

BRANDING AND DIGITALIZATION IN SHARED FARMS: VALUE CREATION, REVENUE CONVERSION, AND FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract: Shared farms connect underused rural resources with urban demand for safe food, agricultural experiences, and long-term participation, yet their financial sustainability is often constrained by weak branding, narrow revenue sources, fragmented customer management, and limited digital capacity. This study examines how branding and digitalization jointly support value creation and revenue conversion in a shared farm in Liaoning Province, China. The evidence consists of 1,332 valid questionnaires, two field investigations, 230 minutes of recorded material, approximately 15,000 Chinese characters of interview records, operating information supplied by the farm, and records from four implemented educational activities. The case shows a revenue structure in which plot adoption contributes approximately 55%, agricultural product sales 25%, and extended services 20%. A standardized parent-child program priced at RMB 298 per adult-child pair provides direct service income and converts approximately 20%-30% of participating families into annual plot-adoption customers. The digital service platform reduces information fragmentation and is reported to improve consultation efficiency by about 40%. Branding, experiential products, and lightweight digital tools therefore form a connected mechanism through which cultural and agricultural resources are converted into differentiated products, customer relationships, and recurring revenue. The findings indicate that revenue diversification, disciplined cost allocation, and modular replication are central to the financial sustainability of small shared farms.

Keywords: Shared farm; Digital agriculture; Brand assets; Revenue diversification; Customer conversion; Financial sustainability

1 INTRODUCTION

Shared farms integrate land, labor, agricultural facilities, and service resources through arrangements such as plot adoption, managed cultivation, product delivery, and on-farm experience. Their economic logic differs from conventional primary production because value is generated not only from agricultural output but also from participation rights, trusted production processes, educational services, cultural content, and repeated interaction with urban customers. For small farms, this combination creates an opportunity to extend the value chain without relying exclusively on production scale. Research on small agricultural firms likewise shows that business-model transformation can unlock previously uncaptured forms of economic, environmental, and social value [1].

The opportunity does not automatically produce stable cash flow. Shared farms may have land, ecological products, and local culture, but still lack a recognizable brand, a repeatable service product, and an integrated customer system. In that situation, the farm remains dependent on one-off visits and low-margin agricultural sales. Digitalization can create both efficiency and novelty value when it is incorporated into the business model rather than used as an isolated communication channel [2]. Collaboration among farms, government, universities, experts, and technology providers can further support value creation, although the interests of farm operators and market users must remain aligned [3]. Integrated enterprise models are also important because disconnected applications cannot fully support business integration and strategic objectives [4].

The case examined in this study is Lianxiang Family Farm in Pulandian District, Dalian. The farm operates under the brand Youran Hexia and covers 440 mu, including a 110-mu area focused on adopted vegetable plots and a 330-mu area used mainly for livestock and processing. Its operating mechanism combines local government support, market-oriented management, expert guidance, and farmer participation. Before the intervention described in the source material, the farm had already developed ecological production and basic online communication, but its customer information was distributed across WeChat groups and livestreaming channels, its educational activities had not been standardized, and its cultural resources had not been converted into identifiable brand assets.

This study asks how branding and digitalization can convert rural resources into revenue and improve the financial sustainability of a small shared farm. It does not estimate unsupported profitability, net present value, or investment returns. Instead, it uses the farm's recorded prices, revenue composition, customer conversion, efficiency change, and budget allocation to analyze the links between resource inputs, product design, customer acquisition, recurring income, and operating risk. This framing preserves the original evidence while transforming a project-plan narrative into a finance-oriented case study.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Digital Transformation and Value Capture

Digital transformation in agriculture involves organizational, cultural, operational, and value-delivery changes rather than the simple adoption of online tools. A systematic analysis of modern agriculture identifies technology, organization, processes, and strategy as connected dimensions of transformation [5]. This distinction is important for shared farms. A livestream or messaging group may improve visibility, but it does not by itself establish a customer asset, a standardized payment process, or a traceable service relationship. Financial value appears when digital functions reduce repeated communication, support customer retention, facilitate payment and booking, and generate information that can guide product design.

