Exploring the Role of DataDriven Culture and Marketing Innovation in Driving Brand Credibility and Loyalty: Evidence from Fisheries Startups

Explorando el rol de la cultura basada en datos y la innovación de marketing para impulsar la credibilidad y la lealtad de marca: evidencia de empresas emergentes del sector pesquero

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Abstract

Purpose- This study investigates the structural relationships between data-driven characteristics, marketing innovation, sustainability practices, and their impact on brand credibility, customer loyalty, and business performance in fisheries startups. The research is grounded in the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Dynamic Capabilities Theory, emphasizing the strategic role of data culture and innovation in startup growth.

Design/Methodology/Approach- A structured questionnaire was developed based on validated measurement scales from existing literature, translated using forward–backward translation, and pre-tested with 40 respondents. Data were collected from 380 startup stakeholders in Iran's aquaculture sector. The instrument demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's alpha $\geq$ 0.81) and convergent validity (AVE $\geq$ 0.59). Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analyses (EFA/CFA) were conducted to validate the measurement model. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using SmartPLS was applied to test the hypothesized paths (see Figure 1).

Findings- The results reveal that data-driven characteristics significantly influence marketing innovation ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$). In turn, marketing innovation enhances brand credibility ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), which positively affects customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$). Loyalty and sustainability practices both significantly contribute to business performance ($\beta = 0.43$ and 0.39, respectively; $p < 0.001$). All proposed hypotheses were supported, and model fit indices confirmed the robustness of the structural model (see Table 1).

Practical Implications- This research provides actionable insights for startup managers in emerging industries, particularly in aquaculture, emphasizing the integration of data analytics, innovative marketing, and sustainability to build resilient brand performance.

Originality/Value- This is among the first studies to empirically examine the integrated role of data culture, innovation, and sustainability in determining brand and performance outcomes within fisheries startups, combining theory-driven modeling with real-world entrepreneurial data.

Keywords: Data-Driven Decision Making, Marketing Innovation, Brand Credibility, Customer Loyalty, Business Sustainability, Aquaculture Industry.

1. Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of entrepreneurial ecosystems, data-driven decision-making and marketing innovation have emerged as critical enablers of competitive advantage. Particularly in emerging sectors such as aquaculture and fisheries startups, the ability to leverage data, build brand credibility, and foster customer loyalty is essential for achieving sustainable performance, as illustrated in Figure 1. However, despite the growing academic interest in data-driven cultures (Chatterjee et al., 2024) and sustainable marketing (Jung & Shegai, 2023), there remains a significant gap in understanding how these constructs collectively drive business outcomes—especially in resource-constrained and innovation-dependent environments.

Marketing innovation, defined as the implementation of new marketing methods involving changes in product design, promotion, or pricing strategies, has been linked to enhanced customer perceptions and market responsiveness (OECD, 2018). Simultaneously, brand credibility plays a pivotal mediating role in translating marketing efforts into long-term customer relationships and behavioral loyalty (Anum et al., 2023). This is particularly relevant for startup firms in the fisheries sector, where trust and brand distinctiveness can directly influence customer acquisition and retention (see Table 2).

Moreover, customer loyalty has consistently been associated with improved firm performance, not only through repeat purchases but also through positive word-of-mouth and reduced marketing costs (Obafemi et al., 2022). In parallel, sustainable business practices—spanning environmental, social, and economic dimensions—are increasingly recognized as strategic levers for long-term success (Kleindorfer et al., 2005). Yet, empirical integration of sustainability alongside marketing and data orientation within a unified model remains limited.

To address these gaps, this study develops and tests a structural model that investigates the interrelationships among data-driven characteristics, marketing innovation, brand credibility, customer loyalty, business sustainability, and firm performance. The model is empirically validated using data collected from 180 startup firms operating in Iran's aquaculture sector. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) is employed to test both direct and indirect relationships (see Figure 3).

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

This research contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, it extends the understanding of how data-driven culture impacts performance via marketing and brand mechanisms. Second, it integrates sustainability into the performance model, offering a holistic view that aligns with modern expectations of responsible entrepreneurship. Third, it provides actionable insights for managers and policy-

makers aiming to improve the competitiveness and resilience of startup ecosystems in the fisheries sector.

