Exploring the Interplay between Organizational Culture, Intrapreneurship, and Performance in Young and Mature Startups

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ABSTRACT

In a rapidly evolving entrepreneurial landscape, Tunisian startups must rely on their ability to innovate and adapt quickly. This study examines how organizational culture shapes intrapreneurship and business performance while considering startup age as a moderating factor. By analyzing data from 91 Tunisian startups using structural equation modeling, we demonstrate that organizational culture fosters intrapreneurship and enhances overall performance. However, intrapreneurship does not act as a direct mediator between culture and performance.

Startup age plays a crucial role in these dynamics: younger startups benefit more from a strong entrepreneurial culture but struggle to translate it into measurable performance, whereas more mature startups are better at converting innovation into tangible results. These findings provide valuable insights into how startups should structure their internal culture based on their stage of development.

Keywords: Organizational Culture, Intrapreneurship, Startup Performance, Startup Age, Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), Corporate Entrepreneurship

INTRODUCTION

Startups operate in environments characterized by high uncertainty. Their ability to survive and thrive largely depends on how well they innovate and adapt to change (Audretsch & Klepper, 2016). In Tunisia, the entrepreneurial landscape has gained momentum thanks to reforms such as the **2018 Startup Act**, yet significant challenges remain. Limited access to funding, regulatory instability, and increasing competition continue to hinder the growth of young ventures (World Bank, 2020).

Intrapreneurship—defined as entrepreneurial initiatives driven by employees within an organization (Sharma & Chrisman, 1999)—has emerged as a strategic tool for startups looking to maintain their competitive edge. A strong organizational culture that promotes autonomy, experimentation, and risk-taking plays a crucial role in fostering intrapreneurial behaviors (Antoncic & Hisrich, 2003). However, while the link between organizational culture and intrapreneurship is well established, its direct impact on business performance remains a topic of debate (Morris et al., 2017).

One key factor often overlooked in this discussion is the **age of the startup**. Early-stage startups tend to operate with flexible structures, making decisions quickly and adapting on the go. In contrast, more mature startups have more defined processes and stability but may struggle with organizational inertia (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). This raises an important question: **How does a startup's age influence the relationship between organizational culture, intrapreneurship, and performance?**

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How does organizational culture shape intrapreneurial behavior in Tunisian startups?

2. What is the relationship between intrapreneurship and startup performance?

3. Does the age of a startup moderate these relationships?

By exploring these questions, this research aims to expand existing literature on intrapreneurship by introducing a **time-based perspective** that has often been overlooked.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Organizational Culture and Intrapreneurship

Organizational culture plays a crucial role in shaping how employees engage with their work environment, take initiative, and contribute to innovative projects (Teece, 2007). In startups, where structures tend to be flexible and resources limited, corporate culture is a key driver of intrapreneurial behavior. A culture that promotes autonomy, risk-taking, and learning through experimentation creates a space where employees feel empowered to explore new ideas without the fear of failure (Bau & Wagner, 2015).

A culture that fosters innovation is built on several key elements. First, a **commitment to continuous improvement and openness to change** encourages startups to challenge existing practices and seek new solutions. Second, **risk tolerance** is essential, as it allows employees to propose and test unconventional ideas, even if the outcomes are uncertain (Antoncic & Hisrich, 2003). Finally, **collaboration and teamwork** help create synergies between employees, enabling knowledge sharing and facilitating the successful execution of intrapreneurial projects.

In emerging economies, where institutional frameworks can be unstable and access to funding is often constrained, organizational culture becomes even more critical. It can act as a **compensatory mechanism**, fostering agility and resilience in companies operating under uncertain conditions (Peng et al., 2008). For instance, in environments where businesses must navigate shifting regulations or bureaucratic hurdles, a culture that values flexibility and innovation provides a competitive advantage.

Leadership also plays a crucial role in reinforcing a strong intrapreneurial culture. Startup leaders who actively encourage entrepreneurial thinking and empower their teams create an environment where employees feel ownership over their ideas (Dess & Lumpkin, 2005). Transparent communication and participative management further strengthen employee engagement, leading to a workplace where intrapreneurial initiatives thrive.

Based on these considerations, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: An organizational culture that fosters innovation, autonomy, and risk-taking positively influences intrapreneurship.

Intrapreneurship and Startup Performance

Intrapreneurship is widely recognized as a driver of growth and competitive differentiation for startups. It enables businesses to seize new opportunities, refine internal processes, and develop innovative products or services that align with market needs (Zahra, 1991). However, while intrapreneurship is often associated with superior performance, its actual impact varies depending on several factors.

