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Entrepreneurial belonging: Migrant entrepreneurs' connections and community in bounded and unbounded ecosystems

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Entrepreneurial Belonging – Migrant Entrepreneurs’ Connections and Community in Bounded and Unbounded Ecosystems

Alexandra David, Judith Terstriep & Jörg Freiling



To the point

- A ‘sense of belonging’ is essential for migrant entrepreneurs (MEs), influencing not only their integration but also their success within entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs). This concept transcends mere economic involvement, delving into critical psychosocial dimensions often overlooked in traditional EE research.
- The study highlights how a robust sense of belonging significantly enhances business success for MEs. In contrast, its absence can lead to issues such as ‘ecosystem hopping’.
- The interim findings call policymakers and practitioners to prioritise belonging in ecosystem design, fostering environments that are equitable and supportive, thus improving the well-being and business outcomes for diverse entrepreneurial communities.

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Keywords: migrant entrepreneurship, sense of belonging, community, entrepreneurial ecosystems

“We propose that the need to belong has two main features. First, people need frequent personal contacts or interactions with the other person. Ideally, these interactions would be affectively positive or pleasant, but it is mainly important that the majority be free from conflict and negative affect. Second, people need to perceive that there is an interpersonal bond or relationship marked by stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future. This aspect provides a relational context to one’s interactions with the other person, and so the perception of the bond is essential for satisfying the need to belong.”

(Baumeister & Leary, 1995: 500)

1 New Angle, New View?

In an increasingly globalised and culturally diverse world, entrepreneurship has emerged as a vital pathway for economic participation, social integration, and upward mobility—especially for minority groups such as migrant populations (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014; Kloosterman, 2010). Migrant entrepreneurs significantly contribute to host economies through job creation, innovation, and the leveraging of transnational networks and intercultural competencies, thereby enriching local entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs) (Light & Gold, 2000; Ram et al., 2008; Freiling, 2022). However, despite these positive contributions, the entrepreneurial trajectories of migrants are often constrained by more than just limited access to capital or markets (David & Terstriep, 2024; Harima, 2022; David et al., 2025). Central to their entrepreneurial success and sustainability is a psychosocial dimension that is often overlooked in existing research, a sense of belonging.

Belonging, conceptualised as the subjective experience of acceptance, recognition, and inclusion within social and institutional contexts, transcends physical presence (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Walton et al., 2012). It entails meaningful connections to networks, communities, and institutional frameworks that provide resources, as well as social legitimacy and psychological security (De Clercq & Voronov, 2009). For many migrant entrepreneurs (MEs), this sense remains precarious due to structural barriers, experiences of discrimination, and exclusion from dominant EEs, which often orient their support toward native-born entrepreneurs (Kloosterman, 2010; Light & Dana, 2013). Such exclusion limits access to vital information, trust-based relationships, resources, and collaborative opportunities essential for innovative and productive entrepreneurship (David et al., 2025).

Research on migrant entrepreneurship has long emphasised embeddedness—the degree to which entrepreneurs are socially and economically integrated in their local context—as a critical determinant of success (Granovetter, 1985; Kloosterman

& Rath, 1999). More recent scholarship adds connectedness, the extent and quality of network ties, to explain how entrepreneurs mobilise resources (David et al., 2025; Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 1998). While these concepts rightly highlight the structural and relational dimensions of entrepreneurial activity, they risk underestimating the emotional and identity-related facets that influence entrepreneurial agency and outcomes (Welter & Smallbone, 2011).

