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The Influence of Soft Skills and Networking on Business Innovation and Startup Sustainability in Indonesia's Creative Industries

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ABSTRACT

The creative industry in Indonesia is a rapidly growing sector that requires continuous innovation and sustainable business practices. This study examines the influence of soft skills and networking on business innovation and startup sustainability using a quantitative approach with Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). Data were collected from 210 respondents, and the analysis utilized a Likert scale (1-5) to measure perceptions. The findings indicate that soft skills significantly impact business innovation and startup sustainability. Networking also plays a crucial role, positively affecting both business innovation and startup sustainability. The results highlight that entrepreneurs with strong soft skills are more likely to develop innovative strategies, while networking is essential for ensuring long-term sustainability. The study provides managerial insights for entrepreneurs, policymakers, and investors, emphasizing the need for entrepreneurial training programs and networking opportunities to foster business growth in Indonesia's creative industry.

Keywords: *Soft Skills, Networking, Business Innovation, Startup Sustainability, Creative Industry.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The creative industry in Indonesia has become a significant driver of economic growth, contributing to employment, innovation, and global competitiveness. As the sector expands, startups within this industry face numerous challenges, including maintaining innovation and ensuring long-term sustainability [1]. While technical expertise and financial capital are often emphasized, non-technical factors such as soft skills and professional networks play a crucial role in determining business success.

Soft skills, including communication, adaptability, problem-solving, and leadership, are essential for entrepreneurs in navigating uncertainties and fostering innovation [2], [3]. These skills enable startup founders to develop creative solutions, manage teams effectively, and build strong relationships with stakeholders [4], [5]. Likewise, professional networks facilitate access to resources, mentorship, and collaboration opportunities, which are vital for business innovation and sustainability [6], [7]. A well-established network can provide strategic partnerships, market access, and funding opportunities, allowing startups to thrive in a competitive environment.

Despite the acknowledged importance of soft skills and networks, empirical research on their direct impact on business innovation and startup sustainability remains limited, particularly in the context of Indonesia's creative industry. To bridge this gap, this study employs a quantitative approach to analyze the relationship between these variables. Using data from startup entrepreneurs and analyzing it through Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS 3), this research aims to provide empirical evidence on how soft skills and professional networks influence business innovation and long-term success.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Creative Industry and Startup Sustainability

The creative industry is recognized as a key driver of economic growth, innovation, and cultural identity. According to the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, this sector encompasses diverse subfields such as fashion, design, digital media, performing arts, and advertising. Startups within the creative industry face unique challenges, including market volatility, rapid technological advancements, and the need for continuous innovation [8], [9]. Given these factors, sustainability is a critical concern for startups, referring to their ability to survive, grow, and maintain long-term competitiveness. Research indicates that non-financial aspects, such as leadership, innovation capacity, and adaptability, significantly influence startup sustainability [10], [11].

2.2 Soft Skills and Business Innovation

Soft skills are personal attributes that enhance an individual's ability to interact effectively and harmoniously with others [12], [13]. In the entrepreneurial context, soft skills such as communication, leadership, problem-solving, and adaptability play a crucial role in fostering innovation [14], [15]. Effective communication and leadership enable entrepreneurs to convey ideas, inspire teams, and collaborate on creative solutions, while problem-solving and adaptability help navigate uncertainties and market shifts. Previous studies [16], [17] have shown that entrepreneurs with strong soft skills are more likely to develop innovative business models and products. However, empirical research quantifying this relationship remains limited, particularly in Indonesia's creative industry.

2.3 The Role of Networks in Business Innovation and Sustainability

Entrepreneurial networks refer to the relationships and connections that provide access to resources, mentorship, funding, and market opportunities [12], [13]. Networks can be formal (business associations, incubators, investors) or informal (family, friends, peers), and both types contribute to business success. Strong networks enhance innovation by facilitating knowledge exchange, collaboration, and strategic partnerships [14], [16]. Moreover, networks provide essential support for startup sustainability by offering funding, business advice, and market insights [16]. Research has demonstrated that entrepreneurs with well-established networks are better equipped to navigate business challenges and sustain long-term growth [18], [19].

