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# From Ethnic Enclaves to Transnational Landscapes: A Review of Immigrant Entrepreneurship Research

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The present article is a detailed analysis of 118 key articles published

in entrepreneurship, economics, management, and sociology journals. Our review is structured into three main sections: entrepreneurship, their business strategies, and their performance and impact. Within each section, we review research focusing on immigrant entrepreneurs' personal characteristics, their ethnic community networks, and the external eco-system. We consider studies of transnational entrepreneurship separately in each section to capture the evolution of research from studies of immigrant entrepreneurs operating in ethnic enclaves to those of entrepreneurs operating in transnational landscapes. In addition, we review research on the diversity among immigrant entrepreneurs, and issues of succession and gender. We outline research gaps and methodological challenges in immigrant entrepreneurship research. Finally, we suggest areas of future research by including studies on

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on immigrant entrepreneurs to highlight the diversity among them and the significance of their international activities. We believe this monograph will be of value to scholars of immigrant entrepreneurship, as well as those at the crossroads of

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The increase in international immigration since the 1960s, and the propensity of immigrants to own and operate businesses in their country of residence, has spawned a growing body of literature in several academic disciplines on the characteristics and contribution of immigrant entrepreneurs. Changing attitudes toward immigrants in Europe and the United States add to the significance of reviewing existing research on the nature and impact of immigrant entrepreneurship.

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Immigrants have displayed a disproportionately high propensity toward entrepreneurship in many advanced economies. In the US, immigrants are twice as likely to be entrepreneurs than native-born Americans (Foundation *et al.*, 2017). The number of new firms with at least one immigrant founder increased steadily between 1995 and 2008 (Kerr and Kerr, 2016), and immigrants founded a quarter of all firms in the US during 2008–2012 (Kerr and Kerr, 2020). Similarly, in the UK, immigrants are nearly twice as likely as their native-born counterparts to be early-stage entrepreneurs (Hart *et al.*, 2017). Business ownership among immigrants has been higher than among the native-born in most advanced economies of Europe (Desiderio and Mestres-Domènech, 2011; Kontos, 2009).

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# Foundations and Trends in Entrepreneurship

Published in the 1970s, highlighted the role of immigrant social networks in supporting group members (Light, 1972) and promoting group solidarity (Bonacich, 1973). Subsequently, economists and entrepreneurship scholars began examining immigrants' human capital and other personal characteristics to explain their entrepreneurial propensity and behavior (Borjas, 1986).

This monograph reviews the existing literature on immigrant entrepreneurship, focusing on immigrant entrepreneurs' personal characteristics, their immigrant ethnic community networks, and the external system. These three broad sets of factors help to explain immigrants' motives for becoming entrepreneurs, their business strategies relating to resource acquisition and markets, and their business performance. In addition, we review research investigating the diversity among immigrant entrepreneurs and their economic and social impact.

There is wide agreement in the academic sphere about the positive contribution of immigrant entrepreneurs to innovation, employment, and economic growth in their host countries (Masera et al., 2002; ARAUCO and Trinidad, 2002; Wong and Ng, 2002; Zhou, 2006).

Immigrant entrepreneurs are especially critical to local economies, accounting for more than 40 per cent of new businesses in California, New York, and New Jersey (Kerr and Kerr, 2016). The significance of skilled immigrants for innovation in terms of quantity as well as quality (number of patents per capita and new firms starts) is also well-recognized (Kerr, 2013). In 2015, immigrants founded 51 per cent – 44 of 87 – of America's startup companies worth \$1 billion or more (Anderson, 2016). Recent US data show that immigrant-owned firms generate over \$775 billion in revenue, \$125 billion in payroll, and \$100 billion in income, and employ one out of every 10 workers (Wong and Liu, 2006). At the same time, immigrant entrepreneurs are polarized in terms of their performance and capital endowment (Oles et al., 2019), highlighting the importance of studying the diversity among them and the public policy implications for their survival, success, and contribution to the host country.

