

# The Impact of Organizational Culture on Product Innovation in Start-up Companies

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**Abstract:** : Start-up companies operate in a dynamic business environment characterized by rapid technological change, market uncertainty, and intense competition, making product innovation a key prerequisite for sustainability and competitiveness. This study aims to analyze the role of organizational culture in shaping and supporting the product innovation process in start-up companies. A qualitative approach with a descriptive-exploratory design was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the values, norms, and work practices that influence innovative behavior. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with founders, team leaders, and employees, non-participatory observation of interactions and work processes, and organizational documentation studies. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of relationships between organizational culture and product innovation stages. The results show that an organizational culture formed organically through intensive interaction, openness to ideas, cross-functional collaboration, tolerance for risk, and diversity of perspectives plays a significant role in driving product innovation. This culture influences all stages of innovation, from ideation to commercialization, and strengthens organizational learning and team psychological resilience. The findings also confirm that start-up sustainability and competitiveness are supported by the integration of cultural value stability and strategic flexibility. This study positions organizational culture as a strategic infrastructure that determines the effectiveness of product innovation in start-up companies.

**Keywords:** : Organizational Culture; Product Innovation; Start-Up

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## 1. Introduction

Developments in the organizational environment, characterized by rapid technological change, globalization, and increasing demands for transparency, have compelled organizations to rethink conventional management approaches. Previous studies on organizational culture and innovation have largely emphasized the role of structural support, leadership style, and knowledge management in fostering innovation performance. However, these studies tend to treat organizational culture as a static construct and often overlook the value-based foundations that shape daily managerial decisions and employee behavior, particularly in dynamic and uncertain organizational contexts. As a result, the question of how core organizational values function as a strategic driver of innovation and sustainable performance remains insufficiently explored.

This gap becomes increasingly evident in the context of start-up organizations. Unlike established organizations that operate with relatively stable structures, formalized procedures, and accumulated organizational routines, start-ups function in conditions of

high uncertainty, limited resources, and rapid change. In such conditions, formal control systems are often underdeveloped, making organizational culture especially shared values a critical mechanism for coordination and decision-making. Nevertheless, prior research rarely distinguishes between the cultural needs of start-ups and those of mature organizations, assuming that cultural frameworks are universally applicable. This assumption obscures the reality that start-ups require a more flexible, value-driven, and meaning-oriented cultural approach to sustain innovation and organizational viability.

A managerial orientation that prioritizes short-term financial outcomes, which is still dominant in many organizations, poses particular risks for start-ups. Excessive emphasis on rapid growth and immediate performance can marginalize ethical considerations, employee well-being, and long-term stakeholder relationships. Under intense competitive pressure, start-ups are especially vulnerable to opportunistic practices that conflict with their foundational values, potentially undermining trust, legitimacy, and organizational identity (Manurung et al., 2025). When the balance between operational performance and value alignment is not maintained, organizational sustainability becomes fragile. This condition highlights that performance and innovation are not merely technical outcomes but are deeply rooted in the value system that underpins managerial processes.

Values-based management offers an alternative paradigm by positioning core values such as integrity, accountability, adaptability, and social responsibility as the foundation of management and innovation practices. While previous studies have discussed values-based management in established organizations, limited attention has been given to how this approach operates within start-ups, where values often substitute for formal structures. In start-ups, shared values play a central role in aligning vision, guiding decision-making under uncertainty, and fostering innovative behavior among employees. This alignment creates a work climate that encourages intrinsic motivation, commitment, and collaborative innovation, which are essential for organizational survival and growth (Widowati et al., 2025; Boyratan et al., 2025).

Furthermore, innovation in start-ups is closely linked to employees' perception of meaningful work. A values-based cultural environment enables individuals to internalize organizational goals and perceive their contributions as significant. This intrinsic motivation supports sustained engagement and creative problem-solving without excessive reliance on external controls. Consequently, innovation performance becomes more resilient and adaptive, driven by internalized values rather than short-term incentives alone. This perspective expands the understanding of innovation as a multidimensional process that integrates psychological, ethical, and strategic dimensions (Jismin et al., 2022).

