THE CREATIVE AND CULTURAL ECONOMY AS A RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGES OF NEET YOUTH IN THE CITY OF CARTAGENA

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Abtract: The purpose of this study was to explore how demographic and socioeconomic factors affect the likelihood of a young person being a NEET in Cartagena, also integrating the creative economy as an alternative for their employability and personal development. The state of the art showed that, in Latin America and Europe, factors such as gender, education, and household income largely determine youth exclusion, with impacts on social mobility and economic growth. Methodologically, the Large Integrated Household Survey (GEIH-DANE, 2024) and a Logit econometric model were used to identify the most relevant variables. The results confirmed that being female, having low educational levels, and belonging to low-income households increases the probability of being NEET, while higher education significantly reduces this risk. It is concluded that the articulation between educational policies, social programs, and creative economic ecosystems could generate inclusive opportunities for employment, training, and entrepreneurship to transform the reality of NEET youth in Cartagena.

Keywords: NEET youth, Gender, Education, Socioeconomic factors, Labor market, Creative economy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cartagena is one of the poorest cities in Colombia, with around half a million inhabitants living in poverty. In this context, a group of young people known as NEETs (not in education, employment, or training) has emerged within the population. This means that they are neither in the education system nor in the labor market, which leads to social exclusion and marginalization. It is estimated that there are around 30,000 NEETs in the city (DANE, 2023). This situation may even increase the risk of them becoming involved in criminal activities and limit their possibilities for development and life prospects (Tanton et al., 2021). This concept was proposed in Europe around the 1990s and is described by the term "NEET," an acronym for "Not in Education, Employment, or Training."

In order to address this social and economic problem in the city, it is essential to describe this population based on demographic and socioeconomic variables such as gender, level of education, age (within the range established for this group), marital status, and certain household conditions, including their relationship with the head of the household. This characterization will serve as a basis for formulating more targeted public policies that contribute to reducing this phenomenon.

According to Hoyos et al. (2016), it is essential to analyze the NEET phenomenon for two main reasons. First, the presence of a NEET youth in the household is often associated with poverty and limits social mobility. Second, there is a link between this condition and violence, as the lack of opportunities forces many of these young people to join illegal groups. This situation is particularly relevant in developing countries.

In the case of Colombia, a creative economy supported by efficient public policies could become a real path to employability and a stronger sense of purpose for NEET youth, precisely because the country has enormous cultural, artistic, and digital potential that remains untapped. In this order of idea, sectors such as music, film, graphic design, digital animation, and cultural tourism offer spaces where creativity can be transformed into income, entrepreneurship, and community projects with social impact. Therefore, if technical training programs, incentives for innovation, and mentoring platforms are combined, these young people would not

only have access to job opportunities but would also develop skills to build meaningful life projects, connecting their talent with the transformation of their territories and the generation of solutions to local problems.

In this sense, the central purpose of the research is to analyze how the main demographic and socioeconomic characteristics affect the possibility of being a NEET youth in the city of Cartagena and then explore how the creative economy could offer concrete opportunities for employability, social inclusion, and personal development. Therefore, this study is not limited to describing a complex social problem but seeks to generate inputs that allow for a better understanding of the structural conditions of these young people and, consequently, to identify innovative alternatives for their insertion into productive dynamics with transformative potential.

Similarly, the proposal aims to articulate empirical findings with public policy strategies and the promotion of creative ecosystems capable of boosting youth talent in areas such as the cultural, digital, and artistic industries. In this vein, the research is expected to provide a solid basis for the design of interventions that strengthen the employability of NEET youth, enhance their capabilities, and enable them to build purposeful life projects, thus contributing to sustainable development and social cohesion in the city of Cartagena.

## 2.	STATE OF THE ART

The study of NEET youth has received little attention in Latin America. Recent works such as those by Pardo (2011), D'Alessandre (2013), the World Bank (2016), and CEPAL (2019) stand out in this region. Most of these studies are descriptive in nature and agree that, in all Latin American countries, approximately two out of every five young people are in this situation, including in Colombia. This means that nearly 40% of human capital is being underutilized, indicating that the demographic dividend is not being fully capitalized on in the region. There are also structural limitations, such as the low capacity to guarantee opportunities for different population groups and the inefficient use of available resources, particularly human capital, which is considered the most relevant (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2008; Hirschman, 1980).

