Jurnal Manajemen dan Kewirausahaan
(JUMAWA) | ISSN (e): 3031-1195
Volume 2 No. 4 (2025)

SUSTAINABLE DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG WOMEN START-UP FOUNDERS IN MAKASSAR'S CREATIVE ECONOMY ECOSYSTEM

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Received	: 29 October 2025	Published	: 14 November 2025
Revised	: 12 November 2025	DOI	: https://doi.org/10.59971/jumawa.v2i4.365
Accepted	: 13 November 2025	Link Publish	: https://abadiinstitute.org/index.php/JUMAWA/issue/view/51

Abstract

This qualitative narrative study explores how young women founders in Makassar's creative economy practice and conceptualize sustainable digital entrepreneurship. Drawing on interpretive phenomenology, the research examines 14 digital or digitally-enabled start-ups led by women aged 23–35 across fashion, creative content, e-craft, and food-tech sectors. Findings reveal that sustainability is not merely an environmental or economic agenda but a lived orientation integrating cultural values, digital competencies, and social commitments. Participants developed "digital craftsmanship"—the blended mastery of aesthetic curation, analytics, and storytelling—through peer learning, MOOCs, and community experimentation. Sustainability was also enacted through relational capital, including trust-based collaborations with artisans, peer mentorship, and co-branding networks that substituted for formal institutional support. Adaptive financing practices—such as micro-grants, crowdfunding, and reciprocal barter—enabled continuity amid structural barriers like gendered funding bias and algorithmic visibility constraints. The study concludes that sustainable digital entrepreneurship in Makassar is co-produced through hybrid ecosystems where local identity, digital affordances, and ethical intent intersect. Policy implications highlight the importance of gender-sensitive finance, networked learning infrastructures, and participatory ecosystem design to foster inclusive, human-centered innovation within Indonesia's emerging creative economies.

Keywords: Sustainable Digital Entrepreneurship, Women Founders, Creative Economy, Relational Capital, Makassar.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of Makassar's creative economy has opened distinct pathways for young women to found and shape digital start-ups that intertwine cultural production, local identity, and market innovation. These entrepreneurial projects are not merely economic activities; they are practices of meaning-making that negotiate sustainability, gendered expectations, and community responsibilities. Sustainable digital entrepreneurship in this context is understood as a praxis in which digital tools, business models, and ethical commitments converge to produce ventures that endure economically while contributing to social and ecological welfare. This study centers on the lived experiences of young women founders to illuminate how sustainability is practiced, narrated, and institutionalized in Makassar's creative ecosystem.

The local creative economy — spanning fashion, digital content, craft, and food-tech — provides affordances for experimentation but also exposes founders to structural constraints such as limited formal financing, algorithmic visibility gaps, and socio-cultural norms that shape risk-taking. Understanding how founders navigate these tensions is crucial for theory and policy. This research asks: How do young women start-up founders in Makassar experience sustainable digital entrepreneurship? What competencies, networks, and practices enable them to combine digital scalability with social purpose? And how do their personal values become embedded in business decisions and ecosystem interactions?

Adopting a humanistic economic stance, the study treats entrepreneurship as a form of human flourishing: economic activity that seeks to balance productivity with dignity, relationality, and long-term community well-being. The empirical focus is therefore on narratives, everyday practices, and ecosystemic relations rather than on capital flows alone. By attending to lived experience, the research aims to contribute nuanced practical recommendations for ecosystem actors — incubators, policymakers, educators, and financiers — while advancing theoretical debates on sustainability, gender, and digital entrepreneurship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on sustainable digital entrepreneurship positions sustainability as multidimensional: environmental stewardship, social inclusion, and economic viability. Networked digital business models offer new routes to scale while also introducing risks related to data dependencies and platform governance, pointing to a delicate balance between opportunity and vulnerability (Jabłoński et al., 2020). Research into digital affordances shows how online communities and platforms provide instrumental support for entrepreneurs—problem-solving, reframing, and reflective practices—especially during crises when physical networks are constrained (Meurer et al., 2021). These affordances matter for young founders who rely on peer knowledge and rapid experimentation.