Organizational sustainability, particularly for start-ups, depends on the ability to balance economic objectives with social and environmental responsibilities from the early stages of development. Values-based management facilitates the systematic integration of these dimensions into strategic decision-making. Decisions grounded in values encourage long-term thinking, enhance stakeholder trust, and contribute to reputational capital an asset that is crucial for start-ups seeking legitimacy in competitive markets (Elgharbawy & Abdel, 2021; Maulana et al., 2025). Sustainability, in this sense, is not merely organizational survival but the capacity to grow ethically and innovatively (Ilmiyono et al., 2024).

Despite its potential, the implementation of values-based management in start-ups faces distinct challenges. Diverse individual backgrounds, the abstract nature of values, and the pressure for rapid results often complicate the translation of values into concrete practices. Inconsistent application may generate skepticism among employees, weakening

cultural cohesion and innovation capacity. These challenges underscore the need for empirical studies that specifically examine how values-based management operates within start-up cultures and how it influences innovation and organizational performance.

Based on these considerations, this study positions itself to address the gap in the literature by examining values-based management as a cultural foundation for innovation and sustainability in start-up organizations. By focusing on this specific organizational context, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of organizational culture, moving beyond generalized models and offering insights that are theoretically relevant and practically applicable for start-up leaders facing complex and uncertain environments.

## **2. Method**

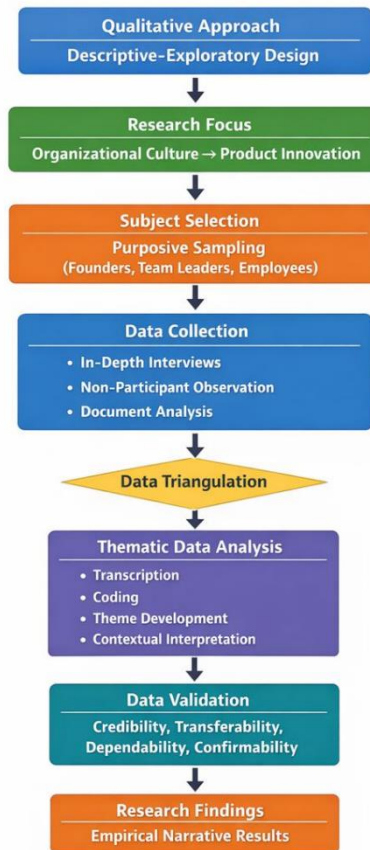
This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive–exploratory design to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of organizational culture in fostering product innovation within start-up companies. This approach prioritizes the exploration of meanings, values, and subjective experiences of organizational actors in their natural settings. In this study, the researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation, enabling a flexible and context-sensitive exploration of the research phenomenon.

The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals who possess direct experience and involvement in product innovation activities. A total of 15 informants participated in this study, consisting of start-up founders (4 informants), team leaders or product managers (5 informants), and employees involved in product development and innovation processes (6 informants). This number of informants was considered sufficient to achieve data saturation, as no new substantive themes emerged during the later stages of data collection.

The inclusion criteria for informants were: (1) active involvement in a start-up organization operating for at least one year, (2) direct participation in product innovation or development processes, and (3) a minimum of one year of working experience within the organization to ensure adequate understanding of the organizational culture. The exclusion criteria included individuals with purely administrative roles, temporary staff or interns, and employees who were not involved in innovation-related activities, as they were deemed less able to provide relevant insights into the research focus.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis, including internal reports, innovation guidelines, and organizational policy documents. Methodological triangulation was applied to enhance the credibility and robustness of the findings by comparing data obtained from multiple sources and techniques.

