



SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AS A STRATEGIC DIRECTION FOR STARTUPS

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Abstract:

This research examines (CSR) as a strategic orientation for startups by clarifying its concept and dimensions and by highlighting the motivations for adopting this approach despite limited resources. The study also emphasizes the role of integrating CSR into startup business models in strengthening competitive advantage, enhancing market legitimacy, attracting investment and talent, and building customer loyalty. Using a descriptive-analytical approach based on a review of relevant scientific literature, the study concludes that adopting CSR can support sustainability, innovation, and trust with stakeholders, ultimately contributing to shared value and a sustainable competitive advantage.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Startups, Sustainability, Stakeholders, Competitive Advantage.

Introduction:

In recent decades, the business environment has undergone profound transformations as a result of the accelerating of globalization, technological development, and increased societal awareness of sustainable development issues, which has led to a reconsideration of the role of economic institutions and the limits of their responsibilities (Horne & Fichter, 2022), (Zhuge, He, Yuan, & Sun, 2023). The success of companies is no longer measured only by their ability to generate profits, but also by the extent to which they contribute to addressing social and environmental issues and enhancing the well-being of society (Pais, 2024). Within this framework, the concept of corporate social responsibility has emerged

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as a modern approach to managing the relationship between the organization and its various stakeholders, based on achieving a balance between economic, social, and environmental dimensions (Wirba, 2023), (Shakil, Hossain, Khan, Noyon, & Ripon, 2025). In light of this transformation, startups have emerged as an important actor in the contemporary economy, due to their organizational flexibility, ability to innovate, and rapid response to market changes (Gautam & Gautam, 2024).

However, in their early stages, these companies face many ultimate challenges. In light of this transformation, startups have emerged as important actors in the contemporary economy, thanks to their organizational flexibility, ability to innovate, rapid response to market changes related to limited resources, building audiences, and gaining investor trust (Ghodake, 2025). Therefore, social responsibility is gaining a strategic dimension that can contribute to strengthening the position of small businesses and strengthening their relationships with their economic and social environment (Belaa, 2023).

The integration of the principles of social responsibility into the approach of startups reflects a shift in the understanding of the role of the organization from a mere economic actor seeking profit to a development actor that participates in the creation of economic and social value at the same time, enhancing opportunities for sustainability and keeping pace with the requirements of the contemporary business environment. (Liu, Lu, Zhang, & Liu, 2021), (Zangara, Corvello, & Filice, 2025).

Research Problem

The main question of the research is the following: To what extent can social responsibility be considered an effective strategic direction for startups?

A number of sub-questions emerge from this question:

- What is CSR, and what are its main dimensions?
- What are the characteristics that distinguish startups from other companies?
- How does CSR contribute to the sustainability of startups and enhance their competitiveness?



- What are the main challenges hindering startups adopting CSR?
- What are the appropriate mechanisms to activate CSR within startups?

Research Objectives

Through this work, we aim to:

- Clarifying the concept of corporate social responsibility and its various prices.
- Analyze the nature of startups and their organizations, and Management Analysis.
- Explain the importance of adopting social responsibility as a strategic direction for students.
- Practical recommendation that social units integrate social responsibility into their business models.

Importance of Research

The importance of this research stems from its scientific and practical aspects, as it sheds light on a relatively recent topic that combines two important fields, namely social responsibility and entrepreneurship, and contributes to bridging the knowledge gap represented by the lack of Arab studies that dealt with social responsibility in the context of startups specifically, in addition to providing a theoretical framework that can form the basis for subsequent studies, whether field or comparative. In practice, the research helps entrepreneurs and startup founders to understand the strategic value of social responsibility and integrate it into their business models, and it also benefits investors, business incubators, and decision-makers in promoting sustainability and responsibility standards within the entrepreneurship ecosystem, in a way that supports sustainable development trends by encouraging business models that combine profitability and positive social impact

1- Literature Review

1.1- Conceptual Framework of Social Responsibility

CSR has gone from a marginal philanthropic act to an essential strategic element in modern corporate management, especially with the escalation of environmental, inequality and governance issues (Camilleri, 2021). CSR today is closely linked to sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals, and building trust with society

and stakeholders. (Ganesh & Bangaru, 2023) . Given the increasing importance of CSR, numerous definitions have emerged, some of the most important of which are:

The World Bank's definition: "Social responsibility is defined as the commitment of economic stakeholders to contribute to sustainable development by working with local stakeholders to improve the standard of living of the population in a way that serves the economy and development at the same time" .