This phenomenon has a greater impact on the most vulnerable households, where the presence of NEET youth is most evident (Águila, Mejía, Pérez, Rivera & Ramírez, 2015; De la Torre & Baquerín, 2017). Several studies indicate that these households experience long periods of educational inactivity and unemployment, which ultimately leads young people to accept precarious, low-income jobs, thus creating a cycle of poverty that is difficult to break (Gregg & Tominey, 2004; Klug, Drobnic & Brockmann, 2019).

In Italy, several studies indicate that this country has maintained one of the highest rates of NEET youth in the European Union for years, reflecting a structural fragility. As De Luca et al. (2025) explain, young Italians tend to resort to informal channels for job search, while public programs for labor market integration have very little impact, leading to limited results. Only the citizen's income has contributed positively to reducing NEETs, raising concerns about the effectiveness of institutions that promote labor market integration in Italy. In this vein, Alfieri et al. (2015) show that young Italian NEETs have low trust in institutions and low social participation, a situation that increases their risk of exclusion. These findings cannot be separated from the strong regional inequalities that characterize the country, as while the north offers better opportunities, the south has higher levels of youth inactivity, as pointed out by Caroleo et al. (2022) and Brunetti and Ricci (2023).

In the European context, studies by Arpaia and Curci (2010), Bruno et al. (2014), and Caroleo et al. (2020) show that the NEET phenomenon intensified following the 2008 economic crisis, underlining both the persistence of this group across countries and the critical role of the school-to-work transition for younger generations. In this sense, prolonged unemployment and the weakness of institutional mechanisms to integrate young people reinforce the NEET condition. Furthermore, Bacher et al. (2017) show that regional differences within countries such as Austria are notable; therefore, factors such as the existence of dual training or spending on active labor market policies explain why some areas manage to reduce the proportion of NEETs while others lag behind. Thus, the phenomenon cannot be seen solely as an individual issue, but also as a reflection of disparate educational and economic structures in Europe.

In India, the NEET phenomenon reflects a structural tension between economic growth and youth exclusion. According to Khan (2025), macroeconomic factors such as unemployment, labor participation, and remittances directly affect their presence, so it is not enough to generate employment; policies that act in parallel on macro stability and the labor market are required. Kumar and Shobana (2024) and Pattayat, S., & Parida, J. K. (2017) add that the disconnect between education and employment, coupled with demographic pressure, increases youth unemployment and exacerbates the NEET problem, which even affects social cohesion. Therefore, skills, entrepreneurship, and labor regulation programs are needed to translate training into real opportunities. Bisht and Pattanaik (2023) highlight that NEETs are a heterogeneous group, marked by educational gaps, social inequalities, and the technological challenge of Industry 4.0. Therefore, they insist on "reshaping, reorienting, and redistributing" skills to achieve effective inclusion.

In India, we see the paradox of the demographic dividend, where more young people are studying, but when they finish their studies and enter the labor market, they realize how difficult it is to find a job, which leads to a complex situation, and what were once expectations turn into frustration. For this reason, there is a need to develop public policies that align education, employment, and social protection among young people who

aspire to continue growing in their professional and personal lives. (Verick, 2023; Mukherjee and Majumder 2023).

In the Mexican case, González and Jiménez (2025) Gutiérrez et al., (2014) analyze university students and find that youth unemployment is not only a response to lack of work experience, but also to gender inequalities, limited mobility, and lack of support for entrepreneurship. Added to this are the findings of Sánchez-Soto and Bautista León (2020), who, in studying young people in Mexico City, conclude that education does not always guarantee employability, which translates into frustration and dashed expectations. What does this mean in practical terms? It means that increasing educational coverage is not enough if the labor market does not offer decent jobs. Therefore, public policies must simultaneously address training, the transition to work, and the structural conditions of inequality in the region.

In Colombia, studies show that the NEET phenomenon is affected by multiple factors, ranging from a lack of job opportunities to the absence of policies for integrating scientific knowledge. Pineda-Ospina (2018) points out that science, technology, and innovation policies have ignored NEET youth, wasting their potential to participate in activities that promote the country's development. This mismatch not only keeps them out of employment and education but also limits the construction of solid occupational identities.

