

INFLUENCE OF STARTUPS IN CREATIVE CITIES

An Analysis of the Performance of Emerging Companies in Building City Branding

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the Creative City derives from the field of economics known as the 'creative economy'. In this framework, activities, goods and services with the capacity to dynamise the economy are relevant (Herrera-Medina et al., 2013). For example, startups are gaining interest as a source of innovation through the implementation of new technologies aimed at the reinvention of business models (Aljalahma & Slof, 2022). According to Informa D&B (2022), 62% of Spanish startups are concentrated in Madrid, Catalonia and Andalusia. The objective of this study is to analyse the impact of startups on these autonomous communities and their coverage in the press. A comprehensive systematic review of over one hundred scientific papers and a content analysis of 255 news items published on Google News in 2024 were carried out. The study explores key aspects that link startups as economic drivers to the promotion of Creative Cities and the construction of City Branding.

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1. Introduction

The notion of the “Creative City” has emerged as a fundamental concept within the domain of the so-named “creative economy”, within the field of economic sciences. Concurrently, and considering the factors that stimulate the development of specific geographical areas, emerging companies or startups are distinguished as innovative business models whose technological base is a distinctive feature and a condition for their positioning in the market. These emerging companies have established themselves as key drivers in the economic transformation of cities by introducing new business models and disruptive technologies. The relationship between these emerging companies and Creative Cities is pivotal, as Creative Cities provide an economic dynamism that reinforces their status as centres of innovation. The present article explores the relationship between the promotion of startups in creative cities, highlighting the influence of the former on the latter. The relevance of this relationship is reflected in the media, specifically in the written press.

The scientific community has recently exhibited a marked interest in the relationship between entrepreneurship and “Creative Cities”, as evidenced by research trends in scientific literature regarding impact, as well as the influence of innovative startups in the construction of the City Brand. In Spain, this phenomenon is particularly evident in communities such as Madrid, Catalonia and Andalusia, which have become hubs of innovation and creativity, with the growing presence of startups in these areas contributing to their economic and social development. This phenomenon is also reflected in the media, particularly in the manner in which media professionals address the subject in their reporting, thereby influencing the broader societal discourse.

2. Theoretical Framework

The following lines describe the necessary conceptual structure that serves as theoretical basis for the work presented. In this way, the concept of “Creative Cities” is defined, which is the starting point for the theoretical argumentation that reflects the influence of emerging companies or startups in the promotion and projection of the former. More specifically, it points out how Creative Cities include startups in their discourse in the design of their communicative actions, which will be a key element in the design of the City Brand.

2.1. *Creative Cities and Startups*

The introduction and popularisation of the concept of Creative Cities, as defined by authors such as Landry (2008) and Florida (2002), has led to the evolution of the term and its increased utilisation. These cities, as characterised by the innovative conditions they foster, aim to enhance the quality of life for their citizens and promote sustainable economic growth. The relevance of the concept has been accentuated since the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) established the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) in 2004.

The decline of traditional industries in the late 20th century resulted in the emergence of the “Creative City” (Yang and Koo, 2019). The UCCN comprises localities where the promotion of creativity is recognised as a strategic element in the urban development process (UNESCO, 2013). UNESCO currently recognises more than 350 Creative Cities that excel in the areas of Gastronomy, Literature, Crafts and Folk Arts, Design, Film, Music and Digital Art (UNESCO, 2013).

The notion of creativity and innovation as intrinsic characteristics of Creative Cities is directly linked to their economic growth and urban progress (Evans, 2009; Montgomery, 2017; Pratt, 2008; Scott, 2006).

In today’s economy, startups are considered a major source of innovation, as they implement new technologies to reinvent business models and produce innovative products. These startups are recognised as pivotal drivers of economic growth and development within their respective localities (Aljahma and Slof, 2022).

The relationship between the incursion of startups in localities and their classification as Creative Cities has been analysed in the scientific community, especially in the last decade. The scientific literature focuses on the willingness of private business initiatives to invest and the economic commitment of public administrations to support future-oriented digital economies (Keane and Chen, 2017; Lee, 2016), without ruling out the necessary support of social groups for this conception of city (Leslie and Hunt, 2013; Sasajima, 2013). The urban renewal and gentrification caused by startups in

Creative Cities, supported by relevant regulatory changes in each locality (Bereitschaft, 2019; Fiorentino, 2018), or the global proliferation of urban creative trends pushing local governments towards market-driven business management models and development imperatives (Nkula-Wenz, 2019), among others.

2.2. Presence of Startups in the Strategic Communication of Creative Cities

Innovative startups have been shown to promote sustainable economic development (De Las Heras-Pedrosa et al., 2023). As drivers of innovation and social renewal, they are linked to cities characterised by their creative potential and their ability to attract creative industries (Thomas & Darnton):

According to *Politiques pour la creativite*, a UNESCO Guide promoted in 2012, developed cities have an undisputable creative potential, usually gathering all major actors of the creative industries - authors, producers, distributors, advertisers, etc. - i.e. they have the necessary means to mobilise this potential to the urban communities' benefit. By stimulating individual capacities and leveraging local resources effectively, the creative industries (...) generate employment opportunities and act as catalysts for innovation and social renewal (2006, p. 153).