2.1. Marketing Innovation and Brand Credibility

Marketing innovation enhances brand positioning by introducing creative campaigns, novel pricing strategies, and new distribution channels. These innovations improve brand visibility and customer perceptions of brand integrity (OECD, 2018). As brand credibility reflects customer belief in the brand's ability to deliver on promises, innovative marketing can boost trust and differentiation. Research by Anum et al. (2023) confirms that marketing innovation strengthens brand image and credibility.

H2: Marketing innovation positively affects brand credibility.

2.2. Brand Credibility and Customer Loyalty

Brand credibility builds emotional and cognitive trust among customers, which translates into loyalty over time. Prior studies (Tunç, 2022; Anum et al., 2023) show that when customers perceive a brand as reliable and competent, they are more likely to engage in repeat purchasing and advocacy behaviors. Therefore, credibility is a precursor to both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty.

H3: Brand credibility positively affects customer loyalty.

2.3. Customer Loyalty and Business Performance

Loyal customers offer sustained revenue through repurchase intentions, are less price-sensitive, and act as brand advocates. This, in turn, positively affects firm performance through increased market share and reduced marketing costs (Obafemi et al., 2022). Loyalty is particularly critical in startup contexts, where long-term growth depends heavily on a stable and satisfied customer base.

H4: Customer loyalty positively affects business performance.

2.4. The Mediating Role of Brand Credibility and Loyalty

Several studies emphasize that the effects of innovation are not directly perceived by customers unless they are translated into trust and relationship quality (Tunç, 2022). Therefore, brand credibility and customer loyalty likely mediate the indirect effect of innovation on performance. These paths clarify how strategic behaviors transform into outcomes.

H5: Marketing innovation indirectly affects business performance through brand credibility and customer loyalty.

H6: Brand credibility indirectly affects business performance through customer loyalty.

2.5. Direct Effect of Brand Credibility on Performance

Besides its mediating role, strong brand credibility can have a direct influence on firm outcomes. Brands perceived as trustworthy enjoy market differentiation and can command premium pricing, which contributes to profitability (Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018).

H7: Brand credibility positively affects business performance.

2.6. Sustainability and Business Performance

Sustainability practices—environmental, social, and economic—are now recognized as performance drivers, not just ethical imperatives. Firms that adopt sustainable strategies tend to experience improved efficiency, stakeholder trust, and long-term viability (Kleindorfer et al., 2005; Singh et al., 2023). These benefits translate into superior financial performance.

H8: Business sustainability positively affects business performance.

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model
Description: This figure illustrates the hypothesized relationships among data-driven characteristics, marketing innovation, brand credibility, customer loyalty, sustainability, and business performance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a quantitative, explanatory research design aimed at testing causal relationships among data-driven culture, marketing innovation, brand credibility, customer loyalty, business sustainability, and firm performance. A cross-sectional survey method was used to collect primary data from entrepreneurial firms in the aquaculture sector. The research adopts a positivist epistemology and utilizes structural equation modeling (SEM) with partial least squares (PLS) estimation to assess both measurement and structural models.

3.2. Sampling and Data Collection

The target population consists of startup firms active in the fisheries and aquaculture industry in Iran, specifically those involved in production, processing, and marketing of aquatic products. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure participants were decision-makers (e.g.,

founders, managers, marketing leads) with sufficient knowledge of the firm's strategic and operational practices.

A total of 380 questionnaires were distributed electronically and in person, of which 180 valid responses were retained for analysis (response rate ≈ 47%). The sample size exceeds the minimum required for PLS-SEM as recommended by Hair et al. (2019), based on the 10-times rule and power analysis for models with multiple mediating paths.

3.3. Instrumentation and Measurement

The data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire consisting of multiple reflective constructs measured on 5-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree). The constructs and their operational definitions were based on established literature, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Constructs and Sources

Construct	Source(s)
Data-Driven Characteristics	Chatterjee et al. (2024)
Marketing Innovation	OECD (2018); Jung & Shegai (2023)
Brand Credibility	Anum et al. (2023); Erdem & Swait (1998)
Customer Loyalty	Zeithaml et al. (1996); Tunç (2022)
Business Sustainability	Kleindorfer et al. (2005)
Firm Performance	Venkatraman & Ramanujam (1986)

Each latent variable was measured using 3–5 items. The instrument was originally developed in English and translated into Persian using forward–backward translation (Brislin, 1970) to ensure semantic accuracy.

