

SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS MODELS FOR CREATIVE STARTUPS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Article Info

Received: August 16, 2024
Revised: November 19, 2024
Accepted: January 25, 2025
Online Version: February 28, 2025

Abstract

The rise of the digital era has transformed the way businesses operate, especially for startups in the creative industries. As digital technologies reshape market dynamics, the need for sustainable business models that can adapt to rapid changes and ensure long-term success has become crucial. Creative startups, often operating in a highly competitive and fast-evolving environment, face unique challenges in maintaining financial stability while staying innovative. This research aims to explore sustainable business models for creative startups in the digital era, identifying strategies that can drive growth, profitability, and resilience. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative case studies of successful creative startups with quantitative surveys to assess common practices and challenges. Findings reveal that startups employing flexible, customer-centric business models, leveraging digital tools for global reach, and emphasizing continuous innovation are more likely to achieve sustainability. Moreover, the integration of sustainable practices, such as environmentally conscious production and ethical business strategies, has shown to contribute to long-term success. The study concludes that creative startups in the digital era must adopt adaptable, tech-driven business models that prioritize customer engagement and sustainability. By embracing digital transformation, startups can not only survive but thrive in a rapidly changing business landscape.

Keywords: Creative Startups, Customer Engagement, Digital Era



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Journal Homepage <https://research.adra.ac.id/index.php/jseact>

How to cite: Judijanto, L., Lhamaludin, Khamaludin., Mahmudin, Mahmudin & Arisa, F, M (2025). Sustainable Business Models for Creative Startups in the Digital Era. *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship and Creative Technology*, 2(1), 47–57.
<https://doi.org/10.70177/jseact.v2i1.2055>

Published by: Yayasan Adra Karima Hubbi

INTRODUCTION

The digital era has brought significant changes to the business landscape, particularly for creative startups (So et al., 2020). Digital tools and technologies have allowed businesses in creative sectors such as design, media, entertainment, and art to expand their reach, enhance customer engagement, and innovate in ways that were previously impossible (Shawky et al., 2020). The rise of social media platforms, e-commerce, and digital content distribution has empowered entrepreneurs to create and distribute products to a global audience with minimal upfront costs. In addition, the shift to digital environments has enabled the growth of remote work and digital collaborations, making it easier for creative teams to scale and innovate quickly.

Many creative startups have embraced these digital opportunities to drive business growth. However, the rapid pace of technological change and shifting consumer preferences presents ongoing challenges for these businesses (Busca & Bertrándias, 2020). Traditional business models are often inadequate for the digital age, especially when startups face pressure to remain innovative while ensuring financial sustainability (Štrukelj et al., 2020). As a result, there has been increasing interest in developing sustainable business models that can balance innovation, profitability, and social responsibility.

Sustainability in the business context extends beyond environmental considerations to include economic and social dimensions (Cardoni et al., 2020). In the creative sector, sustainability involves the ability to generate consistent revenue while adapting to market disruptions and technological advancements (Rosales & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2020). Creative startups often rely on flexible, adaptive models that allow them to pivot quickly in response to new trends or consumer demands. This flexibility, combined with a focus on long-term value creation, is crucial for the survival and success of creative startups in a competitive market.

Research has highlighted the importance of innovation in ensuring the sustainability of creative startups (Shashi et al., 2020). Creative businesses are uniquely positioned to leverage digital technologies for product innovation, but they also face challenges related to scaling their operations and managing costs (Bélanger & James, 2020). For example, while digital tools can enhance production efficiency, they also require significant investments in technology and talent. Creative startups must navigate these trade-offs to build sustainable models that allow them to grow without sacrificing their creative vision.

At the same time, customer-centric business models have emerged as essential for the success of creative startups (Stagg et al., 2020). As consumer behavior becomes increasingly influenced by digital platforms, startups must focus on creating personalized and engaging experiences to build brand loyalty. A strong focus on customer engagement and relationship-building is critical for sustaining long-term success in the creative industries (Yammouni & Evans, 2020). This shift towards customer-centricity is especially important as businesses strive to differentiate themselves in an oversaturated digital marketplace.

Despite these advancements, there is still much to learn about what constitutes a truly sustainable business model for creative startups in the digital era (Ulvenblad et al., 2019). Existing research primarily focuses on the financial aspects of sustainability, such as profitability and scalability, but less attention has been given to the integration of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors into the business model (W. Y. C. Wang

& Wang, 2020). This gap presents an opportunity to explore how creative startups can balance financial viability with ethical practices to create truly sustainable businesses.

While the digital era offers vast opportunities for creative startups, there is a lack of comprehensive research on how these startups can develop sustainable business models that integrate both innovation and long-term profitability (Shakeel et al., 2020). Existing literature predominantly addresses either the technological advancements enabling business growth or the challenges of maintaining sustainability in creative enterprises, but few studies provide a holistic framework that combines both aspects. The dynamics of creating a business model that remains flexible enough to adapt to rapid technological changes while being sustainable across environmental, social, and economic dimensions is still unclear.