This notion constitutes the argumentation employed by Creative Cities in the development of discourses and communicative actions that present them to society as innovative entities capable of mobilising individuals to satisfy their human needs (Colomb, 2012; Mellander et al., 2011). In this regard, the communication strategies employed by these localities encompass both traditional creative industries and emerging technological enterprises (Kong & O'Connor, 2009).

The strategic communication of "Creative Cities" is predominantly informed by neoliberal urban networks and policies, and lauds the establishment of new companies, predominantly within creative and cultural industries (He, 2019). The overarching objective of these communication strategies is to promote and enhance the image of the locale in which the Creative City is situated (Florida, 2002), a goal that is facilitated by its ability to attract and retain creative industries and professionals, thereby fostering a collaborative environment conducive to creative production (Durmaz, 2012).

From a business perspective, authors advocate cooperative communication as a key factor in the development of startups (Jung, 2018; Montelon, 2014; Suciú y Florea, 2015). In the context of local creative communities, such as Creative Cities, the following can be said:

A cooperative environment fosters the development of a win-win innovative business solutions that benefit all parties involved. The value added by creative individuals collaborating within local creative communities and innovative clusters is recognised as a key factor in the development of the economy, with a particular emphasis on supporting creative industries at the regional level. Within creative and innovative communities, such as smart and creative cities and/or local innovative clusters, entrepreneurs acting as business champions can become a source for a long-term competitive advantage. (Suciú and Florea, 2015, p. 734)

In summary, the significance of creative industries on a global scale is increasing, attracting not only the economic wealth of a city, but also the knowledge acquired and the strengthening of its identity. (De Noronha Guedes, 2012) The close relationship between the aforementioned community initiatives to improve citizen satisfaction and local economic development, and the technological innovations and social media enhancement offered by entrepreneurial initiatives, favours the image of a "Creative City" (Nurabadiansyah et al., 2019).

2.3. Creative Cities and City Branding

In Kapferer's (2005) seminal work, the brand is conceptualised as a multifaceted symbol endowed with manifold meanings, and as an identity structure that reflects a prism with six attributes: physicality, relationships, reflection, personality, culture and self-image. These aspects are then further subdivided into two groups. The former group comprises the external expression of the brand (physicality, relationships and reflection), while the latter group comprises the internal expression of the brand (personality, culture and self-image).

One of the most renowned authors who has studied the concept of a brand is Kotler. In collaboration with Armstrong, Kotler offers a definition of the term 'brand' as "a name, a term, a sign, a symbol, a design or a combination of all these elements" (Kotler and Armstrong, 2010, p. 208). These authors further posit that a brand serves to identify a manufacturer or seller, thereby differentiating it from competitors in the market.

In addition, the concept of city branding is of particular relevance to the spheres of urban development, planning and the establishment of a favourable city image (Boric-Cvenic and Mesic, 2019). As advocated by Yang and Koo (2019), the development of an effective "Creative City" strategy necessitates the identification and management of a brand identity strategy, and vice versa (Shin and Kimjunky, 2013). The perception of a City Brand is directly influenced by the characteristics of a "Creative City", including openness, tolerance and diversity.

The concept of the "city brand" has been defined by Sáez Vegas et al. (2011) as "the name of the city, in addition to the logo and slogan if they exist, associated with a group of attributes that, perceived by the target audience, will provoke positive or negative reactions" (p. 131).

The evolution of the economy has resulted in a contemporary knowledge-based creative economy, which has consequently transformed the discourse of the City Brand and the manner in which urban areas shape their identity in the public sphere (Montelon, 2014). In this sense, Montelon (2014) observes that elements such as creativity, innovation and knowledge sharing have superseded those that characterised an industrialised and manufacturing economy, thereby altering the discourse of the City Brand. Consequently, cities are adopting an "alternative approach in the way they market, attract and retain people" and are now advocating the above aspects to "remain competitive and attractive in a creative economy" (Montelon, 2014, p. 4).

Creativity, regarded in the urban context as a hallmark of contemporary identity, has emerged as a pivotal factor in enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of localities within the global economy (Carlucci et al., 2014). Consequently, the distinctive characteristics of an urban environment contribute to the formation of a unique City Brand. The establishment of a "Creative City" brand has been demonstrated to enhance a city's competitiveness in comparison to other geographical areas, underscoring the significance of implementing marketing strategies, termed "urban marketing," within those creative industries that serve as a driving force for Creative Cities and contribute to the definition of the City Brand (De Noronha Guedes, 2012).

3. Objectives

The present study is founded upon two objectives. Firstly, it seeks to provide a comprehensive review of the extant scientific literature pertaining to Creative Cities and entrepreneurship. Secondly, it aims to investigate the influence of Spanish startups in Madrid, Catalonia and Andalusia, in light of the Informa D&B study (2022), which indicates that 62% of Spanish startups are concentrated in these regions. The study will also seek to ascertain the sector in which these startups operate, the number of employees, the business model, and other pertinent characteristics. The second main objective is to analyse the treatment given to startups in the press as a driving force for the dynamisation of the aforementioned geographical areas.

