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Digital Platform Business Models and Startup Scaling: A Bibliometric Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study maps the scholarly development of digital platform business models and their connection to startup scaling through a bibliometric analysis. A dataset of 1,327 Scopus-indexed documents published between 2003 and 2026 was analyzed with VOSviewer to examine keyword co-occurrence, temporal trends, keyword density, co-authorship at the author, institution, and country levels, and citation impact. The results show that digital platforms form the conceptual core of the field and connect six thematic clusters covering platform economics and multi-sided markets, entrepreneurship and e-commerce, digital transformation and competition, ecosystem value creation, the digital economy, and sustainable development. The overlay map indicates a move from earlier work on the sharing economy, network effects, and new business models toward recent attention to sustainability, circular economy, artificial intelligence, and digital entrepreneurship. Collaboration among authors and institutions remains fragmented, while country-level networks are led by Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy, and the Russian Federation. The most cited works concentrate on platform ecosystems, platform business model types, and digital entrepreneurship. Concepts most closely tied to scaling, such as network effects, two-sided markets, and platform design, are still studied less often, which calls for research that links platform design and network dynamics with the growth outcomes of new ventures.

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INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms have changed the way firms create, deliver, and capture value. Instead of controlling a linear value chain, platform firms coordinate interactions between distinct user groups and rely on complementors, data, and ecosystem partners to generate value (Bonina et al., 2021;

Gawer, 2022). This logic has spread from software and online marketplaces to retail, mobility, finance, and industrial sectors, making the platform one of the dominant organizational forms of the digital economy (Hänninen et al., 2018; Madanaguli et al., 2023). As a result, research on platform business models draws on strategic management, information systems, economics, and entrepreneurship, each offering a different lens on how platforms are designed, governed, and monetized (Täuscher & Laudien, 2018; Trabucchi & Buganza, 2021).

For startups, platform business models are attractive because they allow growth that does not require a proportional increase in assets or costs. Once a platform gathers enough participants on each side, every additional user raises the value of the service for others, which lowers acquisition costs and supports rapid expansion (Moro-Visconti et al., 2020; Trabucchi et al., 2022). This scalability is reflected in capital markets, where platform-based unicorns tend to receive higher valuations than firms with conventional models (Cusumano et al., 2024). The case of Uber shows how platform ventures can cross market and regulatory boundaries while growing at unusual speed (Garud et al., 2022), and recent studies point to the entrepreneurial decisions that make such growth possible (Bez et al., 2025; Sahut et al., 2021).

Scaling a platform, however, is far from automatic. New platforms must attract one user group before the other is present, and their entry strategies in two-sided markets differ widely in timing and sequencing (Veisdal, 2020). Founders need to build network effects deliberately (Bartels & Schmitt, 2022), avoid design and launch mistakes that stall growth (Mancha et al., 2021), and protect the platform from disintermediation once users have found each other (Ladd, 2022). Growth also depends on dynamic capabilities, complementor relationships, and access to venture capital (Helfat & Raubitschek, 2018; Khan et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2022), while platform startups operating in markets dominated by large incumbents have to secure survival before they can scale (Kang & Kim, 2026). When platforms expand abroad, replicating network effects across countries brings further challenges (Etemad, 2023; Stallkamp & Schotter, 2021).

Publications on digital platforms have grown quickly, making it harder for researchers to follow how the field is organized. Bibliometric analysis offers a way to map this body of work by measuring publication output, identifying influential authors, institutions, and countries, and tracing how research themes cluster and change over time. Earlier bibliometric and review studies have examined multi-sided platform research (Jia et al., 2021), digital entrepreneurship (Lungu et al., 2024), entrepreneurship in the gig economy (Silva & Moreira, 2022), digital innovation in entrepreneurial firms (Felicetti et al., 2024), and the governance of platform ecosystems (Mukhopadhyay & Bouwman, 2019). Each of these studies covers part of the topic, yet none places platform business models and startup scaling at the center of the analysis.

Much of the current evidence on how startups scale through platforms comes from case studies and single-country samples. Studies of innovative startups in Italy (Ruggieri et al., 2018), a global technology company moving toward a platform model (Şimşek et al., 2022), multi-sided platform startups in Indonesia (Prijadi et al., 2023), and the economic sustainability of startups on digital platforms (Hadizadeh et al., 2024) provide useful insights, but their findings are scattered across disciplines and publication outlets. Consequently, the intellectual structure that connects platform business model research with startup growth remains unclear, which limits the ability of researchers, founders, investors, and policymakers to build on existing knowledge.