Alternative agricultural enterprises usually combine multiple value propositions. Evidence from urban agriculture shows that farm business models can serve different customer segments by combining food, services, community functions, and experiential value [6]. The shared-farm case follows this logic: the adopted plot is both a production entitlement and a relationship product, while educational activities provide service income and expose customers to the production process. The financial question is therefore not limited to the price of vegetables. It concerns how a portfolio of connected offerings increases customer value and stabilizes the revenue base.

2.2 Adoption Constraints and Financial Consequences

The source identifies weak rural connectivity, uneven digital skills, high development complexity, and the cost of blockchain and hardware integration as major constraints. These observations are consistent with recent evidence that farmers' financial conditions, technology infrastructure, perceived usefulness, knowledge, and farm size influence digital-technology adoption [7]. Acceptance also depends on trust, financial consequences, privacy concerns, and personalization, as shown by a digital-agriculture study conducted among users in Northeast China [8]. The case therefore favors a lightweight platform that can operate through common smartphones and ordinary network conditions. This choice is financially relevant because it limits sunk development expenditure and lowers the adoption threshold for small farms.

Digital systems also reshape bargaining positions and value capture. Research on smart-farming ecosystems shows that control over strategic and technical points can determine which actors capture the value generated by digital innovation [9]. In the present case, the farm retains its customer relationship and operational data while the platform organizes booking, traceability, membership, and communication. Agritourism research further indicates that diversification and online direct selling can improve the resilience of farm enterprises when tourism demand or agricultural sales fluctuate [10]. These findings support an analytical framework in which branding creates differentiated content, experiential products convert attention into paid participation, and digitalization turns separate transactions into manageable customer relationships.

Figure 1 explains the two-wheel mechanism through which branding supplies differentiated content and digitalization supplies customer management and operating tools, providing the organizing logic for the financial analysis.

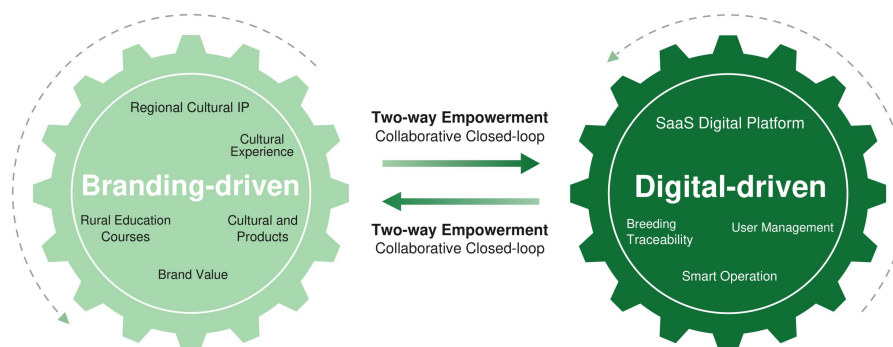


Figure 1 Branding and Digitalization as the Two-Wheel Value-Creation Mechanism

3 CASE, DATA, AND METHOD

3.1 Case Setting and Operating Structure

The farm was selected because it combines agricultural production, adoption services, family experiences, accommodation, catering, and educational facilities. It contains a 300-square-meter detached guesthouse, indoor and outdoor kitchens, a barbecue area, an 800-square-meter camping lawn, a 150-square-meter leisure corridor, fishing and picking areas, and a 600-square-meter reception and science-education space. The operating structure is collaborative: the local party committee supports infrastructure and policy coordination; a professional team undertakes market operation; experts provide agricultural guidance; and local farmers receive land rent and wages for farm-management

work. This structure converts public infrastructure, professional knowledge, land, and labor into a jointly supplied service system.

Figure 2 records the farm's physical environment, cultivation activities, service facilities, and brand communication scenes observed during the field investigation.



Figure 2 Operating Environment and Service Scenes of the Case Farm

3.2 Data Collection

The empirical material comprises an online survey, field observation, semi-structured interviews, operating records, and implementation feedback. The questionnaire targeted university students in Liaoning and yielded 1,332 valid responses within one week. Respondents covered undergraduate and postgraduate levels, although first-year students represented 81.08% of the sample. Students in humanities, business, and arts represented 70.27%; science and engineering students represented 18.92%; and other majors represented 10.81%. The sample is therefore used to describe participation preferences rather than the population structure of all potential farm customers.