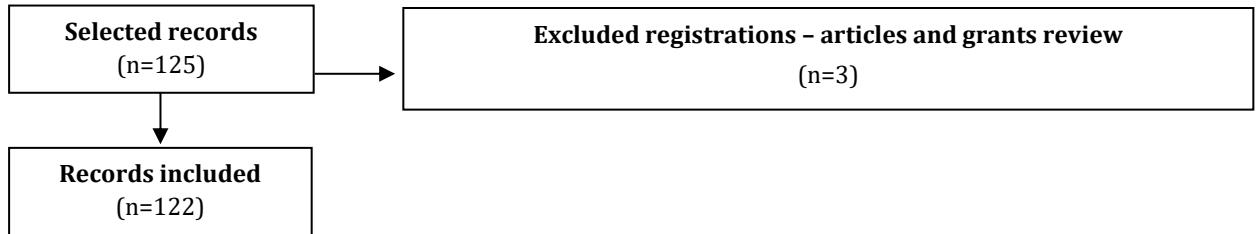
4. Methodology

The methodology employed to accomplish the objectives delineated is predicated on two fundamental lines of work. Firstly, a systematic review of the scientific literature on the subject was conducted, encompassing over a hundred records. To this end, a comprehensive search of relevant scientific papers was conducted in the Web of Science (WoS) repository, a source recognised for its rigour and precision in such analyses (Cabeza Ramírez et al., 2017; Martínez et al., 2015). The process of the study is illustrated in Table 1, which details the selection of 125 records. Given the modest number of records, the exclusive exclusion criteria applied were those related to the nature of the publications (illustrated in the flowchart in Figure 1).

Table 1. Search for scientific papers in Web of Science

Date	Search terms and filter	Registers
1/09/2024	TS= ("creative cit*" OR "creative city*") AND ("startup*" OR "start-up*" OR "entrepreneurship*" OR "entrepreneurship" OR "entrepreneur*" OR "entrepreneurship" OR "entrepreneur*") Filter: Topic	125

Source: Own elaboration based on WoS records.

Figure 1. Flow chart

Source: Own elaboration based on WoS data, 2025.

The narrative objective for the development of the systematic review is summarised following the PICOS (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcomes, Study Design) approach to identify the main elements to be considered in the selection of research papers (Rubio-Aparicio et al., 2018):

1. **POPULATION:** Creative Cities, members of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network and startups.
2. **INTERVENTION:** Analysis of the presence and activity of startups and their impact on the development of Creative Cities.
3. **COMPARISON:** Comparison of the treatment of the presence and influence of startups in Creative Cities in the scientific literature over different time periods; comparison in terms of the volume of research carried out in different geographical areas, as well as between authors and affiliations, and between publications containing studies on the subject.
4. **RESULTS:** Trends in research on the subject described.
5. **STUDY DESIGN:** Systematic review based on records found in the Web of Science database.

In order to achieve the second objective, a content analysis of a total of 255 pieces of information published in Google News in 2024 (up to August) is conducted, taking into account three Spanish autonomous communities, those in which, according to the Informa D&B study (2022), 62% of Spanish startups are concentrated: Madrid, Catalonia and Andalusia. The content analysis employed a coding table created specifically for this purpose, incorporating various variables (see Table 2).

Table 2. Coding table

Headline and URL	
Date	
Media	
Scope of the Media	International; National; Regional or Local
Media Section	
News Protagonist	
Protagonist's Locality or City	
Main Topic	
Target Audience	
Startup Name	
Year of Creation of the Startup	
Startup Sector	
Number of Startups Named	

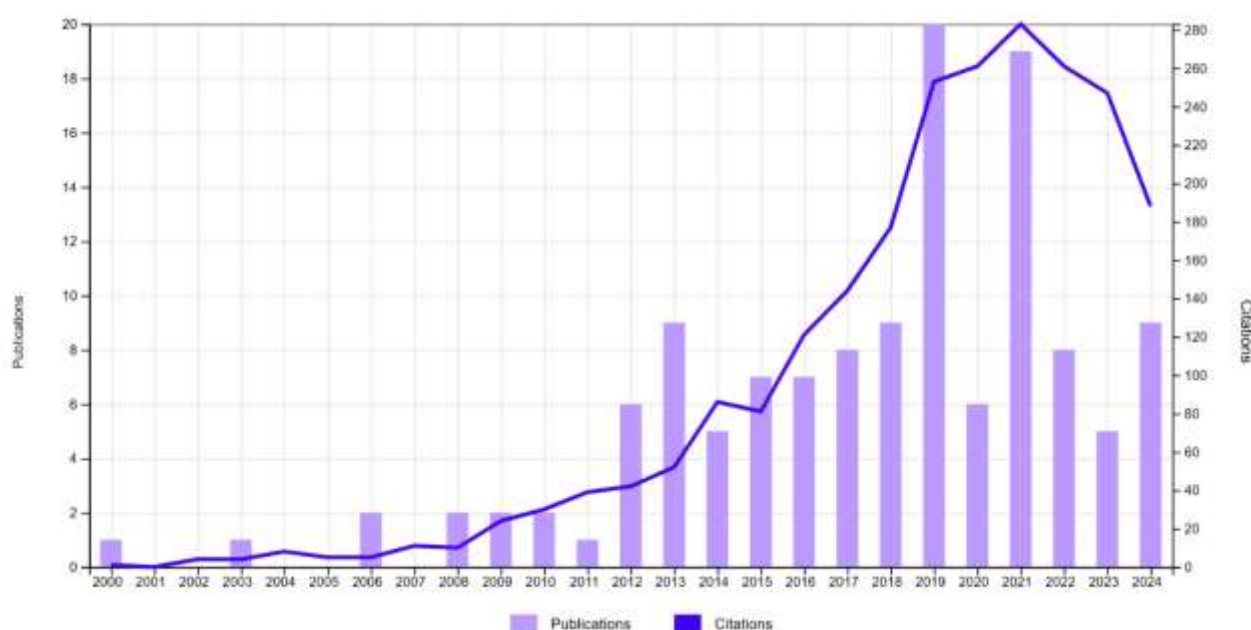
Gender of Founder/CEO	Male; Female; Both
Business Model	B2B; B2C; B2B and B2C