When analyzing specific cases, such as Barranquilla, De la Puente et al. (2025) find that youth unemployment is closely linked to educational level and accumulated work experience, confirming that higher education significantly reduces the likelihood of unemployment. However, the picture is uneven: young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds face much higher unemployment rates, demonstrating that poverty accentuates the vulnerability of this population. For their part, Mora Rodríguez et al. (2017) analyze young people in Cali and conclude that factors such as ethnicity, neighborhood of residence, and duration of job search increase the likelihood of remaining NEET, especially among women. Horbath (2015), in studying and analyzing the labor force in the Aburrá Valley region of Antioquia, also points out that violence, urbanization, and territorial changes influence the configuration of NEET youth, reinforcing that the problem goes beyond the economic sphere and must be addressed with a comprehensive approach that articulates education, employment, and social context.

Various studies show that women are more likely to belong to the NEET group; among the main reasons are early marriage—in fact, according to UNICEF (2020), Latin America is the only region in the world where there has been no reduction in child marriage and early unions in the last 25 years— dedication to caring for the home and early pregnancy, factors that limit the accumulation of human capital and hinder their entry into the labor market. (ANIF, 2024; CEPAL & UN Women, 2021; Charmes, J., 2019; De Hoyos et al., 2016).

In terms of education, NEET youth have lower educational levels compared to those who are not NEET. According to De Hoyos et al. (2016) and Ham et al. (2021), in Colombia, around 50% of NEETs only reached secondary education, while 9% only reached primary education. Thus, the lower the level of education, the greater the likelihood that a young person will be a NEET. This situation highlights the need to implement strategies that promote both access to and retention in the education system, as well as ensuring sufficient places in public universities so that young people from lower-income backgrounds can continue their studies. This reflection is supported by authors such as Arguayo, Mancha, and Rangel (2013); Manacorda, Rosati, Ranzani, and Dachille (2017); McGrath (2014); and Thompson (2011).

In general terms, research has shown that the NEET phenomenon is mainly concentrated in low-income households. In fact, Hoyos et al. (2016) point out that in Latin America, 60% of NINIs come from families living in poverty. Pardo (2011) also affirms that there is a positive relationship between poverty and the incidence of NINIs, which is corroborated by Ochoa, Silva, and Sarmiento (2015) in the case of Colombia. Likewise, Ruesga-Benito, González-Laxe, and Picatoste (2018) argue that the probability of being a NEET depends more on personal and family microeconomic factors than on the general economic environment. Thus, the hypothesis is that the lower the household income, the greater the probability that a young person will become a NEET.

The creative economy

The creative economy refers to the thematic axis that seeks to explain and enhance the relationship between culture, creativity, and economic development. Since the 1990s, especially in countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom, the idea that creativity is not only a source of artistic expression but also of economic and social dynamism has begun to take hold (Gomes, 2018). For this reason, multiple sectors such as music, performing arts, design, film, and literature are now recognized as pillars of this growing economy.

It is important to note that creativity is not limited to artistic production; according to Méndez et al. (2012), it constitutes the ability to generate novel and effective responses to the challenges faced by individuals, communities, and territories. Therefore, the creative economy also involves innovation, urban transformation, and the emergence of new forms of social organization, which explains its increasingly frequent presence in academic literature.

Likewise, the concept is closely linked to the so-called orange economy, a term promoted by the Inter-American Development Bank and supported by pioneering studies such as those by Baumol and Bowen, who highlighted the economic contribution of art and culture (Manjarrez-Olmos et al., 2024). Thus, the recognition of creative work as an economic driver opened up space for public policies and business strategies aimed at strengthening it.

According to the study by Stockley-Patel and Swords (2023), the role of cultural intermediaries, i.e., those actors who facilitate the connection between creativity, innovation, and cultural consumption, is noteworthy. These intermediaries—publishers, promoters, cultural programmers—act as bridges between creators, the market, and audiences, promoting the sustainability of the creative ecosystem.