Data analysis was conducted thematically and concurrently with data collection. The process involved verbatim transcription of interview data, initial and focused coding, theme development, and reflective contextual interpretation to capture the relationship between organizational culture and product innovation. To ensure data trustworthiness, the study applied the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, supported by techniques such as member checking, an audit trail, and researcher reflexivity. This study was conducted in accordance with established qualitative research ethics. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from all informants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and maintaining academic integrity throughout the research process.



**Figure 1. Qualitative Research Design Framework on Organizational Culture and Product Innovation**

### 3. Results and Discussions

#### 3.1 Characteristics of Start-up Organizational Culture in Supporting Product Innovation

Organizational culture in start-up companies demonstrates a character that is formed organically through intensive interaction between members from the early stages of establishment. The values brought by the founders are not limited to symbolic terms but are articulated through repetitive daily work practices. One founder stated that

*“The way we discuss from the start is designed so that everyone feels equal”* (Informant 1).

This statement found empirical coherence through non-participatory observation, which demonstrated the absence of physical or social distance between leaders and team members. This communication pattern formed collective behavioral expectations. These expectations gradually became unwritten organizational standards. These standards guided employee thinking and behavior. A culture of innovation began to develop not through formal policies, but through shared experiences (Sangapan et al., 2025). The openness dimension of ideas not only serves as a channel for creative expression but also as a mechanism for social selection of ideas. Employees learn that ideas are valued based on substance, not structural position. One informant stated that

*“Good ideas will still be used even if they come from the newest members”* (Informant 4).

Observations of internal meetings show that ideas are often debated critically without defensive overtones. This dynamic demonstrates a mature dialogic culture. Dialogue serves as an arena for testing the logic and relevance of ideas. This process improves the quality of innovations before they enter the development stage. Organizational culture acts as an epistemic filter, preventing innovation from becoming purely speculative. Collaboration in startups isn't just manifested in formal teamwork, but rather as a fluid relational pattern. Cross-functional interactions are spontaneous and situational. One developer stated that

*"There is no clear limit on when we have to talk between teams, everything can be done directly"* (Informant 3).

Observations confirm the informal exchange of information outside of formal forums. This pattern accelerates the circulation of organizational knowledge. Knowledge is not trapped in functional silos; perspective integration occurs simultaneously (Zahra et al., 2025). A collaborative culture enriches the understanding of product problems. Richer understanding expands the possibilities for innovative solutions. The risk tolerance aspect shows how culture influences an organization's relationship with uncertainty. Risk is not positioned as a personal threat, but rather as a collective phenomenon that needs to be managed together. One team leader stated that

*"We always focus on what can be learned, not who is at fault"* (Informant 2).

Observation of the product failure evaluation process indicates the absence of a blame-oriented language. The emerging discourse is oriented toward system improvement. This orientation fosters the team's psychological resilience. Such resilience enables repeated exploration without emotional exhaustion. Organizational culture functions as a psychological safeguard. This protection constitutes a critical prerequisite for high-risk innovation. The diversity of organizational members' backgrounds enriches the complexity of an innovative culture. Differences in discipline, experience, and modes of thinking are not suppressed but are instead managed productively (Putra & Munthe, 2024). One informant stated that

*"differences in perspectives often trigger debate, but it is precisely this process that improves the product"* (Informant 6).

Observations show that cognitive conflict is accepted as a natural part of the work process. Conflict does not escalate into relational conflict. Organizational culture serves as a mechanism for conflict regulation. This regulation allows differences to become a source of added value. Innovation emerges from the synthesis of perspectives. An inclusive culture strengthens organizational adaptability.

### **3.2 Product Innovation Processes Influenced by Organizational Culture**

The formation of innovative ideas in start-up companies occurs through intensive social interaction rather than as the outcome of isolated individual work. Initial ideas are treated as raw material that remains open to reinterpretation and collective refinement. One informant noted that "initial ideas are usually rough, but they develop through discussion" (Informant 5), indicating an acceptance of imperfection as an integral part of the creative process. This pattern is reflected in the dynamics of idea forums, which demonstrate a tendency toward exploration rather than evaluation. Discussions evolve through the testing of assumptions, the simulation of consequences, and the exchange of cross-functional perspectives. Such an environment creates psychological conditions that support intellectual courage. Organizational culture plays a role in framing ideas as processes rather than final products, and this orientation enhances the conceptual depth of innovation from the earliest stages (Bendak et al., 2020; Salsabila et al., 2024).

