



Integrating social sustainability in startups: an analysis of internal and external drivers, mediators, and performance outcomes

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Abstract

Startups, characterized by agility and innovative potential, are uniquely positioned to integrate social sustainability practices. Many scholars regard social sustainability as not only inherently important but also as a key driver of long-term competitive advantage. Consequently, it is a critical factor that new ventures must integrate into their business models. Despite its importance, research on social sustainability practices within startups remains scarce. This article explores the theme, focusing on its antecedents, implementation levers, and effects. The study adopts a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 51 startups from different sectors, of different size, and at different stages of development. The finding suggests that awareness of social sustainability and implementation of social sustainability strategies, varies significantly among startups. These variations are influenced by both internal factors, such as company culture, team composition, and organizational flexibility, as well as external factors, such as ecosystems, resource availability, and supplier relationships. While formal sustainability policies are often limited due to the lean and adaptive nature of startups, various informal activities aimed at employees, clients, and other stakeholders demonstrate a strong belief in the value of social sustainability. The results have been synthesized into a framework summarizing the variables and complex relationships that characterize social sustainability dynamics within startups. The study provides a basis for analyzing social sustainable practices in new ventures, but also highlights the need for further research to investigate the influence of demographic, political and cultural variables on sustainability awareness and performance.

Keywords Social sustainability · Startups · Innovation · Entrepreneurship · Performance · Awareness

JEL Classification O - Economic Development, Innovation, Technological Change, and Growth

1 Introduction

In recent years, social sustainability has gained prominence in both academic research and business practice, emerging as a key pillar for ensuring long-term growth and longevity of companies (Schönborn et al. 2019). It refers to a society's capacity to sustain and enhance the well-being of its people over time, supported by systems, structures, and relationships that foster equity, inclusion, and quality of life (Mismir et al. 2017). In this study, we consider social sustainability at an organizational level. It encompasses both internal dimensions such as employee well-being, equity, and inclusion, and external dimensions including community engagement, stakeholder relationships, and broader social impact. Rising awareness among consumers, investors, and policymakers about the social implications of economic activities has elevated social sustainability to a strategic business priority, including startups (Garriga and Melé 2004; Visvizi et al. 2022). Startups, with their agility and structural flexibility, are particularly well-positioned to embed socially sustainable practices from the outset, laying the foundation for lasting competitive advantage (Harlin and Berglund 2021). Nevertheless, despite their adaptability, startups often face substantial challenges, limited financial and human resources, pressure to scale rapidly, and short-term survival imperatives, which may hinder the consistent implementation of social sustainability initiatives (Muñoz and Dimov 2015).

Social sustainability extends well beyond the boundaries of corporate social responsibility, positioning itself as a holistic framework that integrates economic impact with the well-being of communities (Porter and Kramer 2011). Recent studies suggest that companies embracing social sustainability not only meet the growing expectations of ethically conscious stakeholders but also benefit from increased resilience, enhanced reputation, and a stronger capacity to attract responsible investors and talent (Garriga and Melé 2004). This is particularly relevant for startups, which are uniquely positioned to embed social sustainability into the very foundation of their business models, contributing to a more ethical and innovative entrepreneurial ecosystem (Bouncken and Kraus 2022). By contrast, established firms often struggle to adopt such practices due to rigid organizational structures, entrenched corporate cultures, and legacy systems that were not designed with sustainability in mind (Porter and Kramer 2011; Trautwein 2021).

The evolution of social sustainability is shaped by global dynamics such as rising social inequality, climate change, digital transformation, and the growing participation of women and minority groups in the labor market, all of which are reshaping consumer expectations and regulatory standards (Kraus et al. 2014). Startups are particularly well-equipped to respond to these challenges through innovative solutions and business models that address complex societal issues directly (Trautwein 2021). While a substantial body of literature has explored social sustainability in large corporations (McIntyre et al. 2016), the startup context remains under-researched.

This study aims to bridge this gap by focusing on how startups develop and implement social sustainability practices, taking into account their distinct characteristics, limited resources, high pressure for growth, and organizational agility. We examine the challenges and enabling factors startups face, and the role of stakeholders in shaping these practices. Understanding these dynamics is essential, as startups often oper-

ate in uncertain environments with low levels of formalization. By uncovering the drivers, mechanisms, and outcomes of social sustainability in startups, this research provides valuable insights for fostering sustainable innovation and informing both entrepreneurial strategy and public policy. Additionally, it explores the role of digital transformation and the long-term benefits of social sustainability in enhancing startups' resilience and competitive positioning. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by providing an in-depth understanding of:

1. What are the internal and external variables that influence the adoption of social sustainability practices in startups?
2. What are the levers through which startups implement social sustainability?
3. What are the economic and competitive benefits, as well as the challenges and costs, associated with the adoption of these practices?

The study involved 51 startups, 20 in the United States and 31 in Italy. The advantage of this comparative approach is that it highlights the cultural and regulatory differences between the two contexts (Hill and Mudambi 2010; Finkle 2012; Gao et al. 2020; El Amrani et al. 2021; Visvizi et al. 2022).

The findings highlight the challenges and opportunities startups face when integrating social sustainability, while also providing a practical framework that managers and entrepreneurs can use to enhance their operations. The framework was used to identify the factors that predispose startups to adopt social sustainability practices (antecedents), the mechanisms they use to implement them (levers), and the resulting performance outcomes. Lastly, performance measures the effects of sustainable practices in terms of creating shared value, enhancing reputation, economic growth, and innovation capacity (Russo and Perrini 2010; Corvello et al. 2023). This model is particularly relevant in a globalized context, where startups often face a multitude of stakeholders, including suppliers, customers, and investors operating in different geographical regions and demanding increasingly high ethical standards (Gereffi et al. 2005).

2 Theoretical background

In this Section we discuss the main contributions in prior literature that provide a foundation for interpreting the phenomenon of social sustainability in startups, exploring the dynamics and challenges that characterize these innovative entities.