The International Business Council for Sustainable Development (IBSD) defines social responsibility as the ongoing commitment by businesses to act ethically, contribute to economic development and improve the quality of living conditions for the workforce and their families, the local community and society at large (Belaa , 2023)

The French Observatory for Corporate Social Responsibility (ORSE) defines it as "the mobilization of all the energies of the institution to contribute positively alongside all public actors to sustainable development, by integrating economic, social and environmental dimensions into their activities in order to make them compatible with the Sustainable Development Goals."

The European Union: "The way in which companies and institutions should work to integrate social, environmental and economic concerns and issues into decision-making, strategies, policies, values, company culture, processes and activities within the company, transparently and accountably to apply best practices, work to implement laws and instructions related to the fight against corruption and bribery, and commit to maintaining health and safety, environmental protection, human rights and workers." (Kateb & Kateb , 2023)

ICC definition: "The voluntary commitment of businesses to conduct their activities responsibly."

International Business Leaders Forum: Social responsibility is defined as "those practices that are transparent, open, ethical and respectful of employees, society, and the environment, and are designed to provide sustainable value to society at large, as well as to shareholders." (Belaa , 2023)

In general, social responsibility is defined as: "A company's commitment to act ethically, comply with the law, and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of



employees, their families, the community, and the surrounding environment.” Corporate social responsibility (CSR) also refers to the integration of ethical and socially responsible policies, practices, and programs into all aspects of a company, including its core functions, supply chains, and policymaking. (Sukma & Ismail, 2023),

According to Carroll, the CSR pyramid has been examined in four dimensions: the economic dimension, the legal dimension, the ethical dimension and the philanthropic dimension (Liu, Lu, Zhang, & Liu, 2021), (Khan, Hasan, Rabeeu, & Hossain, 2024)

Figure 1. Carroll’s startup CSR pyramid.



Source: (Liu, Lu, Zhang, & Liu, 2021, p. 6)

The economic dimension: This dimension recognizes the need to be based on the principles of competition and technological development in a framework that shows the social responsibility of the institution and in a way that does not harm either the institution or the society.

The legal dimension: This dimension is based on environmental protection, occupational safety and justice, and consumer protection laws in the form of laws that institutions are supposed to respect in a way that allows society to rise

The ethical dimension: This principle is based in its analysis on the ethical principles guaranteed by social norms and values through the need to protect the environment and the ethical aspects of consumption and the elimination of unemployment by opening the field of employment, equal opportunities, and respect for the prevailing customs and traditions in society.

The philanthropic dimension: This dimension is closely related to the quality of life through the need to improve the latter, and the elements related to public taste, transportation, and othersimprovethe latter, and the elements related to public taste, transportation, and others

1.2- Conceptual Framework for Startups

The researcher about the term "startup" for the first time comes to mind that this term is new, but basically its appearance was in the middle of the last century, exactly during the emergence of venture capital technology after World War II, but in fact there are no research or studies on startups during that period, as the first actual appearance of this term was in 1976, when it was addressed in an article entitled The business of investing in STARTUP data Processing field unfashionable, which was published in the American magazine FORBES, and since then this term has become more and more frequent, until the term "startup" was mentioned, and the word "start" consists of two parts: start-up, which refers to the idea of start-up, and "up", which refers to the idea of strong growth. (Bărbulescu, Tecău , Munteanu , & Constantin, 2021), (Bharad & Sharma, 2024)

A startup is typically defined as: " A newly established company in its initial development stages that focuses on innovation to develop scalable business models, often coming into existence to meet specific needs or gaps in the market, using technology and creative methods to differentiate it from its competitors (Jain, 2025)

And he knows it *Eric Ries In his book entitled B:* The lean Startup It is "a human being designed to create a new product or service in a state of extreme uncertainty." (Ries, 2011, p. 37)

It is also defined as "any young, dynamic organization built on technology and innovation whose founder tries to take advantage of the development of an unknown product or service in order to create new markets." (Nutan & Nagpal, 2024)

From the previous definitions, we conclude that startups are: companies or entrepreneurial projects in their early stages, aiming to develop innovative products or services to meet the needs of the market, or find solutions to certain problems, as these institutions are characterized by high flexibility, rapid growth potential, and rely mainly on technology and innovation.