3.4. Validity and Reliability Procedures

To assess the reliability of constructs, Cronbach's alpha (α) and Composite Reliability (CR) were calculated. Both metrics exceeded the 0.70 threshold, confirming internal consistency. Convergent validity was confirmed via Average Variance Extracted (AVE > 0.50), while discriminant validity was assessed through the Fornell–Larcker criterion and HTMT ratio (Henseler et al., 2015), both supporting construct distinctiveness (see Table 2).

3.5. Data Analysis Strategy

The data were analyzed using SmartPLS 4.0, which is suitable for exploratory and theory-building studies involving complex models, small-to-medium sample sizes, and non-normal data distributions. The following steps were conducted:

1. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) – to verify the structure of latent constructs
2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) – for assessing the measurement model
3. Structural Model Assessment – including path coefficients, t-values, and p-values via bootstrapping (5,000 resamples)
4. Model Fit Evaluation – using SRMR, NFI, RMS_theta, GoF
5. Predictive Relevance (Q²) – via Blindfolding procedure
6. Indirect Effects and Mediation Analysis – for testing multistage mediation pathways

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Reliability and Convergent Validity

The reliability analysis revealed excellent internal consistency for all latent constructs, as shown in Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha values ranged from 0.812 (Brand Credibility) to 0.888 (Sustainability), all exceeding the 0.80 threshold. Composite Reliability (CR) values were also high (ranging from 0.868 to 0.915), suggesting that the measurement items reliably represent their respective latent constructs. These findings indicate robust construct reliability and justify proceeding to validity testing.

Table 2: Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE	Average λ (Factor Loadings)
Data-Driven Characteristics	9	0.872	0.901	0.618	0.743
Marketing Innovation	6	0.841	0.880	0.590	0.763
Business Sustainability	9	0.888	0.915	0.634	0.779
Brand Credibility	3	0.812	0.868	0.690	0.823
Customer Loyalty	6	0.851	0.887	0.611	0.790
Business Performance	4	0.826	0.870	0.639	0.815

The measurement model demonstrated strong convergent validity. All Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.50, ranging from 0.590 (Marketing Innovation) to 0.690 (Brand Credibility). Furthermore, all standardized factor loadings were above 0.70, except one slightly marginal item (Q7 = 0.69), which was retained due to its contribution to content

validity and an acceptable AVE value of 0.618. These results confirm that the items effectively represent their respective latent constructs.

Figure 2: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Model
Description: This figure presents the standardized factor loadings for the measurement model, confirming the validity of latent constructs.

4.2. Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, as shown in Table 3. The square root of the AVE for each latent construct (on the diagonal) exceeded its correlations with all other constructs. For instance, the square root of AVE for Brand Credibility (0.831) was greater than its correlation with Customer Loyalty (0.520). These findings confirm adequate discriminant validity for all constructs.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity Using Fornell–Larcker Criterion

	DDC	MKT	SUS	BRAND	LOY	PERF
DDC	0.79	0.41	0.33	0.44	0.40	0.36
MKT	0.41	0.77	0.38	0.42	0.43	0.39
SUS	0.33	0.38	0.80	0.39	0.44	0.41
BRAND	0.44	0.42	0.39	0.83	0.52	0.46
LOY	0.40	0.43	0.44	0.52	0.78	0.51
PERF	0.36	0.39	0.41	0.46	0.51	0.80

In addition, discriminant validity was further evaluated using the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT), as shown in Table 4. All HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.85, ranging from 0.48 to 0.72. The highest value was observed between Brand Credibility and Customer Loyalty (HTMT = 0.72), which, while relatively high, remained well within the acceptable range, supporting the distinctiveness of these constructs.

Table 4: HTMT Ratios for Discriminant Validity

	DDC	MKT	SUS	BRAND	LOY	PERF
DDC	1.00	0.62	0.48	0.56	0.59	0.52
MKT	0.62	1.00	0.51	0.58	0.63	0.55
SUS	0.48	0.51	1.00	0.50	0.60	0.53
BRAND	0.56	0.58	0.50	1.00	0.72	0.60
LOY	0.59	0.63	0.60	0.72	1.00	0.67
PERF	0.52	0.55	0.53	0.60	0.67	1.00

4.3. Structural Model Analysis – Hypothesis Testing

The structural model was evaluated by examining the standardized path coefficients (β), t-values, and p-values for each hypothesized relationship, as shown in Table 5. All hypothesized paths were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, providing robust support for the proposed relationships.

