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Female entrepreneurship in startup ecosystems worldwide☆

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ABSTRACT

Startup ecosystems have a positive impact on the creation of new businesses and the entire economy and accordingly receive attention from both academics and politicians. However, while entrepreneurial ecosystems reflect a high level of entrepreneurial activity, they differ significantly in terms of the proportion of female founders, which means some ecosystems do not fulfill their true potential. This study uses qualitative comparative analysis to explore the combinations of ecosystem characteristics explaining a high proportion of female founders in the 20 most successful startup ecosystems worldwide. The results suggest two different configurations explaining a high proportion of female founders and reveal which issues require attention on a metropolitan level and which issues might require national policy makers to become involved. These findings contribute to the ecosystem literature and link to the stream of female entrepreneurship.

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1. Introduction

Entrepreneurial activity can foster growth and economic development. Audretsch (2009) defines a society, which understands entrepreneurship as the driving force for growth and development as an entrepreneurial society. In this setting, the institutional framework stimulates a positive attitude to risk-taking and entrepreneurial activity (Kuckertz, Berger, & Allmendinger, 2015). Cultivating systems offering centers of entrepreneurial activity is one approach available to government to stimulate and sustain an entrepreneurial society (Hechavarría & Ingram, 2014).

Silicon Valley, Tel Aviv, London, and Berlin are just a few examples of successful startup ecosystems that can serve as role models (Herrmann, Gauthier, Holtzschke, Berman, & Marmer, 2015). However, when Herrmann and colleagues ranked these metropolitan areas according to the proportion of female founders in the firms located therein, perhaps surprisingly Silicon Valley did not achieve the top ranking. Fig. 1 shows the map of the 20 most important startup ecosystems ranked according to the proportion of female founders working within each of those ecosystems.

Increased levels of female entrepreneurship can contribute to a higher quality of entrepreneurship through conferring greater diversity,

not merely in gender terms but also with regard to “products, processes, forms of organization and targeted markets” (Verheul, Stel, & Thurik, 2006, p. 152). Furthermore, raising the proportion of female founders might be a worthwhile objective in itself, because several studies provide empirical evidence of female founders who focus less on economic goals than their male counterparts and instead devoting more time to pursuing also social goals (Jennings & Brush, 2013). Hanson (2009) argues that the presence of female entrepreneurs and their businesses realizing social goals benefits the relevant regional community. Therefore, ecosystems might not be delivering their full potential if they do not succeed in activating both the male and female workforce. Assuming ecosystems are the role model for the entrepreneurial society, increasing the proportion of female founders operating in those startup ecosystems would lead to raising the level of entrepreneurial activity of women in the entire economy. Accordingly, this study aims to explore which characteristics of an ecosystem on the micro, meso, and macro levels explain a high proportion of female founders among startups.

The results of this study contribute to the entrepreneurship literature and provide practical implications in three ways: first, by linking the literature on ecosystems and female entrepreneurship and highlighting how those two streams might benefit from addressing their common interests; second, by emphasizing the potential of designing gender-specific public policies to stimulate entrepreneurial activity; and third by revealing the potential for further development of already successful startup ecosystems.

Following this introduction, the study seeks to link the two research streams of female entrepreneurship and the characteristics of startup ecosystems theoretically supporting each stream. The subsequent section on research design provides information on the data underpinning

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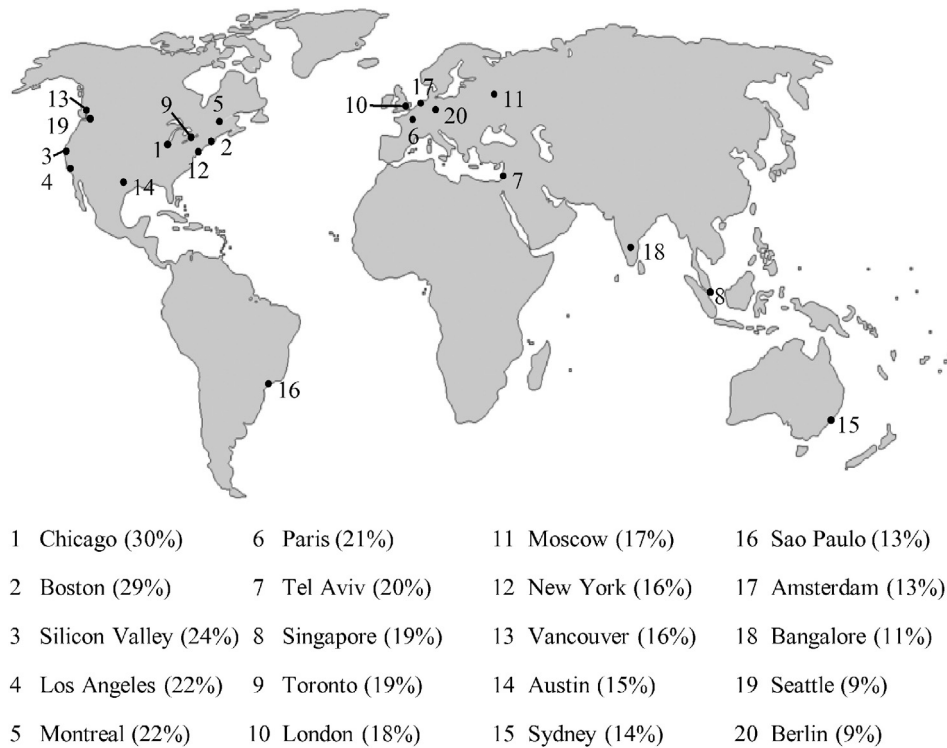