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

5. Results

The results of the initial phase of the study underscore the augmentation in scientific production concerning Creative Cities and entrepreneurship that has been witnessed since the year 2000 (see Figure 2). The year 2000 marked the inaugural publication in the WoS repository; nevertheless, the progression of publications has been non-uniform since that initial publication was documented. There are recurrent periods in which no documents are published on the subject of the study, with the exception of 2011, when more than five annual publications are recorded. 2019 and 2021 are notable for the dissemination of more than half of the remaining publications in other years.

Figure 2. Evolution of scientific production and citations



Source: Web of Science, 2024.

Regarding citations, Figure 2 demonstrates that the increase in the number of citations has been consistent, particularly in the last decade. Despite a decline in scientific interest in the subject observed in the last two years (2022 and 2023), this decline is not significant and further observation over a one-year period will be required to ascertain its significance.

The citation report (Table 3) indicates that the average number of citations per paper is high (18.17), with an H-Index of 24, thereby substantiating the scientific interest in the research domain under scrutiny.

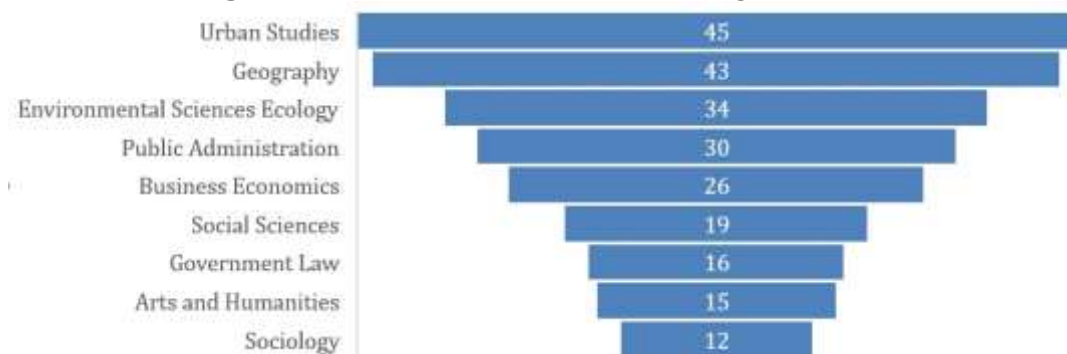
Table 3. Citation Report, according to WoS data

Citation report	
Registers	125
Quotations	2.271
Average number of citations	18,17
H-Index	24

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

If we look at the research fields in which most publications are classified, as shown in Figure 3, the following stand out with more than twenty records: Urban Studies (45), Geography (43), Environmental Sciences (34), Public Administration (30) and Business Studies (26).

Figure 3. Prevalent areas of research, according to WoS data



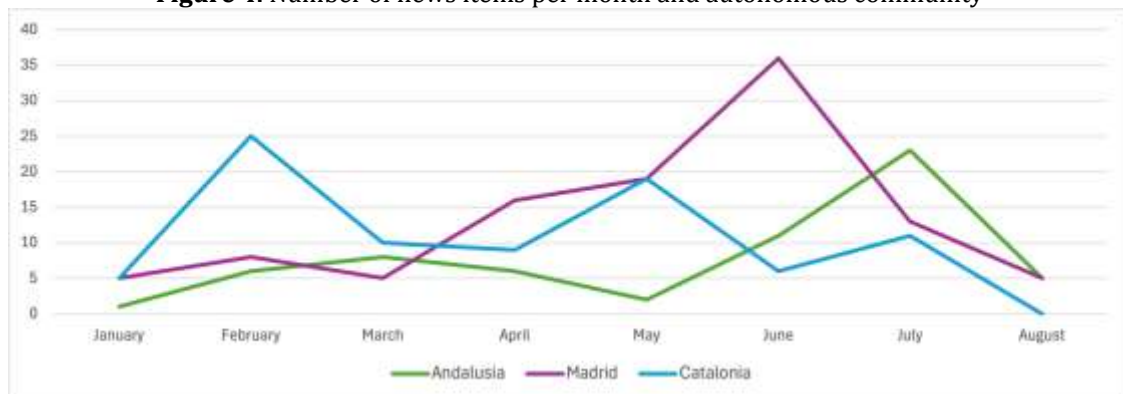
Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

5.2. Google News Content Analysis

5.2.1. News and Autonomous Communities

As shown in Figure 4, Madrid is the autonomous community with the most news items over the period analysed (42%), followed by Catalonia (33%). Andalusia is the region with the least news (24%). Madrid is the protagonist of the news, especially from May onwards, with an increasing trend, peaking in June and decreasing thereafter. On the other hand, news about Catalonia is mainly published in February and news about Andalusia is most common in July. August is the month with the lowest number of news items on the topic in question.