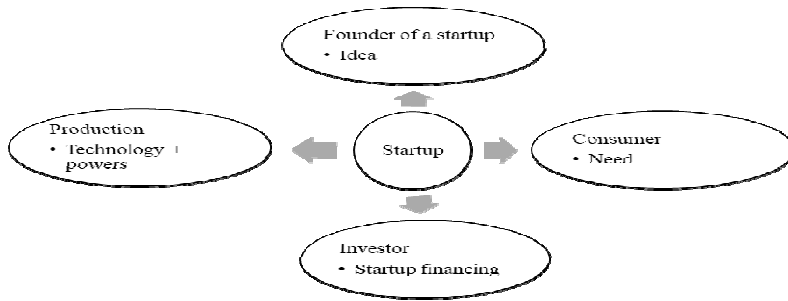
Startups are characterized by a set of characteristics that distinguish them from traditional institutions, including the following: (Gionfriddo & Piccaluga, 2024), (Zerrouki , 2025), (Bouras , 2024)

- Recent Institutions
- Young fledgling enterprises have two options: develop and become successful enterprises or deteriorate and close.
- Organizations with the opportunity for gradual and incremental growth
- Institutions related to and mainly dependent on technology
- Organizations that require low costs
- Under-resourced institutions
- Organizations that require costs for research, development and innovation.

The startup lifecycle includes the stages that a startup goes through from the moment of concept, market entry, and expansion. There is no single approach to the number of stages of a startup's lifecycle, but it does have standard characteristics. (Hadjadj & Bouchekifa , 2025)

The first stage (pre-seeded) is characterized by the emergence of a clear idea for technical and commercial implementation. The product is developed at the seed stage with limited functionality that allows the problem to be solved. The start-up phase is characterized by creating a business model, having a team, and looking for the perfect business model, which can change before the expansion process. The growth phase is when the scaling up occurs; the startup begins to make a profit, expand into the market, and attract venture capital investments and other financial resources. During the expansion phase, the startup occupies certain positions in the market, expands production or service delivery, and increases the asset base and capital. In the exit stage, the startup is stable; growth slows down; this stage is the exit point for venture capitalists. (Polishchuk, 2023)

The main components of startups are their founder and idea, consumer and need, production technology and production with capabilities, investors, and funding. Specific components work interconnected within synchronization with the chosen market type in a particular state or international arena

Figure 2. Components of startups

Source : (Polishchuk, 2023)

The success of startups at every stage of the lifecycle depends on the efficiency of the ecosystem and the interaction of all participants (Polishchuk, 2023). Pre-launch factors play a crucial role in determining a startup's fate and chances of success (Akhtar & Ab Aziz, 2025).

Table1. Summary of Findings on Pre-launch Factors Affecting Startup Success

Factor	Description	Number of Studies	Key Findings	Implications for Startups
Solution Validation	The process of testing the product/service with potential users to ensure it meets market needs.	4	Startups that conducted thorough solution validation had a higher rate of user adoption and lower product churn.	Validates product-market fit before launch; crucial for early-stage pivot decisions.
Market Demand Forecasting	Estimating future demand for a product/service to optimize supply levels and operations.	5	Poor demand forecasting was linked to cash flow problems due to overproduction or missed opportunities.	Influences production and inventory strategies; affects capital allocation.
Resource Allocation	Distribution of capital and human resources to various business functions.	2	Effective resource allocation correlated with reduced operational costs and increased efficiency.	Determines prioritization of investments; critical for sustaining initial growth phase.

Source: (Akhtar & Ab Aziz, 2025, p. 288)

Startups have also been economic, social, and scientific in order to value scientific research to serve the well-being of modern societies and meet their needs, and many startups have succeeded in creating wealth and added value and supporting the economies of several



countries such as the United States of America and East Asian countries thanks to the development of innovative products and services, as well as allowing the creation of new job opportunities and providing solutions to communities that are easily accessible and at low costs. (Djoudi & Rahal , 2025)

1.3- Startups and Social Responsibility

Startups are increasingly treat social responsibility not as a philanthropy, but as a strategic asset. Across contexts, research links well designed CSR and social sustainability to better performance, resilience, and access to resources for young ventures . Multiple studies have found positive links between CSR and new venture performance, especially for young or family -owned ventures, where CSR helps overcome the "liability of newness" by building legitimacy and trust(Zuo et al., 2021; Malpani& Ghosh, 2022; Khan et al., 2024; Khattak et al., 2021).