2.1 Social sustainability: definition and dimensions

Social sustainability is increasingly recognized not only as an ethical obligation but as a strategic asset for entrepreneurial ventures (Missimer et al. 2017; Harlin and Berglund 2021). For startups operating in contexts marked by volatility, uncertainty, and limited resources, embedding social sustainability from the outset can generate significant advantages. On the internal side, it enhances employee engagement, reinforces organizational identity, and strengthens the capacity to attract and retain

diverse talent (Muñoz and Dimov 2015). Externally, it fosters stakeholder trust, improves brand reputation, and facilitates access to entrepreneurial ecosystems and funding networks where social impact is gaining prominence. Unlike large corporations that often struggle to retrofit sustainability into established, rigid structures, startups have the agility to integrate social sustainability directly into their business models and operational routines, aligning growth strategies with shifting societal expectations. Nonetheless, startups face distinctive challenges in implementing such practices, including the tension between short-term survival and long-term sustainability goals, the need to adapt rapidly to changing environmental demands, and the creative use of constrained resources (Jansson et al. 2017; Florez-Jimenez et al. 2025). In this context, social sustainability emerges not merely as a moral imperative, but as a key enabler of resilience, innovation, and sustained competitive advantage.

2.2 Theoretical foundations for social sustainability in startups

Stakeholder theory, initially developed by Freeman and later expanded by McVea, argues that firms should look beyond maximizing shareholder value and take into account the interests of a broader set of stakeholders. This theoretical lens provides a valuable foundation for understanding how startups can balance the often competing needs of customers, investors, suppliers, and local communities (Freeman and McVea 2001; Morsing and Schultz 2008; Maon et al. 2021; Johannsdottir and Davidsdottir 2024). For startups, typically operating in resource-constrained and uncertain environments, building trust-based relationships becomes a critical strategy for strengthening reputation and fostering long-term sustainability. Such reciprocal relationships contribute to resilient networks that extend beyond formal contracts and are vital during periods of crisis. In this study, stakeholder pressures are conceptualized as external antecedents, while stakeholder engagement practices function as strategic levers for implementing social sustainability.

Complementing this view, the Resource-Based View (RBV) highlights the strategic role of internal assets and capabilities in shaping competitive advantage (Barney 1991; Helfat et al. 2023). In the context of startups, antecedents include intangible resources such as founding values, organizational culture, and initial social capital. The corresponding levers are capabilities like employee training, community engagement, and sustainability-driven innovation initiatives. These assets enable startups to formulate agile, sustainability-oriented strategies that support not only economic performance but also stronger market positioning (Bouncken et al. 2021).

Given the uncertain and dynamic nature of startup environments, Effectuation Theory (Sarasvathy 2001) offers a useful lens for understanding how entrepreneurs develop sustainability strategies using available means. Startups often adopt a flexible, partnership-driven approach rather than pursuing predefined goals, making use of existing resources and relationships to adapt as circumstances evolve.

Social Capital Theory (Filipovic and Arslanagic-Kalajdzic 2023) further explains the value of trust-based networks as critical assets in sustainability implementation. In startups, social capital operates both as an antecedent (pre-existing network ties) and as a lever (community and partner engagement strategies), supporting the diffu-

sion and integration of socially sustainable practices (Gedajlovic et al. 2013; Chang et al. 2024).

In the domain of corporate social responsibility (CSR), Russo and Perrini (2010) observe that SMEs and startups often adopt a more informal and relational approach compared to large firms (Russo and Perrini 2010). This informality fosters trust and direct engagement with stakeholders, which proves particularly effective in fast-changing environments. However, the authors also argue that as startups grow and expand into new markets, adopting more formalized managerial tools may enhance their capacity to address complex sustainability challenges.

Sustainable procurement is another critical area where startups are making strategic choices. Agan et al. (2013) show that startups increasingly select suppliers based on stringent sustainability criteria, not only to enhance reputation, but also to mitigate operational risks (Agan et al. 2013). Environmental certifications such as ISO 14001 serve as important signals of responsible sourcing, helping build credibility with stakeholders, particularly investors. Yet, the effectiveness of such certifications depends on whether sustainability is embedded in core decision-making or merely used for signaling.

Effective collaboration with suppliers has been identified as a key factor in boosting startups' social performance (Sancha et al. 2016; Demir and Lukes 2024). These partnerships foster shared responsibility and promote sustainable practices across the supply chain. Still, Movahedipour et al. (2017) identify several barriers to sustainable supply chain adoption in startups, notably the lack of technological infrastructure. Overcoming such barriers is essential to optimize operations and reduce environmental impact (Movahedipour et al. 2017). Overcoming such barriers is essential to optimize operations and reduce environmental impact.

Johnson et al. (2018) explore how social capital facilitates cross-sector partnerships between NGOs and startups, providing access to critical knowledge and resources that enhance sustainability practices (Johnson et al. 2018). Similarly, Shete et al. (2020) use a fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) to rank key enablers of sustainable innovation, underscoring the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration for balancing social, environmental, and economic objectives (Shete et al. 2020).

Thorlakson et al. (2018) emphasize the role of sustainable procurement in meeting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Thorlakson et al. 2018). Their findings highlight how supplier codes of conduct can help startups ensure high sustainability standards throughout the supply chain, strengthening both corporate integrity and social impact, factors increasingly valued by customers and investors alike (Roig-Tierno et al. 2018).

Leadership also plays a vital role in advancing social sustainability. Harlin and Berglund (2021) stress the importance of inclusive leadership that embraces diversity, enabling startups to foster innovation and build resilient work environments (Harlin and Berglund 2021). Such leadership is instrumental in attracting and retaining talent, while enhancing responsiveness to societal demands. Magee et al. (2012) propose a community-oriented approach that allows startups to deepen their local impact and build authentic relationships with stakeholders (Magee et al. 2012).

To assess performance, Jiang et al. (2018) introduce a sustainability evaluation model that integrates economic, social, and environmental metrics (Jiang et al. 2018).

This framework enables startups to monitor progress holistically and adjust strategies accordingly.

Finally, Daradkeh and Mansoor (2023) highlight the importance of operational flexibility in enabling startups to respond quickly to evolving market conditions while pursuing proactive social sustainability strategies. Their research underscores the role of agility in responsibly managing growth and addressing stakeholder expectations (Daradkeh and Mansoor 2023).

2.3 Social sustainability in tech-enabled startups

Tech-driven startups offer distinct opportunities for embedding social sustainability into their operations. In particular, AI-oriented startups are playing an increasingly pivotal role in advancing sustainable innovation. Bessen et al. (2022) argue that access to proprietary data provides these startups with a strategic advantage, enabling the development of novel solutions and attracting critical investment for long-term sustainability initiatives (Bessen et al. 2022). Exclusive datasets not only foster economic value creation but also enhance startups' capacity to address pressing environmental and social challenges. For instance, AI technologies can be leveraged to analyze complex data related to energy consumption or carbon emissions, helping to identify actionable patterns that contribute to reducing environmental impact.