Along these lines, Henderson and Quintana (2021) determine that culture is a key factor in identity, social cohesion, and innovation. The authors also agree with and support UNESCO's statement that cultural expressions have a dual nature, both cultural and economic. In this vein, the UNESCO Convention (2005) has defined cultural and creative industries as those that produce and disseminate goods and services with cultural content, which transmit ideas, values, and ways of life. Thus, the creative economy is at the center of sustainable development, integrating culture, innovation, and economic growth into a single perspective. It therefore offers a framework that goes beyond a purely commercial vision to place creativity at the heart of human development.

The creative economy and NEETs.

The creative economy has established itself as a dynamic field with great potential to respond to urgent social challenges. It emerged in a context marked by globalization and technological changes that drove new ways of generating economic and social value. In this vein, creativity is not only a cultural resource but also an engine that transforms territories and communities. Therefore, its ability to diversify production and build more inclusive and sustainable ecosystems makes it a key strategy for strengthening social integration, cultural innovation, and collective well-being, especially in regions with high youth exclusion.

It is therefore clear that the creative economy offers significant opportunities for young people who are neither in education nor employment, known as NEETs. This group faces high rates of unemployment and marginalization; however, in this scenario, they find the possibility of integrating into collaborative, flexible projects with high digital demand that do not depend exclusively on formal education. By participating in activities such as audiovisual production, digital design, cultural management, or artistic content creation, they acquire technical, communication, and business skills that strengthen their economic autonomy, creativity, and ability to generate social impact.

In this sense, and as UNESCO (2013; 2018) states in one of its reports, the creative economy not only promotes employability but also drives the personal and professional development of these young people. By getting involved in cultural and creative networks, they gain access to training, mentoring, and experimentation opportunities that boost their confidence, sense of belonging, and vision for the future. It is therefore a comprehensive process that links social inclusion, cultural innovation, and the construction of sustainable life projects, recognizing that there is no single path to achieving these objectives, but rather that public policies, institutional alliances, and community strategies are required to realize this potential.

3.METHODOLOGY

The empirical evidence reviewed suggests that demographic and socioeconomic determinants are key factors in explaining the probability of a young person belonging to the NEET category. For this reason, in this section, the GEIH for the third quarter of 2024 collected by DANE was used to take the variables studied (Table 1). First, this section describes the variables used in the model. Next, a Logit model was estimated for cross-sectional data to determine how each of these variables influences the probability of being a NEET youth or not. This econometric technique is used when the dependent variable is dichotomous (it only takes values of zero and one) and has been widely used in studies of this type (Alderete, 2006; Sánchez R, 2021; Acevedo & Rodríguez, 2021). In this way, the probability of a young person being NEET is determined according to their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. The econometric software Stata 18 was used to run the model.

Table 1. Model variables.

Dependent variable	Classification	Definition	Expected relationship
NEET	categorical dichotomous	takes the value of 1 if the student is male. Zero otherwise	The probability of being a Nini is expected to be influenced by demographic and socioeconomic characteristics
Independent variables	**Classification**	**Definition**	**Expected relationship**
Gender	categorical dichotomous	1 if female, 0 if male	The probability is expected to be higher if female.

Education	categorical polytomous	1 for no education, 2 for elementary school, 3 for middle school, 4 for high school, and 5 for higher education	The probability of being NEET is expected to decrease with higher levels of education
Marital status	Categorical polytomous	1 not married but living with a partner, 2 married, 3 separated, and 4 single	If marital status is married, a higher probability of being NEET is expected
Relationship with the head of the household	Categorical polytomous	1 head of household, 2 partners, 3 children or stepchild, 4 grandchild, 5 other relative.	If the respondent is the child or grandchild of the head of household, the probability of being a NEET increases.
Income	continuous	numerical value.	The lower the household income, the greater the probability of being a NEET

Source: own elaboration based on GEIH

According to Table 1, the large integrated household survey for the first quarter of 2025 collected by DANE will be used. First, a descriptive statistical exercise is proposed. Next, a Logit model for cross-sectional data is estimated to determine how each of these variables influences the probability of being a NEET youth or not being a NEET youth.

Binary logistic regression is defined as a statistical technique used when the dependent variable is dichotomous (it only takes values of zero and one). In this case, the dependent variable establishes that if a young person is NEET, it takes the value of 1 if affirmative and zero if not. In this way, the probability of a young person being NEET is found according to their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. The econometric software Stata was used to run the model.