First, intrapreneurship contributes to **value creation** by helping startups anticipate market trends and adopt a proactive approach to change (Covin & Slevin, 1991). This forward- thinking mindset allows businesses to identify untapped opportunities and implement strategic innovations, ultimately strengthening their market position.

However, fostering intrapreneurial initiatives is not without challenges. In some cases, these initiatives can lead to **significant costs**, consuming financial and human resources without guaranteeing immediate returns (March, 1991). For instance, a startup investing heavily in a disruptive innovation without first validating market demand may struggle to turn that investment into commercial success.

Additionally, the impact of intrapreneurship on performance depends on **organizational maturity**. A well-structured startup with clear processes for evaluating and scaling innovations is more likely to reap the benefits of intrapreneurial efforts. In contrast, a younger or less structured company may find its initiatives fragmented or misaligned with strategic goals, reducing their overall effectiveness (Guth & Ginsberg, 1990).

Given these nuances, while intrapreneurship is often linked to positive business outcomes, it is crucial to assess the conditions that enhance or hinder its success. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Intrapreneurship has a positive effect on startup performance.

The Moderating Role of Startup Age

The age of a startup can influence the relationship between organizational culture, intrapreneurship, and performance. In the early stages, startups tend to have **a flexible structure** that allows for rapid experimentation and iteration. However, this agility often comes at the expense of well-established processes and resource availability, making it more challenging to implement intrapreneurial initiatives effectively (Hannan & Freeman, 1984).

During their initial years, startups typically focus on **financial viability and customer acquisition**. Intrapreneurial efforts may be seen as secondary priorities, as they divert resources toward uncertain projects. Even when an organizational culture supports innovation and risk-taking, the real impact on performance may be limited due to a lack of experience, capital, or operational stability.

On the other hand, **more mature startups** benefit from **greater organizational structure and easier access to funding**, which allows them to integrate intrapreneurship into long-term growth strategies. They are more likely to have the resources and strategic frameworks needed to translate internal initiatives into meaningful business outcomes. However, as startups age, they also face the risk of **organizational inertia**—where rigid processes and hierarchical decision-making slow down innovation and experimentation (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994).

The role of startup age is therefore complex:

- **Younger startups** benefit significantly from a strong organizational culture that fosters entrepreneurship, but their lack of structure and resources can limit the tangible impact of intrapreneurship on performance.
- **Older startups** are better positioned to leverage intrapreneurial efforts, but they must actively maintain an agile and innovation-driven mindset to avoid stagnation.

Considering these insights, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Startup age moderates the relationship between organizational culture, intrapreneurship, and performance.

Summary of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Description
H1	An organizational culture that fosters innovation, autonomy, and risk-taking positively influences intrapreneurship.
H2	Intrapreneurship has a positive effect on startup performance.
H3	Startup age moderates the relationship between organizational culture, intrapreneurship, and performance.

This section highlights the significance of organizational culture in fostering intrapreneurship while recognizing that its impact on performance is not uniform across all startups. By incorporating startup age as a moderating

factor, this research provides a more nuanced understanding of the conditions under which intrapreneurship drives business success. Future studies could further explore how external factors, such as industry type or market conditions, influence these dynamics.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Study Design

This study adopts a **quantitative approach** to examine the relationships between organizational culture, intrapreneurship, and startup performance, while considering **the moderating role of startup age**. The goal is to identify patterns and potential causal links among these variables, providing empirical insights into their interactions within an emerging entrepreneurial ecosystem.

A **quantitative methodology** was chosen to ensure measurable and generalizable results across Tunisian startups. While a qualitative approach could have provided deeper insights into underlying mechanisms, the nature of our research question requires statistical validation of the hypothesized relationships.

Data Collection and Sampling

Data was collected through an **online survey** conducted between November and January, targeting **Tunisian startups from various industries**. This collection method was chosen to reach a broad range of entrepreneurs and managers while offering flexibility in participation.

The final sample consists of **91 officially registered startups** under Tunisia's **Startup Act**, a government initiative designed to support and structure the country's entrepreneurial ecosystem. The sampling method follows a **non-probabilistic approach**, relying on the availability and willingness of entrepreneurs to participate. While this method does not ensure complete representativeness of the Tunisian startup landscape, it provides a **reliable snapshot of actively innovative and intrapreneurial firms**.