During the development phase, collective work mechanisms are not grounded in rigid formal instructions but in a shared understanding of product direction and values (Putri et al., 2023; Armadani & Ali, 2025). Coordination emerges as a result of the internalization of common goals rather than as a response to structural control. One informant stated that

*“We rarely need detailed instructions because we already understand the product direction”* (Informant 1).

This demonstrates the functioning of cognitive consensus as a substitute for written procedures. Cross-functional interactions occur with minimal friction because each actor understands their contribution to the overall system. This alignment allows for rapid adjustments when specifications or market needs change. The development process becomes adaptive without losing coherence. The organizational culture operates as an implicit coordination system. This system accelerates iteration without sacrificing quality.

Decision-making during the innovation process exhibits a deliberative character that places social legitimacy as a prerequisite for implementation. Strategic decisions are not generated through the logic of a single authority, but rather through argumentative negotiations involving various functional interests. The leadership's statement that

*“We prefer decisions that can be jointly accounted for”* (Informant 2)

Reflects a collective orientation toward organizational responsibility. Decision discussions demonstrate the simultaneous integration of technical, economic, and risk considerations. This approach strengthens ownership of the decisions made. Implementation commitment emerges as a consequence of deliberative participation; a participatory culture reduces latent resistance. Decision stability is the foundation for sustainable innovation (Nugroho, 2024). The product testing process serves as an arena for organizational learning that emphasizes epistemic reflexivity. User feedback is treated as a source of correction to internal assumptions, rather than as a threatening external assessment. One informant stated that

*“We always go back to user data before fixing features”* (Informant 4),

Empirical orientation in product evaluation. Collective reflection practices demonstrate a willingness to revise previous decisions. This attitude indicates a low organizational ego regarding work outcomes. Learning accumulates through documentation and cross-team discussions. The resulting knowledge extends beyond the individual level. Organizational culture fosters the formation of collective memory. This memory strengthens long-term innovation capacity.

The implementation and commercialization phases demonstrate how cultural values maintain the continuity of innovation orientation through to the execution stage. Final decisions remain guided by user benefits as the primary criterion of legitimacy.

*“The final decision is always asked, does this really help the user”* (Informant 3)

This emphasizes the dominance of value logic over short-term considerations. Integration between technical and marketing teams occurs organically, avoiding fragmentation of objectives. Product implementation is understood as a social process involving the negotiation of meaning across functions. Organizational cohesion is strengthened through value alignment. Strategy execution is consistent without losing flexibility. Organizational culture serves as a mechanism for maintaining the direction of innovation. This mechanism ensures that innovation is not reduced to mere technical activity.

### 3.3 Implications of Organizational Culture on Start-up Sustainability and Competitiveness

The sustainability of start-up organizations is underpinned by their collective ability to systematically navigate uncertainty, rather than through ad hoc responses to external pressures. An internalized experimental orientation allows the organization to view change as a normal operating condition. The founders' statement that

*“Market changes are not too surprising because we are used to experimenting”*  
(Informant 1)

Reflecting collective cognitive readiness. Product direction adjustments occur without structural disruption because the organization's core values remain intact. This stability does not hinder flexibility but rather provides a consistent frame of reference. This framework allows the organization to move quickly without losing strategic orientation. Adaptability results from value consistency, not abandonment. This finding reinforces the view that startup sustainability stems from the integration of cultural stability and strategic agility (Adha et al., 2025).