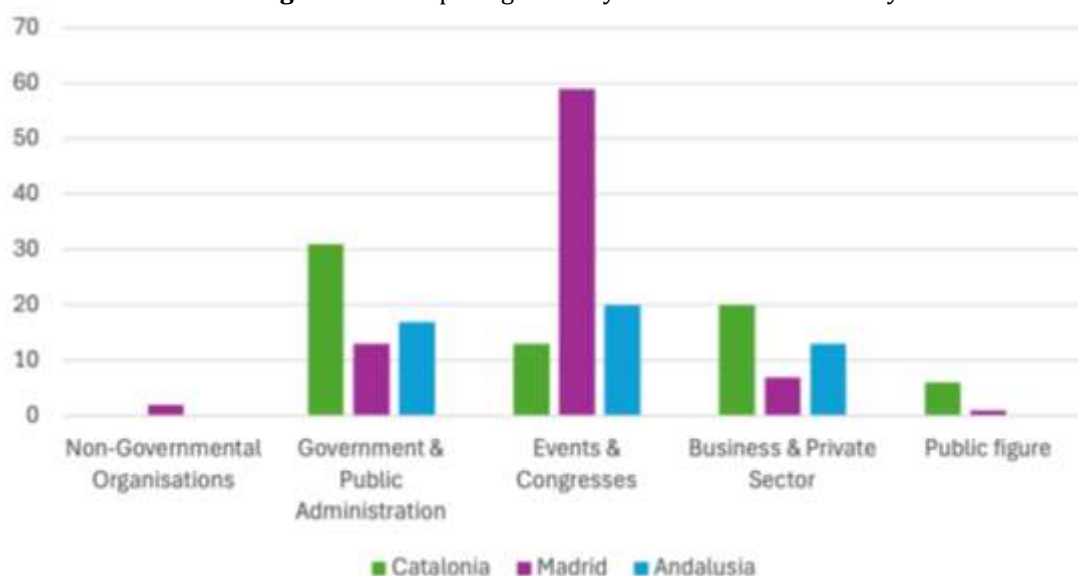
Figure 4. Number of news items per month and autonomous community



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

In terms of the protagonists of the news items (Figure 5), events and congresses stand out in the first place, especially in Madrid, with a total of 59 news items. In second place are the government and public administration, the main protagonists of the news analysed on Catalonia. In third place are companies and the private sector, where Catalonia also receives more attention than other actors. There are also, to a lesser extent, news items related to public figures and non-governmental organisations.

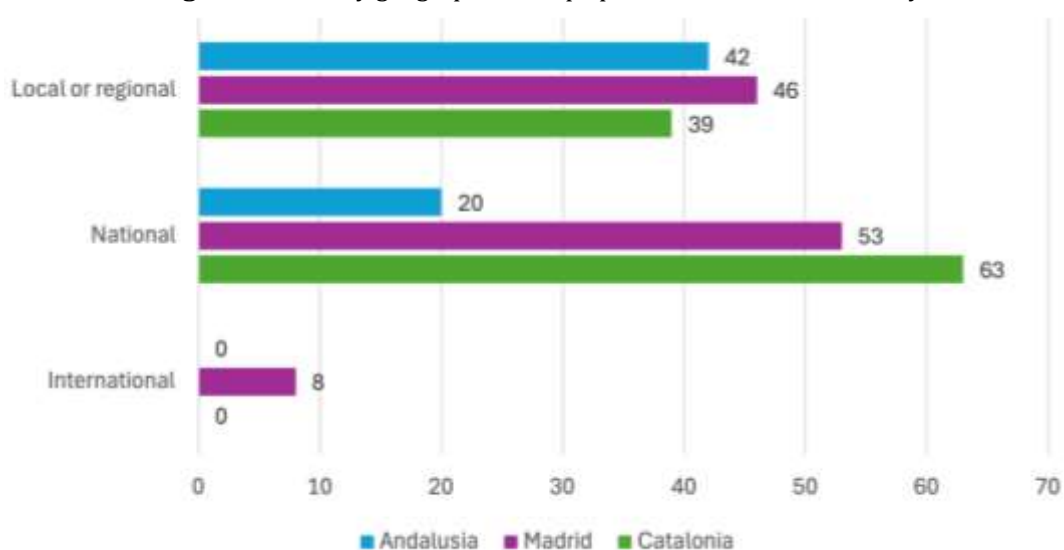
Figure 5. News protagonists by autonomous community