Gendered analyses of entrepreneurship reveal persistent constraints: smaller average firm size, limited access to venture funding during uncertainty, and socio-cultural expectations that shape time and resource allocation. Empirical studies in Indonesia highlight the importance of absorptive capacity and tailored entrepreneurial competencies for women's leadership and firm performance (Setyaningrum et al., 2023). Crises like the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated digitization and reshaped entrepreneurial opportunity structures, but also exacerbated funding declines for early-stage ventures and uneven effects across sectors; understanding resilience and pivoting strategies is therefore central to sustainable entrepreneurship in the present era (Belitski et al., 2021; Bellavitis et al., 2021).

Pedagogical literature emphasizes that sustainable capabilities for entrepreneurs are cultivated through networked learning and connectivist approaches: digital technologies not only transmit content but scaffold learning networks that enable founders to assemble knowledge across communities and contexts (Dziubaniuk et al., 2023). From the perspective of economic sociology, power relations — embodied in state actors, legacy firms, and investors — shape access to opportunity and the institutional scaffolding of entrepreneurial ecosystems. Examining how power operates helps explain differential trajectories among founders and their capacity to scale sustainably (Audretsch & Fiedler, 2022).

Policy and program evaluations suggest targeted support mechanisms—small matching grants, childcare subsidies, and business advisory services—can have measurable positive effects on women entrepreneurs' performance, particularly by alleviating time and information constraints (Srhoj et al., 2021).

METHOD

To access the interiority of entrepreneurial experience, this study uses a narrative qualitative design informed by interpretive phenomenology. The aim is to surface meaning-making processes, temporal trajectories, and relational practices that constitute sustainable digital entrepreneurship. Purposive sampling identified 14 young women founders (ages 23–35) operating digital or digitally-enabled start-ups within Makassar's creative economy. Selection criteria emphasized diversity of sector (fashion, creative content, e-craft marketplaces, food-tech), firm maturity (pre-revenue to early-revenue), and ecosystem engagement (members of co-working spaces, incubators, or informal communities).

Data collection combined semi-structured narrative interviews (two sessions per participant), participant observation at community events and co-working sites, and document analysis of digital artifacts (websites, social media campaigns, crowdfunding pages). Interviews focused on entrepreneurial biographies, sustainability commitments, digital practices, and relational networks. Analytical procedures followed narrative thematic analysis: transcripts were iteratively coded for emic concepts, temporality, cognitive frames, and practice repertoires; narrative structures (turning points, pivots, and rituals) were mapped; and cross-case synthesis identified common patterns and divergent trajectories. Researcher reflexivity and member checking were employed to enhance trustworthiness.

Ethical considerations included informed consent, the option for anonymity, and collaborative interpretation sessions where participants validated thematic summaries and suggested contextual corrections.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants articulated sustainability as an integrative orientation rather than a set of compliance tasks. For many, sustainability emerged from local cultural commitments — using indigenous materials, fair partnerships with artisans, or designing products that honor Makassar's heritage — combined with digital strategies for visibility and market access. A core competency reported across cases was "digital craftsmanship": the layered ability to curate aesthetics, manage platform analytics, and produce compelling narratives. Founders described continuous upskilling through MOOCs, peer tutorials, and platform experimentation, indicating a reliance on connectivist learning pathways (Dziubaniuk et al., 2023).

Relational capital constituted another pillar of sustainability. Founders relied on dense networks of peers, local artisans, university links, and informal mentors to mobilize resources, secure micro-collaborations, and co-create market propositions. Online communities supplemented local ties by providing problem-solving and emotional support during pivots (Meurer et al., 2021). Financial strategies reflected adaptive bricolage: a mix of micro-grants, crowd-based funding, revenue reinvestment, and barter partnerships. Several participants reported that small targeted grants enabled investments in packaging, digital marketing, or childcare support that indirectly increased productivity and growth potential, reflecting the effectiveness of focused women-targeted interventions (Srhoj et al., 2021).