CSR towards primary stakeholders (employees, customers, and investors) tends to improve financial performance, while CSR that focuses mainly on more distant stakeholders can initially hurt finances unless cushioned by indirect government support (Ji et al., 2024). CSR is also associated with stronger innovation performance in high growth firms, particularly via responsibilities to employees and shareholders(Huang et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2024).

Table 2: Key links between corporate social responsibility and startups

CSR focus in early ventures	Main reported benefits	Citations
Internal& external CSR (employees, community, environment)	Higher sustainability, risks, mitigation, opportunity creation	(Belaa , 2023), (Liu, Lu, Zhang, & Liu, 2021), (Malpani& Ghosh, 2022)
"Green" CSR & innovation	Better environmental and overall sustainable performance	(Le, 2022), (Malik, et al., 2021)
Early CSR in new ventures/joint ventures	Reputation, funding access, brand trust, resilience	(Khan M. , Hasan , Rabeeu, & Hossain , 2024) , (Khattak, Anwar , & Clauß, 2021)

Source: Prepared by the author

2- Methodology

This study relies on the descriptive-analytical approach as one of the appropriate approaches to study administrative and economic phenomena and analyze their various dimensions, as this approach aims to describe and analyze the concept of social responsibility for startups and highlight their role as a strategic direction that can contribute to achieving institutional sustainability and enhancing the competitiveness of these companies in a changing and increasingly competitive business environment. The study was mainly based on the analysis of the scientific literature related to the research topic, with a heavy reliance on scientific articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals, because they provide theoretical and conceptual frameworks that help clarify the study variables, which are represented in startups and social responsibility. The study also focused on the conceptual framework of these two variables, in addition to studies that examined the nature of the relationship between social responsibility and startups, both in terms of their impact on institutional performance and their role in enhancing sustainability and achieving competitive advantage. In addition, some specialized scientific books in the field of business administration and strategic management were used, with the aim of strengthening theoretical analysis and expanding the understanding of the concepts related to the subject of the study. The analysis of these different scientific sources has made it possible to form an integrated theoretical perception about the social responsibility of startups, while highlighting the most important findings of previous studies in this field, which contributes to understanding the theoretical and practical dimensions of this trend and its role in supporting the sustainability of startups and enhancing their ability to adapt to the changes of the contemporary business environment

3- Results and Discussion

3.1- The Strategic Role of Social Responsibility in Startups

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is framed as a strategic tool for excellence, responsible entrepreneurship, and competitiveness, not just philanthropy. Conceptual work highlight the inherent social responsibility throughout the entrepreneurial process, contributing to opportunity identification, stakeholder relationship building, and the



promotion of social entrepreneurship, and Social responsibility fosters innovation and long-term sustainability in emerging markets. Although startups often focus on survival, growth and funding, CSR give them important strategic advantages, most notably: (Zhuge, He, Yuan, & Sun, 2023), (Malpani& Ghosh, 2022)

Enhance corporate reputation: Startups typically don't have a long history or a well-established reputation, so their commitment to CSR values helps them build a positive mindset in the market and with most stakeholders.

Building legitimacy and trust: A Startups need to earn the trust of the market quickly. When it demonstrating a clear commitment to ethical, social, and environmental values, it enhances its credibility with customers, investors, and partners.

Attracting investment: Venture capital funds (VCs) are increasingly interested in ESG-compliant companies. (Ji, Sheng , & Wan, 2024), (Huang, Xie , Zeng, & Li, 2021)

Talent Acquisition: Millennials and Gen Z (who represent the core workforce in startups) prefer to work for "purpose-driven" organizations that align with their personal values.

Differentiation: In crowded markets, social impact is a powerful marketing story that builds deep loyalty among the modern consumerism. Product excellence alone may not be enough. When a company is associated with clear values such as sustainable development, transparency, and community service, it creates a competitive advantage that is difficult to imitate

Enhancing customer loyalty: The Consumers is becoming more aware of the impact of businesses on society and the environment. Therefore, many customers tend to support brands that adopt responsible practices, which is reflected in increased loyalty, repeat purchases, and improving the customer experience.