Measurement of Variables

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, the study's key dimensions were measured using **established scales from academic literature**:

- **Organizational Culture:** This variable was assessed using the scale developed by

Bau & Wagner (2015), which captures core dimensions such as **innovation orientation, risk tolerance, autonomy, and collaboration**. These elements are recognized as critical drivers of intrapreneurship within startups.

- **Intrapreneurship:** We applied the **Gawke et al. (2019)** scale, which distinguishes different aspects of intrapreneurial initiatives, including **decision-making autonomy, innovation capability, and opportunity exploration**. This multidimensional approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of intrapreneurial behaviors within startups.

- **Startup Performance:** A **multidimensional performance measurement approach** was adopted, considering both **financial indicators** (revenue growth, profitability), **non-financial indicators** (innovation, customer satisfaction), and **organizational factors** (adaptive capacity, internal skill development).

Additionally, **startup age** was included as a **moderating variable** to analyze its influence on the relationships between **organizational culture, intrapreneurship, and performance**. This variable was measured in **years since the company's official founding**.

Methodological Summary

Aspect	Description
Study Type	Quantitative, exploratory
Data Collection Method	Online survey
Sample	91 Tunisian startups
Measurement Scales	Bau & Wagner (2015) for organizational culture, Gawke et al. (2019) for intrapreneurship
Analysis Method	Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM)
Statistical Tools	Bootstrapping (5,000 resamples), reliability and validity assessments

This methodological framework ensures a **robust and structured approach** to analyzing the role of organizational culture in fostering intrapreneurship and improving startup performance, while considering how these effects evolve based on the company's stage of development.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Our study highlights a significant relationship between organizational culture and intrapreneurship ($\beta = 0.622$, $p < 0.05$). These results confirm that startups fostering innovation, autonomy, and risk-taking tend to see more entrepreneurial initiatives emerging from their employees. This aligns with existing literature, which emphasizes the central role of company culture in shaping internal entrepreneurial behavior (Bau & Wagner, 2015; Antoncic & Hisrich, 2003).

Additionally, we observe a direct and significant impact of organizational culture on startup performance ($\beta = 0.544$, $p < 0.05$). Startups that embrace experimentation and collaboration appear better equipped to navigate market shifts and optimize their internal processes. This finding supports Teece's (2007) work, which suggests that an innovation-friendly culture enhances a company's ability to develop dynamic capabilities in unstable environments.

However, despite the clear link between culture and performance, our analysis does not show a statistically significant relationship between intrapreneurship and performance ($\beta = -0.042$, $p > 0.05$). This lack of direct correlation raises questions about the actual contribution of intrapreneurial initiatives to startup success.

Table 1 — Main Empirical Results of the PLS-SEM Model

Tested Relationship	Coefficient β	p-value	Significance	Interpretation
Organizational Culture → Intrapreneurship	**0.622**	**p < 0.05**	Significant	A culture promoting innovation, autonomy, and risk-taking strongly enhances intrapreneurship.
Organizational Culture → Startup Performance	**0.544**	**p < 0.05**	Significant	Startups with an innovation-oriented culture achieve better overall performance.
Intrapreneurship → Startup Performance	**–0.042**	**p > 0.05**	Not significant	Intrapreneurship does not directly improve performance; benefits may be

				delayed or poorly executed.
Startup Age (Moderation)	*Qualitatively confirmed*	—	Observed	Younger startups benefit from culture but struggle to convert intrapreneurship into performance; mature startups do so more effectively.

Understanding the Disconnect Between Intrapreneurship and Performance

One key takeaway from this study is that while intrapreneurship is encouraged by a strong organizational culture, it does not always translate into immediate performance gains. Several factors may explain this phenomenon.

Table 2 — Narrative Summary of Key Findings

Dimension	Key Result	Explanation
Organizational Culture	Strong positive influence on intrapreneurship and performance	Confirms culture as the central driver of internal innovation.
Intrapreneurship	No direct effect on performance	Impact requires time, structure, and strategic alignment.
Startup Performance	Driven more by culture than by intrapreneurship alone	Performance depends on organizational capabilities and agility.
Startup Age	Influences the effectiveness of intrapreneurship	Young startups: high creativity, low execution. Mature startups: stronger conversion into performance.

Time Lag in Intrapreneurial Impact

Intrapreneurial initiatives often require a period of adaptation before yielding tangible outcomes. Unlike standard operational processes, intrapreneurship involves phases of experimentation, testing, and adjustments before a project can be fully leveraged. As a result, its effects on performance may be delayed and not immediately reflected in traditional success metrics such as financial profitability or revenue growth (March, 1991).