This study addresses that issue through a bibliometric analysis of research on digital platform business models and startup scaling. It aims to identify the main thematic clusters and their relationships, trace how research topics have shifted over time, map collaboration patterns among

authors, institutions, and countries, and highlight the most influential publications in the field. The results are expected to give a structured overview of the field and to point out directions for future research on how platform-based ventures grow.

METHODS

This study uses a quantitative bibliometric approach to examine the structure and development of research on digital platform business models and startup scaling. Bibliometric analysis allows a large body of literature to be assessed systematically by combining performance indicators, such as publication and citation counts, with science mapping techniques that reveal thematic clusters, collaboration networks, and temporal trends. This combination shows which topics form the core of the field, how they relate to one another, and which publications and actors have shaped its development.

Bibliographic data were retrieved from the Scopus database, which was chosen for its broad multidisciplinary coverage, consistent metadata, and compatibility with bibliometric software. The search was applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords using terms related to digital platforms, platform business models, startups, and business scaling, combined with Boolean operators. Records were exported on 2 October 2026 in RIS format, including citation counts, author affiliations, and keywords. The final dataset consisted of 1,327 documents published between 2003 and 2026, plus one article in press scheduled for 2027, comprising 695 journal articles, 299 conference papers, 213 book chapters, 44 reviews, 41 books, and 35 other document types. Annual output rose from fewer than 15 documents per year before 2017 to 155 in 2021 and 215 in 2025, with 177 documents already recorded for 2026 at the time of data collection.

The analysis was carried out with VOSviewer version 1.6.20. Keyword co-occurrence analysis was used to generate network, overlay, and density visualizations, while co-authorship analysis was applied at the author, institution, and country levels. In each map, nodes represent items such as keywords, authors, institutions, or countries, node size reflects the frequency of occurrence or the number of documents, and the thickness of links indicates the strength of co-occurrence or collaboration. Clusters were identified with the VOSviewer clustering algorithm and are displayed in different colors. Citation analysis was then performed using Scopus citation counts to identify the ten most cited documents in the dataset.

RESULTS

Keyword Co-Occurrence Network Visualization

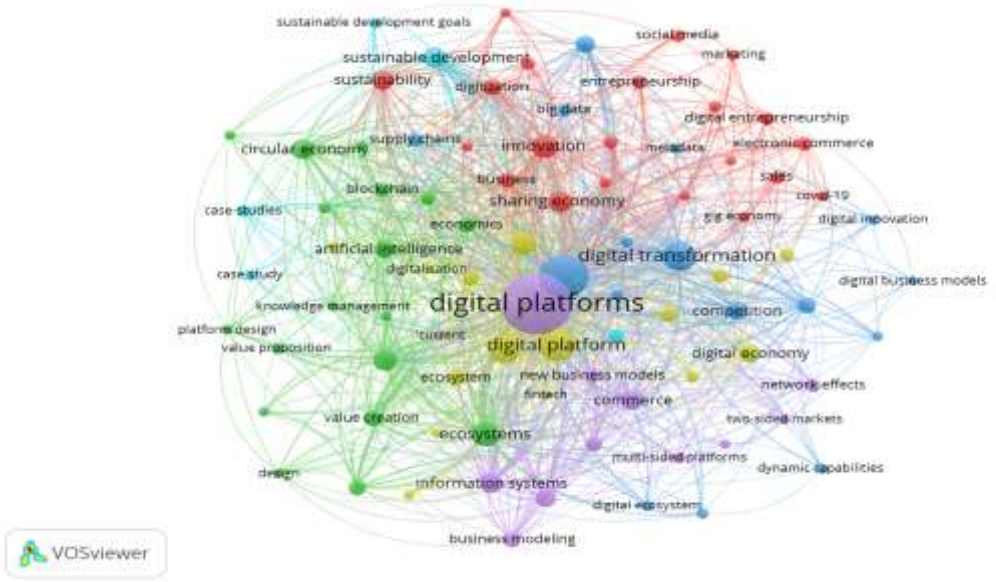


Figure 1. Network Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

Figure 1 presents the keyword co-occurrence network of research on digital platform business models and startup scaling. Digital platforms is the largest and most central node and is linked to almost every other keyword on the map, confirming its role as the conceptual anchor of the field. Related terms such as digital platform, digital transformation, innovation, sharing economy, and ecosystems also appear as large nodes positioned close to the center, which means they are frequently studied together with the platform concept. The network is divided into six clusters, and the dense web of links crossing between them shows that the research streams are closely connected rather than isolated, a pattern that reflects how platform research combines economic, strategic, entrepreneurial, and technological perspectives (Gawer, 2022; Trabucchi & Buganza, 2021).