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

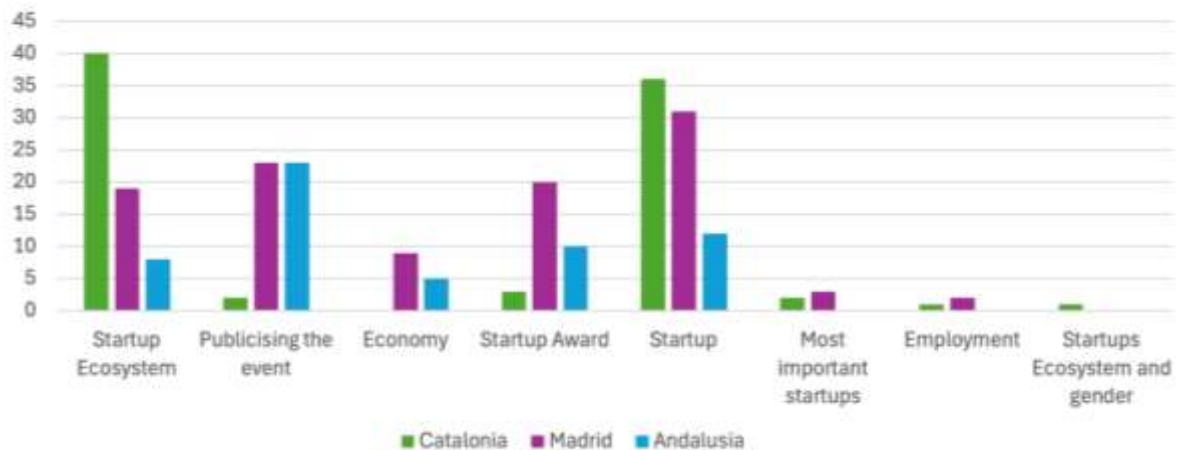
The scope of the news, as can be seen in Figure 6, is mostly national, followed by local or regional. There are few news items with an international scope, and those that do exist are limited to the community of Madrid. Catalonia and Madrid opt for a greater number of news items with a national geographical scope. Andalusia, on the other hand, has more items with a local or regional scope.

Figure 6. News by geographical scope per autonomous community



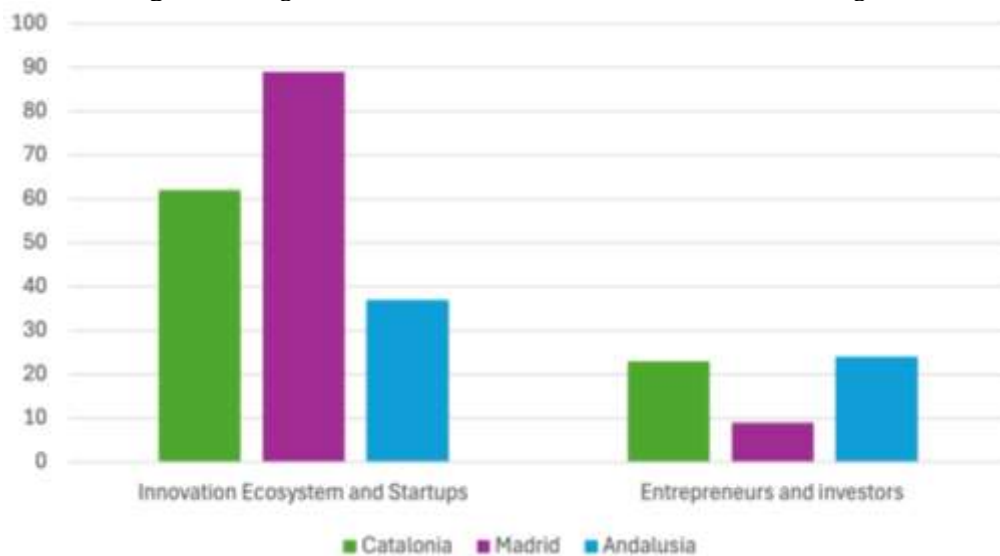
Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

The main theme of the news items found (Figure 7) is, logically and given the sample chosen, focused on entrepreneurship, although within this, Ecosystem and Startup is the theme that brings together the largest number of news items, especially in Catalonia. This is followed by startups and topics related to the dissemination of events, the latter being more common in Madrid, also due to the fact that this region has the largest number of news items on this topic. Awards for startups are the fourth most important news item, followed by topics related to the economy.

Figure 7. Main topic of the news item and autonomous community

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

In terms of target audience, two main groups can be identified (Figure 8). First and foremost, the entire innovation and start-up ecosystem, and secondly, entrepreneurs and investors. Madrid is the region that allocates the most news to the entire innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem, followed by Catalonia. Andalusia is the region with the most news dedicated to entrepreneurs and investors, followed by Catalonia.

Figure 8. Target audience of the news item and Autonomous Region

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

In terms of the most active press in Andalusia, "andaluciaempre.es" stands out, followed by the Europa Press news agency. In Madrid, TeleMadrid is the regional television channel that publishes the most news on the subject, followed by Emprendedores and El Referente. La Vanguardia is the newspaper that publishes the most news about Catalonia, followed by Crónica and El Periódico.

The places most mentioned in the news from Andalusia are, apart from the autonomous community itself, Seville, Marbella, Granada and Malaga (in that order). In Catalonia, Barcelona is in first place, followed by Catalonia in second and, at a distance but still relevant, Madrid in third.

5.2.2. Startups

In terms of the startups that appear in the headlines of the news items analysed in each of the autonomous communities, as shown in Table 4, Catalonia is the region that mentions the most startups, followed by Madrid. The Andalusian news items refer to a total of only 11 startups.