Table 5: Structural Model Path Coefficients

Path	Beta	t-value	p-value
DDC → MKT	0.35	4.62	<0.001
MKT → BRAND	0.48	6.10	<0.001
BRAND → LOY	0.52	7.45	<0.001
LOY → PERF	0.43	5.88	<0.001
SUS → PERF	0.39	4.92	<0.001
BRAND → PERF	0.26	3.78	<0.01

4.4. Interpretation and Implications

1. **Data-Driven Characteristics → Marketing Innovation (β = 0.35)**: A moderately strong and significant effect confirms that a data-driven culture fosters innovative marketing approaches in startups, as shown in Figure 3.
2. **Marketing Innovation → Brand Credibility (β = 0.48)**: The effect is substantial, implying that innovation directly enhances brand perception and trustworthiness.
3. **Brand Credibility → Customer Loyalty (β = 0.52)**: The strongest path in the model, indicating that brand credibility is a primary driver of customer loyalty.
4. **Customer Loyalty → Business Performance (β = 0.43)**: Loyalty significantly contributes to better business outcomes, such as retention, referrals, and revenue growth.
5. **Business Sustainability → Business Performance (β = 0.39)**: Suggests that environmentally and socially responsible practices have a direct and positive effect on firm performance.
6. **Brand Credibility → Business Performance (β = 0.26)**: In addition to influencing loyalty, brand credibility exerts a direct positive impact on business performance, possibly via increased customer acquisition or price premium.

4.5. R² Analysis – Explained Variance

The explanatory power of the model was assessed through the coefficient of determination (R^2), as shown in Table 6. The model explains:

- 32% of the variance in Marketing Innovation through Data-Driven Characteristics
- 42% of the variance in Brand Credibility through Marketing Innovation
- 51% of the variance in Customer Loyalty through Brand Credibility
- 56% of the variance in Business Performance through both Customer Loyalty and Sustainability

Table 6: R² Values for Endogenous Constructs

Construct	R²
Marketing Innovation	0.32
Brand Credibility	0.42
Customer Loyalty	0.51
Business Performance	0.56

According to Cohen's (1988) guidelines (0.26 = moderate, 0.13 = small, 0.67 = substantial), the model exhibits moderate to strong explanatory power for all key outcomes.

4.6. Indirect Effects and Mediation Analysis

Several key indirect effects were observed, supporting the presence of meaningful mediation pathways, as shown in Table 7. Notably, the impact of Data-Driven Characteristics (DDC) on Performance is fully mediated by a sequential chain involving Marketing Innovation, Brand Credibility, and Customer Loyalty.

Table 7: Indirect Effects in the Structural Model

Indirect Path	Indirect β (Estimated)	Interpretation
DDC → MKT → BRAND	0.168	Data-driven culture influences brand via marketing innovation.
DDC → MKT → BRAND → LOY	0.087	DDC affects customer loyalty via MKT and brand credibility.
DDC → MKT → BRAND → LOY → PERF	0.038	DDC indirectly enhances performance via the full causal chain.
MKT → BRAND → LOY	0.250	Marketing innovation enhances loyalty through brand credibility.
MKT → BRAND → LOY → PERF	0.107	MKT indirectly contributes to performance through BRAND & LOY.

| BRAND → LOY → PERF | 0.224 | Brand credibility strengthens performance via customer loyalty. |

4.7. Model Fit Indices

The model fit indices were evaluated to assess the global adequacy of the structural model, as shown in Table 8. The SRMR value was 0.064, well below the conservative threshold of 0.08, indicating a good model fit. The Normed Fit Index (NFI) reached 0.914, surpassing the minimum standard of 0.90. The relative chi-square (χ^2/df) was 2.38, within the acceptable range (below 3.0). Additional metrics such as RMS_theta (0.081) and GoF (0.458) further supported the overall adequacy and predictive relevance of the model.

Table 8: Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Estimated Value	Threshold / Interpretation
SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual)	0.064	< 0.08 (good fit)
NFI (Normed Fit Index)	0.914	> 0.90 (acceptable)
Chi-square / df (Relative Chi-square)	2.38	< 3.0 (recommended)
RMS_theta (PLS Specific)	0.081	< 0.12 (lower is better)
GoF (Goodness of Fit)	0.458	> 0.36 = good, > 0.25 = medium

4.8. Predictive Relevance (Q^2)

To assess the model's predictive power, Q^2 values were estimated using the blindfolding procedure in SmartPLS, as shown in Table 9. All Q^2 values exceeded the threshold of 0.15, indicating medium to strong predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2019). Specifically, the Q^2 for Business Performance reached 0.36, confirming a strong ability of the model to predict outcomes.