The purple cluster groups digital platforms, commerce, new business models, network effects, two-sided markets, multi-sided platforms, information systems, and business modeling. It represents the economic foundation of platform research, explaining how platforms create value by connecting user groups and how network effects drive growth, which is the core mechanism behind the rapid scaling of platform startups (Jia et al., 2021; Trabucchi et al., 2022). The red cluster, built around innovation, sharing economy, entrepreneurship, digital entrepreneurship, electronic commerce, social media, marketing, sales, gig economy, and covid-19, reflects the entrepreneurial and market side of platform activity, including how new ventures use platforms to reach customers and how the pandemic accelerated online business (Garud et al., 2022; Sahut et al., 2021). The blue cluster, containing digital transformation, competition, big data, supply chains, digital innovation, digital business models, dynamic capabilities, and digital ecosystem, captures the strategic view of how firms build capabilities and compete through platform-based models (Helfat & Raubitschek, 2018).

The green cluster contains circular economy, blockchain, artificial intelligence, economics, knowledge management, platform design, value proposition, value creation, ecosystems, and design. It focuses on how platforms are designed to create value for participants within ecosystems

and how emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and blockchain open new value propositions for platform ventures (Fasano et al., 2025). The yellow cluster, consisting of digital platform, digital economy, ecosystem, digitalisation, and fintech, links platform research with the wider digital economy and financial services, where scalability is closely tied to market valuation (Moro-Visconti et al., 2020). The smaller cyan cluster, formed by sustainable development, sustainable development goals, case study, and case-studies, shows an effort to connect platform business models with sustainability goals, mostly through case-based research. Taken as a whole, the network suggests that startup scaling is discussed across several clusters at once, with network effects in the purple cluster, entrepreneurship in the red cluster, and capabilities in the blue cluster, instead of forming a separate theme of its own.