Founders' narratives recurrently emphasized temporal resilience: the capacity to pivot business models during demand shocks, to absorb short-term income fluctuations, and to maintain long-term value commitments. This resilience was shaped by both internal practices (budgeting, product diversification) and external relations (community pre-orders, collaborative promos). However, structural constraints were salient: limited access to venture funding, algorithmic opacity affecting visibility, and gendered expectations that constrained time and mobility. Participants described encounters with exclusionary funding practices and the difficulty of translating cultural authenticity into investor metrics.

Table 1. Summary of Emergent Themes and Illustrative

Theme	Illustrative Practices	Implications
Integrative Sustainability	Local sourcing + digital sales	Cultural authenticity as market differentiation
Digital Craftsmanship	Social analytics + content design	Learning networks drive capability building(Dziubaniuk et al., 2023)
Relational Capital	Cross-promotions + artisan partnerships	Trust economies substitute for formal infrastructure
Adaptive Finance	Micro-grants + crowdfunding	Small grants can catalyze growth for women founders(Srhoj et al., 2021)
Structural Barriers	Funding bias + algorithmic limits	Power asymmetries shape scaling paths(Audretsch & Fiedler, 2022)

Source: data processed, 2025

Across cases, founders described a moral economy logic: business decisions were informed by care for collaborators, environmental concern, and a desire to redistribute value locally. This ethical framing functioned both as a motivational resource and as a strategic differentiator in crowded digital markets.

Discussion

The narratives from Makassar show that sustainable digital entrepreneurship is co-constructed: it emerges where place-based cultural capital meets networked digital affordances. Local identity and global digital practices become entwined, producing hybrid value propositions that privilege meaning alongside profit. Learning occurs beyond formal institutions; connectivist learning through online and peer networks is central to capability development for young founders, enabling rapid adaptation to shifting platform logics and market demands (Dziubaniuk et al., 2023). Educational and incubator programs should therefore emphasize network-building and practical microlearning.

Financial inclusion matters, and targeted small-scale interventions can be catalytic. The observed pattern of using micro-grants and community financing suggests that policy tools that reduce time and information constraints for women entrepreneurs are effective and cost-efficient in promoting sustainable growth (Srhoj et al., 2021). Yet power dynamics — investor preferences, platform design, and institutional recognition — mediate whose sustainability narratives gain traction. Attention to power inequalities is necessary to avoid reproducing exclusion within the very ecosystems designed to be inclusive (Audretsch & Fiedler, 2022).

The COVID-19 era has underscored both risks and opportunities: digitization created spaces for visibility but also intensified competition and made venture funding scarcer for early-stage firms, reaffirming the need for ecosystem supports that buffer uncertainties and enable pivoting (Belitski et al., 2021; Bellavitis et al., 2021). Policy and practice should thus pivot from one-size-fits-all scaling models to ecosystemic supports that foreground relational infrastructure: affordable co-working, localized digital marketplaces, mentorship networks, and platforms for collective bargaining and visibility.

CONCLUSION

Young women founders in Makassar enact sustainable digital entrepreneurship through integrative practices that couple cultural authenticity with digital strategy, relying heavily on relational networks and adaptive learning. Sustainability, in their accounts, is a lived orientation that privileges longevity, care, and community impact. To nurture such entrepreneurship, stakeholders must invest in connective learning environments, gender-sensitive finance instruments, and governance approaches that address power imbalances in platform economies. Doing so will allow humanistic economic aims — dignified livelihoods and communal flourishing — to shape future digital growth trajectories in Makassar and similar creative ecosystems.

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