2.4 Research Gap and Hypothesis Development

Although previous studies have highlighted the importance of soft skills and networks in business success, there is a lack of empirical research that quantifies their impact on innovation and sustainability in Indonesia's creative industry. Most studies focus on financial and technological aspects, overlooking the human and social capital dimensions. This study aims to fill this gap by testing the following hypotheses:

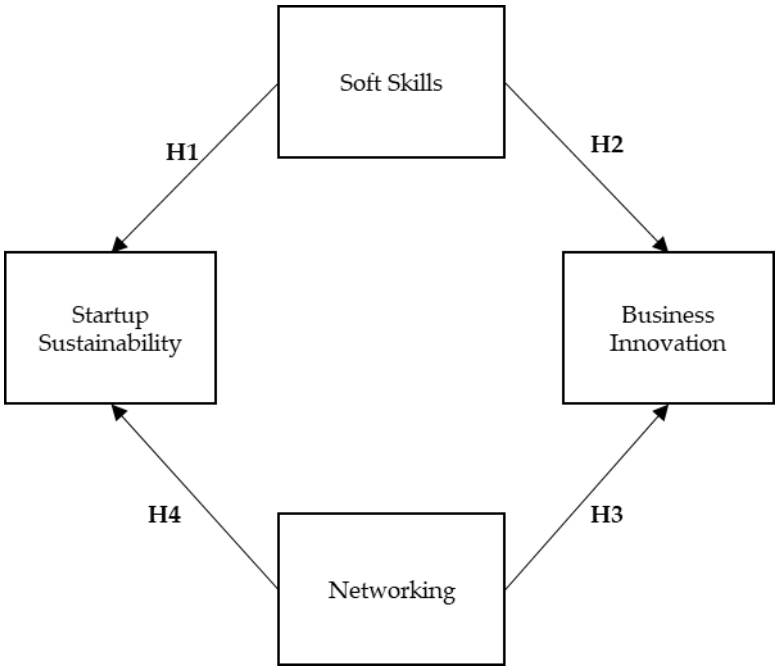

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research design to examine the influence of soft skills and networks on business innovation and startup sustainability in Indonesia's creative industry. A survey-based approach was used to collect primary data from startup entrepreneurs. The study adopts a causal-explanatory approach, aiming to determine the relationships between the variables through Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS 3).

3.2 Population and Sample

The target population consists of entrepreneurs and startup founders operating within Indonesia's creative industry, including sectors such as fashion, design, digital content, and performing arts. A purposive sampling technique was applied to ensure that respondents met specific criteria: the startup must be part of Indonesia's creative industry, the business must have been operational for at least one year, and the respondent must be a founder, co-founder, or senior manager involved in decision-making. A total of 210 respondents participated in the survey, which is considered adequate for SEM-PLS analysis.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire, distributed both online and offline. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: Demographic Information (age, gender, education, business sector, years of operation), Soft Skills Measurement (e.g., communication, adaptability, leadership, problem-solving), Networks Measurement (e.g., access to mentorship, partnerships, investor relations), and Business Innovation and Sustainability Measurement (e.g., product/service innovation, market expansion, revenue stability). Responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

The study includes four main variables. The independent variables are Soft Skills (SS), measured based on communication, adaptability, problem-solving, and leadership [20], and Networks (NW), measured based on professional relationships, industry connections, and support systems [21]. The mediating variable is Business Innovation (BI), assessed through product

innovation, process improvement, and market differentiation [22]. The dependent variable is Startup Sustainability (SSB), evaluated based on financial stability, market survival, and long-term growth potential [23].