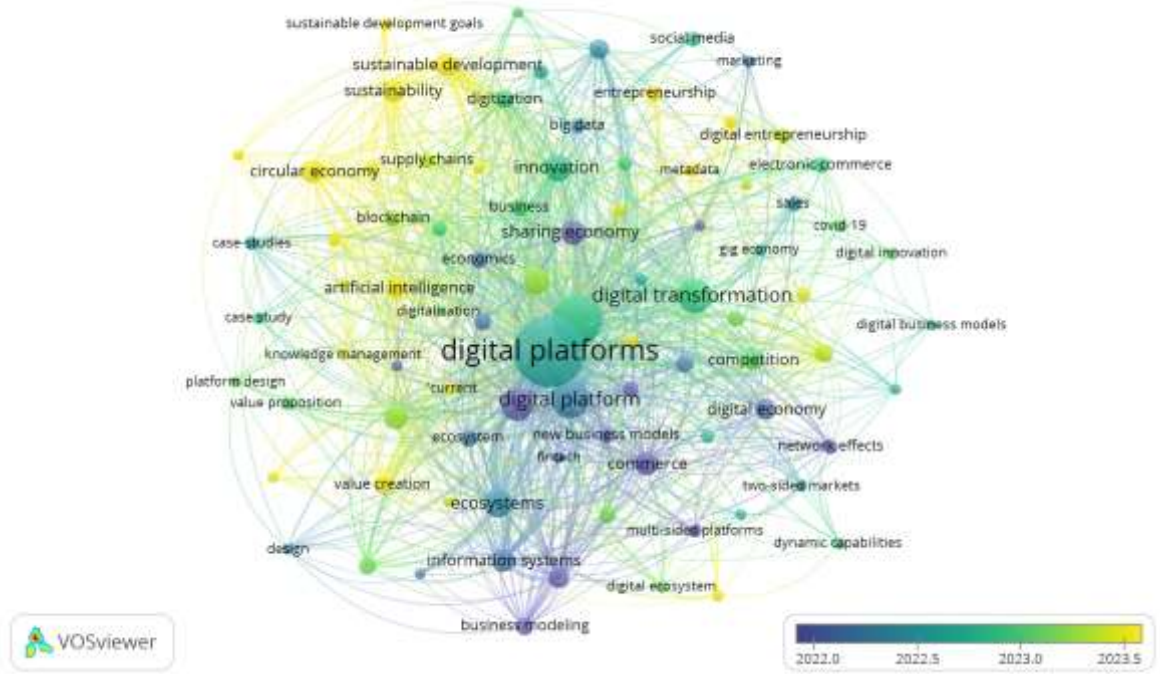


Figure 2. Overlay Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

Figure 2 shows the overlay visualization, in which node colors indicate the average publication year of each keyword, ranging from around 2022.0 (dark blue to purple) to 2023.5 and later (yellow). Older themes, shown in purple and dark blue, include sharing economy, digital platform, commerce, new business models, network effects, multi-sided platforms, business modeling, digital economy, economics, and knowledge management. These terms reflect the foundational stage of the field, when research concentrated on explaining platform economics, the sharing economy, and how platforms differ from traditional business models (Hänninen et al., 2018; Täuscher & Laudien, 2018).

Teal and green nodes, such as digital platforms, digital transformation, innovation, ecosystems, information systems, competition, electronic commerce, social media, and gig economy, mark a middle phase in which platforms were studied as drivers of digital transformation and market competition. The most recent themes, shown in yellow, include sustainability, sustainable

development, sustainable development goals, circular economy, artificial intelligence, entrepreneurship, digital entrepreneurship, value creation, supply chains, and metadata. These yellow nodes are concentrated in the upper left part of the map, around the sustainability and circular economy area, and in the upper right part, around entrepreneurship, which shows that the newest work develops along two directions: platforms for sustainable value creation and platforms as vehicles for digital entrepreneurship.

This temporal pattern is relevant for understanding how startup scaling is studied. The concepts that explain how platforms grow, such as network effects and multi-sided platforms, belong to the earlier phase and now serve as an established theoretical base. Recent studies build on this base by asking how platform startups can grow in an economically and environmentally sustainable way (Hadizadeh et al., 2024), how artificial intelligence changes platform business model innovation (Fasano et al., 2025), and how digital innovation shapes the growth of entrepreneurial firms (Felicetti et al., 2024). The shift suggests that scaling is increasingly assessed by speed of growth together with the quality of value created for users, partners, and society.