Two field investigations were conducted at the farm. The source records 230 minutes of video and approximately 15,000 Chinese characters of interview notes. Interviews covered the farm manager, farm workers, visitors, and customers. Topics included investment scale, staffing, service flow, pricing, digital tools, brand positioning, customer acquisition, revenue composition, costs, profit conditions, development constraints, income changes among participating farmers, visitor satisfaction, and repurchase intention. The analysis also uses implementation records from four educational activities involving nearly 200 participants and feedback from the delivered digital platform.

3.3 Analytical Method

The study applies a case-based financial mapping method. Evidence is organized into resource inputs, products and prices, customer acquisition channels, revenue sources, operating costs, conversion outcomes, and risks. Survey results are used to identify demand and participation constraints. Field records are used to reconstruct the farm's service portfolio and revenue logic. Implementation data are then used to examine whether the proposed branding, educational, and digital components create observable revenue or efficiency effects.

The original questionnaire analysis reports a significant goodness-of-fit result, $\chi^2 = 36.308, p = 0.010 < 0.05$, indicating unequal response proportions among the available choices. The higher-response items included policy support, professional-skill matching, household economic conditions, safety, rural infrastructure, and personal time. These variables are interpreted as participation and customer-acquisition constraints rather than as estimates of monetary demand.

3.4 Demand Signals and Financial Interpretation

The questionnaire provides several demand signals that are relevant to the farm's product and revenue design. Among the 1,332 respondents, 75.68% associated shared farms with the combination of ecological tourism and agricultural production, 72.97% understood the model as farmers renting idle resources to urban consumers, and 64.86% recognized that university students could participate in rural revitalization through the model. These responses indicate that the market proposition is not perceived as food production alone. Customers may value access to rural resources, educational participation, and ecological experience together. This supports a bundled product design in which the adopted plot, farm visit, agricultural instruction, and product delivery are connected rather than priced and managed as unrelated services.

Information channels also have direct implications for acquisition expenditure. Social platforms such as Douyin and Bilibili were reported by 70.27% of respondents, followed by social-practice or volunteer activities at 59.46%, news reports at 54.05%, recommendations from family or friends at 48.65%, and school courses or lectures at 45.95%. The source's use of short videos, livestreams, WeChat groups, educational activities, and university cooperation therefore corresponds to the channels through which respondents already obtain information. From a financial perspective, the combination of owned social content and implemented activities can reduce dependence on paid advertising. It can also

produce reusable material for repeated customer contact, although the source does not provide channel-specific spending or conversion data.

Participation decisions are strongly conditioned by affordability and institutional support. Household economic conditions were selected by 81.08% of respondents, policy support by 78.38%, safety safeguards by 72.97%, rural infrastructure by 70.27%, and both professional-skill matching and personal time by 67.57%. These percentages do not measure willingness to pay, but they clarify why pricing, safety, transport convenience, and organizational endorsement influence conversion. The standardized RMB 298 program responds to the need for a clearly defined package, while the farm's science-education and teaching-practice qualifications strengthen the institutional trust required for school and family customers.

Preferred participation routes reinforce this interpretation. Government-organized activities were selected by 59.46% of respondents, university associations by 56.76%, university-enterprise projects by 54.05%, and independently initiated projects by 51.35%. When respondents preferred other rural revitalization fields, greater social influence and higher economic returns were each selected by 24.32%, clearer policy support by 21.62%, and better professional matching by 16.22%. The case can therefore increase demand not merely by adding entertainment, but by making economic value, learning outcomes, safety, and institutional support visible in the product proposition.

Table 1 consolidates the questionnaire, field investigation, interview, activity, and platform records and clarifies how each evidence source supports the subsequent financial analysis.

Table 1 Case Evidence Used in the Financial Analysis

Evidence	Source record	Financial relevance
Questionnaire	1,332 valid responses	Demand conditions and participation constraints
Field investigation	Two visits; 230 minutes of video	Operating process and resource use
Interviews	About 15,000 Chinese characters	Pricing, revenue, cost, and customer evidence
Activity records	Four activities; nearly 200 participants	Service income and conversion channel
Platform feedback	Consultation efficiency increased about 40%	Potential reduction in communication cost

4 FINANCIAL CHARACTERISTICS AND VALUE CONVERSION

4.1 Baseline Revenue Model

The farm's baseline financial structure combines recurring adoption income with transaction-based sales and services. Vegetable plots of approximately 45-50 square meters are offered at RMB 1,198 per year for managed cultivation across three seasons. The service includes planting, seed supply, weeding, pest control, progress communication, and access to harvests. Livestock adoption covers free-range chickens and pigs, while agricultural sales include group purchases, picking, and direct delivery. The source records a promotional price of RMB 10 for six sticky-corn ears with a minimum order of 30, illustrating the use of group purchasing to expand sales and acquire customers.

