

The Market-to-Scale (M2S) Framework: A Validation-Driven Startup Execution Model for Emerging Economies

¹Dr. Ramandeep Kaur, ²Dr. Kanchan Rani, ³Parvinder Singh Bajwa, ⁴Jasdeep Kaur

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce and Management, Sri Guru Granth Sahib World University
Fatehgarh Sahib, Punjab, India

²Associate Professor, Department of Commerce and Management, Sri Guru Granth Sahib World University,
Fatehgarh Sahib, Punjab, India

^{3,4}Research Scholar, Department of Commerce and Management, Sri Guru Granth Sahib World University,
Fatehgarh Sahib, Punjab, India

Abstract

The high failure rates of start-ups strain entrepreneurial environments, particularly in emerging economies where there is market uncertainty and resource scarcity. While insights exist in the literature regarding parts of startup development (e.g., customer discovery, scaling), there is little guidance in integrating execution decisions. In this study, we propose the Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework which connects market discovery with sustainable scaling through a validation-rooted execution pathway.

M2S Framework: The M2S framework comprises ten stages, all of which are interdependent: marketing research, ideal customer profiling, pain validation, pricing validation, minimum viable product development, go-to-market strategy formulation; channel selection; sales execution customer feedback and scale. Each stage is a validation checkpoint to eliminate uncertainty and decide the best path forward, reducing the risk of premature scaling.

This framework combines many fragmented theories into a clear model demonstrating startup decision-making in the face of uncertainty. As far as practical implications are concerned, it offers a roadmap for founders, incubators and policymakers seeking to boost execution discipline and scaling readiness scale in emerging markets such as India where validation could make a difference to survival and sustained growth of ecosystem.

Keywords: Startup framework; Market validation; Go-to-market strategy; Scaling; Emerging economies; Entrepreneurship

1. Introduction

Start-ups are the wheels of innovation, job creation and disruption of economy which has become inevitable in nascent economies like India. Over the past 10 years, we have witnessed vigorous entrepreneurial growth in India, enabled by a robust digital infrastructure, better access to capital and favorable policies. As we know, startup failure rates are high and many ventures fall short within a few years. The majority of start-ups fail because they lack market understanding and customer validation (CB Insights, 2021) — not because their technology isn't working properly; nor do the ones that use bad technology.

The academic literature on entrepreneurship and innovation offers extensive insights into specific dimensions of startup development. Marketing research highlights the importance of understanding customer needs, segmenting markets, and selecting appropriate target segments as foundations of value creation (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Customer development theory emphasises systematic customer discovery and validation as prerequisites for building products that solve real problems (Blank & Dorf, 2012). The lean startup approach further advocates iterative experimentation, minimum viable products (MVPs), and validated learning as mechanisms for reducing uncertainty in early-stage ventures (Ries, 2011). Separately, research on go-to-market (GTM) strategy examines

channel selection, sales execution, and commercialization pathways as drivers of adoption and revenue generation.

While each of these perspectives contributes meaningfully to understanding startup success, they are often presented in isolation. As a result, founders and early-stage managers are confronted with a fragmented body of knowledge that provides limited guidance on how these elements should be sequenced, integrated, and executed over time. This fragmentation creates a persistent gap between theory and practice, particularly for startups operating under conditions of high uncertainty and resource constraints. In emerging markets such as India, where customer heterogeneity, price sensitivity, and informal substitutes are prevalent, the absence of an integrated execution pathway significantly increases the risk of strategic misalignment.

Customer development research underscores the necessity of validating customer problems and solutions before scaling, yet it provides limited direction on how validated insights should translate into pricing logic, channel strategy, and sales execution (Blank & Dorf, 2012). Similarly, lean startup methodology prioritises experimentation and learning but offers comparatively less structure regarding downstream commercialization decisions, such as GTM strategy and scaling readiness (Ries, 2011). Marketing strategy literature, on the other hand, emphasises segmentation, targeting, and positioning but often assumes the existence of relatively stable markets and established demand patterns (Kotler & Keller, 2016). These assumptions may not hold in nascent or emerging markets, where demand uncertainty is pronounced and customer behaviour is highly context dependent.

Scaling research further complicates this landscape. Scholars argue that growth and scaling are distinct phenomena, with scaling requiring the development of organizational capabilities that allow firms to expand efficiently without proportional increases in costs (Teece, 2007). However, scaling is frequently treated as an aspirational outcome rather than as a conditional process dependent on prior validation and capability accumulation. Empirical evidence suggests that premature scaling—expanding operations, hiring, or marketing before achieving product–market fit—remains one of the most common causes of startup failure (CB Insights, 2021). This indicates the need for clearer conceptual guidance on when and how startups should transition from experimentation to expansion.

The Indian startup ecosystem accentuates these challenges. Indian markets are characterised by significant diversity in income levels, digital literacy, language, and trust mechanisms, particularly across Tier-1, Tier-2, and Tier-3 cities. Many customers rely on informal or low-cost substitutes, making willingness to pay difficult to assess and demand signals ambiguous. Under such conditions, founders often prioritise rapid product development or growth metrics over disciplined validation, increasing the likelihood of resource misallocation and early failure. These contextual realities underscore the importance of a framework that integrates market research, customer validation, commercialization, and scaling into a coherent execution pathway.