Drori et al. (2009) categorize immigrant entrepreneurs into two types: ethnic entrepreneurs and transnational entrepreneurs. Ethnic entrepreneurs are especially critical to local economies, accounting for more than 40 per cent of new businesses in California, New York, and New Jersey (Kerr and Kerr, 2016). The significance of skilled immigrants for innovation in terms of quantity as well as quality (number of patents per capita and new firms starts) is also well-recognized (Kerr, 2013). In 2015, immigrants founded 51 per cent – 44 of 87 – of America's startup companies worth \$1 billion or more (Anderson, 2016). Recent US data show that immigrant-owned firms generate over \$775 billion in revenue, \$125 billion in payroll, and \$100 billion in income, and employ one out of every 10 workers (Wong and Liu, 2006). At the same time, immigrant entrepreneurs are polarized in terms of their performance and capital endowment (Oles et al., 2019), highlighting the importance of studying the diversity among them and the public policy implications for their survival, success, and contribution to the host country.

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## Foundations and Trends® in Entrepreneurship

Franchising, entrepreneurship, immigrant entrepreneurs, who operate within “ethnic enclaves”, or spatial clustering of immigrants from the same ethnic community. The term “ethnic” in the sociology literature has been used as a substitute for several identifiers such as race, religion, language, shared history and origin (Nwankwo and Lindridge, 1998). “Ethnic” also refers to a specific type of opportunity available to immigrants in their country of residence or host country, in particular, demand for ethnic products and services that are linked to an immigrant group’s region of origin (Kloosterman, 2010; Light *et al.*, 1994; Light and Rosenstein, 1995; Waldinger *et al.*, 1990). Ethnic entrepreneurs cater to their own community’s demands and rely on their own co-ethnic community for labor. Some immigrant entrepreneurs serve the wider host community’s needs, while others rely on co-ethnic labor (Bonacich, 1973). In recent years, yet other immigrant entrepreneurs adopt strategies that involve selling to the wider national market, or even international markets, while relying on the host country’s labor for producing their products or services (Arghetti and *al.*, 2011; Basu, 2011; EChung and Tuangio, 2013; Ram and Hillin, 1994; Saxenian, 2002a). In a further variation of the latter, immigrant entrepreneurs may cater to domestic or international markets, while establishing operations in other countries, including their countries of origin. Transnational entrepreneurs refer to immigrants who run businesses concurrently in their host country and country of origin. They exploit knowledge and networks in both host and home countries for the expansion of investment flows between the two countries (Drori *et al.*, 2009) in any form or by any means, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publishers.

The transnational linkages and innovative market-making practices of immigrant entrepreneurs are recognized as a crucial element of economic development in both host and home countries (McEwan *et al.*, 2005; Saxenian, 2005; Wagner *et al.*, 2002). Highly skilled transnational organizations that have been granted a photocopy license, a separate system of payment has been arranged. For advertising or promotional purposes, for creating new collective works, or for resale, in the rest of the world: Permission to photocopy must be obtained from the copyright owner. Please apply to now Publishers Inc., PO Box 1024, Hanover, MA 02339, USA; Tel: +1 781 871 0245; [www.nowpublishers.com](http://www.nowpublishers.com); [sales@nowpublishers.com](mailto:sales@nowpublishers.com)

The transnational entrepreneurship phenomenon is likely to grow at a fast rate as individuals increasingly gain international experience living and

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**Foundations and Trends in Entrepreneurship** (Fairlie and Lofstrom, 2015). While studies have explored entrepreneurs' transnational activity, the research is limited and fragmented, lacking rigorous theory testing and development (Drori *et al.*, 2009).

A recent review of immigrant entrepreneurship research focuses on immigrants who... start a business as a means of economic survival (Anaga-Isla and Rialp, 2013, p. 821) and ignores research on transnational entrepreneurs. Studies of transnational entrepreneurs have implications for advancing knowledge in research streams beyond immigrant entrepreneurship. Research on transnational entrepreneurs' motivation, for example, can contribute to the literature on motivation in international entrepreneurship, where the theoretical position of migrants in relation to born global firms is less developed (Riddle *et al.*,

2000)

Our aim is to trace the evolution of immigrant entrepreneurship research from studies focused on immigrant entrepreneurs operating

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in reviewing research on immigrants' motives for entrepreneurship, their strategies in securing resources and markets, and their business performance.