Nevertheless, Vakkuri et al. (2020) caution that AI development in startups often overlooks ethical considerations (Vakkuri et al. 2020). This gap presents a serious risk, as AI systems can have far-reaching societal effects. Startups that fail to integrate ethical principles into their design and deployment processes risk losing stakeholder trust and may face legal or reputational consequences. To mitigate these risks and maintain a competitive edge, AI-focused startups must adopt responsible innovation practices that take into account the social impact of their technologies (Scartozzi et al. 2025).

Weber et al. (2022) further emphasize the potential of AI as a catalyst for more sustainable and innovative business models (Weber et al. 2022). Their research shows that integrating AI can help startups not only streamline operations but also accelerate the transition toward more deeply embedded sustainability practices (Kraus et al. 2019). AI tools can support energy optimization, reduce waste, and increase overall efficiency, aligning organizational performance with the expectations of environmentally conscious stakeholders and positioning startups as frontrunners in sustainable technological innovation (Jorzik et al. 2024).

Trautwein (2021) explores AI's role in resource management, highlighting how it can improve daily operational efficiency and reduce waste (Trautwein 2021). For instance, AI applications can enhance workforce management by optimizing shift planning and staff allocation based on real-time operational demands. These innovations enable startups to increase productivity, lower operational costs, and respond more effectively to sustainability challenges, strengthening their organizational resilience.

Supply chain resilience also plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of sustainable practices, especially in resource-constrained startup environments. Safari et al. (2024) demonstrate that startups tend to adopt more flexible and adaptive

supply chain management strategies compared to the rigid structures found in larger firms (Safari et al. 2024). This flexibility allows them to navigate disruptions more effectively, optimize resource use, and maintain operational continuity. Their capacity for rapid adaptation makes them particularly adept at implementing innovative, sustainability-oriented solutions even in times of crisis.

Garbie (2015) underscores that the dynamic and evolving nature of startups often makes them more attuned to sustainability issues than mature organizations (Garbie 2015). Startups can promote internal training programs that raise awareness of sustainability challenges and encourage employee engagement in sustainable practices. This heightened sensitivity allows them to embrace innovation quickly and drive positive environmental and social change throughout their operations and supply chains.

In sum, recent literature reinforces and expands upon earlier findings, affirming the growing strategic relevance of social sustainability for startups. Both theoretical and empirical studies suggest that social sustainability is not only a moral obligation but also a key lever for competitiveness and innovation. Nonetheless, important questions remain, particularly regarding how these practices are implemented across different cultural and geographic settings, and how emerging technologies can further accelerate this transformation.

This study aims to contribute to this evolving conversation by offering an updated and in-depth perspective on social sustainability in startups, with a specific focus on stakeholder relationships and supply chain dynamics.

3 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is particularly well-suited to exploring complex and evolving phenomena such as social sustainability in startups. Qualitative methods enable an in-depth examination of topics marked by conceptual ambiguity and limited empirical consensus (Creswell and Poth 2018; Flick 2018). Given the scarcity of consolidated findings in the field, a qualitative approach is especially appropriate for uncovering and interpreting the underlying dynamics of sustainability practices within startup environments. To this end, semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method, supported by the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al. 2013), a widely recognized framework for conducting rigorous theory-building based on qualitative data.

Semi-structured interviews allow for rich, detailed interaction between the researcher and participants, enabling a nuanced understanding of founders' perceptions, motivations, and strategic choices (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). Compared to more rigid tools like surveys, this format provides the necessary flexibility to adapt to emergent themes and probe deeper into issues not initially included in the interview guide. This adaptability is particularly important in the context of social sustainability, where practices are often informal, emergent, and not yet well codified in the literature (Tracy 2019).

The study sample includes 51 startups operating in various sectors across Italy and the United States, selected from a curated database of innovative ventures. The

inclusion of startups from two different national ecosystems was intended to capture a wider variety of sustainability practices, shaped by diverse institutional, regulatory, and cultural conditions. A detailed overview of the sample characteristics is provided in Table 1. Interviews were conducted between April and September 2024, either via 45–60-min video calls or during in-person meetings at startup headquarters. A structured interview protocol (see Appendix A) was used to ensure consistency and replicability across interviews (Yin 2018). This approach enabled a comprehensive exploration of the diverse ways in which startups engage with social sustainability. The heterogeneity of the sample was instrumental in enhancing the external validity of the findings and supporting their applicability across a range of entrepreneurial contexts (Guest et al. 2013).

The interview guide was structured into multiple sections, each designed to explore specific dimensions of social sustainability. Questions focused on internal sustainability policies adopted by startups, the impact of these practices on relationships with customers and suppliers, and the role of sustainability in shaping innovation strategies (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). This structure enabled the collection of rich, targeted data reflecting both operational practices and their broader strategic implications. As a result, the interviews provided a comprehensive view of how social sustainability is interpreted, implemented, and leveraged within startup envi-

Table 1 Overview of the interviewed startups

	Value	%
Total number of startups	51	
Countries of origin		
USA	21	41
Italy	30	59
Sector		
Digital services and consulting	13	25
Healhtech	7	14
Greentech and Sustainability	6	12
IoT and hardware	5	10
Saas	4	8
AI and machine learning	3	6
Robotics and automation	3	6
Socialtech and community	3	6
Edtech	3	6
E-commerce and marketplace	2	4
FinTech	2	4
Revenue ranges (€ milion)		
0–1	38	75
1–5	10	20
5–10	3	6
Company size (# employees)		
1–10	25	49
11–50	22	43
51–100	3	6
100+	1	2
Average interview duration	45–60 min	

ronments, capturing both established routines and emerging innovations. In line with the Gioia methodology, data analysis was conducted in three main phases: first-order coding, second-order coding, and theoretical aggregation. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, that is, until no new themes or insights emerged. During the first-order coding phase, initial concepts were extracted using participants' own language, preserving the authenticity and contextual richness of their perspectives (Saldana 2021). This inductive process helped surface nuanced and diverse interpretations without imposing preconceived frameworks.

In the second-order phase, these first-order codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories, enabling the identification of patterns across the interview dataset and facilitating the emergence of core thematic dimensions. This stage was critical for linking participant-level insights to organizational-level phenomena.