Organizational growth inherently brings increased social complexity, potentially weakening value cohesion if not managed reflectively. In the context of growing organizations, particularly start-ups, a key challenge lies in the process of internalizing collective thinking among new members. Organizational behavior literature confirms that structural expansion often creates a cognitive distance between the founders' values and daily operational practices (Trimulyana, 2025). To respond to this situation, organizations tend to develop informal socialization mechanisms based on direct interaction. Informal mentoring and situational learning serve as primary channels for value transmission through observation, imitation, and active participation in decision-making. Cultural values are not positioned as written, declarative norms, but rather are embodied in daily work practices. This approach ensures the continuity of innovation orientation as the organization grows. Thus, cultural continuity serves as a support for collective identity, serving as the foundation for consistent and targeted innovation.

Startup competitiveness is not solely determined by technological superiority or access to financial resources, but rather by the organization's ability to maintain a rhythm of innovation that aligns with market dynamics. A strategic management perspective positions innovation as a prerequisite for sustainability, not simply a response to external pressures. Within this framework, product iteration is understood as a continuous process driven by internal expectations of quality, relevance, and organizational learning. Organizational culture creates normative pressures that encourage constructive, iterative innovation, without relying on formal sanction mechanisms. These pressures facilitate collective creativity and reduce reliance on large-scale capital. Competitive advantage is formed through the accumulation of knowledge, continuous learning, and consistency in innovation practices, resulting in a strategic position that is difficult for competitors to imitate (Nuruddin et al., 2025; Pratiwi & Sisdiyanto, 2025).

The implications of organizational culture are also reflected in the level of individual attachment to the organization as a space for professional actualization. Work engagement theory explains that work experiences are perceived as meaningful when individuals see a direct link between the contribution of ideas and the tangible impact on organizational outcomes. Cognitive participation in the innovation process strengthens employees' emotional engagement, which in turn encourages active participation without reliance on formal control. (Anggrayni et al., 2025; Anisyah, 2025) This condition contributes to increased employee retention as a consequence of positive work meaning. Human resource stability allows the accumulation of tacit knowledge that is contextual and difficult to

codify. This internalized knowledge improves the quality of innovative decision-making and strengthens the organization's adaptive capacity. Thus, organizational culture forms a psychologically and strategically productive work ecosystem.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that organizational culture operates as a strategic infrastructure that simultaneously supports innovation, sustainability, and competitiveness. The relationship between individuals, processes, and organizational goals is integrated through values that are lived out in daily practices. This integration results in consistent strategic direction without sacrificing operational flexibility. Organizational culture functions as an intangible asset that is difficult to replicate because it is rooted in collective experience and historical learning. The resulting advantages are cumulative and long-term. Start-ups that manage culture reflectively have a greater capacity to survive and thrive in dynamic environments. These findings reinforce the position of organizational culture as a structural determinant of product innovation and emphasize the research contribution of viewing culture as a strategic mechanism, rather than simply a social attribute of organizations

## Conclusions

Based on the overall research findings, it can be concluded that organizational culture in start-up companies plays a fundamental role in shaping and maintaining the sustainability of product innovation. A culture that grows organically from the early stages of establishment is able to create egalitarian, dialogical, and collaborative interaction patterns. The value of openness to ideas makes innovation a collective process that emphasizes substantive quality over structural hierarchy. Tolerance for risk and failure builds psychological resilience that enables iterative exploration without personal pressure. Fluid cross-functional collaboration accelerates the circulation of knowledge and prevents fragmentation of understanding in product development. The diversity of organizational members' backgrounds enriches perspectives and encourages the birth of innovative solutions through the synthesis of ideas. In the innovation process, organizational culture functions as an implicit coordination mechanism that replaces reliance on formal procedures. Deliberative decision-making strengthens social legitimacy and collective commitment to innovation implementation. Learning processes based on user feedback form a collective memory that strengthens long-term innovation capacity. At the strategic level, organizational culture maintains the continuity of innovation orientation amid market dynamics and uncertainty. Start-up sustainability and competitiveness are formed from the integration of value stability and operational flexibility. Thus, organizational culture can be understood as a strategic infrastructure that simultaneously determines the quality of innovation, sustainability, and competitive advantage of start-ups.

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