Strategic Misalignment

Not all intrapreneurial initiatives align with the company's strategic priorities. In resource- constrained startups, it is crucial for innovation efforts to be closely linked to market needs and business goals. When there is a misalignment, resources may be invested in creative but non-strategic projects that fail to generate measurable value in the short term (Covin & Slevin, 1991).

Risk Aversion in Emerging Markets

The success of intrapreneurial projects heavily depends on how companies manage risk and tolerate failure. In emerging economies like Tunisia, where institutional and economic uncertainties are high, businesses may hesitate to allocate significant resources to high-risk projects. This cautious approach can limit the scalability of intrapreneurial initiatives, reducing their potential impact on performance (Morris et al., 2017).

The Moderating Effect of Startup Age

Another key finding from our study is the moderating role of startup age. Our analysis indicates that younger startups, despite benefiting from a dynamic organizational culture, struggle to translate intrapreneurial efforts into measurable performance outcomes. Conversely, more mature startups are better positioned to leverage intrapreneurship as a driver of business success.

Several factors may explain this pattern.

Early-Stage Startups Prioritize Survival

Startups in their early phases are primarily focused on achieving stability and validating their business model. Given the challenges of acquiring customers and optimizing operations, these companies often prioritize short-term, high-impact actions. Intrapreneurial initiatives, while encouraged, may take a backseat to more immediate survival-driven activities (Hannan & Freeman, 1984).

Mature Startups Have Better Organizational Structures

More established startups tend to have structured processes and well-distributed resources, allowing them to integrate intrapreneurial efforts more effectively into their broader strategy. Over time, these firms develop innovation management and project evaluation mechanisms, reducing failure rates and maximizing the benefits of intrapreneurial initiatives (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994).

However, the relationship between startup age and intrapreneurship is not linear. While mature startups benefit from better execution of intrapreneurial projects, they also face the risk of **organizational inertia**. As companies grow, they tend to formalize processes and implement controls that, while necessary for efficiency, may slow down decision-making and stifle creativity (Zahra & Covin, 1995).

Contextualizing the Link Between Intrapreneurship and Performance

Our findings suggest that the connection between intrapreneurship and performance is highly dependent on a company's development stage. Startups in early phases must carefully structure their intrapreneurial efforts to ensure they contribute directly to growth, while more mature firms must balance structure and flexibility to avoid innovation stagnation.

Our study confirms certain aspects of existing research while providing new insights. The positive relationship between organizational culture and intrapreneurship is consistent with De Jong & Den Hartog's (2010) findings, which highlight the importance of a work environment conducive to innovation. Similarly, our results support Teece's (2007) argument that a strong innovation culture is a strategic asset that enhances dynamic capabilities.

However, our findings challenge the widely accepted notion that intrapreneurship directly enhances performance. While some studies suggest a straightforward positive effect (Covin & Slevin, 1991), our results indicate that this relationship is more complex, influenced by organizational structure and strategic alignment. This highlights the need for startups to carefully design and evaluate their intrapreneurial initiatives, ensuring they are well-integrated within their broader business strategy.

Table 3 — Reasons Why Intrapreneurship Does Not Directly Increase Performance

Explanatory Factor	**Observed Effect**
Time-lag effect	Intrapreneurial projects need time before producing measurable results.
Strategic misalignment	Some initiatives do not match market priorities or business goals.
Resource constraints in young startups	Ideas exist but cannot be executed due to lack of structure or capital.
Risk aversion (especially in emerging markets)	High uncertainty limits investment in experimental projects.

Managerial Implications

These insights offer actionable recommendations for startup leaders and policymakers:

1. **Cultivating an Intrapreneurial Culture with Strategic Alignment** Encouraging internal entrepreneurship is beneficial, but startups must ensure that new initiatives align with their market positioning and long-term goals. Innovation without strategic direction can lead to wasted efforts and diluted impact.

2. **Implementing Project Evaluation Mechanisms** Startups should establish clear processes to track and measure the outcomes of intrapreneurial projects. Regular assessments can help refine strategies and increase the likelihood of successful innovation implementation.

3. **Adapting Innovation Strategies to the Startup's Growth Stage**

- **Early-stage startups** should focus on initiatives that offer **quick, tangible benefits**, ensuring they contribute directly to market traction and revenue generation.

- **Mature startups** have more room to invest in **long-term innovation**, allowing them to take calculated risks that drive sustained growth.

This study underscores the need for a nuanced approach to intrapreneurship, taking into account the unique characteristics of startups and their evolution over time. Startup age emerges as a critical factor, shaping both the relevance and effectiveness of internal entrepreneurial efforts.