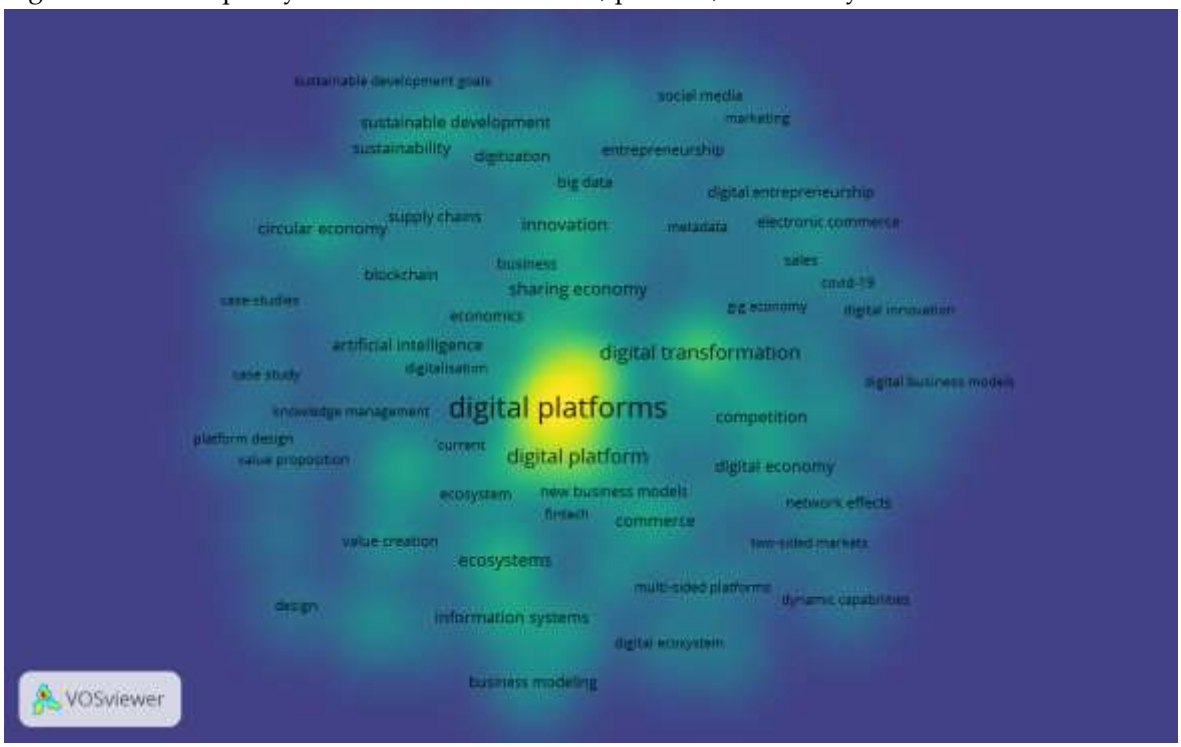


Figure 3. Density Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

Figure 2 shows the overlay visualization, in which node colors indicate the average publication year of each keyword, ranging from around 2022.0 (dark blue to purple) to 2023.5 and later (yellow). Older themes, shown in purple and dark blue, include sharing economy, digital platform, commerce, new business models, network effects, multi-sided platforms, business modeling, digital economy, economics, and knowledge management. These terms reflect the foundational stage of the field, when research concentrated on explaining platform economics, the sharing economy, and how platforms differ from traditional business models (Hänninen et al., 2018; Täuscher & Laudien, 2018).

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Co-Authorship Network

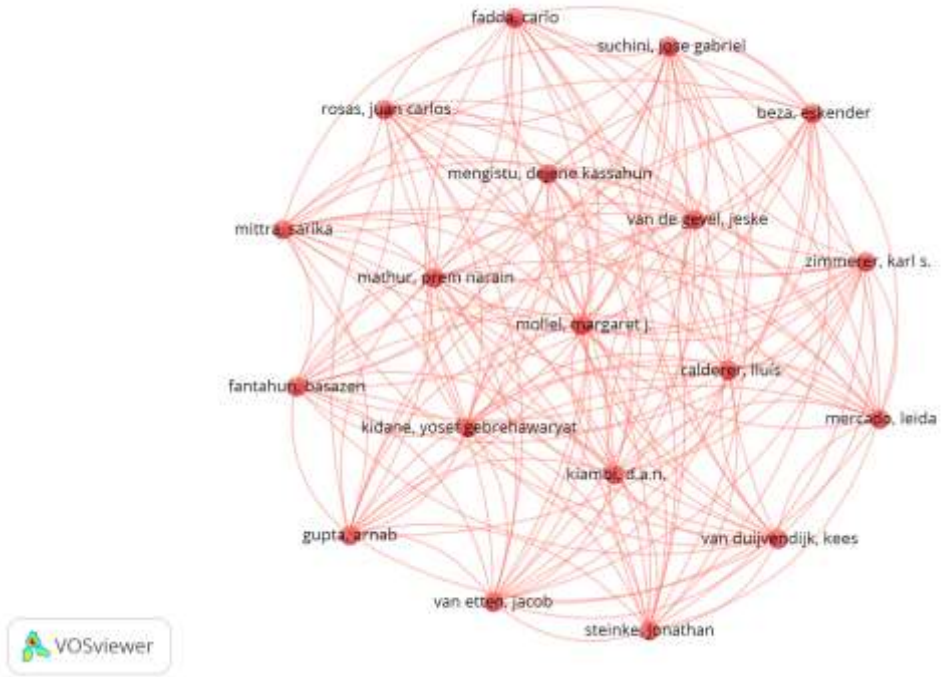


Figure 4. Author Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

Figure 4 displays the co-authorship network among authors. The map shows a single red cluster of 19 authors, including van Etten J., Steinke J., Beza E., Fadda C., Mengistu D.K., Kidane Y.G., Mollel M.J., Zimmerer K.S., and Rosas J.C., who are all connected to one another. The nodes have similar sizes and the links have similar thickness, which indicates that the collaboration does not come from repeated joint work by a core group but from co-authorship of the same publication.

