by different technological architectures may all moderate the mechanisms through which trust is formed. Future research could conduct comparative studies across industries and platform development stages in order to enhance the contextual adaptability and explanatory power of the theory.

Third, this study mainly relies on cross-sectional survey data. Although such data are useful for testing associations among variables, they are less able to capture the dynamic and temporal effects involved in the construction and evolution of trust. As a relational psychological state, trust is formed, strengthened, disrupted and repaired through a continuous process of evolution. Future research could adopt longitudinal research designs, dynamic panel data, or process-based case studies to reveal more fully the trajectories, critical turning points and influencing factors involved in the evolution of trust in platform ecosystems.

Fourth, the positive moderating effect of manipulation power was unexpected and warrants further investigation. While we have interpreted this finding as reflecting dependence under power asymmetry and constrained trust, future research could explore alternative explanations. For instance, qualitative or experimental designs may examine whether psychological mechanisms such as trauma bonding play a role in power-imbalanced platform relationships, a possibility that our survey-based design could not directly test.

In addition, this study focuses primarily on the mediating role of corporate reputation and the moderating roles of opportunistic behaviour and manipulation power, while giving limited attention to other potential mechanisms within digital platform ecosystems. Future research could further incorporate factors such as digital governance mechanisms, cultural

differences and institutional environments in order to develop a more systematic and multidimensional theoretical framework for platform-based trust. Moreover, this study should explore the perspectives of actors who have exited the ecosystem to balance our findings and investigate the broader implications of opportunism and the manipulation power of the core firm on trust dynamics.

Finally, although this study helps to validate the general applicability of the theoretical model, it provides limited detailed insight into the deeper motivations, cognitive processes and contextual interactions underlying the behaviours of core firms and actors. Future research could adopt mixed-methods approaches, combining interviews, observation, textual analysis and other qualitative methods, to examine the micro-level mechanisms and complex processes through which trust is constructed in digital platform ecosystems. Such work would provide richer insights for both theoretical development and managerial practice.

Author Contributions: S.Z.: Writing—review and editing, Writing—original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. R.W.: Writing—review and editing, Writing—original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis. Z.X.: Writing—review and editing, Writing—original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research is supported by the National Social Science Fund of China: [Grant Number 25BGL256].

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to its minimal-risk organisational and academic research nature, and institutional exemption confirmation was provided by the Business School, Xiangtan University.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained verbally from all participants involved in the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the discussions and the intended academic use of the data.

Data Availability Statement: Dataset available on request from the authors.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Scales.

Core Variables	Index	Scale Items	Items Source
Opportunism of Core firms (OPTBH)	OPTBH1	Engage in dishonest behavior.	Hsieh (2010) [118]
	OPTBH2	Providing incomplete or misleading information.	
	OPTBH3	Failed to provide effective support or sufficient resources.	
	OPTBH4	Violate formal or informal agreements.	
	OPTBH5 *	Make slight changes to some of the consensus reached during the cooperation.	
	OPTBH6	It involves speculative behavior.	
	OPTBH7	Privately occupy or misappropriate our technical knowledge.	
	OPTBH8	There are unreasonable standards and excessive price suppression on the products we provide.	
Ecological Niche Creativity (ACENP)	ACENP1	The core enterprise will train and exchange with us on new capabilities that are conducive to adapting to market changes within the ecosystem it leads, in order to enhance our comprehensive strength.	Xie X et al. (2022) [119]
	ACENP2	The core enterprise will regularly leverage the opportunities arising from the updating of technical resources within the system to help us expand our products and services within the ecosystem.	
	ACENP3 *	Core enterprises often seek and integrate new ecosystem partners to generate and capitalize on new opportunities.	
	ACENP4	The core enterprise has significantly improved the internal processes of our ecosystem, including business management processes and product manufacturing processes.	

Table A1. Cont.

Core Variables	Index	Scale Items	Items Source
Key Resource Sharing Intention (KRCSI)	KRCSI1	Core enterprises typically share their key resources (such as knowledge, technology, etc.) with us.	Bock&Kim (2002) [49]
	KRCSI2	The core enterprise will attempt to share its key resources with us in a more efficient manner.	
	KRCSI3	In future collaborations, the core enterprise will share more of its key resources with us.	
	KRCSI4	If it is beneficial to the development of the ecosystem, the core enterprise will share its key resources with any of our affiliated niche enterprises.	
	KRCSI5	The core enterprise always provides its key resources in response to our requests.	
Manipulation Power of Core firms (MANPW)	MANPW1	If we fail to comply with the requirements of the core enterprise, we will face economic and other penalties.	Jain et al. (2014) [120]
	MANPW2	If we do not adhere to the requirements of the core enterprise, it threatens to revoke the commitments initially made to us.	
	MANPW3	If we do not comply with the requirements of the core enterprise, it will refuse to provide us with important support.	
	MANPW4	If we do not comply with the requirements of the core enterprise, it will threaten to take legal action against us.	
	MANPW5	In order to make us comply with its demands, the core enterprise will threaten to cooperate with our substitutes.	
Actors' Trust intention (TRVIP)	TRVIP1 *	When transactions need to be conducted in the manner and with the outcomes we envision, the technological proficiency demonstrated by core enterprises	Bhattacharjee (2002) [121]
	TRVIP2 *	When it comes to conducting transactions in the manner and achieving the outcomes we envision, the level of expertise demonstrated by core enterprises is crucial	
	TRVIP3 *	In terms of meeting our needs, the capabilities of core enterprises	
	TRVIP4	When handling commercial transactions or disputes, the fairness of core enterprises	
	TRVIP5	When providing corresponding supporting services for our affiliated niche enterprises, the fairness of core enterprises	
	TRVIP6	When our internal data is involved in the process of ecological trading, the integrity of the core enterprise is crucial	
	TRVIP7	The level of enthusiasm of core enterprises in addressing the issues we are concerned about	
	TRVIP8 *	Core enterprises tend to prefer cooperation with us	
	TRVIP9	The core enterprise meets our needs	
Core Firms Reputation (CFREP)	CFREP1	The core enterprise of the ecosystem we are part of is a highly respected company.	Keh & Xie (2009) [122]
	CFREP2	The core enterprise of the ecosystem we are part of is a successful company.	
	CFREP3	The core enterprise of the ecosystem we are part of is a company with substantial strength.	

Note(s): * Deleted scale items.

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