The final stage involved theoretical aggregation, where the thematic categories were further synthesized into overarching theoretical constructs. This step enabled the construction of a coherent and grounded explanatory model of how startups approach and implement social sustainability (Charmaz 2014). The use of the Gioia methodology allowed for the translation of empirical insights into a structured theoretical framework, generating contributions of relevance to both academic literature and managerial practice (Bazeley 2018).

The combination of a rigorous analytical approach, the richness of the qualitative data, and the diversity of the sample provided a robust foundation for developing theoretical insights into social sustainability in startups. Beyond its empirical findings, this study contributes to the broader literature on sustainable entrepreneurship by offering a grounded understanding of how sustainability is enacted in dynamic, resource-constrained, and fast-evolving organizational contexts. It also offers a basis for future research on the integration of social sustainability into early-stage business strategies and operations.

4 Results

The findings of this study offer a structured interpretation of the key factors shaping social sustainability in startups. Drawing on the qualitative analysis of interviews with 51 founders and managers, a comprehensive framework was developed that organizes the emergent variables into four main categories: internal factors, external factors, mediators (levers), and performance outcomes (Table 2).

Table 2 was constructed by systematically identifying salient items from the interview transcripts. These items were grouped into variables, which were then clustered under the broader analytical categories mentioned above. These categories were not predetermined but emerged inductively from the data analysis process, in line with the qualitative methodology employed.

For example, one founder remarked: “When you’re in an environment where certain things are somewhat in the air, you end up considering sustainable practices more... and, without paying too much attention, you might notice that, somehow, even economic results are affected in the long run, although it’s not immediately obvious” (Startup 1). This statement illustrates how elements such as organizational

Table 2 Variables emerging from the interviews

First-level constructs	Second-level constructs	Categories
Company values Employee professional experience Team cohesiveness Seniority Organizational flexibility	Company culture Organizational structure	Internal factors
Gender equality Diversity inclusion Disability	Diversity and inclusion	
Access to funding Investment funds sustainable policies Collaborations with accelerators Networking with universities and research centers Participation in sustainability fairs and conferences	Resource availability Innovation ecosystem	External factors
Trust-based relationships with suppliers and customers Selection of local and sustainable suppliers Supplier selection protocols based on sustainable criteria	Relationships with suppliers and customers	
Adaptation to specific local environmental laws Adaptation to local culture and practices	Local culture and policies	Lever
Knowledge of social sustainability principles and dynamics Internal training on sustainability topics Corporate sustainability programs Use of renewable resources in production processes Waste reduction initiatives Adoption of technologies to improve energy efficiency Company code of ethics Environmental certifications (e. g. ISO 14001) Implementation of sustainability guidelines	Awareness of social sustainability Activities and policies supporting social sustainability	
Sustainable innovations in products and processes Employee attitude towards innovation Expansions into sustainability-aware markets Partnerships with sustainability-oriented customers Diversification of revenue streams via sustainable products	Innovation performance Growth	Outcomes
Increased funding due to sustainable reputation Reduction in operating costs through energy savings Improvement in credit ratings through ESG compliance Market positioning based on sustainability Attraction of top talent with strong sustainability values Enhanced customer loyalty due to sustainability commitments	Economic performance Competitive advantage	

culture and the surrounding environment can influence the adoption of socially sustainable practices, which in turn may have an indirect yet meaningful impact on long-term economic performance.

Building on the classification of internal and external factors, mediators, and outcomes (Table 2), a comprehensive framework was developed and is presented in Fig. 1. This framework captures the dynamic interplay among these elements, illustrating how their interactions collectively influence the implementation and evolution of social sustainability practices within startups.

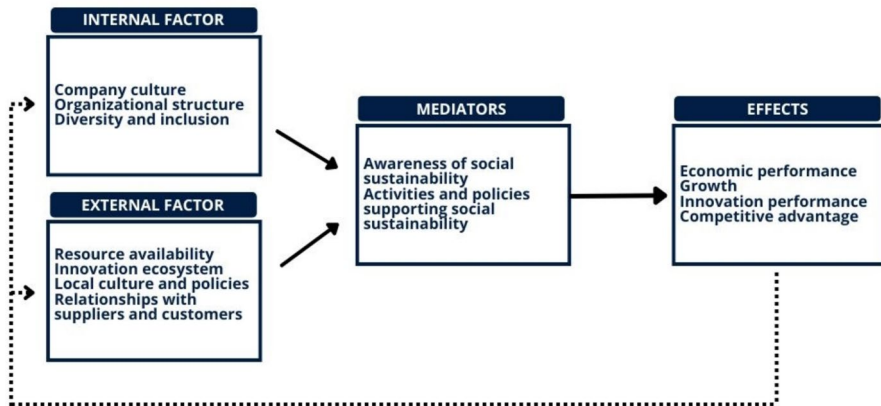


Fig. 1 Overall framework

Our analysis reveals that the integration of social sustainability in startups is shaped by the dynamic interaction of internal drivers, external influences, and operational levers. Startups do not adopt sustainability practices in isolation; rather, their efforts are embedded within a complex and interdependent system of factors. Internal drivers such as organizational culture, leadership values, and team composition interact with external conditions, including resource availability, regulatory frameworks, and ecosystem support, to shape the design and implementation of sustainability initiatives. These combined forces activate specific levers, mechanisms that translate enabling conditions into actionable strategies, which ultimately influence both economic and social performance outcomes.

Importantly, the framework developed in this study (Fig. 1) does not reflect a linear or unidirectional model. Instead, it illustrates an iterative and evolving process, where positive sustainability outcomes such as enhanced reputation, employee engagement, or stakeholder trust can feed back into and reinforce the very internal drivers that initiated them. These feedback loops strengthen the organization's commitment to sustainability over time, creating a virtuous cycle of continuous improvement. To visualize these relationships, we present a synthesized framework in Fig. 1, which aims to provide a clear and comprehensive representation of the mechanisms underpinning social sustainability in startups. Further analytical details regarding the hypothesized relationships can be found in Appendix B.

For example, internal factors such as company culture strongly influence sustainability awareness, which in turn drives innovation, particularly in terms of sustainable products and processes. Founders of startups with a well-established sustainability orientation often perceive their ventures as outperforming competitors, citing both market advantage and the ability to build long-term trust with stakeholders. Moreover, diverse and well-integrated teams contribute multiple perspectives, fostering creativity and enhancing the startup's capacity to respond to external challenges. A flexible organizational structure further enables agile adaptation to changing conditions.