This pattern comes from one large collaborative study on a crowdsourced citizen science platform for evaluating crop varieties with farmers in several countries (Van Etten et al., 2019). Although the study comes from agricultural research, it shows how platform logic, which relies on mass participation and data from many users, has been applied in development contexts, in line with the broader discussion of digital platforms for development (Bonina et al., 2021). Its large author team also explains why this group dominates the author map despite the topic being somewhat removed from business research.

At the same time, the most productive authors in the dataset, such as Trabucchi D. (12 documents), Buganza T. (8 documents), and Mancha R. (7 documents), do not appear in this connected network, because they tend to publish in small and stable teams (Mancha et al., 2021; Trabucchi & Buganza, 2021). The map therefore suggests that author-level collaboration in this field is still fragmented. Research on platform business models and startup scaling is carried out by many small groups working in parallel, with limited cross-team collaboration that could help integrate findings from different contexts.

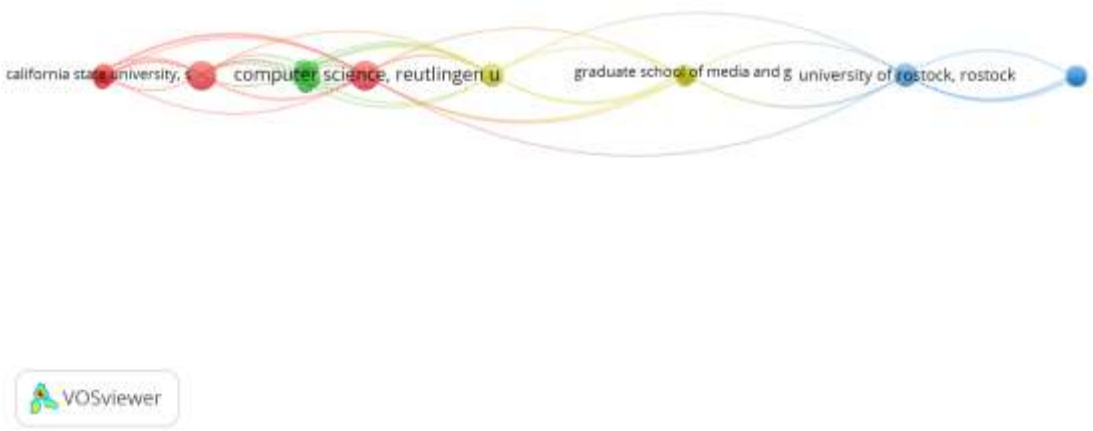


Figure 5. Institution Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

Figure 5 shows the institutional collaboration network, which forms a thin chain of small clusters rather than a dense web. The red cluster on the left links California State University with the Faculty of Computer Science at Reutlingen University, the green cluster forms a small group of closely positioned institutions in the middle, the yellow cluster includes the Graduate School of Media and Governance at Keio University, and the blue cluster on the right centers on the University of Rostock.

The institutions in this chain are connected mainly through a small number of joint papers on enterprise architecture, digital ecosystems, and artificial intelligence platforms (Masuda et al., 2023; Schmidt et al., 2022). Reutlingen University occupies the most central position, acting as a bridge that connects the American partners on the left with the Japanese and other German partners

on the right. Without such bridging institutions, the network would split into several unconnected groups.

The linear shape of the network indicates that institutional partnerships are limited and that knowledge exchange between research centers working on platform business models remains weak. It also shows that the most connected institutional ties come from information systems and computer science departments, whereas business schools and entrepreneurship centers, which would be expected to lead research on startup scaling, do not form a visible collaborative network. Building stronger links between technical and management-oriented institutions could help combine platform architecture knowledge with insights on business model design and venture growth.