By recognizing these dynamics, entrepreneurs and policymakers can design more tailored innovation strategies that maximize both short-term and long-term benefits. While organizational culture remains a powerful enabler of intrapreneurship, its real impact depends on **how well startups align their internal initiatives with their growth trajectory**.

Ultimately, fostering intrapreneurship should not be seen as a one-size-fits-all solution but rather as an evolving process that requires **strategic adaptation at different stages of business development**.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study highlights the crucial role that organizational culture plays in fostering intrapreneurship and shaping the performance of Tunisian startups. The way a company defines its values, structures its processes, and implements internal practices significantly impacts employees' ability to innovate and take initiative. However, this influence is not uniform across all businesses—it varies depending on the startup's stage of development.

Our findings suggest that early-stage startups benefit the most from a culture centered on innovation and autonomy. Their flexibility and openness to change create an ideal environment for intrapreneurship. However, these young businesses often lack the necessary resources and structures to convert their intrapreneurial efforts into measurable success. Without a well-defined framework, even the most promising ideas risk failing to generate a tangible impact on overall performance.

Conversely, more mature startups, with well-established structures and operational processes, are generally better positioned to harness the potential of intrapreneurship. These businesses can integrate innovative initiatives into a coherent strategy for long-term growth. However, they must remain cautious of organizational inertia. Overly rigid processes and excessive formalization can stifle initiative-taking and slow down innovation. To sustain an entrepreneurial mindset, these companies must strike a balance between maintaining structure and preserving flexibility.

These insights provide valuable guidance for both startup founders and policymakers. To maximize the impact of intrapreneurship, strategies must be adapted based on the startup's stage of growth.

- **For early-stage startups**, it is crucial to implement support mechanisms that help transform innovative ideas into viable projects. This could involve **mentorship programs, incubators, and easier access to funding** to provide the necessary structure and resources for intrapreneurial initiatives to thrive. Startup founders should also focus on establishing an organizational framework that encourages initiative- taking while ensuring a degree of structure to align efforts with strategic goals.

- **For scaling startups**, the challenge lies in preventing "bureaucratic drag" that can slow down innovation. These businesses must **strike a balance between structured processes and organizational agility**. Encouraging a governance model that supports experimentation and continuous learning can sustain intrapreneurial activity. Tools such as **innovation labs, internal entrepreneurship incentives, and participatory governance models** can help keep the innovation engine running within these companies.

- **For policymakers and institutional stakeholders**, adapting **support programs and funding mechanisms** based on startup maturity is essential. Young startups need **venture capital funding and incubators**, while more advanced companies benefit from **collaborations with industrial players, large corporations, and research institutions** to scale their growth and amplify the impact of intrapreneurial initiatives.

Beyond the findings of this study, several avenues for future research emerge. First, a deeper investigation into the **role of institutional environments** in shaping the relationship between organizational culture, intrapreneurship, and performance would be valuable. Public policies, economic stability, and access to funding play a critical role in the success of intrapreneurial ventures, and considering these factors would enhance our understanding of how startups navigate their ecosystems.

Another important aspect is the **sectoral impact** on these dynamics. High-tech industries, where innovation cycles are rapid, may exhibit different intrapreneurial patterns compared to more traditional sectors that rely on incremental process improvements. A comparative analysis across industries would refine strategic recommendations for startup leaders.

Finally, adopting a **longitudinal research approach** would provide deeper insights into how intrapreneurial practices evolve over time. Rather than offering a one-time snapshot, tracking startups over several years could reveal how their organizational culture transforms and how intrapreneurship contributes (or fails to contribute) to long-term success.

This research underscores the significance of organizational culture in fostering intrapreneurship within Tunisian startups while emphasizing that its effectiveness is closely tied to the company’s stage of growth. To fully leverage intrapreneurship, young startups need to structure their initiatives and secure necessary resources, whereas more mature companies must actively work to preserve agility and avoid stagnation.

From a practical standpoint, these findings advocate for a **differentiated approach** to managing innovation and supporting startups. Aligning internal strategies and public policies with a company's life cycle is a key factor in building a **dynamic and sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem**.

Ultimately, while organizational culture is a powerful driver of innovation and growth, its true impact depends on continuous adaptation. The balance between structure and flexibility must be carefully maintained to create an environment where intrapreneurship thrives. Rather than being an end goal, intrapreneurship should be seen as an evolving process that requires tailored support mechanisms at each stage of a startup’s development.

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