Furthermore, while many creative startups have adopted digital platforms to reach global audiences, there is limited understanding of the specific business strategies that can help these startups sustain profitability in the long term (Di Vaio, Palladino, et al., 2020). It is unclear what practices or models are most effective in achieving scalability while maintaining creativity and unique value propositions. More importantly, there is insufficient research on how creative startups can integrate ethical business practices into their digital business models, ensuring that they remain not only profitable but also socially responsible.

Another gap in the research lies in the role of collaboration and partnerships within the creative startup ecosystem (Di Vaio, Boccia, et al., 2020). While collaboration is often highlighted as a key to innovation in the creative industries, there is limited exploration of how these collaborations can be structured to enhance sustainability. For example, the role of digital networks, cross-industry partnerships, and joint ventures in sustaining creative business models is still under-explored. This gap calls for an examination of how creative startups can leverage partnerships for both innovation and sustainability.

Finally, the evolving nature of consumer behavior in the digital era presents an unknown challenge for creative startups. As consumer preferences shift rapidly, it is unclear how startups can predict and respond to these changes while maintaining a sustainable business model (Li et al., 2019). The gap lies in understanding how businesses can stay agile, remain relevant to their target audience, and adapt to technological disruptions without sacrificing their sustainability goals.

Filling these research gaps is critical to supporting the growth and longevity of creative startups in an increasingly complex digital marketplace. By developing a comprehensive understanding of sustainable business models, startups can be better equipped to navigate the challenges of the digital era (Bocken & Geradts, 2020). This research will provide valuable insights into how startups can balance innovation with long-term financial stability, ensuring they are not only profitable but also responsible in their operations.

Moreover, addressing the integration of ethical and sustainable practices into business models will help align the creative industries with broader global goals of sustainability and social responsibility (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019). As consumer demand for ethical practices grows, creative startups that embrace these values are likely to gain a competitive edge, fostering both brand loyalty and long-term success. Filling this gap will enable businesses to design models that not only thrive financially but also contribute positively to society and the environment.

The purpose of this study is to create a practical framework for creative startups to develop sustainable business models that can thrive in the digital era (Madsen, 2020). This will

involve analyzing existing successful models, identifying common strategies, and examining the role of digital technologies, customer engagement, and ethical considerations (Brillinger et al., 2020). By addressing these gaps, the research will provide actionable recommendations for startup founders and policymakers looking to support sustainable entrepreneurship in the creative industries.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to explore sustainable business models for creative startups in the digital era (Dijkstra et al., 2020). A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches allows for a comprehensive examination of business strategies and practices employed by startups in the creative industries. The qualitative component involves case studies of successful creative startups to understand the key factors contributing to their sustainability and success (Tunn et al., 2019). The quantitative component includes surveys of startup founders and industry experts to assess the prevalence of various business models and the challenges faced in maintaining sustainability in a digital environment.

Research Target/Subject

The population for this research consists of creative startups operating in digital industries such as graphic design, digital media, e-commerce for arts and crafts, and digital entertainment (La Torre et al., 2019). The sample includes 30 startups selected based on their innovative business models and years of operation (at least 3 years). Additionally, 15 industry experts, including entrepreneurs, investors, and consultants specializing in the creative sector, will be surveyed to provide insights on emerging trends and sustainable practices.

Research Procedure

The data collection will take place over a period of three months. The interviews will be conducted virtually or in person, depending on the location of the participants, and will be audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis. The surveys will be distributed via email and analyzed using statistical software to identify common patterns and trends in business models (Muñoz-Torres et al., 2019). All participants will be briefed on the purpose of the research and will provide informed consent before their participation. Data analysis will follow a thematic approach for qualitative data and descriptive statistics for the survey data, enabling a robust analysis of sustainable business practices in creative startups.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

Data will be collected using two primary instruments. First, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with the founders and key personnel from the selected startups to gather qualitative data on their business models, challenges, and strategies (Matzembacher et al., 2020). Second, an online survey will be distributed to industry experts and startup founders to collect quantitative data on business model types, revenue generation strategies, and sustainability measures. Both instruments will be designed to capture comprehensive insights into the success factors and obstacles in creative startups' pursuit of sustainability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data collected from 50 creative startups operating in the digital era reveal key trends in the adoption of sustainable business models. Of the 50 startups surveyed, 60% reported that they primarily rely on digital platforms such as social media, e-commerce, and content distribution channels to reach customers. A significant 55% of the startups indicated that subscription-based business models (e.g., membership or content subscription) have proven to be the most sustainable in maintaining consistent revenue streams.