In response to these gaps, this study develops the Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework, a conceptual and integrative framework that synthesises insights from marketing research, customer development, lean startup methodology, and GTM strategy literature. The M2S framework conceptualises startup development as a validation-driven process that progresses from market research and ideal customer profiling to pain validation, pricing validation, MVP development, GTM strategy formulation, channel selection, sales execution, customer feedback, and scaling. Each stage is designed to reduce uncertainty and generate evidence before advancing to the next, thereby minimising the risks associated with premature scaling.

Unlike existing models that focus narrowly on innovation or growth acceleration, the M2S framework places validation at the centre of startup execution. By explicitly incorporating pricing validation, channel efficiency, and sales execution as early and interdependent decisions, the framework addresses commonly overlooked failure points identified in both academic and practitioner literature. Furthermore, the framework recognises the iterative

nature of entrepreneurial learning by embedding feedback loops that allow startups to revisit earlier stages based on market response, consistent with learning-based views of entrepreneurship (Ries, 2011).

The primary objective of this study is to develop and articulate a comprehensive framework that bridges fragmented theoretical insights and offers a coherent execution pathway from market understanding to scalable growth. Specifically, the study aims to integrate key constructs from marketing, entrepreneurship, and innovation research into a single conceptual model; to clarify the sequential and interdependent nature of startup execution activities; and to highlight the managerial, policy, and social implications of adopting a validation-driven approach in emerging markets.

This study contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, it advances entrepreneurship research by offering an integrative framework that connects early-stage market exploration with downstream commercialization and scaling decisions. Second, it contributes to practice by providing founders, incubators, and accelerators with a structured decision-making tool that can reduce failure risk and improve execution discipline. Third, it contributes to societal and policy discussions by outlining how improved startup survival can support employment generation, MSME formalisation, and inclusive economic development in emerging economies such as India.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews relevant literature and identifies gaps motivating the framework's development. This is followed by a description of the framework development methodology. The Market-to-Scale (M2S) framework is then presented and explained in detail. Subsequently, managerial, policy, and social implications are discussed. The paper concludes by summarising key contributions and outlining directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Startup Failure and Market Uncertainty

A central theme in entrepreneurship research is the high level of uncertainty associated with new venture creation. Unlike established firms, startups operate with limited information about customer needs, demand conditions, and competitive responses, making early decision-making inherently risky. Scholars argue that uncertainty in startups is not merely environmental but structural, arising from incomplete knowledge about markets, customers, and viable business models (McGrath & MacMillan, 1995). This uncertainty significantly influences startup survival and performance outcomes.

Empirical studies have shown that many startups fail not because of poor technological design but due to incorrect assumptions about customer demand and market readiness (Shepherd, Douglas, & Shanley, 2000). These findings underscore the importance of systematic market understanding as a precursor to venture success. However, while the literature highlights the problem of uncertainty, it offers limited integrative guidance on how startups should progressively reduce uncertainty through structured execution processes.

2.2 Market Research, Segmentation, and Ideal Customer Identification

Marketing scholarship emphasizes that value creation begins with a deep understanding of customers and markets. Classical marketing theory identifies segmentation, targeting, and positioning as essential mechanisms for aligning firm offerings with customer needs (Wedel & Kamakura, 2000). In entrepreneurial contexts, identifying an ideal customer segment is particularly critical because startups lack the resources to serve broad or heterogeneous markets effectively.

Research on entrepreneurial marketing suggests that startups often rely on intuition rather than systematic analysis when defining their target customers, leading to misalignment between offerings and market expectations (Morris, Schindehutte, & LaForge, 2002). While the importance of customer focus is well established, prior studies largely

treat customer identification as a static decision rather than a dynamic process that evolves through validation and feedback. This limitation points to the need for frameworks that explicitly link early market research with ongoing customer refinement.

2.3 Customer Problems, Value Creation, and Willingness to Pay

The literature on value creation emphasizes that successful ventures solve problems that customers perceive as important and are willing to pay to resolve. From a value-based perspective, customer adoption depends not only on functional benefits but also on perceived economic and emotional value (Anderson, Narus, & van Rossum, 2006). In startup contexts, identifying genuine customer pain points is essential for distinguishing viable opportunities from superficial interest.

Studies on new product adoption indicate that customer willingness to pay is a critical but often neglected dimension of early-stage validation (Tellis, 1988). Many startups validate interest through usage or engagement metrics without adequately testing pricing assumptions, resulting in weak revenue models. Existing research acknowledges the importance of value perception but does not sufficiently integrate pricing validation into broader startup execution models, creating a gap that the present framework seeks to address.

2.4 Product Development, Experimentation, and Learning

Innovation research highlights experimentation as a central mechanism through which firms learn about markets and technologies. In uncertain environments, experimentation enables firms to test assumptions, refine offerings, and adapt strategies based on evidence rather than conjecture (Thomke, 1998). For startups, early product development is less about optimization and more about learning what works.