Fig. 1. Map of the 20 most startup-oriented ecosystems ranked according to the proportion of female founders based on Herrmann et al. (2015).

the study, justifies the choice of qualitative comparative analysis, and describes the conditions explaining the outcome. In the following section, the authors present and discuss the results of the analysis and outline its implications for researchers and policy makers.

2. Theory

Researchers and politicians seeking to foster entrepreneurial activity have strong interest in understanding the building blocks of venture creation (Bates, Jackson, & Johnson, 2007; Glaeser, Rosenthal, & Strange, 2010; Kuckertz et al., 2015). Bates et al. (2007) embrace past research on the requirements of entrepreneurial activity by applying the so-called 3M framework. Accordingly, new venture creation requires the presence of a **market**, including the opportunity recognition and exploitation in the market (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000), access to **money** in terms of funding and **management** in terms of accessible human capital. Individuals undertaking entrepreneurial activity always involve a complex system with a multitude of factors such as institutional aspects and other actors that commentators must take into account (Kuckertz, Berger, & Mpeqa, 2016). Brush, de Bruin, and Welter (2009) extend the 3M framework to include the **meso and macro environment**. The meso environment thereby relates to the regional support and public policies. The macro environment on the other hand focuses on cultural and societal norms and expectations.

However, when focusing on a specific group of individuals within an ecosystem, researchers need to treat that group like only a (control) variable. The literature stream on female entrepreneurship that emerged in the 1970s agrees that “entrepreneurship is a gendered phenomenon” (Jennings & Brush, 2013, p. 679). Kobeissi (2010) analyzes this gendered phenomenon and also emphasizes that net-effects cannot capture the context consideration, or in other words female entrepreneurship. This statement is especially relevant to attempt to compare proportions of female founders across different cultures (Henry, Foss, & Ahl, 2016). Accordingly, Brush et al. (2009) argue that to understand the entrepreneurial activity of female individuals, commentators should consider motherhood, which not only refers to having children but also

affects household composition and expectations. However, Aldrich and Cliff (2003) argue that the characteristics of the family system have an impact on the venture creation process. Therefore, in their framework the characteristics of the family system flow from norms, values, and attitudes, which represents the macro perspective. Accordingly, motherhood is not the interface of market, money and management (Brush et al., 2009), but is an integral part of the macro environment and as such also influences the micro and meso level.

Fig. 2 shows an interpretation of the 5M framework that deviates from that of Brush et al. (2009) in two respects: First, the figure shows the micro level (market, money, management) as integral to the meso environment and the meso environment to be a subset of the macro environment. Dopfer, Foster, and Potts (2004) recommend this last 5M framework for the analysis of complex systems such as new venture creation. Second, the micro, meso, and macro levels influence each other (Dopfer et al., 2004).

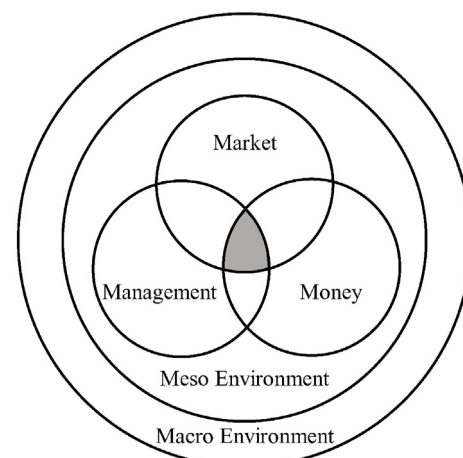


Fig. 2. Framework for analyzing female entrepreneurship following Brush et al. (2009).

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