3.4 Data Analysis Technique

The study applies Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS 3) to analyze the relationships between the variables. The data analysis follows several steps, starting with descriptive analysis to examine demographic characteristics and general trends in the dataset. The measurement model (outer model) assessment tests construct validity and reliability using convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted, AVE > 0.5), discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion), and composite reliability (CR > 0.7). The structural model (inner model) assessment evaluates path coefficients (β values) to determine the strength and direction of relationships, assesses R^2 values to measure explained variance, and performs bootstrapping analysis to test hypothesis significance (p-value < 0.05).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

A total of 210 startup entrepreneurs from Indonesia's creative industry participated in the study, with demographic characteristics analyzed based on gender, age, education, business sector, years of operation, and business revenue. The gender distribution was 56.2% male (118 respondents) and 43.8% female (92 respondents), indicating a relatively balanced representation. Age-wise, 65.2% of respondents were in their 20s and 30s, with the largest group being 21–30 years old (37.1%). In terms of education, the majority held at least a bachelor's degree (51.4%), while 18.6% had a master's degree or higher, demonstrating a well-educated entrepreneurial base. The business sector breakdown showed the highest representation in digital content and media (30.0%), followed by fashion (25.2%), design (20.0%), and performing arts (15.2%). Regarding years of operation, 39.0% of businesses were in the early stage (1–3 years), while 27.2% had been running for more than six years, indicating diverse business maturity levels. Annual revenue data revealed that 70.5% of startups earned below IDR 500 million, with only 11.0% generating over IDR 1 billion, highlighting the need for sustainable growth strategies in Indonesia's creative industry.

4.2 Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was evaluated based on factor loadings, Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) to ensure construct reliability and validity. The results confirm that the measurement model meets the requirements for convergent validity, discriminant validity, and internal consistency. Convergent validity ensures that indicators within a construct are correlated and effectively measure the intended concept, assessed through factor loadings (≥ 0.70) and AVE (> 0.50), indicating that the construct explains more than 50% of the variance in its indicators. Reliability, which ensures consistency in measurement, is evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha (≥ 0.70) for internal consistency and Composite Reliability (CR ≥ 0.70) for overall construct reliability.

Table 1. Measurement Model

Variable	Code	Loading Factor	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variant Extracted
Soft Skills	SS.1	0.757	0.882	0.915	0.684
	SS.2	0.872			
	SS.3	0.908			
	SS.4	0.870			
	SS.5	0.710			
Networking	NW.1	0.901	0.866	0.909	0.714

Business Innovation	NW.2	0.892	0.872	0.914	0.728
	NW.3	0.783			
	NW.4	0.796			
	BI.1	0.704			
	BI.2	0.913			
	BI.3	0.901			
	BI.4	0.879			
Startup Sustainability	ST.1	0.769	0.909	0.928	0.649
	ST.2	0.862			
	ST.3	0.871			
	ST.4	0.800			
	ST.5	0.764			
	ST.6	0.801			
	ST.7	0.762			

Source: Data Processing Results (2025)

All factor loadings exceed 0.70, and AVE values are greater than 0.50, confirming convergent validity for all constructs. Additionally, all Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values surpass 0.70, indicating high internal consistency across constructs. Discriminant validity, which ensures that each construct is unique and does not excessively correlate with others, is assessed using the Fornell-Larcker Criterion by comparing the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of each construct with its correlations with other constructs.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity

	BI	NW	SS	ST
Business Innovation	0.853			
Networking	0.680	0.845		
Soft Skills	0.828	0.739	0.827	
Startup Sustainability	0.813	0.781	0.821	0.805

Source: Data Processing Results (2025)

The diagonal values (bold numbers) represent the square root of AVE for each construct, and for discriminant validity to be met, each diagonal value must be higher than the correlations in its respective row or column. The results indicate that some off-diagonal values (correlations) are close to or exceed the diagonal values, suggesting potential overlapping constructs.