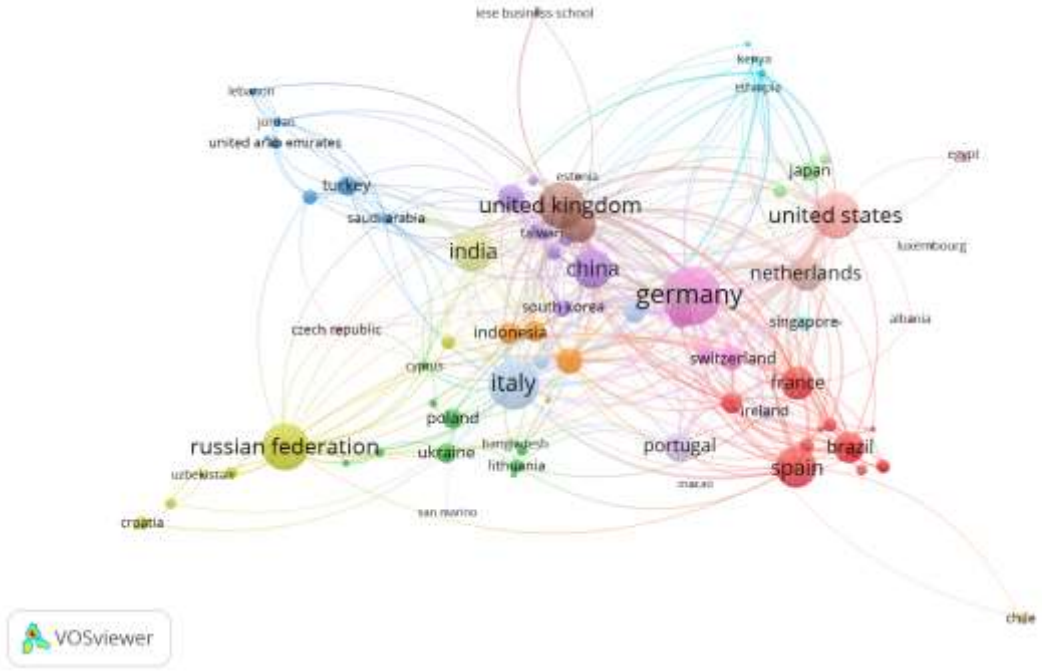


Figure 6. Country Visualization
Source: Data Analysis

Figure 6 presents the country co-authorship network. Germany is the largest and most connected node, followed by the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy, the Russian Federation, India, China, Spain, and the Netherlands, which serve as the main hubs of research output and international collaboration. Several regional groupings can be seen: a cluster centered on Spain, France, Brazil, and Ireland that links Europe with Latin America; a cluster led by the Russian Federation together with Uzbekistan and Croatia; a Middle Eastern cluster including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Lebanon; and an Asian group in which China, Taiwan, South Korea, and Indonesia connect with European partners.

The leading position of Germany is consistent with its strong research base on industrial platforms, Industry 4.0, and network effects in two-sided markets (Bartels & Schmitt, 2022; Madanaguli et al., 2023). The Russian Federation forms a distinct cluster with relatively few links to Western Europe, reflecting a body of research on national digital platforms and their competition with foreign platforms (Eferin et al., 2019). Kenya and Ethiopia appear at the edge of the network, connected mainly through joint projects with European partners, while Chile, Egypt, Albania, and Luxembourg have only weak ties.

Indonesia's position near the center of the map, despite its modest node size, suggests growing participation from emerging economies where platform-based startups are expanding quickly, as shown by research on multi-sided platform startups in the country (Prijadi et al., 2023). Overall, research on platform business models is global in reach, but output and collaboration remain concentrated in Europe and North America. Wider participation from Asia, Africa, and Latin America would help show whether scaling strategies developed in advanced economies work in markets with different regulatory, financial, and competitive conditions.

Citation Analysis

Table 1. Most Cited Article

Citations	Author and Year	Title
1,062	Alcácer & Cruz-Machado (2019)	Scanning the Industry 4.0: A Literature Review on Technologies for Manufacturing Systems
935	Helfat & Raubitschek (2018)	Dynamic and integrative capabilities for profiting from innovation in digital platform-based ecosystems
499	Täuscher & Laudien (2018)	Understanding platform business models: A mixed methods study of marketplaces
492	Bonina et al. (2021)	Digital platforms for development: Foundations and research agenda
390	Ivanov et al. (2022)	Cloud supply chain: Integrating Industry 4.0 and digital platforms in the "Supply Chain-as-a-Service"
388	Sahut et al. (2021)	The age of digital entrepreneurship
376	Sadowski (2020)	The Internet of Landlords: Digital Platforms and New Mechanisms of Rentier Capitalism
366	Stallkamp & Schotter (2021)	Platforms without borders? The international strategies of digital platform firms
341	Çetin et al. (2021)	Circular digital built environment: An emerging framework
335	Gawer (2022)	Digital platforms and ecosystems: remarks on the dominant organizational forms of the digital age