Table 4. *Startups named in the news headlines*

Andalusia	Madrid	Catalonia
Galgus	Graddus	Delphi
Donicus	Screensor	Newcop
Tutrocyte	Captoplastic	Keybotic
Swap Your Travel	Spotwear	Gocleer
Seabery	Therminer	Mundimoto
2GF Solutions	Accessible Madrid	ZeroError
Clientify	Byld	Qilimanjaro Quantum Tech
Dovetail	Nabbu	SolarMente
Kampaoh	Reveni	Kleta
Rewoox	Internxt	MyPoppins
Global Payments Systems	NaviLens	Emily.AI
	Rooral	Fleet
	Ailin.Health	Cuideo
	IBBX	Newcop
	Shakers	CitizensLegal
	Invopop	Dàlia
	Neatsy	Drivi
	Celonis	Badi
	Toteemi	VRAIn
	Webel	Flanks
	Cacaok'an	Myneral
	Kuorum	Alinia
	Storemore	Sycal
	LuzIA	Brickken
	Funtech Rocket	Syra Coffee
	Distripha	Neatsight
	Ubicuity	Roka Furadada
	Hoop Carpool	Nearby
		Polarimètrics
		Stayforlong

Source: Google News. Own elaboration, 2025.

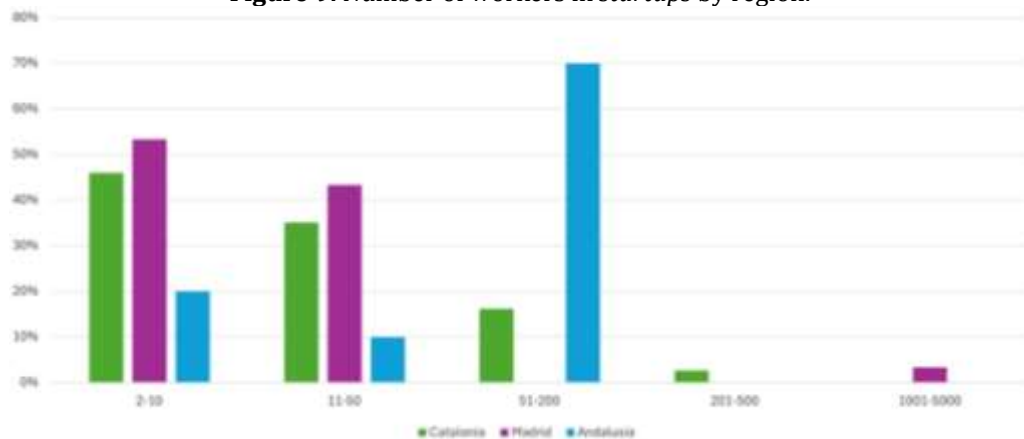
In Andalusia, the company most mentioned is Dovetail, a foreign company that will develop a project in Andalusia to convert aircraft turbines to use only zero-emission electric propulsion. In Madrid, Invopop, a Madrid startup that helps companies to issue invoices in any country, stands out. In Catalonia, meanwhile, two startups dominate the news. One is Barcelona-based Keybotic, which designs and builds autonomous robot dogs for industrial inspections. The other is Solarmente, which offers solar energy services.

In terms of the sectors of the startups most cited in the news analysed, in Andalusia they are concentrated in the aeronautics and technology sectors. In Madrid, on the other hand, the majority of startups belong to the e-commerce, education and training, and technology and software sectors. Catalonia, on the other hand, focuses mainly on the technology sector, followed by the energy sector.

The main locations of the analysed startups are Seville (Andalusia), Madrid (Madrid) and Barcelona (Catalonia). The year of creation of the found startups was also studied, with 2022 and 2020 being the dominant years in Andalusia, 2021 being the main year in Madrid and 2019 and 2020 being the years of creation of the majority of startups cited in Catalonia.

Regarding the number of persons employed in the newly born enterprises analysed (Figure 9), in Andalusia the majority (70%) have between 51 and 200 employees. In Madrid, on the other hand, 53% of the startups found had no more than ten employees, as did 46% of the startups in Catalonia.

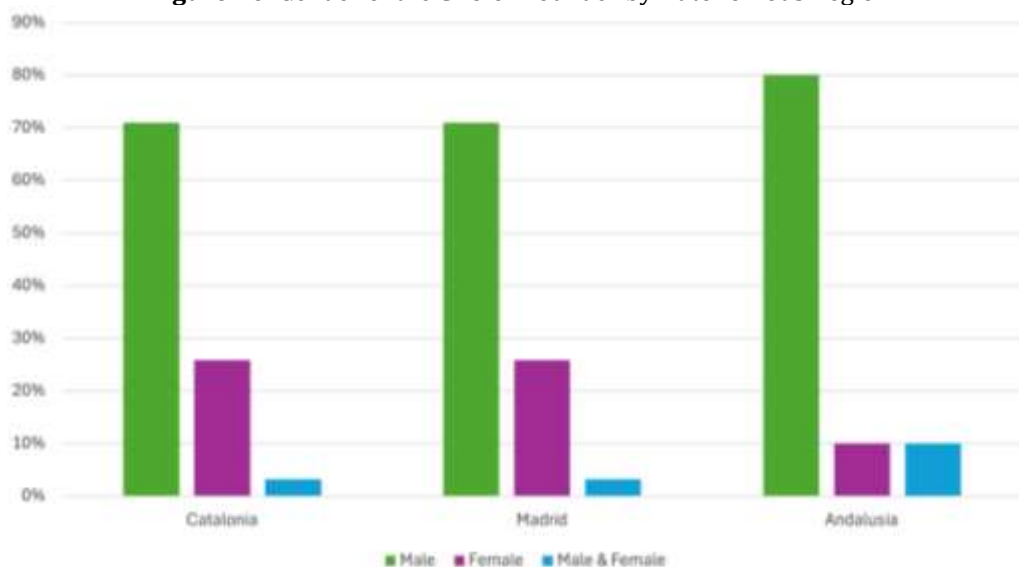
Figure 9. Number of workers in *startups* by region.