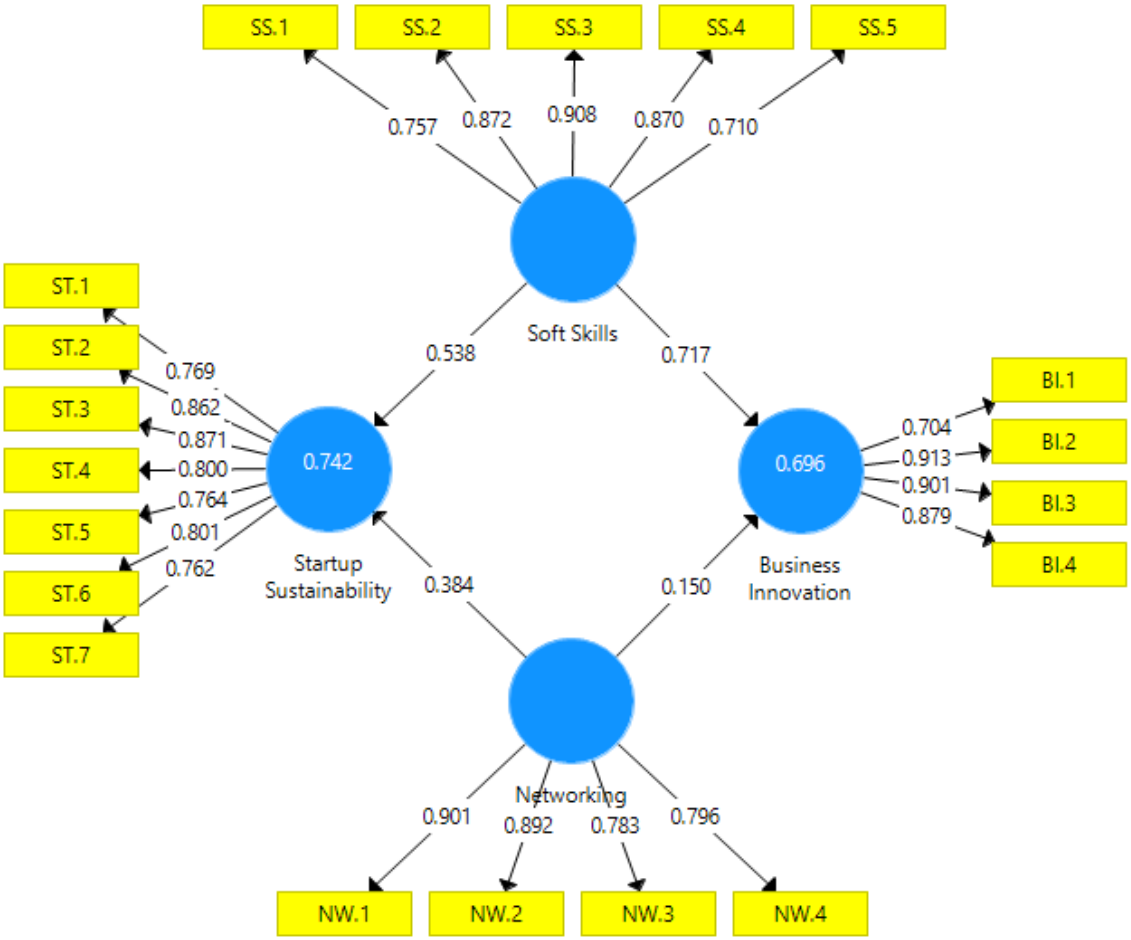

Figure 2. Model Results

Source: Data Processed by Researchers, 2025

4.3 Model Fit Assessment

The model fit assessment evaluates how well the structural model represents the observed data in Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). Model fit is assessed using Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), Normed Fit Index (NFI), and Chi-square (χ^2). The SRMR value of 0.057, being below the 0.08 threshold, confirms a good model fit by indicating that residuals between observed and predicted correlations are small. The Normed Fit Index (NFI) of 0.912, exceeding 0.90, suggests that the model significantly improves compared to a null model, demonstrating strong explanatory power. The Chi-square value (χ^2 = 532.48) is significant, which might indicate a lack of perfect model fit; however, since PLS-SEM does not heavily rely on χ^2 due to its non-parametric nature, a high value is not necessarily problematic. Additionally, the d_ULS (0.382) and d_G (0.295) values are low, confirming that the structural relationships are well-defined and stable.