Driven Innovation :Startups are closely linked to innovation, and social responsibility emerges as a stimulating tool for innovation, trying to solve a social problem often leads a startups to innovate unprecedented products or services, such as FinTech companies that

target financial inclusion for the unbanked (Khattak, Anwar , &Clauß, 2021), (Liu, Lu, Zhang, & Liu, 2021)

Reduce risk: Adhering to legal, ethical, and environmental standards helps avoid many potential crises, such as legal disputes or reputational damage.

Supporting long-term sustainability: Companies that integrate social and environmental considerations into their business model from the outset are better able to sustain and growbalance (Zhuge, He, Yuan, & Sun, 2023)

Table 3: The impact of social responsibility on startups

CSR focus in startups	Main benefit / risk	Citations
Internal & primary stakeholders (employees, customers, investors)	Better financial performance, innovation, legitimacy	(Huang, Xie , Zeng, & Li, 2021), (Jama, 2025) , (Khan M. , Hasan , Rabeeu, & Hossain , 2024), (Malpani& Ghosh, 2022)
Broad external/secondary stakeholders (community, philanthropy)	Long-term reputation; short-term financial strain without support	(Liu, Lu, Zhang, & Liu, 2021), (Ganesh & Bangaru, 2023), (Ji, Sheng , & Wan, 2024)
Early, integrated CSR strategy	Mitigates liability of newness; strengthens brand and trust	(Malpani& Ghosh, 2022), (Khan M. , Hasan , Rabeeu, & Hossain , 2024), (Khattak, Anwar , &Clauß, 2021), (Fixen, 2025)

Source : Prepared by the author

In order for startups to be able to adopt social responsibility in a practical and effective manner, the following mechanisms can be relied upon: (Fixen, 2025), (Huang, Xie , Zeng, & Li, 2021), (Liu, Lu, Zhang, & Liu, 2021), (Malpani & Ghosh, 2022)

Integrating CSR into the Vision and Mission : CSR should start from the company's identity and mission, not just a side activity. The more the values are part of the foundation, the more opportunities there are to commit to them in the future.

Start with simple and applicable practices : The company does not have to start with extensive and expensive programs, but it is enough to adopt initial practices such as:



Transparency with customers. Fair employment policies. Rational waste and energy management. Respect for privacy and data protection, support small community initiatives relevant to the activity.

Linking Social Responsibility to the Business Model: The best forms of social responsibility is what is directly related to the product or service. If a startup solves a societal problem through its core activity, it gives it sustainable value. The modern view of social responsibility goes beyond the concept of ancillary activities, such as donations or sponsorships, to integrate responsibility into the business model. For startups, this integration is relatively easier than for larger companies, and this integration is reflected in a number of practices, such as:

- Design products or services that solve social or environmental problems.
- Building fair and sustainable supply chains.
- Adopt transparent policies in pricing, staffing, and data.
- Reduce the environmental impact of operations from the outset.
- Attention to diversity and inclusion within the work teams.

Adopt clear measurement indicators: Startups can use simple indicators to measure their social and environmental performance, such as: diversity in the workforce, employee satisfaction rate, energy and resource consumption, customer satisfaction and trust.

Building partnerships with the community and supporters: Collaborating with universities, non-profit organizations, business incubators and government agencies to develop corporate social responsibility initiatives at an affordable cost.

Enhance governance and transparency: Even in small startups, having a degree of transparency in decisions and disclosure contributes to establishing corporate responsibility.

Employing technology to serve sustainability: Digital tools can be used to reduce costs, measure impact, and improve environmental and social efficiency.

3.2- Dimensions of Applying Social Responsibility in Startups

It includes the company's responsibility its employees and internal organizational structure, and includes: providing a fair and safe work environment. Commitment to equality and non-discrimination. Developing professional skills, building an organizational culture on transparency, attention, etc., and considering work-life balance. In startups in particular, this dimension is important because the culture of the organization is shaped in the early stages, and what is planted early is difficult to change later. (Khattak, Anwar , & Clauß, 2021), (Malpani& Ghosh, 2022)

External Dimension

The company's responsibility towards customers, society and the environment includes: providing safe and high-quality products, protecting customer data and privacy, integrity in advertising and marketing, contributing to the development of the local community and reducing the environmental impact of operational activities.