Land and plot adoption accounts for approximately 55% of revenue, agricultural products for 25%, and extended services such as catering, accommodation, and activities for 20%. This composition shows that recurring adoption is the financial anchor, while product sales and services diversify cash inflows. The model also combines income received by local farmers from land transfer and farm employment. According to the interviewed 62-year-old farm manager, the combination of land rent and wages produced higher income than independent corn cultivation, although the source does not provide an exact monetary comparison.

Table 2 compares the recorded prices and revenue components and explains how each component contributes to direct income, customer acquisition, or conversion into recurring adoption revenue.

Table 2 Revenue Sources, Prices, and Conversion Functions

Component	Recorded value	Role in revenue conversion
Vegetable-plot adoption	RMB 1,198/year; 45-50 m ²	Recurring adoption income
Agricultural products	About 25% of revenue	Transactional sales and customer acquisition
Extended services	About 20% of revenue	Catering, accommodation, and activity income
Parent-child program	RMB 298/adult-child pair	Direct service income and adoption lead
Program-to-adoption conversion	About 20%-30%	Conversion from experience to recurring income

4.2 Branding as a Commercial Asset

The farm possessed black-soil culture, seasonal farming knowledge, local food traditions, and the slogan 'I have a plot in Daliujia,' but these elements were initially fragmented. The branding intervention organized them around two original characters, Tiantian and Nuonuo, linked respectively to farm management and agricultural-product promotion. The financial function of the characters is not limited to visual decoration. They create identifiable content for short videos, educational materials, customer gifts, and merchandise, thereby extending the number of customer contact points.

The source provides concrete cost and price information for several cultural products. A waterproof sticker set costs approximately RMB 1.5 and is used as a gift. A canvas bag costs RMB 12 and has a retail price of RMB 29. An A6 notebook costs RMB 6, and an acrylic key ring costs RMB 3; both can be used as gifts or activity materials. These

items support customer identification and membership rather than serving solely as stand-alone sales. The recorded canvas-bag values imply a unit gross difference of RMB 17 before selling, design, and administrative expenses, but the evidence is insufficient for a complete margin calculation.

4.3 Experiential Products and Customer Conversion

Educational activities convert farm resources into a standardized service product. The farm developed a one-day parent-child program priced at RMB 298 per adult-child pair and scheduled from 10:00 to 15:00. The program includes an opening session, agricultural science instruction, field practice, animal interaction, village-history learning, a farm meal, and a closing discussion. Supporting services include a program leader, agricultural guidance, and safety supervision. Four activities were implemented for parent-child families, university students, and adult groups, reaching nearly 200 participants.

The educational program has two financial effects. It generates direct service revenue and acts as a customer-acquisition mechanism for the plot-adoption business. Field feedback indicates that about 20%-30% of participating families subsequently adopted a vegetable plot. The experience reduces information asymmetry because customers observe the rejection of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, manual farm work, organic-fertilizer use, and the production process. The conversion from a one-day experience to an annual RMB 1,198 relationship gives the program a role analogous to a paid customer acquisition channel. The available evidence does not provide group size for every activity or total marketing expenditure, so acquisition cost and lifetime value are not estimated.

4.4 Digitalization and Operating Efficiency

The original communication process depended on multiple WeChat groups and twice-daily livestreams. Although these channels increased transparency, they did not produce a unified customer record or a standardized service process. The delivered digital system therefore combines a plot-adoption webpage with an agricultural-education mini program. Customers can submit adoption intentions, check progress, view growth diaries, select plots, access traceability records, manage membership points, review activity schedules, register, and make payments.

The platform was designed as a lightweight front-end system using HTML5, CSS3, and JavaScript. It does not require local installation and is adapted to mobile browsing. This design responds directly to the source's concern that rural network quality and operator capability are uneven and that blockchain and intelligent-hardware integration may exceed the financial capacity of small farms. After delivery, the farm reported an approximately 40% improvement in adoption-consultation efficiency. This percentage is a managerial observation rather than a controlled productivity estimate, but it provides direct evidence that centralized information can reduce repetitive communication.