However, prior studies often examine experimentation at the product or technology level without explicitly linking it to downstream commercialization decisions (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997). This separation limits the ability of founders to translate learning into coordinated market actions. As a result, experimentation may generate insights that are not effectively leveraged in pricing, channel selection, or sales strategy. This disconnect reinforces the need for an integrative framework that embeds experimentation within a broader execution pathway.

2.5 Go-To-Market Strategy, Channels, and Sales Execution

Go-to-market strategy research focuses on how firms introduce products to customers through appropriate channels and sales mechanisms. Channel selection plays a crucial role in shaping customer access, acquisition costs, and adoption rates (Rosenbloom, 2013). For startups, choosing the wrong channel can significantly increase customer acquisition costs and delay revenue generation.

Sales execution further determines whether market interest translates into sustainable revenue. Research on early-stage ventures suggests that sales capabilities are often underdeveloped, as founders prioritize product development over commercialization (Davila, Foster, & Gupta, 2003). While marketing and sales are recognised as critical functions, they are frequently treated as operational concerns rather than as strategic components of startup validation. Consequently, the literature lacks integrated models that connect GTM decisions with prior customer and pricing validation.

2.6 Feedback, Adaptation, and Scaling Readiness

Feedback mechanisms are widely recognised as essential for organizational learning and adaptation. Organizational learning theory suggests that firms improve performance by interpreting feedback from their environment and adjusting routines accordingly (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). In startup contexts, customer feedback provides critical signals about product usefulness, pricing acceptability, and service quality.

Scaling research emphasizes that growth should be contingent upon the development of routines, processes, and capabilities that support expansion (Greiner, 1998). Without such capabilities, growth can lead to operational breakdowns and financial stress. Despite this understanding, many startups pursue growth prematurely, often driven by external pressures or misinterpreted success indicators. Prior literature treats feedback, learning, and scaling as related but distinct phenomena, offering limited guidance on how they should be integrated into a sequential execution logic.

2.7 Synthesis and Research Gap

The reviewed literature demonstrates that while substantial knowledge exists on individual components of startup development—such as market research, customer identification, value creation, experimentation, commercialization, and scaling—these components are rarely integrated into a single, coherent framework. Existing studies tend to focus on isolated stages, leaving founders without clear guidance on how decisions made at one stage influence outcomes at subsequent stages.

This fragmentation is particularly problematic in emerging market contexts, where uncertainty, resource constraints, and heterogeneous customer needs magnify the consequences of poor sequencing and misalignment. The absence of an integrative, validation-driven framework that connects early market understanding with commercialization and scaling decisions constitutes a significant gap in the literature. Addressing this gap motivates the development of the Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework, which seeks to unify these disparate insights into a structured execution pathway

M2S Framework Stage	Key Concepts from Literature	Representative Literature (APA 7 in-text citation)	How the Literature Informs the Framework
Marketing Research	Market uncertainty, demand ambiguity, opportunity discovery	McGrath & MacMillan (1995); Shepherd et al. (2000)	Establishes the need for systematic market understanding to reduce uncertainty before resource commitment.
Ideal Customer Profile (ICP)	Market segmentation, target selection, customer focus	Wedel & Kamakura (2000); Morris et al. (2002)	Supports focused targeting to avoid overextension and misalignment in early-stage ventures.
Pain Validation	Customer problem importance, perceived value	Anderson et al. (2006)	Emphasizes identifying problems customers genuinely value solving, rather than superficial interest.
Pricing Validation	Willingness to pay, price sensitivity	Tellis (1988)	Highlights pricing as a validation mechanism to test economic value, not merely customer interest.
Minimum Viable Product (MVP)	Experimentation, learning under uncertainty	Thomke (1998); Brown & Eisenhardt (1997)	Frames MVP as a learning instrument to test assumptions rather than a

			fully optimized product.
Go-To-Market (GTM) Strategy	Market entry, commercialization logic	Rosenbloom (2013)	Informs structured decisions on how value is delivered to customers, not just what is delivered.
Channels	Distribution efficiency, customer access, acquisition cost	Rosenbloom (2013)	Demonstrates the strategic role of channels in shaping adoption, reach, and cost structures.
Sales Execution	Commercial capability, revenue conversion	Davila et al. (2003)	Highlights sales as a critical but underdeveloped capability in early-stage startups.
Customer Feedback	Organizational learning, adaptation	Argote & Miron-Spektor (2011)	Provides the learning logic that enables iteration, correction, and refinement of earlier decisions.
Scale	Growth stages, capability development	Greiner (1998)	Frames scaling as a conditional process dependent on organizational readiness and validated routines.

3. Framework Development Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual framework development methodology to develop the Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework. Conceptual framework development is appropriate when the objective is to synthesize fragmented theoretical insights into a coherent structure that explains relationships among key concepts, rather than to empirically test hypotheses (Jabareen, 2009). In entrepreneurship and strategic management research, such an approach is widely used to structure complex, multi-stage phenomena and to guide subsequent empirical inquiry (Whetten, 1989).

The methodological orientation of this study is theory-informed and integrative, recognising that startup execution spans multiple domains—marketing, innovation, commercialization, and scaling—which are often examined independently in prior research. Accordingly, the framework development process focuses on conceptual clarity, logical sequencing, and contextual relevance, particularly within emerging economy settings.