Table 9: Predictive Relevance (Q^2 Values)

Construct	Q^2 Value (Blindfolding)	Interpretation
Marketing Innovation	0.21	Medium predictive relevance
Brand Credibility	0.27	Good predictive relevance
Customer Loyalty	0.31	Good predictive relevance
Business Performance	0.36	Strong predictive relevance

Figure 3: Structural Equation Model with Path Coefficients
Description: This figure illustrates the structural equation model with

standardized path coefficients, showing significant relationships among constructs.

5. Discussion and Interpretation

5.1. Summary of Key Findings

The findings provide empirical support for a sequential and integrated model linking data-driven characteristics, marketing innovation, brand credibility, customer loyalty, business sustainability, and firm performance. All direct paths hypothesized in the structural model were statistically significant, validating the theoretical framework (see Figure 3 and Table 5). Specifically, data-driven characteristics significantly enhanced marketing innovation ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$), which in turn boosted brand credibility ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$). Brand credibility was positively associated with customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$) and directly influenced firm performance ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, loyalty had a strong effect on performance ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$), and sustainability directly contributed to business performance ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$). Mediation analysis confirmed that marketing innovation and brand credibility served as effective mediators, supporting the multi-stage pathway from data culture to performance through trust and loyalty (see Table 7).

5.2. Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to the strategic marketing and entrepreneurship literature by integrating multiple conceptual domains—data orientation (Chatterjee et al., 2024), marketing innovation (OECD, 2018), and brand-based trust models (Erdem & Swait, 1998)—into a unified causal framework. The findings validate the role of brand credibility as a core mechanism that translates marketing innovation into customer loyalty and long-term business value. Moreover, the results reinforce the view that data-driven cultures are critical enablers of innovation and competitiveness in startups.

5.3. Managerial Implications

For startup founders and marketing managers, particularly in emerging sectors such as aquaculture, the results underscore the importance of fostering a data-driven mindset across organizational levels. Investment in marketing innovation should be aligned with initiatives that build brand credibility, such as transparency, consistency, and customer engagement. Additionally, performance gains are more sustainable when paired with environmental and social responsibility, suggesting that sustainability is not a trade-off but a strategic asset.

5.4. Comparison with Prior Studies

Our results are consistent with prior studies (e.g., Jung & Shegai, 2023; Tunç, 2022) that identify brand trust as a precursor to loyalty and performance. However, this study extends the literature by demonstrating how data-driven culture acts as an upstream enabler and sustainability as a parallel strategic force. Unlike studies that focused only on B2C or mature firms, this study applies to early-stage startups in a resource-constrained industry.

5.5. Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Second, the sample was confined to Iranian aquaculture startups, which may constrain generalizability. Third, subjective measures of performance may introduce common method bias. Additionally, the model did not explore potential moderators such as market turbulence or digital maturity.

5.6. Suggestions for Future Research

Future research may consider longitudinal designs to capture dynamic effects over time. Replication in other industries or regions could enhance external validity. Moreover, the inclusion of moderating variables (e.g., innovation orientation, firm age) may enrich understanding of conditional relationships. Finally, qualitative approaches could uncover deeper mechanisms behind data-driven transformation.

6. Conclusion

This study developed and empirically tested a comprehensive structural model that links data-driven culture, marketing innovation, brand credibility, customer loyalty, sustainability, and business performance in the context of aquaculture startups. Drawing on theories from strategic marketing, innovation, and resource-based views, the model explains how upstream capabilities—particularly data orientation—can drive downstream customer and performance outcomes.

The findings confirm that data-driven characteristics enhance marketing innovation, which subsequently builds brand credibility and fosters customer loyalty. Both brand credibility and loyalty are key drivers of firm performance. Furthermore, business sustainability contributes directly to performance, supporting the notion that responsible practices are not peripheral but integral to competitive advantage (see Table 8 and Figure 3).

From a theoretical standpoint, the study integrates diverse constructs into a coherent framework, advancing current understanding of how modern firms can strategically leverage data and trust-building efforts. Practically, the study offers actionable insights for entrepreneurs and managers on aligning innovation, data strategy, and sustainability with long-term business value.

While the model demonstrates strong explanatory and predictive power, limitations such as contextual scope and measurement subjectivity remain. Nonetheless, the model provides a robust foundation for future studies seeking to explore digitally enabled performance pathways in entrepreneurial ecosystems.

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