External factors also play a critical role. Adequate access to resources allows startups to invest in sustainable technologies and initiatives. A strong entrepreneurial eco-

system or network provides strategic connections, opening pathways to new markets and partnerships. Supplier choices impact both the quality and perception of a product, while meaningful engagement with local communities can increase legitimacy and product acceptance, supporting sustainable growth trajectories.

Overall, these findings underscore that social sustainability in startups is not the result of a single driver but rather the outcome of a synergistic configuration of internal and external elements. By effectively managing these dimensions, startups can build business models that are not only economically viable but also socially impactful and ethically grounded.

In the following section, we provide a detailed description of the specific variables identified through the interview analysis, which collectively form the foundation of the proposed framework.

4.1 Internal factors

Internal factors include variables that interviewees frequently highlight as key drivers of social sustainability within their startups. These factors originate from within the organization and play a crucial role in shaping how sustainability is understood and implemented. Among the most influential internal drivers are company culture, team composition and cohesiveness and organizational flexibility. Also, elements such as seniority and the presence of inclusive policies contribute to the establishment of long-term sustainability initiatives. In the following sections, we will examine each of these internal drivers in detail.

Company culture Company culture embodies the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that define the work environment. A culture oriented toward sustainability encourages responsible practices and promotes an inclusive work atmosphere. For example, one interviewee stated: “*You know... sustainability... it's like inside, it's part... of what we do... you don't even think about it... it's just there*” (Startup 4).

Seniority The level of seniority within the company impacts organizational dynamics and the transmission of company values. Although startups typically have flatter hierarchies and fewer long-tenured employees, the experience and influence of senior leadership can significantly shape the adoption and promotion of sustainable practices. An interviewee noted: “*Over time... you can see that those who have been here longer... know how to... make these sustainable things take root*” (Startup 7).

Team cohesiveness A cohesive team fosters open communication, mutual trust and commitment to sustainability goals. When team members work closely together and share a unified vision, they can more effectively identify and implement innovative solutions to sustainability challenges. One interviewee emphasized the importance of collaboration within the team: “*We're small... and diverse, everyone has their own perspective... so one might say one thing, another... something else, but in the end... we find a common path and do something good*” (Startup 3). This reflects the importance of collaboration within a diverse team.

Organizational structure A flexible organizational structure (a typical feature of startups) facilitates the adoption of sustainable practices by allowing responsiveness to emerging sustainability challenges. Unlike larger corporations, which may face bureaucratic obstacles, startups can more easily experiment with new sustainability

initiatives. One interviewee noted: *“We’re small and... you know, we move fast, we don’t have to wait... we just do it”* (Startup 9).

Diversity and inclusion Diversity and inclusion are key drivers of innovation, as they bring in different perspectives and approaches. One interviewee noted that having a diverse team led to ideas they would not have considered otherwise: *“Oh yes... diversity... it really helped us... new things that we would have never seen... if we didn’t have all these different viewpoints”* (Startup 8).

4.2 External factors

External factors include variables beyond the direct control of a startup that, at the same time, play a crucial role in shaping its approach to social sustainability. These factors create opportunities or constraints that influence how and to what extent startups can implement sustainable practices. The main external factors identified in the study include the innovation ecosystem; the availability of financial and material resources; local culture and policies and relationships with suppliers and customers. Understanding these external influences is essential for startups seeking to develop effective sustainability strategies.

Innovation ecosystem The set of actors, institutions, and resources that the company interacts with. This includes accelerators, investors, suppliers, and customers. Participating in an innovative ecosystem is both an opportunity and a constrain. Partners in the ecosystem provide resources necessary to implement sustainability strategies. At the same time the products and resources generated by the startup are more likely successful if the company is integrated in an ecosystem capable of valorizing them. One interviewee noted: *“This place... yes, we’re lucky... it’s like... everyone talks about sustainability... it pushes us, really... keeps us aligned with our values, you know?”* (Startup 5).

Resource availability The availability of material and financial resources plays a crucial role in the adoption of sustainable practices. An interviewee stated: *“When we got the funding..., we could do more... things we couldn’t before... like sustainable projects, yes”* (Startup 6). Access to resources enables the implementation of ambitious projects.

Local culture and policies The traditions, values, and practices of the community or geographical area where the company operates influence the startup’s approach to sustainability. Additionally, government policies, including tax incentives, environmental regulations, and sustainability mandates, play a crucial role in shaping business decisions. One interviewee observed

“Our community... well, we are mindful of what we do, you know... adapting... because here, things are done a certain way... and we want to stay in sync with them” (Startup 14). This reflects how startups align with both cultural expectations and policy frameworks to enhance their sustainability efforts. Adapting to local culture and regulatory incentives strengthens ties with the territory and provides financial and operational benefits that encourage sustainable practices. Some differences between the Italian and U.S. startups emerged. Italian startups often emphasized the role of local cultural norms, community engagement, and public policy incentives in shaping their sustainability practices. In contrast, U.S. startups tended to frame social

sustainability more in relation to market opportunities, scalability, and competitive advantage.

Relationships with suppliers and customers Strong, trust-based relationships with suppliers and customers are essential for ensuring the company's long-term success. One interviewee stated: “*We like working with suppliers... and customers who..., understand us, trust us, and work together... it's easier to do sustainable things that way*” (Startup 10). Trust between suppliers and customers facilitates the implementation of sustainable practices. The process of selecting suppliers that meet sustainability criteria is key to reducing the company's environmental impact. An interviewee mentioned: “*Well, we had to change suppliers... the old ones didn't work, right? They didn't meet certain criteria... but the new ones did... it made a difference*” (Startup 13).

4.3 Levers

Levers represent variables that moderate the influence of internal and external factors, facilitating the generation of observed effects. The main mediators include:

Awareness of social sustainability The understanding and commitment to socially responsible practices. One interviewee explained: “*Well, we had to understand... I mean, what it really meant... not just saying we do it, but really doing it*” (Startup 9). Startups develop sustainability awareness through awareness-raising sessions and ongoing training on social and environmental issues, encouraging employees to integrate these practices into their daily activities. Most interviewees demonstrated a general awareness of the concept of social sustainability. However, their interpretations were broad and varied, ranging from a focus on internal dimensions, such as employee well-being and inclusion, to external aspects like community engagement and stakeholder collaboration. This variability reflects the evolving understanding of social sustainability among startups.