3.1 Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

The framework development follows a qualitative, interpretive research design, grounded in the view that startup processes are shaped by uncertainty, learning, and context-specific decision-making. Rather than assuming linear causality or deterministic outcomes, this approach acknowledges that entrepreneurial action involves iterative sense-making and adaptation. Such a perspective is consistent with prior work on theory building in management research, which emphasises abstraction, integration, and explanatory coherence over prediction at early stages of theory development (Whetten, 1989).

The study does not aim to propose testable hypotheses at this stage; instead, it seeks to organize existing knowledge into a structured execution pathway that can inform both practice and future empirical research.

3.2 Literature-Driven Synthesis Approach

The M2S framework was developed through a systematic literature synthesis process, drawing on established guidance for conceptual integration in management research (Webster & Watson, 2002). Rather than conducting a narrow systematic review, the study adopted a cross-disciplinary mapping strategy to capture the diverse streams of literature relevant to startup development.

The synthesis focused on identifying:

- Recurring Constructs,
- Dominant Process Logics,
- And Commonly Reported Failure Points Across Prior Studies.

Four major literature domains informed the framework construction:

- (1) market research and customer identification,
- (2) customer problem validation and value creation,
- (3) experimentation and early product development, and
- (4) commercialization, feedback, and scaling readiness.

This approach enabled the identification of conceptual overlaps and disconnects across domains that are rarely examined together in existing studies.

3.3 Identification of Fragmentation and Integration Logic

Following the literature synthesis, the study systematically examined how startup activities are sequenced and treated independently in prior research. While earlier studies provide strong insights into individual activities—such as segmentation, experimentation, or scaling—there is limited guidance on how these activities should be integrated into a unified execution logic. This observation aligns with prior critiques that entrepreneurship research often lacks integrative process frameworks that link early exploration with later growth outcomes (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The integration logic of the M2S framework is therefore based on dependency relationships among activities. Each stage of the framework is positioned such that advancement requires evidence generated from the preceding stage, thereby reducing uncertainty and preventing premature escalation of resource commitments.

3.4 Framework Construction Process

The construction of the M2S framework followed an iterative abstraction and refinement process, consistent with best practices in conceptual model development (Jabareen, 2009). First, key startup activities repeatedly emphasized in the literature were extracted and compared. Second, these activities were ordered based on their logical and temporal dependencies. Third, validation checkpoints were embedded between stages to ensure that movement through the framework is driven by evidence rather than intuition or growth pressure.

Importantly, the framework incorporates feedback loops to reflect the iterative nature of entrepreneurial learning. This ensures that the model does not impose a rigid linear structure but instead captures the adaptive reality of startup execution.

3.5 Contextual Grounding and Scope

The framework is explicitly grounded in the context of emerging economies, with particular reference to the Indian startup ecosystem. Emerging markets are characterised by demand uncertainty, price sensitivity, informal substitutes, and heterogeneous customer segments, which amplify the consequences of poor sequencing and premature scaling. These contextual conditions informed the framework's emphasis on early validation, pricing discipline, and feedback-driven scaling decisions.

The scope of the framework is intentionally bounded to early-stage and growth-stage startups, particularly those operating in technology-enabled or service-oriented sectors. The framework does not claim universal applicability across all organizational forms; rather, it is positioned as a contextually relevant execution model that can be adapted and empirically tested in future research.

3.6 Outcome of the Methodological Process

The outcome of this methodology is the Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework, presented as an integrative conceptual execution pathway that connects market understanding with scalable growth. By synthesizing fragmented literature into a coherent structure, the framework provides a foundation for managerial application and future empirical validation.

Building on the conceptual synthesis and methodological approach outlined in the preceding section, the following section presents the Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework. Guided by a validation-driven integration of prior literature and contextual considerations relevant to emerging markets, the framework translates fragmented theoretical insights into a structured execution pathway. The M2S framework delineates a sequence of interdependent stages through which startups progressively reduce market uncertainty, validate assumptions, and build readiness for scalable growth. By explicitly linking early market understanding with downstream commercialization and scaling decisions, the framework provides a coherent foundation for the stage-wise explanation presented in the next section.

4. The Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework

The Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework conceptualizes startup development as a validation-driven and sequential execution pathway that links early market understanding with sustainable scaling. Rather than treating startup activities as isolated or ad hoc decisions, the framework integrates insights from marketing, entrepreneurship, innovation, and growth literature into a coherent structure. The central premise of the framework is that each stage reduces uncertainty and generates evidence that conditions progression to subsequent stages, thereby minimizing the risk of premature scaling.

4.1 Marketing Research

The first stage of the M2S framework emphasizes marketing research as the foundation of startup decision-making. Startups typically operate under conditions of extreme uncertainty regarding customer needs, demand size, and competitive dynamics. Systematic market research enables founders to move beyond intuition by identifying market trends, customer behaviors, and opportunity spaces. Prior research highlights that structured market analysis helps reduce assumption-driven errors and improves early strategic alignment (McGrath & MacMillan, 1995). In the M2S framework, marketing research serves as the initial mechanism for uncertainty reduction and opportunity screening.