Figure 3 summarizes the platform's multi-agent coordination, data-interface, and rule-engine layers and their roles in customer lifecycle management and operating support.

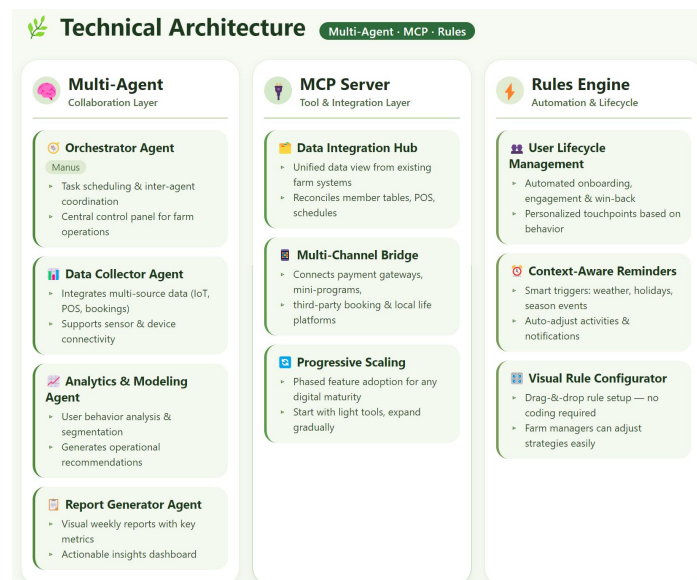


Figure 3 Lightweight Digital Operating Architecture Used by the Case Farm

4.5 Customer Portfolio and Cross-Selling Logic

The farm's customer portfolio contains professional and high-awareness consumers, school groups, teachers, and parent-child families. Their common demands include safe and transparent agricultural products, practical learning, family interaction, and convenient access to farming experiences. Government endorsement, long-term cultivation rights, flexible participation without a conventional entrance ticket, and an integrated rural-living experience constitute

the main differentiators. These features allow the farm to cross-sell across product categories. A customer may enter through an educational activity, purchase agricultural products, adopt a plot, use catering or accommodation, and later redeem cultural products through membership points.

The source also identifies service gaps that can interrupt this sequence. Parcel delivery was not standardized, membership functions were absent, on-site signs required improvement, and customer feedback relied on limited channels. The digital platform and operating procedures address these points by placing adoption records, growth updates, activity booking, payment, and membership in one service path. Financially, the value of this integration lies in protecting conversion between product stages. A visitor who cannot obtain timely information or complete payment conveniently may not become a recurring customer. Conversely, traceable records and regular growth updates can maintain the trust required for annual adoption and word-of-mouth referrals.

5 FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALING

5.1 Revenue Diversification and Cash-Flow Stability

The case does not supply monthly cash-flow statements, but the operating evidence supports a clear diversification logic. Annual plot adoption provides a recurring revenue base; agricultural products provide frequent transactional income; and educational activities, catering, accommodation, and events create service income. The components are connected rather than independent. Educational activities expose customers to the production process, brand content sustains communication, and the digital platform maintains the relationship after the visit. This linkage reduces reliance on a single harvest or a single visit.

Seasonality remains important. Spring planting, summer field management, autumn harvest, and winter food preparation support different program themes. A full-season schedule can distribute service revenue across the year, but agricultural activity, tourism demand, and weather still create variation. The farm's plan to serve parent-child families, school groups, university students, and adult groups also spreads demand across customer segments. Formal education-base qualifications are financially important because they enable cooperation with schools and institutions and may convert irregular consumer demand into more stable organization-based orders.

5.2 Cost Allocation and Capital Discipline

The source records a total project budget of RMB 10,000. Software development and maintenance receives the largest allocation at RMB 3,500, followed by materials and production at RMB 2,000, expert consultation at RMB 1,800, travel and investigation at RMB 1,200, literature at RMB 500, printing at RMB 500, and other expenses at RMB 500. By April 2026, RMB 1,750 had been used: RMB 800 for travel and investigation, RMB 400 for software, RMB 200 for literature, RMB 200 for materials, and RMB 150 for other costs. The recorded expenditure equals 17.5% of the planned budget.