Activities and policies supporting social sustainability The daily operations that the company undertakes to promote sustainability. One interviewee said: “*Everything we do... you know, we first check if it has an impact... also on social aspects... and in the end, that's what matters for our brand*” (Startup 10). Initiatives include zero-waste practices, corporate volunteer programs, and supporting local suppliers. These activities help reduce environmental impact and strengthen community ties. The company policies clearly guide organizational behavior towards sustainability. These policies serve as a crucial bridge between causes and effects. One interviewee explained: “*We have policies, yes, but they're like... we wrote them to make sure we stay on track... because in the end... everything here has to be sustainable; you know?*” (Startup 12). Internal policies in startups include rules on emission reduction, respect for workers' rights, and the use of eco-friendly materials. Additionally, some companies adopt emission offset practices and require regular checks to ensure compliance with sustainability standards.

4.4 Outcomes

The outcomes, or effects, or performances, are the results generated by internal and external factors through the mediation of the identified levers. These impacts include economic performance, innovation, growth, and competitive advantage, reflecting how sustainability influences a startup's success.

Economic performance Economic performance indicates how effectively the startup generates revenue, manages costs, and achieves profitability. It is typically measured through traditional metrics like revenue, profit margins, and return on investment. One interviewee noted: “*Over time, we saw... I mean, the money comes in better, it's like there's a positive effect... integrating sustainability... if that makes sense...*” (Startup 10).

Growth For startups growth, both in terms of customers and investments is an especially relevant goal (since they are transient structures aimed at transforming themselves into a self-sustaining business). According to the interviewees growth is often linked to the adoption of sustainable practices. One interviewee said: “*After we focused on sustainability... like, we got more customers... and even investors were more interested*” (Startup 11). Several other startup owners believed that a sustainable reputation attracted new customers and investors.

Innovation performance Innovation, driven by the need for sustainable solutions, is essential for staying competitive. Sustainable practices and innovation outcomes are sometimes so much intertwined that it is difficult to understand which one is the cause and which one is the effect. An interviewee stated: “*Sustainability put us... how to say, in front of challenges... and made us think of new things... ideas we never would have had before*” (Startup 13).

Competitive advantage In the perception of our interviewees, sustainability is not only driven by personal or organizational values, it is also a driver of business performance through increased competitive advantage. By contributing to the development of products and processes accepted or even requested by the partners, sustainable practices contribute setting startups apart from competitors. One interviewee said: “*We managed to stand out... I mean, others don't do it like this... and we gained a bigger market share*” (Startup 14).

5 Discussion

The interview analysis led to the identification of several theoretical constructs that help explain the dynamics of social sustainability in startups. These constructs illustrate how internal factors, external influences, and organizational levers directly and indirectly affect business performance, offering an integrated perspective on how social sustainability is enacted in early-stage ventures. The findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge in this field, specifically within the context of startups, and reinforce the relevance of established theoretical frameworks such as the Resource-Based View, Stakeholder Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Effectuation Theory.

Among these, internal factors emerged as particularly critical in shaping the adoption of social sustainability practices, strongly supporting the logic of the Resource-Based View (RBV). Notably, corporate culture surfaced as a foundational pillar for startups seeking to embed social sustainability into their operations. Consistent with Freeman and McVea (2001) and Johannsdottir and Davidsdottir (2024), the findings suggest that a sustainability-oriented culture not only enhances stakeholder engagement but also fosters an internal environment where employees feel motivated to contribute to sustainability goals.

This expands the notion of “trust-based relationships” by introducing the idea of “culture as a strategic lever.” Many of the founders interviewed reported that a strong sustainability-driven culture enables them to attract talent who align with the company’s values, thereby reducing turnover and increasing organizational cohesion. These insights also resonate with Harlin and Berglund’s (2021) argument that sustainability is becoming a key strategic priority, though their work did not fully explore the specific role of organizational culture in fostering innovation (Harlin and Berglund 2021).

Seniority emerged as another important factor within the Resource-Based View (RBV) framework. Experienced employees serve as carriers of organizational values and play a key role in reinforcing the internal knowledge base that supports sustainable strategies. Senior team members often act as custodians of sustainability, not only by promoting awareness of these practices among newer colleagues but also by contributing to organizational continuity in rapidly evolving environments. This finding expands on the work of Russo and Perrini (2010), who identified seniority as a stabilizing force in SMEs (Russo and Perrini 2010). In the context of startups, seniority contributes to strengthening human capital and supports the long-term internalization of sustainability practices through accumulated experience and tacit knowledge.

The composition and cohesion of the team also proved to be highly significant. In startups, team diversity enables problems to be addressed from multiple perspectives, fostering creativity and innovation. This aligns with findings by Daradkeh and Mansoor (2023), who underscore diversity as a critical driver of adaptability and growth. Moreover, it supports the principles of Effectuation Theory (Sarasvathy 2001), which emphasizes flexibility, experimentation, and leveraging existing resources under conditions of uncertainty.

However, our findings indicate that diversity alone is not sufficient. It must be complemented by strong team cohesion in order to translate into innovation and sustainable competitive advantage. Startups with well-coordinated and diverse teams demonstrate greater agility in responding to external challenges while remaining aligned with their sustainability objectives.

These insights offer a nuanced perspective when compared to Harlin and Berglund (2021), who suggest that startups are inherently inclined to systematically implement diversity and inclusion (D&I) practices. In contrast, our findings suggest that while startups are generally aware of the importance of D&I values, the practical implementation of inclusive policies often remains fragmented or emergent. Rather than being fully institutionalized, inclusion is frequently seen as a work in progress, an opportunity to be developed rather than a consolidated organizational practice. This divergence highlights the gap between awareness and execution, suggesting that

some startups may still lack formal structures to effectively integrate inclusion into their operations.

External factors including the innovation ecosystem, access to resources, and relationships with suppliers, play a pivotal role in shaping the adoption of sustainable practices in startups. This finding aligns with both Stakeholder Theory and Social Capital Theory, which emphasize the importance of networks and community ties in enabling access to critical resources and establishing organizational legitimacy. Our research confirms the insights of Trautwein (2021) and Agan et al. (2013), showing that startups embedded in resource-rich ecosystems are more likely to embrace sustainable strategies. Beyond confirming previous findings, our study adds a novel contribution: the ecosystem does not merely provide resources, it actively shapes company culture and strategic priorities. Startups operating in environments where sustainability is widely shared as a collective value are more inclined to internalize these norms, which in turn fosters innovation and drives the development of more socially and environmentally responsible solutions.