4.2 Ideal Customer Profile (ICP)

Building on market research insights, the framework advances to the identification of an Ideal Customer Profile (ICP). Given limited resources, startups cannot effectively serve broad or heterogeneous markets. Marketing and entrepreneurial research consistently stresses the importance of focused targeting to enhance strategic clarity and

resource efficiency (Wedel & Kamakura, 2000). The ICP stage refines market insights into a clearly defined customer segment that exhibits the highest problem intensity and adoption potential. This stage ensures that subsequent validation and development efforts are directed toward the most promising customer group.

4.3 Pain Validation

Pain validation represents a critical transition from assumption to evidence. At this stage, startups assess whether the identified customer segment experiences a problem that is both significant and urgent. Research on value creation suggests that adoption depends on the perceived importance of the problem and the value associated with its resolution (Anderson et al., 2006). The M2S framework positions pain validation as a distinct stage to prevent false positives arising from superficial interest or polite feedback. Only problems that demonstrate strong relevance and urgency warrant further investment.

4.4 Pricing Validation

Unlike many existing models, the M2S framework explicitly incorporates pricing validation as a separate stage. Pricing literature highlights willingness to pay as a key indicator of economic value and market viability (Tellis, 1988). Many startups validate usage or engagement without testing price sensitivity, leading to unsustainable business models. Pricing validation in the M2S framework ensures that customer interest translates into economic commitment, thereby strengthening revenue logic before product scaling.

4.5 Minimum Viable Product (MVP)

The Minimum Viable Product (MVP) stage focuses on experimentation and learning rather than optimization. Innovation research emphasizes that early product development should prioritize learning about customer response under uncertainty (Thomke, 1998). The M2S framework treats the MVP as a learning artifact designed to test validated assumptions regarding customer pain and pricing. This approach aligns with prior findings that experimentation enables startups to adapt offerings based on evidence rather than conjecture (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997).

4.6 Go-To-Market (GTM) Strategy

Once product assumptions are validated, the framework advances to go-to-market (GTM) strategy. GTM decisions determine how value is communicated, delivered, and positioned in the market. Research on marketing channels and commercialization underscores that poor GTM design can undermine otherwise strong products (Rosenbloom, 2013). In the M2S framework, GTM strategy aligns positioning, messaging, and market entry logic with validated customer insights, ensuring coherence between product value and market communication.

4.7 Channels

Channel selection is treated as a distinct strategic decision rather than a purely operational choice. Distribution research highlights that channels influence customer access, acquisition cost, and adoption speed (Rosenbloom, 2013). The M2S framework emphasizes the selection of channels that efficiently reach the ICP while maintaining favorable cost structures. By evaluating channel performance early, startups avoid costly misalignment between acquisition strategy and customer behavior.

4.8 Sales Execution

Sales execution represents the conversion of validated demand into revenue. Prior research indicates that early-stage startups often underinvest in sales capabilities, focusing disproportionately on product development (Davila et al., 2003). The M2S framework positions sales execution as a validation checkpoint that tests whether customer interest can be consistently converted into transactions. Effective sales execution provides critical evidence of repeatability and revenue potential.

4.9 Customer Feedback

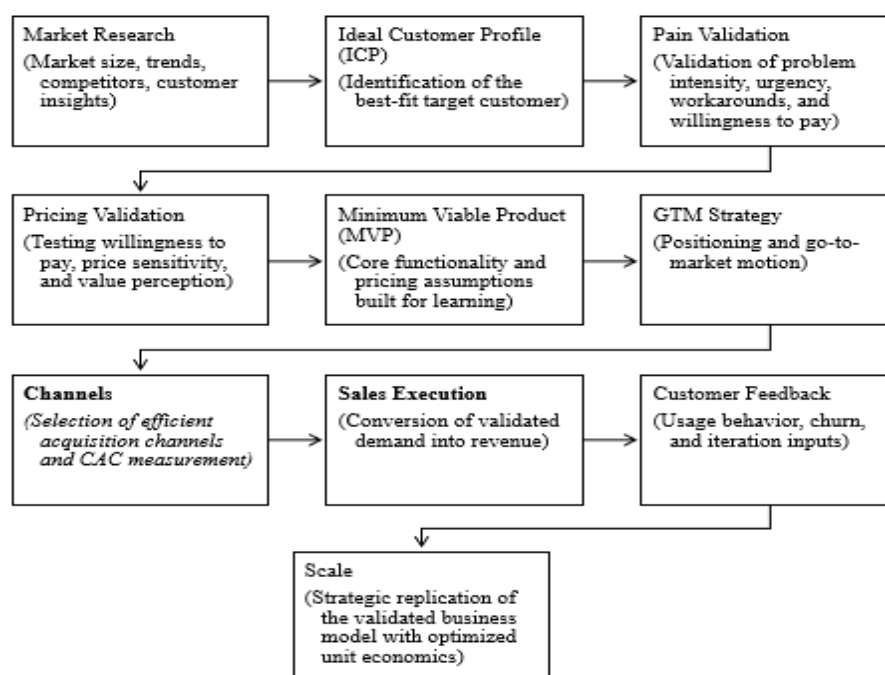
Customer feedback functions as the learning mechanism that connects execution with adaptation. Organizational learning theory suggests that firms improve performance by interpreting feedback and refining routines accordingly (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). In the M2S framework, feedback informs iteration across earlier stages, allowing startups to refine product features, pricing, channels, or sales approaches based on real-world usage and response.