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

As can be seen in Figure 10, the CEO/founder of most startups in Madrid, Andalusia and Catalonia is male. The percentage of female CEOs is much lower than that of male CEOs, with Catalonia having the highest percentage of female CEOs, followed by Madrid.

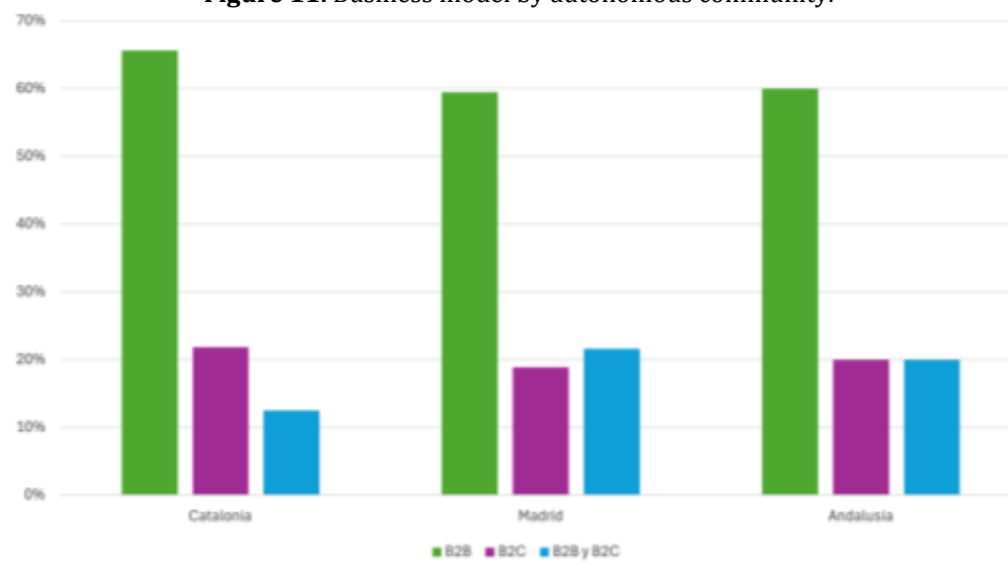
Figure 10. Gender of the CEO or Founder by Autonomous Region



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

As regards the business model, Figure 11 shows that in the three autonomous communities the B2B model dominates, i.e. those startups that sell their products or services to other companies. To a lesser extent, there are those that sell directly to the final consumer. There is also a percentage of startups that use a combination of both business models.

Figure 11. Business model by autonomous community.



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

6. Conclusions

The results obtained suggest that, although research on entrepreneurship and creative cities is still in its infancy, there is a clear interest in the scientific community for research in this area. The steady increase in the number of citations of scientific papers published in high-impact journals reflects this attention by an increasing number of authors, mainly concentrated in the United Kingdom and the United States. Although the first publication registered in the WoS repository dates back to 2000, the trend in publications over the last quarter of a century has not been regular, and it is only in the last twelve years that the dissemination of scientific records has been uninterrupted, with a greater abundance of works.

The concentration of startups in communities such as Madrid, Catalonia and Andalusia highlight the strategic importance of these hubs in the development of innovation ecosystems. Consequently, startups benefit from the resources of these ecosystems and, in turn, contribute to their strengthening through their capacity to innovate and generate economic and social value. This study demonstrates that Madrid leads in terms of media coverage and concentration of startup-related events, while Catalonia stands out for its focus on the technology and energy sectors. Andalusia, despite its comparatively limited media presence, is also exhibiting a growing interest in the technology sector, particularly in specific industries such as aeronautics. It is also notable that significant differences exist in the size of the startups, as well as in the media focus and the productive sectors. The higher visibility in communities such as Madrid and Catalonia can be linked to a more mature business environment and national projection, while in Andalusia it can be related to a greater focus on local strategy.

Concurrently, despite the growth of entrepreneurship and innovation, a marked gender disparity persists in terms of female representation in leadership roles, particularly evident in Madrid and Andalusia, where men continue to predominate. This finding underscores a pressing challenge and a crucial area for enhancement with respect to gender equity.

The influence of startups on the environment in which they operate is reflected in the studies referred to in this article, promoting the consolidation of localities as Creative Cities, due, among other aspects, to the idiosyncrasy of startups, innovative entities that break into the market with business models that are largely based on new technologies for their subsistence. This dynamic environment fosters the establishment of a distinct City Brand in these locales, where private initiatives and local administrations adapt their management to support the emergence of these entities, thereby catalysing the economic development of the area.

It is evident that startups and City Brand are symbiotically related, as they play an instrumental role in the development of a city's reputation by contributing to economic growth and innovation.

Consequently, the City Brand fosters an environment conducive to the flourishing of startups, attracting investment and talent.

Creative cities are defined by the integration of creativity, culture and entrepreneurship. Consequently, the promotion of startups in these creative cities contributes not only to their urban revitalisation but also to the enhancement of their identity and global competitiveness, thereby promoting economic growth and cultural dynamism. In addition to becoming pivotal agents in the economic transformation of creative cities, startups are imperative to the establishment of a robust City Brand. These synergies are instrumental in the transformation of cities of the future.

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