Another key external influence is local culture, consistent with Social Capital Theory, which emerges as a powerful factor in shaping startup behavior through shared norms, expectations, and community values. Our findings suggest that startups embedded in cultural contexts where sustainability is strongly promoted are more likely to adopt and institutionalize sustainable practices, in line with the work of Thorlakson et al. (2018) and Garbie (2015). However, the role of local culture is not universally facilitative. In some cases, founders reported that operating in cultural environments less attuned to sustainability values posed a barrier to implementation. This highlights a tension between internal strategic intentions and external cultural expectations. In such contexts, startups may need to invest additional effort to reconcile their sustainability goals with prevailing norms, suggesting that geographic and cultural context can either accelerate or constrain the integration of sustainability practices.

Supplier selection emerged as a critical factor in achieving supply chain sustainability and reflects the core principles of Stakeholder Theory, which emphasizes the importance of meeting the expectations of all stakeholder groups. Startups that prioritize sustainable suppliers not only enhance their reputation but also mitigate operational risks—an insight consistent with the findings of Sancha et al. (2016).

Among the most significant levers, sustainability awareness stood out as a key driver for translating intentions into tangible outcomes. Prior research grounded in Stakeholder Theory has already underscored the importance of corporate policies in addressing stakeholder expectations (Freeman and McVea 2001). This study adds further support to that view, showing that increased awareness and the adoption of clear sustainability policies not only lead to more efficient resource management but also boost brand reputation thereby attracting investors and customers who value social responsibility. These findings align with those of Garriga and Melé (2004).

The benefits of these dynamics are reflected in enhanced economic performance, increased capacity for innovation, and overall business growth. Startups that adopt a long-term strategic vision and invest in sustainability perceive it as a key contributor to performance improvement. This is consistent with Porter and Kramer's (2011)

shared value framework, which posits that businesses can generate economic value by addressing social challenges.

However, despite a generally positive orientation toward social sustainability, several startups reported tensions between sustainability goals and short-term survival pressures. Financial constraints, the urgency of scaling operations, and the demands of customers and suppliers at times forced founders to deprioritize sustainability initiatives. These trade-offs underscore the fragile and dynamic nature of sustainability commitments in fast-paced entrepreneurial environments.

Overall, the findings of this study not only validate key theoretical frameworks but also offer novel insights. On one hand, they enrich the literature by highlighting the role of corporate culture, employee seniority, and team composition in driving the adoption of sustainable practices. On the other, they underscore how sustainability can serve as a source of competitive advantage enabling startups to integrate more effectively into networks of partners, customers, and communities that share similar values.

6 Conclusion

This study has examined how startups integrate social sustainability into their operations, shedding light on the internal and external dynamics that influence this process. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 51 founders of high-tech startups and applying the Gioia methodology for data analysis, the research identified key internal factors including corporate culture, employee seniority, team composition, organizational structure, and diversity and inclusion practices. These factors interact with external influences such as the entrepreneurial ecosystem, resource availability, and supplier selection to shape the use of strategic levers that support the implementation of social sustainability.

Findings reveal that, although with varying levels of maturity, startups generally demonstrate a clear awareness of the importance of social sustainability. This awareness is often reflected in their strategies and operational decisions. In turn, the adoption of sustainability-oriented policies and practices is perceived to generate positive outcomes across multiple dimensions of business performance, including economic results, innovation capacity, growth potential, and competitive positioning.

This research offers several important contributions to the literature. First, it extends the discussion on social sustainability to the relatively underexplored context of startups, providing much-needed insight into how early-stage firms engage with these issues. Second, it proposes an integrated framework that maps the relationships among internal and external factors, enabling levers, and observed outcomes offering a valuable tool for both scholars and practitioners seeking to better understand and support the sustainable growth of entrepreneurial ventures.

A key theoretical contribution of this study lies in extending the Resource-Based View (RBV) to the context of startups. Our findings demonstrate that intangible resources such as organizational culture, sustainability awareness, and team cohesion, should not be seen as static assets, but rather as dynamic capabilities that evolve over time and contribute to a startup's resilience and long-term performance. These

resources not only support the achievement of economic goals but also play a pivotal role in fostering trust-based relationships with stakeholders, investors, and local communities. Furthermore, embedding sustainability into daily operations emerges as a critical factor for attracting investment and establishing a sustainable competitive advantage.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research lays the groundwork for future studies on social sustainability in startups, offering a solid empirical foundation that broadens our understanding of how intangible resources are managed in early-stage firms. It also opens the door to a promising new research stream focused on the intersection of sustainability, innovation, and entrepreneurial growth, and the role of startups as agents of social and environmental transformation.

The practical implications of this research are wide-ranging and relevant to multiple stakeholders. For managers and entrepreneurs, the study provides a structured framework to understand how socially sustainable decisions such as fostering an inclusive organizational culture or choosing responsible suppliers, can positively influence both financial performance and market positioning. The proposed framework can serve as a strategic guide for developing tools and processes that help allocate resources more effectively, design sustainability-focused policies, and create shared value that is both economic and social in nature.

The findings also underscore the importance of investing in culture and cultivating ethical, trust-based relationships across the startup's network. Building a sustainable organizational culture not only enhances a firm's reputation but also contributes to cost reduction, strengthens team cohesion, and generates long-term competitive advantages. Startups that adopt inclusive policies and prioritize sustainability are better positioned to attract mission-driven talent, connect with ethically conscious consumers, and improve their capacity for innovation and agility in rapidly changing markets.

For investors, the study highlights that sustainability should no longer be viewed solely as an ethical consideration but as a key driver of long-term value creation. Sustainability-oriented startups are more likely to demonstrate durable performance and lower risk profiles, making sustainability a strategic indicator for investment evaluation and decision-making.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the geographic focus on Italian and American startups may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural, economic, and regulatory contexts. Startups operating in emerging markets, for instance, may face distinct challenges and constraints in adopting social sustainability practices. Second, the research primarily focused on technology-based startups, which are often more inclined toward innovation and may exhibit a greater predisposition for sustainability-oriented strategies compared to startups in more traditional or resource-intensive sectors. Third, the cross-sectional design of the study offers a snapshot of social sustainability practices at a specific point in time, rather than capturing their evolution as startups mature. A longitudinal approach would provide more insight into how these practices develop, adapt, or fade over time. Lastly, although the qualitative methodology allowed for a deep and nuanced exploration of internal dynamics, future studies could benefit from integrat-

ing quantitative methods to reinforce the empirical validity of the model and broaden its applicability across different startup ecosystems.