4.10 Scale

The final stage of the framework is scale, defined as the replication of a validated business model through the development of routines, processes, and capabilities. Growth literature distinguishes scaling from simple growth, emphasizing that scaling requires organizational readiness and process stability (Greiner, 1998). The M2S framework treats scaling as an outcome of cumulative validation, not a discretionary growth decision. Only startups that demonstrate validated demand, efficient channels, and effective sales execution are positioned to scale sustainably.

Collectively, the Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework provides a structured, evidence-driven pathway that integrates market research, customer validation, experimentation, commercialization, and scaling. By emphasizing validation at each stage and embedding feedback loops, the framework addresses critical gaps in existing literature and offers a coherent execution logic particularly relevant to startups operating in emerging market contexts.

Figure 1 Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework: An Integrated Pathway from Market Research to Scalable Growth



Note. The market-to-scale (M2S) Startup Framework illustrated is a helpful model that graphs how startups progress from marketing research and ideal customer profiling (ICP) to pricing validation, minimum viable product (MVP) development, go-to-market (GTM) strategy formation. Putting the first twelve months into context: (1) revenue or number of users increased by 100% (with the same number of customers), whichever

comes first; (2) customer support staff times 50% (new hires); (3) product features or market share rises 10 percentage points in one year through direct sales channels. The framework draws on theories of market research, customer development, lean startup methods, and dynamic capability theory. It emphasizes validating decisions and scaling based on what you have learned from experience. Such ideas are especially useful for growing and sometimes highly diverse markets like those of India.

Source: Author's conceptualization.

Table 2 The Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework: Stage-Wise Explanation

Stage	Core Purpose	Key Decisions & Activities	Validation Logic (Evidence Required)	Theoretical Basis (APA-7 in-text)
Marketing Research	Reduce initial market uncertainty	Market analysis, customer insights, competitor scanning	Evidence of market need and opportunity	McGrath & MacMillan (1995); Shepherd et al. (2000)
Ideal Customer Profile (ICP)	Focus limited resources on high-fit customers	Segment refinement, target prioritization	Clear definition of most valuable customer segment	Wedel & Kamakura (2000); Morris et al. (2002)
Pain Validation	Confirm problem significance and urgency	Customer interviews, problem testing	Customers acknowledge problem importance	Anderson et al. (2006)
Pricing Validation	Test economic value and willingness to pay	Price experiments, sensitivity analysis	Customers show willingness to pay	Tellis (1988)
Minimum Viable Product (MVP)	Learn through experimentation	Prototype development, controlled testing	Product solves validated pain at acceptable price	Thomke (1998); Brown & Eisenhardt (1997)
Go-To-Market (GTM) Strategy	Align value proposition with market entry	Positioning, messaging, launch planning	Coherence between product, customer, and market	Rosenbloom (2013)
Channels	Ensure efficient customer access	Channel selection, CAC assessment	Channels deliver customers cost-effectively	Rosenbloom (2013)
Sales Execution	Convert demand into revenue	Sales process design, conversion tracking	Repeatable sales and revenue generation	Davila et al. (2003)
Customer Feedback	Enable learning and adaptation	Usage analysis, feedback collection	Actionable insights for iteration	Argote & Miron-Spektor (2011)
Scale	Replicate validated model sustainably	Process standardization, capability building	Stable routines and scalable economics	Greiner (1998)

5. Theoretical Integration and Contribution

The Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework contributes to entrepreneurship and management literature by integrating fragmented theoretical perspectives into a coherent, validation-driven execution framework. Prior research in entrepreneurship has been criticised for addressing startup phenomena in isolated stages, often separating market exploration, experimentation, commercialization, and scaling into distinct analytical silos (Whetten, 1989). The M2S framework responds to this limitation by synthesizing these perspectives into a unified structure that explains how startups progress from market uncertainty to scalable growth through sequential validation.

From a marketing theory perspective, the framework integrates foundational concepts of market research, segmentation, and customer focus with downstream execution decisions. Traditional marketing models emphasize customer understanding and targeting but often assume relatively stable markets and established demand patterns (Wedel & Kamakura, 2000). The M2S framework extends this logic to entrepreneurial contexts by explicitly linking early market research and ideal customer profiling with ongoing validation, pricing decisions, and channel strategy. In doing so, it advances marketing scholarship by demonstrating how customer-centric principles operate dynamically under conditions of high uncertainty.

The framework also integrates insights from entrepreneurship and innovation research, particularly those emphasizing learning, experimentation, and adaptation. Prior studies highlight experimentation as a mechanism for learning but frequently examine it at the product or technology level without embedding it within a broader execution logic (Thomke, 1998). The M2S framework extends this view by positioning experimentation, through MVP development, as one component within a larger validation sequence that includes pricing, sales execution, and feedback-driven refinement. This integration clarifies how learning at one stage conditions readiness for subsequent stages.