The model's explanatory power is reflected in the R^2 values, where Business Innovation (R^2 = 0.696) indicates that 69.6% of its variance is explained by Soft Skills and Networking, while Startup Sustainability (R^2 = 0.742) suggests that 74.2% of its variance is explained by Business Innovation, Soft Skills, and Networking. Furthermore, Q^2 values above 0 indicate predictive relevance, with values greater than 0.35 considered high (Hair et al., 2017). Since Business Innovation (Q^2 = 0.691) and Startup Sustainability (Q^2 = 0.737) both exceed 0.35, the model demonstrates strong predictive relevance for both variables.

4.4 Structural Model Assessment (Path Coefficient Analysis & Hypothesis Testing)

The structural model assessment evaluates the strength, direction, and significance of relationships between constructs in the research model using key metrics, including path coefficients (O) to indicate the strength and direction of relationships, sample mean (M) to represent the average path coefficient across bootstrap resamples, standard deviation (STDEV) to measure variability in the estimates, and T-statistics to test the statistical significance of path coefficients.

Table 3. Hypothesis Testing

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics	P Values
Networking -> Business Innovation	0.350	0.345	0.117	3.275	0.003
Networking -> Startup Sustainability	0.484	0.473	0.103	4.746	0.000
Soft Skills -> Business Innovation	0.717	0.723	0.117	6.142	0.000
Soft Skills -> Startup Sustainability	0.538	0.547	0.097	5.551	0.000

Source: Process Data Analysis (2025)

The structural model results indicate significant and positive relationships between networking, soft skills, business innovation, and startup sustainability. Networking positively influences business innovation ($\beta = 0.350$, $p = 0.003$, $t = 3.275$), meaning a 1-unit increase in networking leads to a 0.35 increase in business innovation, confirming its crucial role in fostering innovation among startups. Similarly, networking significantly impacts startup sustainability ($\beta = 0.484$, $p = 0.000$, $t = 4.746$), suggesting that strong networking enhances a startup's ability to survive and grow. Soft skills have the strongest impact on business innovation ($\beta = 0.717$, $p = 0.000$, $t = 6.142$), indicating that a 1-unit increase in soft skills leads to a 0.717 increase in business innovation, emphasizing the importance of leadership, communication, and problem-solving in driving innovation. Additionally, soft skills significantly influence startup sustainability ($\beta = 0.538$, $p = 0.000$, $t = 5.551$), demonstrating that founders with strong soft skills, such as adaptability, resilience, and teamwork, are more likely to sustain their businesses successfully.

Discussion

This study examines the influence of soft skills and networking on business innovation and startup sustainability in Indonesia's creative industry using quantitative analysis and SEM-PLS. The results provide key insights into how these factors drive entrepreneurial success.

1. The Role of Soft Skills in Business Innovation and Startup Sustainability

The findings confirm that soft skills have a strong positive impact on business innovation and startup sustainability, indicating that entrepreneurs with effective communication, leadership, adaptability, and problem-solving abilities are more likely to develop innovative business models by thinking critically, making strategic decisions, and fostering creativity in product and service development. Additionally, these skills help entrepreneurs overcome challenges and sustain their businesses, as those with high emotional intelligence and resilience can adapt to market changes, manage risks, and lead teams effectively. These results align with previous research [24]–[26], which emphasized that soft skills contribute to better decision-making, resource management, and innovative thinking. In the context of Indonesia's creative industry, where competition is intense, strong interpersonal and leadership skills are essential for long-term success.