Despite these limitations, the findings point to a growing awareness of social sustainability among startups, though with substantial variation in how it is interpreted and operationalized across organizations. While startups are often characterized by lean, agile structures and limited formalization, many of them engage in meaningful sustainability-related activities directed toward employees, customers, and supply chain partners. These initiatives reflect a widespread recognition of social sustainability as both a strategic lever and a cultural value. However, the causal relationship between social sustainability and economic performance remains to be clarified. While many startups perceive a positive association, it is important to determine whether social sustainability actively contributes to improved performance or simply coexists with other performance-enhancing factors. Clarifying this relationship is essential for developing more targeted and effective sustainability strategies. In addition, further quantitative research is needed to examine how awareness and implementation of social sustainability practices vary across startups, taking into account differences in demographics, industry sectors, and cultural contexts. Such studies would help refine the proposed framework and provide more tailored guidance for entrepreneurs, policymakers, and investors aiming to foster sustainable and responsible entrepreneurship.

Future research should further explore the variability of social sustainability among startups by adopting quantitative methodologies that can help identify the causal factors influencing their development across social, environmental, and economic dimensions. Analyzing differences based on organizational demographics such as size, age, industry, or leadership composition, could offer valuable insights into the dynamics that shape the adoption and effectiveness of sustainability practices. Another important avenue for investigation is the role of government policies and regulatory frameworks in either enabling or constraining the implementation of socially sustainable practices. A deeper understanding of how policy instruments influence startup behavior will be critical for designing future frameworks that promote more inclusive, responsible, and sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems. Moreover, emerging technologies such as blockchain and artificial intelligence represent promising tools for advancing social sustainability. Future studies could examine how these technologies facilitate the integration of sustainability by enhancing operational transparency, traceability, and cost-efficiency across supply chains, ultimately enabling more robust and scalable sustainable practices.

In conclusion, social sustainability is increasingly viewed by entrepreneurs not merely as an ethical imperative but as a strategic asset central to the competitiveness and long-term success of startups. In practical terms, startups seeking to embed social sustainability more effectively can implement initiatives such as employee training programs, establish internal sustainability task forces, integrate social metrics into performance evaluations, and adopt formal supplier selection criteria based on social responsibility standards. Startups that successfully integrate sustainability into their daily operations and core business strategies are more likely to generate a virtuous cycle of innovation, growth, and resilience. This, in turn, enhances not only profitability and brand reputation but also contributes to broader social and environmental

impact. The framework proposed in this study offers entrepreneurs a practical guide for embedding sustainability into their strategic planning strengthening their economic performance while contributing to a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable entrepreneurial future.

Appendix A

Below is the detailed interview.

– Introductory question:

- Describe your vision of social sustainability. What is the level of awareness regarding it in your organization (is it discussed, widely regarded as an interest, or even a focus of specific company policies and actions)? (Zangara and Filice [2024](#))

– Company:

- What specific internal policies does your company have to promote social sustainability? (Harlin and Berglund [2021](#))
- Could you indicate which of your startup's activities have a positive and which have a negative impact on social sustainability (even if such an impact is unintended)? (Ma et al. [2020](#))
- What are the effects of the aforementioned policies and activities on performance, both in terms of social sustainability and growth? (Horne and Fichter [2022](#))

– Supply chain:

- How does your awareness and commitment to social sustainability influence relationships with customers and partners? Does this approach contribute to retaining these contacts?
- If your commitment to social sustainability has a positive impact, could you specify which aspect is most effective? Is the sustainability applied to the product more relevant or the internal sustainability within the organization?
- Do you feel that the level of awareness and commitment to social sustainability is similar between your company and your clients/partners? How do you ensure alignment in this regard?
- What strategies do you adopt to integrate social sustainability into your innovations, products, technologies, and business models? How do these practices contribute to making the business environment more innovative and dynamic, potentially generating added value for which your company could be rewarded? (Mirghaderi et al. [2023](#))
- What impacts do your policies and activities related to social sustainability have on your supply chain, including relationships with customers and

suppliers? How do these relationships, in turn, influence your sustainability policies? Are there differences in the approach to social sustainability based on the type of company or geographic region? (Wagner 2021)

– **Levers and barriers:**

- What are the levers and barriers to implementing these social sustainability policies/activities? (Barriers such as inadequate implementation of information technology and the lack of clear policy frameworks hinder the adoption and execution of sustainable supply chain management) (Movahedipour et al. 2017)

Appendix B

Relation	Internal factors	Mediator	Effect
R1	Company culture	Awareness of social sustainability	Economic performance
R2	Company culture	Awareness of social sustainability	Innovation performance
R3	Company culture	Policy	Growth performance
R4	Company culture	Activities	Competitive advantage
R5	Seniority	Awareness of social sustainability	Growth performance
R6	Seniority	Policy	Economic performance
R7	Seniority	Activities	Competitive advantage
R8	Team	Awareness of social sustainability	Innovation performance
R9	Team	Policy	Growth performance
R10	Team	Activities	Competitive advantage
R11	Organizational structure	Awareness of social sustainability	Innovation performance
R12	Organizational structure	Policy	Economic performance
R13	Organizational structure	Activities	Growth performance
R14	Diversity and inclusion	Awareness of social sustainability	Innovation performance
R15	Diversity and inclusion	Policy	Growth performance
R16	Diversity and inclusion	Activities	Competitive advantage

Relation	External factors	Mediator	Effect
R17	Resource abundance	Awareness of social sustainability	Economic performance
R18	Resource abundance	Policy	Growth performance
R19	Resource abundance	Activities	Innovation performance
R20	Ecosystem	Awareness of social sustainability	Innovation performance
R21	Ecosystem	Policy	Growth performance
R22	Ecosystem	Activities	Competitive advantage
R23	Supplier selection	Awareness of social sustainability	Growth performance
R24	Supplier selection	Policy	Economic performance
R25	Supplier selection	Activities	Competitive advantage
R26	Local culture	Awareness of social sustainability	Growth performance
R27	Local culture	Policy	Economic performance
R28	Local culture	Activities	Innovation performance

Relation	External factors	Mediator	Effect
R29	Relationships with suppliers and customers	Awareness of social sustainability	Innovation performance
R30	Relationships with suppliers and customers	Policy	Growth performance
R31	Relationships with suppliers and customers	Activities	Competitive advantage

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