In relation to commercialization and growth literature, the M2S framework contributes by reframing scaling as an outcome of cumulative validation rather than a discretionary growth objective. Existing growth models often distinguish between growth and scaling but provide limited guidance on how startups should transition between these phases (Greiner, 1998). By embedding explicit validation checkpoints prior to scaling, the framework aligns with capability-based views of firm development, which argue that sustainable expansion requires stable routines and organizational readiness (Teece, 2007). The M2S framework thus offers a structured explanation of when scaling becomes feasible, grounded in prior theoretical insights.

Overall, the primary theoretical contribution of the M2S framework lies in its integrative and process-oriented perspective. Rather than proposing new constructs, the framework advances existing theory by organizing well-established concepts into a coherent execution pathway that reflects the realities of startup decision-making. By explicitly connecting market understanding, customer validation, experimentation, commercialization, and scaling within a single framework, the study contributes a conceptual bridge between theory and practice, particularly relevant to startups operating in emerging market contexts.

6. Managerial Implications

The Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework offers several important managerial implications for startup founders, early-stage managers, incubators, and ecosystem stakeholders. By organizing startup execution into a validation-driven sequence, the framework provides managers with a structured decision-making guide that reduces reliance on intuition and ad hoc judgment, which are common sources of early-stage failure. Prior research suggests that managerial overconfidence and assumption-based decision-making often lead startups to misallocate scarce resources (Shepherd et al., 2000). The M2S framework addresses this risk by encouraging managers to advance only after evidence has been generated at each stage.

For startup founders and leadership teams, the framework emphasizes the importance of prioritization and sequencing. Rather than simultaneously pursuing product development, marketing, and scaling, managers are encouraged to focus on one validation objective at a time—beginning with market understanding and customer pain, followed by pricing and commercialization readiness. This disciplined approach helps founders avoid premature scaling, a phenomenon widely identified as a key cause of startup failure (Greiner, 1998). By clarifying when scaling is appropriate, the framework supports more sustainable growth trajectories.

The framework also has direct implications for resource allocation and cost management. Early-stage startups often operate under severe financial constraints, making efficient use of capital critical. By explicitly incorporating pricing validation, channel efficiency, and sales execution before scaling, the M2S framework helps managers assess unit economics early in the venture lifecycle. This aligns with research indicating that early attention to revenue logic and commercialization capabilities improves venture performance and survival (Davila et al., 2003). Managers can use the framework to identify weak links in their execution pipeline before committing significant resources.

For product and marketing managers, the framework reinforces the integration of customer feedback into continuous decision-making. Rather than treating feedback as a post-launch activity, the M2S framework positions customer feedback as an ongoing learning mechanism that informs refinement across multiple stages. Organizational learning research highlights that firms capable of systematically interpreting and acting on feedback are better positioned to adapt and sustain performance over time (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). The framework thus encourages managers to institutionalize feedback processes rather than relying on sporadic or informal insights.

The M2S framework also offers guidance for incubators, accelerators, and startup mentors. Program designers can use the framework to structure mentoring, milestone setting, and performance evaluation around validation outcomes rather than superficial growth metrics. By aligning support mechanisms with framework stages—such as requiring evidence of pain and pricing validation before funding product expansion—ecosystem actors can improve the effectiveness of startup support initiatives. This implication is particularly relevant in emerging markets, where external support often plays a critical role in early-stage venture development.

Overall, the managerial contribution of the M2S framework lies in its ability to translate fragmented academic insights into a practical execution roadmap. By clarifying what managers should focus on at each stage and why, the framework enhances strategic discipline, improves learning efficiency, and increases the likelihood of sustainable scaling. These implications position the M2S framework as a valuable tool for improving managerial practice in startup environments characterized by high uncertainty and limited resources.

7. Policy and Ecosystem Implications (Indian Context)

The Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework offers important implications for public policy and entrepreneurial ecosystem design in India, where startups operate under conditions of market heterogeneity, institutional gaps, and uneven access to resources. Indian startup policy has largely focused on encouraging venture creation through funding support, incubation programs, and regulatory facilitation. While such initiatives have increased startup formation, they have been less effective in addressing execution-stage failures, particularly those arising from poor market validation and premature scaling (NITI Aayog, 2022).

The M2S framework provides a stage-aligned policy lens that can help policymakers move beyond entry-focused interventions toward execution-quality support. For example, government-led incubation and acceleration programs can align funding tranches, mentoring, and evaluation criteria with validation milestones—such as evidence of pain validation, pricing acceptance, or channel efficiency—rather than relying solely on business plan

quality or growth projections. Prior research suggests that ecosystem effectiveness improves when institutional support mechanisms are aligned with venture development stages (Isenberg, 2011).

The framework is particularly relevant for India's MSME- and startup-oriented policy initiatives, where a large share of ventures serve price-sensitive and informal markets. By emphasizing early pricing validation and customer feedback, the M2S framework aligns with the realities of Indian demand conditions, where adoption often depends on affordability, trust, and demonstrated value rather than novelty alone. Policymakers can use the framework to design capacity-building programs that strengthen market research, sales capability, and feedback systems—areas that are frequently underdeveloped among early-stage Indian startups (World Bank, 2020).