DISCUSSION

The results show that research on digital platform business models is organized around a strong conceptual core, with digital platforms linking streams on platform economics, entrepreneurship, digital transformation, ecosystem value creation, the digital economy, and sustainability. For startup scaling, the most relevant stream is the purple cluster, where network effects, two-sided markets, and multi-sided platforms explain why platforms can grow faster than conventional firms (Trabucchi et al., 2022; Veisdal, 2020). The red cluster complements this view by showing how entrepreneurs use platforms to enter markets and reach customers, especially through e-commerce, social media, and the gig economy (Garud et al., 2022; Sahut et al., 2021). The blue cluster adds a strategic layer, stressing that growth depends on dynamic capabilities and on the ability to compete and adapt within digital ecosystems (Cozzolino et al., 2018; Helfat & Raubitschek, 2018). Taken together, these clusters indicate that scaling a platform venture requires a combination of market design, entrepreneurial action, and organizational capabilities.

The overlay and density maps reveal how priorities in the field have changed. Earlier studies focused on the sharing economy, new business models, and the mechanics of multi-sided markets, while recent work has moved toward sustainability, circular economy, artificial intelligence, and digital entrepreneurship. This shift suggests that platform ventures are now judged by how they

create value for wider ecosystems and contribute to sustainable development, in addition to how fast they grow (Bonina et al., 2021; Hadizadeh et al., 2024). At the same time, concepts that are central to scaling, such as network effects, two-sided markets, platform design, and dynamic capabilities, appear in low-density areas. The field therefore has many conceptual tools for explaining platform growth but relatively few studies that apply them systematically to startups, particularly regarding how young ventures sequence user acquisition, build trust, and prevent disintermediation as they expand (Ladd, 2022; Mancha et al., 2021).

The collaboration maps point to a fragmented research community. At the author level, the most connected group comes from a single multi-author project rather than from a stable research network, and the institutional map forms a thin chain of small partnerships. At the country level, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Italy dominate output and act as central hubs, while countries in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Southeast Asia occupy peripheral positions. This imbalance matters because platform startups in emerging markets such as Indonesia face different conditions in financing, regulation, and competition with large incumbents (Kang & Kim, 2026; Prijadi et al., 2023). Stronger cross-country and cross-institution collaboration would help test whether scaling strategies developed in advanced economies hold in these settings.

These findings carry several implications. For researchers, the distance between platform theory and startup scaling calls for longitudinal and comparative studies that follow platform startups from launch to growth and examine how network effects, complementor relationships, and venture capital interact over time (Khan et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2022). For founders, the literature shows that scaling depends on building network effects deliberately, designing value propositions for each user side, and maintaining governance that keeps users on the platform (Bartels & Schmitt, 2022; Trabucchi & Buganza, 2021). For investors and policymakers, the link between platform models and startup valuations (Cusumano et al., 2024) calls for attention to market concentration and fair competition, so that new platform ventures can still enter and grow in markets dominated by established players (Gawer, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study mapped research on digital platform business models and startup scaling using 1,327 Scopus documents published between 2003 and 2026. The analysis shows that digital platforms form the conceptual center of the field and are connected to six clusters covering platform economics and multi-sided markets, entrepreneurship and e-commerce, digital transformation and competition, ecosystem value creation, the digital economy, and sustainable development. Research attention has moved from the sharing economy, network effects, and new business models toward sustainability, circular economy, artificial intelligence, and digital entrepreneurship. The density map shows that the concepts most closely tied to scaling, including network effects, two-sided markets, platform design, and dynamic capabilities, are still studied less often than broader themes such as digital transformation and innovation.

Collaboration remains fragmented at the author and institution levels, while country-level output is concentrated in Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy, and the Russian Federation, with emerging economies on the periphery. The most cited works deal with platform ecosystems, platform business model types, and digital entrepreneurship, offering a solid theoretical basis but limited direct evidence on how startups scale. Future research should examine startup scaling more explicitly through longitudinal, comparative, and mixed-method designs, give more

attention to platform ventures in emerging economies, and connect platform growth with sustainability and the adoption of artificial intelligence. This study is limited to Scopus data and to the keyword-based search used, so future work could combine several databases and apply co-citation or bibliographic coupling analysis to deepen the understanding of this field.

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