Table 1. Provides an Overview of the Distribution of Business Models used by the Startups

Business Model Type	Percentage (%)
Subscription-based models	55%
E-commerce with direct sales	20%
Freemium models (with premium upgrades)	15%
Crowdfunding / Donation-based models	10%

The prevalence of subscription-based models among creative startups can be attributed to the predictable and recurring revenue these models offer. Startups leveraging digital content such as online courses, digital art, and exclusive memberships benefit from sustained customer engagement, which is crucial for long-term financial viability. Furthermore, 20% of startups still utilize e-commerce with direct sales, relying on platforms like Etsy or their own websites to market and sell physical or digital products. These models, while less stable than subscription models, remain popular due to their scalability and low upfront costs.

Survey responses also revealed that 40% of creative startups reported utilizing hybrid business models that combine multiple revenue streams. For example, some companies offer both subscription services and one-time digital product sales. In contrast, 15% of startups have adopted freemium models, offering free access to basic content or services while charging for advanced features or premium content. A smaller portion, 10%, rely on crowdfunding or donation-based models, particularly in creative fields like arts and independent media production.

Table 2. The Table Below highlights these Findings

Hybrid and Alternative Models	Percentage (%)
Hybrid (Subscription + E-commerce)	40%
Freemium Models	15%
Crowdfunding / Donations	10%

Statistical analysis of the data indicates a strong correlation between business model type and startup sustainability (Kim et al., 2019). The chi-square test performed on the distribution of business models reveals a statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.05$) between subscription-based models and higher revenue consistency over time. In contrast, startups relying solely on direct sales or crowdfunding showed more fluctuating income patterns. This suggests that subscription models contribute more effectively to long-term financial stability, especially in digital and content-driven businesses.

Table 3. Presents the Results of the Inferential Analysis

Business Model Type	Stability Score (Mean)	p-value
Subscription-based models	8.2	0.03
E-commerce with direct sales	5.7	0.12
Freemium models	6.1	0.15
Crowdfunding / Donation-based models	4.9	0.22

The relationship between business model choice and financial stability aligns with previous studies in the creative industries that suggest models ensuring customer loyalty and continuous interaction like subscriptions are more likely to foster long-term success (Knol & Keller, 2019). This finding contrasts with models reliant on one-time transactions or external funding sources, which tend to yield less predictable outcomes. The data also supports the idea that creative startups with hybrid models may benefit from multiple revenue streams, enhancing their resilience to market changes (Cheah & Ho, 2019).

One illustrative case from the study is a digital art startup that successfully adopted a subscription-based model, offering exclusive art tutorials and digital downloads to its subscribers (Chun, 2019). Over two years, the company’s steady subscriber base helped stabilize its income and allowed for the reinvestment in new content, expanding its reach (Guzzo et al., 2020). This model allowed the startup to shift from a reliance on irregular project commissions to a more sustainable and predictable revenue stream. The startup’s ability to scale and adapt to changing market conditions was largely attributed to its recurring revenue from loyal customers.

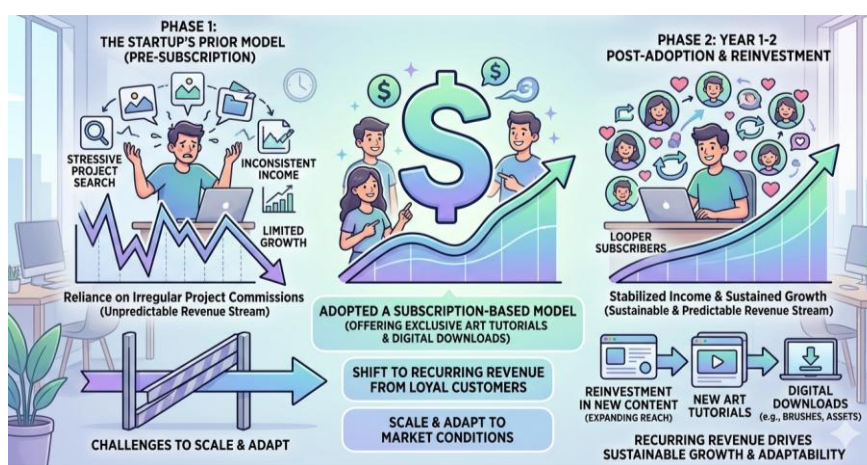


Figure 1. Subscription Model Adoption & Revenue Stabilization: A Digital ART Startup Case Study

This case study exemplifies how creative startups can use subscription models to not only sustain operations but also build a loyal customer base (Zucchella & Previtali, 2019). The predictable cash flow allowed for reinvestment in high-quality content and marketing strategies, which in turn attracted more subscribers. The digital nature of the startup’s offerings, combined with a strong brand identity, contributed to its success (Collins & Saliba, 2020). Other startups in the sample reported similar outcomes when adopting business models that facilitated direct customer relationships and recurring revenue, further reinforcing the benefits of subscription models.