Environmental dimension

Even if startups are small, their environmental impact can be significant, especially in the technical, industrial, and logistics sectors, and potential environmental applications include: energy conservation, use of recyclable materials, reduction of waste and emissions, and adoption of environmentally friendly operating practices. (Bărbulescu, Tecău , Munteanu , & Constantin, 2021), (Malpani& Ghosh, 2022)

The Digital and Ethical Dimension

With the rise of digital startups, a new dimension of social responsibility has emerged: protecting privacy and data, mitigating bias in algorithms and artificial intelligence, ensuring transparency in data collection and use, and safeguarding users from digital



exploitation. This dimension is crucial for startups operating in the fields of technology and digital platforms. (Nutan & Nagpal, 2024), (Zangara, Corvello, & Filice, 2025)

3.3- Challenges and Obstacles for Startups

Global reviewsshow a rapid expansion in startup research, particularly in India and East Asia, with an increasing focus on digital innovation, local ecosystems, and innovative financing. Across various environments, research indicates that when startups integrate genuine social and environmental responsibility into their strategies and operations, they tend to make gains in survival, financial performance, innovation, and resilience. These benefits are amplified when social responsibility is implemented as a core and integral part of the business model, rather than a peripheral or token activity. Despite the numerous advantages of social responsibility, startups face several challenges in adopting it, the most significant of which are: (Belaa , 2023), (Zangara, Corvello, & Filice, 2025),(Malpani& Ghosh, 2022), (Khan M. , Hasan , Rabeeu, & Hossain , 2024), (Khattak, Anwar , &Clauß, 2021)

- Startups often operate with limited budgets, which makes them focus on survival and rapid growth before any other considerations.
- Investor Pressure and Growth Sometimes, investors seek quick returns, which may lead to companies neglecting social and environmental aspects.
- Lack of structures and policies: Many startups do not have clear governance systems or corporate policies that govern their practices in their early stages.
- Poor managerial awareness: Some founders may view corporate social responsibility as an added cost or advertising activity, rather than as a strategic element.
- Difficulty in Impact Measurement, as most startups lack clear tools to measure the social and environmental impact of their activities, which limits their ability to evaluate and develop.
- The priority of survival: In the critical stages of a company's life, survival in the market may be the primary concern, delaying the development of integrated social responsibility programs.

Conclusion

Social responsibility is no longer a secondary concept or a secondary option, but has become an essential part of modern business philosophy. For startups, adopting this approach does not conflict with the pursuit of profit or rapid growth; rather, it can be a real driver of sustainability, innovation, and building trust in the market. In the modern era, the success of a startup is measured not only by its ability to attract funding or achieve widespread adoption, but also by its ability to deliver responsible value to society, the environment, and all stakeholders. Therefore, corporate social responsibility (CSR) for startups represents a conscious and promising strategic decision that can make the difference between temporary growth and sustainable growth.

Through this study, we arrived at a number of conclusions, which are:

- Social responsibility has evolved from a charitable concept to a comprehensive strategic approach that impacts an organization's performance and sustainability.
- Startups, despite their limited resources, are interested in adopting social responsibility from their earliest stages.
- Social responsibility contributes to building trust and credibility, enhancing the reputation and competitive advantage of startups.
- Integrating social responsibility into the business model is more effective than treating it as a separate activity.
- There is a positive relationship between social responsibility and innovation, especially in startups of a technical or social nature
- Among the most prominent obstacles that prevent the implementation of social responsibility are: limited resources, growth pressures, weak awareness, and difficulty in measurement.
- Adopting simple, realistic, and measurable practices can be an effective step for startups towards sustainability.

Based on the results of previous studies, this research recommends the following:



- The need to integrate social responsibility into the core vision of startups from the very beginning.
- Educate entrepreneurs on the importance of social responsibility as a strategic investment, and not an additional cost.
- Developing simplified tools to measure social and environmental impact that are tailored to the nature of startups.
- Encourage investors and business incubators to include corporate social responsibility and sustainability standards within their evaluation and support criteria.
- Strengthening partnerships and collaboration between startups, academia and the community to develop responsible and low-cost
- Prioritize the ethical and digital dimensions, especially in technology and data startups.
- Conducting future field studies to measure the impact of social responsibility on financial performance, growth, and reputation in Arab startups

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