4.   RESULTS

4.1. Description of the model variables

According to the GEIH, it was found that, in Cartagena, for the period analyzed, 25,183 young people out of 243,600 were NEETs, corresponding to 10.33% of the city's young population. In terms of gender, Table 2 shows that the majority of NEETs in Cartagena are women. This is consistent with the literature, which suggests that the majority of NEETs are female.

Table 2. Distribution of the population between 14 and 28 years of age.

Gender	NEETs
1 (female)	17,105
0 (male)	8,078
Total	25,183

Source: GEIH-DANE, July-September 2024.

Table 3 shows the educational level of NEET youth, highlighting several issues. Firstly, the highest percentage of NEETs (50.66%) are young people who have completed high school but do not have the option of continuing their studies for reasons such as their household income not allowing them to attend a private university, deficiencies in their education that prevent them from accessing a public university, and a problem with places at these same types of universities. Second, the fact that 8,220 young professionals cannot find work highlights the barriers that young people face due to lack of experience, coupled with the limited number of job openings.

Table 3. Distribution of NEETs vs. level of education.

Educational level attained	NEETs
Primary education (1 to 5)	859
Secondary education (6 to 9)	3,453
Secondary (10 to 13)	12,649
Higher education	8,220
Total	25,183

Source: GEIH-DANE, July-September 2024

As discussed in the theoretical references, being head of household puts pressure on young people to enter the labor market, as they must generate income in some way. This would explain the low participation of married or cohabiting young people among the NINIs.

Table 4. Distribution of young NINIs and their marital status.

Marital status	NEETs
Common-law marriage	2,993
Married	761
Divorced	1,323
Single	20,105
Total	25,183

Source: GEIH-DANE, July-September 2024

In terms of dependency relationships, a high percentage of NEET youth are children of the head of the household. It is noteworthy that 4,699 grandchildren of the head of the household, which highlights the high proportion of NEET youth living with their grandparents, suggesting that there are many dysfunctional households in the city.

Table 5. NINI youth and their relationship with the head of the household.

Relationship with the head of the household	NINI youth
Head of household	716
Partner,	1,053
Child, stepchild	14,855
Grandchild	4,699
Other non-relative	3,860
Total	25,183

Source: GEIH-DANE, July-September 2024

Finally, household income is analyzed, which shows that the largest number of NEET youth are grouped in the first three income quintiles, confirming the results of Buitrón et al. (2018), who argue that, in general, young people from lower-income families are more likely to be NEET.

Table 6. Distribution of NEET youth by household income quintile

Quintile 1	37.75%
Quintile 2	23.33%
Quintile 3	22.06
Quintile 4	10.64
Quintile 5	6.22

Source: GEIH-DANE, July-September 2024

4.2. Econometric model

In order to establish how demographic variables impact the probability of being a NEET in Cartagena, this section develops a Logit model specified as follows:

NINI= β_0+ β_1 woman+ β_2 age+ β_3 marital status+ β_4 education+ β_5 head of household relationship + β_6 household income + €_i

In the analysis, each categorical variable was considered with a reference category: in the case of gender, being male was taken as the basis; for marital status, being single; for educational level, having no education; and for relationship with the head of household, being the spouse or partner of the head of household was defined as the reference. The regression results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Logit model results.

Dimension	Variables	Average marginal effects
Gender	Female	0.062 (0.002)
Age		0.002*** (0.000)
Education	Basic secondary	0.098 (0.003)
	Higher education	-0.076 (0.001)
Relationship with head of household	Child, stepchild	0.083** (0.0459)

	Grandchild	.09182** (0.0488)
Marital status	Common-law marriage	-0.0417 (0.0243)
	Single	0.0548** (0.0174)
Income quintile	Quintile two	-0.036*** (0.002)
	Quintile three	-0.087*** (0.003)
	Quintile four	-0.148*** (0.003)
	Quintile five	-0.144*** (0.003)

Source: own calculations

The results of the model show that women are 6.2 percentage points more likely to be NEETs than men. Age is also a significant variable, showing that as people approach the age of 28, the probability of being NEET increases. In terms of education, reaching university level reduces the probability of being NEET. The basic secondary variable was found to be insignificant. In terms of marital status, being single increases the probability of being NEET. The variable of cohabitation was found to be insignificant. Regarding the relationship with the head of the household, being a child or grandchild increases this probability. Finally, young people in quintiles 2, 3, 4, and 5 are less likely to be NEETs than those in quintile 1. In terms of the goodness of the model, it correctly classified 89.45% of the observations.