At the ecosystem level, the M2S framework also offers guidance for incubators, accelerators, and industry associations. Ecosystem actors can use the framework as a common reference model to coordinate mentoring, investor readiness programs, and performance tracking. By standardizing expectations around validation and scaling readiness, the framework can reduce misalignment between founders, investors, and support institutions. This alignment is especially critical in emerging economies, where fragmented ecosystem support often leads to inconsistent guidance and increased failure risk.

8. Social Contribution of the M2S Framework

Beyond managerial and policy relevance, the Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework contributes to broader social and economic outcomes, particularly in emerging market contexts such as India. Startup failure has social costs that extend beyond individual founders, including employment instability, wasted public resources, and reduced trust in entrepreneurial activity. By offering a structured, validation-driven execution pathway, the M2S framework contributes indirectly to improved startup survival, which is a prerequisite for sustainable job creation and inclusive economic growth (Audretsch, 2007).

The framework also supports the formalization and productivity enhancement of MSMEs, many of which adopt startup-led digital and service innovations. When startups validate customer pain, pricing, and channels effectively, they are better positioned to deliver solutions that improve operational efficiency and market access for small businesses. Prior research highlights that productivity gains among MSMEs are closely linked to the diffusion of well-adapted innovations rather than generic technological adoption (OECD, 2017). The M2S framework encourages such adaptation by embedding customer feedback and contextual validation throughout the execution process.

From a societal perspective, the framework promotes responsible and inclusive entrepreneurship. By discouraging premature scaling and growth-at-all-costs mentalities, the M2S framework aligns entrepreneurial success with long-term value creation rather than short-term expansion. This orientation is particularly important in emerging economies, where fragile markets and social inequalities can be exacerbated by unstable venture growth. By guiding startups toward evidence-based scaling, the framework contributes to more resilient entrepreneurial ecosystems and more equitable economic outcomes.

Overall, the social contribution of the M2S framework lies in its potential to improve the quality of entrepreneurship, not merely its quantity. By enhancing execution discipline, learning, and sustainability, the framework supports startups that generate durable economic and social value, reinforcing the role of entrepreneurship as a driver of inclusive development in India and other emerging economies.

9. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its conceptual and integrative contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework is conceptual in nature and has not been empirically tested within this study. While the framework is grounded in well-established literature and structured through systematic synthesis, its explanatory power and practical effectiveness remain to be validated through

empirical research. As with many framework development studies, the absence of primary data limits the ability to draw causal inferences or assess performance outcomes across different startup contexts (Whetten, 1989).

Second, the framework is primarily contextualized within emerging market settings, with a particular focus on India. Although many of the underlying principles—such as validation, learning, and disciplined scaling—are broadly applicable, the execution dynamics may differ in developed economies with more mature markets, stronger institutions, and lower demand uncertainty. Future studies should therefore examine the applicability and adaptability of the M2S framework across diverse institutional and geographic contexts.

Third, the framework treats startup development as a structured sequence of stages, albeit with feedback loops. In practice, startups may experience overlaps, regressions, or parallel execution of certain activities. While the framework allows for iteration, future research could explore non-linear or sector-specific adaptations of the model, particularly in fast-moving industries such as software-as-a-service (SaaS), fintech, or platform-based ventures.

Future research can extend this study in several directions. Empirical validation using survey-based methods, case studies, or longitudinal designs could test the relationships implied by the framework and assess its impact on startup survival and performance. Researchers may also operationalize framework stages into measurable constructs and apply structural equation modeling or comparative analysis across sectors. Additionally, future studies could examine the role of external actors—such as investors, incubators, and policymakers—in influencing progression through framework stages. Such extensions would strengthen the explanatory and predictive utility of the M2S framework and contribute to theory refinement.

10. Conclusion

This study set out to address a critical gap in entrepreneurship and startup research by developing an integrated, validation-driven framework that connects early market understanding with sustainable scaling. Drawing on fragmented but complementary streams of literature in marketing, customer development, innovation, commercialization, and growth, the study proposed the Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework as a structured execution pathway for startups operating under conditions of high uncertainty.

The framework advances existing knowledge by organizing well-established concepts into a coherent sequence of interdependent stages, each designed to reduce uncertainty and generate evidence before further resource commitment. By explicitly incorporating pricing validation, channel efficiency, sales execution, and feedback-driven learning, the M2S framework addresses commonly observed failure points that are underrepresented in prior models. In doing so, it offers both theoretical integration and practical relevance, particularly for startups in emerging market contexts such as India.

Beyond its academic contribution, the framework has important implications for managers, ecosystem actors, and policymakers seeking to improve startup survival and execution quality. By emphasizing disciplined validation over intuition-driven growth, the M2S framework aligns entrepreneurial activity with sustainable value creation and inclusive economic development.

In conclusion, the Market-to-Scale (M2S) Startup Framework provides a conceptually grounded and practically oriented contribution to the entrepreneurship literature. While future empirical research is needed to test and refine the framework, this study lays a foundation for more integrated, evidence-based approaches to startup development and scaling in emerging economies.

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