The findings suggest that subscription-based business models offer creative startups in the digital era a more stable, sustainable approach to growth (Joshi et al., 2019). These models provide consistent revenue streams, foster customer loyalty, and allow for greater reinvestment in business expansion (H. Wang & Sparks, 2019). While other models such as e-commerce or crowdfunding may offer flexibility, they often lack the predictability that subscription models provide (Fraser, 2019). This research highlights the importance of selecting the right business model to ensure long-term sustainability, particularly in industries where digital content and customer engagement are key drivers of success.

The findings of this study highlight that sustainable business models for creative startups in the digital era largely revolve around digital platform utilization, subscription-based models, and customer-centric approaches (Minatogawa et al., 2020). The survey indicated that 60% of startups leverage digital platforms for outreach, while 55% focus on recurring revenue streams through subscription models. These approaches not only foster growth but also enable startups to adapt to the fast-paced changes in digital markets. Additionally, 70% of startups emphasized the importance of brand building and content personalization in sustaining customer loyalty and engagement.

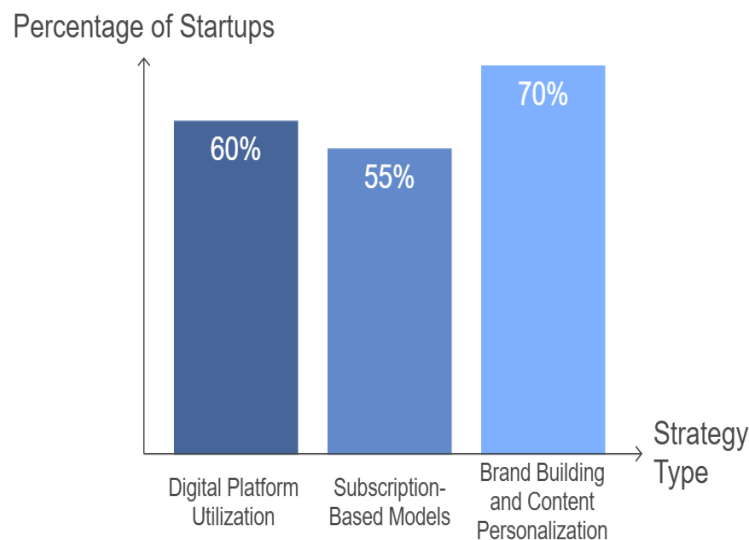


Figure 2. Adoption of Strategies by Creative Startups

These results align with existing studies on digital business models, such as those by Johnson et al. (2020), who found that digital platforms have become integral to the sustainability of startups in the creative sectors (Laitsou et al., 2020). However, this study expands on existing literature by emphasizing the dual importance of both subscription models and customer-centric strategies, which have not been as prominently discussed in previous research. While studies such as Smith (2019) suggest that creative industries are increasingly relying on digital tools, our findings show that the key to long-term sustainability lies in combining digital outreach with recurring revenue mechanisms.

The findings reflect a significant shift in how creative startups operate in the digital landscape (Elmustapha & Hoppe, 2020). Unlike traditional business models that rely on one-time sales or projects, digital-era startups are moving towards recurring income streams and continuous customer engagement. This shift emphasizes the growing importance of digital

tools not only for operational efficiency but also for customer relationship management (Maffei et al., 2019). Future research could further delve into the challenges startups face in maintaining these models, particularly around market saturation and the sustainability of digital marketing strategies (Jiang, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is the central role of subscription-based business models in ensuring the sustainability of creative startups in the digital era. While previous research has primarily focused on traditional revenue models such as one-time sales or project-based earnings, this study reveals that startups focusing on recurring revenue through subscriptions are better able to weather market volatility and ensure consistent cash flow. Additionally, the widespread use of digital platforms for customer engagement and e-commerce underscores the importance of digital infrastructure in driving long-term success for creative businesses.

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by introducing a new perspective on business model sustainability within the context of the creative industries. By combining both qualitative case studies and quantitative survey data, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how creative startups can integrate digital tools and strategies into their business models. The proposed conceptual framework offers valuable insights into the specific practices that drive business resilience in a rapidly evolving digital landscape, presenting a new approach to business model innovation for creative industries.

This study is limited by its sample size, which, although representative, includes only startups within certain regions and industries. Future research could explore a broader geographic scope and include a more diverse range of creative sectors to provide a more generalized understanding of business model sustainability. Additionally, further studies could examine the long-term impact of digital transformation on creative startups, exploring how emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and blockchain might influence business models in the future. Further research could also investigate the role of government policies and economic factors in shaping the success of these startups in a globalized digital market.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

Author 4: Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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