We synthesize the existing body of knowledge in immigrant entrepreneurship to infer the main themes, identify research gaps and methodological challenges and suggest a future research agenda. In

consolidating the research, we extend prior reviews that have focused on international immigrant entrepreneurship limited to 45 papers (Anaga-Isla and Rialp 2013, p. 821), on the economic contribution of immigrant entrepreneurs (Fairlie and Lofstrom, 2015), or on immigrant

entrepreneurs in the US (Kerr and Kerr 2016, 2020). We believe this prior work will be of value to scholars at the crossroads of immigrant entrepreneurship, international entrepreneurship, and international business. It will also be of interest to graduate students and early career researchers seeking to identify the research gaps in the immigrant entrepreneurship literature and develop a roadmap for future research.

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## Foundations and Trends® in Entrepreneurship

Our review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles to ensure a high level of validated knowledge. We used a variety of keywords, including “ethnic”, “diaspora”, “immigrant”, “migrant”, and “transnational”, along with “entrepreneur” to search the literature and manually identify articles published, sold and distributed by:

from a variety of sources including ABI Inform, EBSCO host, and Google Scholar. As immigrant entrepreneurship research is interdisciplinary, we examined entrepreneurship journals as well as journals in economics, business management, sociology, and urban studies. The journals that

prominently figured in our literature review were *International Business Review* (13), *Small Business Economics* (13), *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* (10), *International Small Business Journal* (9), *International Migration Review* (8), *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (8), *Entrepreneurship Theory & Practice* (6), *Journal of International Business Studies* (6), *Journal of Business Venturing* (5), *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (6), *American Sociological Review* (4), *Environment and Planning* (4), and *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (4).

*From Ethnic Enclaves to Transnational Landscapes: A Review of Immigrant Entrepreneurship Research, Foundations and Trends® in Entrepreneurship*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 1–153, 2021.

We define immigrant entrepreneurs as majority owner-founders of new ventures. Since empirical research on immigrant entrepreneurship includes self-employed immigrants, as well as those engaged in creating rapidly growing companies, we adopt a broad definition to include both types of studies in our review. At the same time, we excluded articles on immigrant gig workers and freelancers, since our focus is on self-employed people working in an incorporated business. Similarly, we excluded articles on managers of business houses or large firms, but

made an exception where articles covered both immigrant entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs (e.g., family or independent immigrants, or workers) as long as a subset of findings was relevant to our review (e.g. Wagner *et al.*, 2002; Zimmer and Aldrich, 1987). We included studies of diaspora entrepreneurs, who maintained ties with their homeland (Huddle and Brinkerhoff, 2011) and excluded articles on issues of class and migration networks among transnationals in the sociology literature unless the findings pertained to entrepreneurship. We included seminal articles, as well as more recent studies, and conceptual as well as empirical papers.

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**Foundations and Trends® in Entrepreneurship** articles, we included a few seminal books published in the field.

Below, we present an overview of the theoretical perspectives and research methods used in these articles. Next, we outline the main themes in the literature. A plethora of studies has documented the background and characteristics of immigrant entrepreneurs, the role of ethnic ties and external environmental factors in influencing business entry motives, business strategy, performance, and the impact of immigrant entrepreneurs. Studies have also shed light on the motivations and scale of transnational activity. We consolidate this evidence. Our survey of the literature focuses on four main themes: (1) motivations, (2) business strategies, (3) performance and impact of immigrant entrepreneurs, and (4) variations among immigrant entrepreneurs by country, community, gender, and age.

For each theme, we first present evidence from the immigrant entrepreneurship literature followed by insights from the transnational entrepreneurship literature. We do so to highlight recent research on transnational entrepreneurs, who display unique characteristics compared to immigrant entrepreneurs more generally.

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The findings of key articles included in our review are summarized in Table A.1 in the appendix. Finally, we discuss directions for future immigrant entrepreneurship research. We identify methodological challenges in conducting research and suggest ways to deal with those challenges. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publishers.

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