The allocation reveals a preference for reusable intangible and digital assets rather than heavy fixed investment. Software, course materials, brand content, and operating procedures can be reused across activities and potentially transferred to additional farms. However, planned budget and operating profit are different concepts. The budget demonstrates implementation discipline but does not establish commercial profitability. A later financial assessment would require complete records of labor, food, insurance, platform maintenance, depreciation, marketing, refunds, and customer-service costs, none of which are fully available in the source.

Table 3 compares the planned allocation with the expenditure recorded by April 2026, highlighting the concentration of planned resources in software, reusable materials, expert support, and field investigation.

Table 3 Planned and Recorded Project Expenditure

Category	Planned (RMB)	Used by Apr. 2026 (RMB)
Literature and information	500	200
Materials and production	2,000	200
Travel and investigation	1,200	800
Software development and maintenance	3,500	400
Printing and production	500	-
Expert consultation	1,800	-
Other expenses	500	150
Total	10,000	1,750

5.3 Asset-Light Replication

The proposed scaling model is a solution-output service rather than long-term direct operation of a single farm. The transferable package contains brand and IP design, modular educational courses, a lightweight operating platform, and standard operating procedures. This arrangement reduces the need for permanent on-site personnel and avoids ownership of agricultural land and large facilities. Its financial advantage is that the same knowledge assets can serve multiple farms, increasing the service radius while limiting fixed capital requirements.

The source proposes a staged platform model with a free basic version and paid value-added services. This structure can lower initial adoption barriers and reserve future income from customer management, traceability, intelligent marketing, and operating analysis. The source also plans tests in three to five farms of different sizes. Such testing is necessary before claiming scalability because local culture, customer structure, connectivity, staff capability, and qualification requirements may alter delivery cost and willingness to pay.

6 RISK AND GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Market and Revenue Risk

The principal market risks are seasonal demand, dependence on family and school customers, uncertain repurchase, and competition from farms using similar rural symbols. Cultural resources from black-soil farming, local heritage, and traditional food are valuable only when they are organized into distinctive content. Repeated use of similar crops and folk images across competing farms can weaken differentiation and increase customer-acquisition expenditure. The case addresses this risk through original characters, farm-specific stories, user interaction, and the conversion of real farming practices into educational content.

6.2 Technology and Cost Risk

Weak networks, uneven device quality, low operator digital literacy, integration complexity, and the cost of traceability hardware can undermine the expected efficiency benefit. The lightweight design reduces these risks, but future expansion into multi-agent coordination, rule engines, automated marketing, and external interfaces will increase maintenance and error-control requirements. Functions should therefore be added in stages and justified by observed operating demand. Expensive technologies should not be introduced merely for technical completeness when their cost exceeds the farm's capacity.

6.3 Service Quality and Institutional Risk

Educational products must be adapted to children, families, university groups, and adults. Poorly matched content can reduce satisfaction and conversion. Cooperation with schools also requires formal qualifications, safety procedures, and alignment with local educational requirements. The farm has obtained several recognized qualifications, including science-education and educational-practice bases, which strengthen institutional trust and access to organization-based customers. Continued governance should connect activity design, safety, feedback, payment, and customer records so that service expansion does not weaken quality control.

7 CONCLUSION

This case demonstrates how branding and digitalization can convert the physical and cultural resources of a shared farm into a more diversified revenue system. The financial mechanism begins with a recurring plot-adoption product, adds agricultural sales and extended services, and uses educational activities to generate both immediate income and new adoption customers. Regional culture and original characters create differentiated content, while the lightweight platform organizes information, traceability, membership, booking, and payment. The reported 20%-30% conversion from participating families to plot adopters and the approximately 40% improvement in consultation efficiency provide practical evidence of revenue conversion and cost-saving potential.

The evidence does not support a complete profitability or investment-return calculation, and this limitation is financially significant. Future evaluation should retain transaction-level revenue and cost records, distinguish direct and shared costs, monitor customer retention, and compare platform maintenance expenditure with saved labor time and additional sales. Within the available evidence, the most defensible conclusion is that financial sustainability depends on connecting brand assets, paid experiences, recurring adoption, and low-cost digital management. A modular and asset-light delivery model may extend these benefits to additional farms, but replication should be tested against local demand, operating capacity, and willingness to pay.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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