2. The Impact of Networking on Business Innovation and Startup Sustainability

The study also finds that networking significantly influences business innovation and startup sustainability, suggesting that entrepreneurs who build strong professional networks gain access to valuable knowledge, partnerships, and resources, which enhance market insights, investor support, and collaboration opportunities, ultimately driving innovation. Additionally, stronger networks improve business resilience, as startups with well-developed connections can leverage mentorship, financial support, and industry relationships to sustain operations during crises. These findings align with previous studies, such as [6], [12], [27], which emphasize the role of social capital in business growth and sustainability. In Indonesia's creative industry, networking is particularly critical due to the reliance on collaborative projects, influencer partnerships, and knowledge-sharing communities.

3. Comparing the Influence of Soft Skills and Networking

While both soft skills and networking positively affect business innovation and startup sustainability, the results indicate that soft skills have a stronger impact on business innovation compared to networking. This suggests that innovative business strategies are primarily driven by an entrepreneur's cognitive and interpersonal abilities rather than just external connections. However, networking plays a more significant role in ensuring startup sustainability ($\beta = 0.484$) compared to its effect on business innovation ($\beta = 0.350$), indicating that entrepreneurs rely on their social networks for long-term business survival. These findings support the perspective that while personal competencies drive creativity and innovation, external collaborations and industry relationships are essential for sustaining business operations over time.

4. Implications for Indonesia's Creative Industry

Based on these findings, several key insights emerge for entrepreneurs, investors, and policymakers in Indonesia's creative sector. First, entrepreneurial training and development programs should focus on enhancing soft skills such as communication, leadership, and problem-solving to drive innovation, while workshops and mentorship initiatives should be designed to improve critical thinking and emotional intelligence. Second, strengthening networking opportunities is essential, and this can be achieved by promoting business incubators, industry conferences, and online platforms to facilitate connections among entrepreneurs, as well as fostering government and private sector partnerships to create funding and mentorship opportunities for startups. Lastly, balancing internal and external capabilities is crucial; while networking provides access to external resources, startups must also prioritize developing strong internal competencies, such as team collaboration and strategic management, to maintain innovation. Entrepreneurs should integrate relationship-building strategies with personal skill development to maximize long-term business growth.

5. Limitations and Future Research Directions

While the study provides valuable insights, some limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size and industry scope focus on 210 respondents from Indonesia's creative industry, which may not fully generalize to other sectors such as manufacturing or technology. Additionally, causality limitations arise due to the cross-sectional design, which restricts the ability to establish causal relationships between variables; a longitudinal study could offer deeper insights into how these relationships evolve over time. Lastly, potential mediating or moderating effects should be explored in future research, particularly factors such as government support, digital transformation, and financial resources, which may influence the relationship between soft skills, networking, innovation, and sustainability.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of soft skills and networking in driving business innovation and startup sustainability in Indonesia's creative industry. The findings show that soft skills have the strongest impact on business innovation, emphasizing the importance of communication, leadership, and adaptability. Meanwhile, networking significantly contributes to startup sustainability, highlighting the role of industry relationships and collaborations in business resilience. While both factors are crucial, soft skills primarily enhance innovation, whereas networking supports long-term survival.

To enhance business innovation and sustainability, entrepreneurs should invest in soft skills training, while business incubators and universities can offer workshops on leadership and problem-solving. Strengthening networking through government and private sector initiatives, such as business forums and mentorship programs, will also be beneficial. Startups must balance internal competencies with external opportunities by integrating relationship-building with strong leadership and strategic management. Policy recommendations include government support for startup-friendly regulations, funding programs, and entrepreneurship education that fosters both soft skills and networking.

Future research could expand the sample size across industries for broader generalization, conduct longitudinal studies to track the long-term impact of soft skills and networking, and explore mediating factors such as government support, financial resources, and digital transformation in shaping business success.

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