5. DISCUSSION.

The results of the econometric model confirm that NINI status in Cartagena is significantly associated with variables such as gender, educational level, marital status, age, and household income. In this regard, it was found that being female increases the probability of belonging to this category, which coincides with previous studies by De Hoyos et al (2016), Pardo (2011), and D Alessandre (2013), which show how family responsibilities, early motherhood, and the lack of support services, such as daycare or work-life balance programs, limit women's entry into the labor market. It is therefore essential that public policies take these findings into account and develop differentiated strategies to reduce gender gaps in access to education and employment. Likewise, educational attainment is a determining factor. The results showed, as in the findings of Arguayo et al (2013), that higher education reduces the probability of being NEET, confirming that education remains the most effective way to improve employability and social mobility. However, in contexts of high inequality such as Cartagena, accessing and remaining in higher education represents a challenge for low-income youth, which requires financing policies, scholarships, and the strengthening of public universities to ensure educational continuity and reduce dropout rates.

A novel contribution of this research lies in linking these findings to the potential of the creative economy. This sector, comprising cultural, artistic, and digital industries, offers real opportunities for youth employability, especially because it does not require traditional career paths and values the creative, digital, and communication skills that many young people possess. Thus, the creative economy could become a driving force for transforming the status of NEETs, providing them with training in areas such as digital design, audiovisual production, cultural management, or artistic entrepreneurship, which in turn can generate income and strengthen the cultural identity of the city.

In this vein, the articulation between educational policies, creative economy programs, and innovation ecosystems would allow for the construction of more flexible and sustainable paths to labor inclusion for NEET youth. Technical and technological training linked to the creative industries, combined with incentives for cultural entrepreneurship and mentoring platforms, would enhance not only employability, but also personal and h l development, economic autonomy, and a sense of purpose among this population. Therefore, it is proposed that future local development plans integrate the creative economy as a cross-cutting strategy to reduce the NEET phenomenon and promote a more inclusive and innovative city.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research confirm that the probability of being a NEET youth in Cartagena is closely associated with variables such as gender, educational level, marital status, relationship with the head of the household, and family income. In this sense, it is evident that being a woman, belonging to low-income households, and not having a higher education significantly increases the probability of falling into this con-

dition, which coincides with previous studies conducted in Latin America and Europe, where structural inequalities and the persistence of gender and educational gaps are highlighted. Therefore, this study reaffirms the need for differentiated public policies that reduce social, educational, and economic barriers, with special attention to female school retention and the prevention of teenage pregnancy.

Thus, access to and retention in higher education emerge as determining factors in reducing NEET status, as higher levels of education increase employability and social mobility. However, the results show that educational coverage alone is not enough; it is also necessary to strengthen scholarship programs, forgivable loans, and inter-institutional partnerships that enable low-income youth to successfully complete their academic careers. In this vein, education policies must be coordinated with labor market integration strategies that reduce the gaps between vocational training and labor market demands.

A novel contribution of this study is to link the creative economy as an alternative for the employability and personal development of NEET youth. Sectors such as audiovisual production, digital design, animation, music, and cultural tourism offer inclusive, flexible spaces with potential for social innovation that do not depend exclusively on traditional formal education. Therefore, the promotion of creative ecosystems, combined with mentoring and entrepreneurship platforms, could transform the NINI condition in a by generating income, strengthening economic autonomy, and building life projects with purpose and territorial roots.

Finally, it is recommended that future studies delve deeper into the internal dynamics of households, territorial inequalities, and the articulation between social, educational, and cultural policies to address the NEET phenomenon comprehensively. In this sense, the combination of quantitative and qualitative data would allow for a better understanding of the complexity of the problem and the design of sustainable interventions that integrate the creative economy as a strategic axis for human development and social inclusion in Cartagena.

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