The *sense of belonging* addresses this gap by foregrounding the subjective, affective experience of inclusion, which shapes entrepreneurs' motivation, resilience, and capacity to engage fully with their environment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; De Clercq & Voronov, 2009; Hähnlein et al., 2025). It functions as a psychosocial foundation for productive entrepreneurship (Duta & Khurana, 2023)—defined not merely by economic output but by the ability to innovate, take risks, and contribute meaningfully to socio-economic development (Felin et al., 2015; Welter, 2011). Without a sense of belonging, MEs often face isolation, tokenism, and marginalisation that diminish their productivity and long-term viability (Kloosterman, 2010; Ram et al., 2008). Importantly, belonging acts as a dynamic and relational bridge between embeddedness and connectedness, linking structural integration with active participation and identity formation within EEs. This dual role makes belonging a soft yet indispensable factor in the analysis and cultivation of inclusive EEs (Hameed et al., 2023). Building on this premise, the present study seeks to foreground belonging as a central analytical lens in migrant entrepreneurship research. It poses the following question: *To what extent does a sense of belonging shape MEs' engagement and continuity within EEs, and how might ecosystem design foster this belonging to enable more inclusive and productive forms of entrepreneurship?*

By integrating belonging into the frameworks of embeddedness (Kloosterman & Rath, 1999) and connectedness (David et al., 2025), this work enhances a multidimensional understanding of migrant entrepreneurship that reflects its social, cultural, and emotional complexities. At the beginning of researching this issue, we aim to stimulate a broader debate on the role of *entrepreneurial belonging* as a central reference point within EEs. We contend that the sense of belonging, expressed through connection, community, and recognition, is crucial in shaping how MEs stay engaged, connected, and embedded in their respective ecosystems. Belonging is not merely a social or emotional aspect; instead, it actively structures entrepreneurial behaviour and ecosystem participation. In doing so, it impacts entrepreneurial resilience, knowledge circulation, and long-term sustainability.

2 Community Belonging: A Cornerstone of MEs in EEs?

A profound human necessity lies in the experience of belonging, a psychological and emotional state marked by acceptance, recognition, and meaningful

connection within a social collective or community (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Imboden, 2024). In EEs, belongingness—as a socio-psychological phenomenon—is not simply individual or transactional; it is deeply embedded in communal relationships and group dynamics. It involves feeling valued as a member of the entrepreneurial community and experiencing inclusion within the shared socio-economic networks and support structures that define these ecosystems (Sandbu, 2020). This communal sense of belonging provides emotional affirmation, nurtures identity, and motivates active engagement and collaboration among entrepreneurs (David & Terstriep, 2024).

According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), belongingness is as essential as basic physiological needs, propelling individuals to cultivate enduring and positive social bonds that underpin their self-concept and social positioning (Granovetter, 1985). For MEs, the collective dynamics within communities are especially critical. These dynamics influence how MEs situate themselves in the local ecosystem, establish trust, and access collective resources. Absent this communal belonging, these entrepreneurs often face isolation, marginalisation, and reduced agency, weakening their capacity to engage with key ecosystem actors and institutions (David et al., 2025; Harima, 2022). Belongingness within communities is closely intertwined with economic opportunities and perceptions of inclusion in dominant socio-economic narratives and practices (Sandbu, 2020). When communities perceive opportunity structures as exclusive or biased toward established elites, feelings of exclusion are amplified, further marginalising MEs within the broader ecosystem (Neumeyer et al., 2018). This social exclusion resonates on the individual level, fostering alienation and insecurity that hinder communal participation and access to collaborative networks essential for entrepreneurial growth (Refai et al., 2024; David & Terstriep, 2025).

Psychological frameworks substantiate the communal nature of belongingness. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy situates belonging as a prerequisite for higher-level self-fulfilment, while Schachter's (1959) work highlights the human drive toward social affiliation, particularly under stress. 'Attachment theories' pioneered by Harlow (1958) and the social support research of Cohen and Wills (1985) further illuminate how communal bonds serve as critical buffers against adversity, promoting resilience. Together, these perspectives affirm that belonging within a community is foundational to well-being and sustained social participation. For MEs, community belonging transcends personal acceptance; it signifies an anchoring in a 'safe space' where collective identity, mutual support, and economic opportunity intersect (Sandbu, 2020) and supports entrepreneurs' well-being (Stephan, 2018; Kumaria et al., 2025). This communal anchorage generates the trust, reciprocity, and solidarity essential for collaborative entrepreneurial practices (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; David et al., 2025). It serves as a vital conduit for knowledge exchange, risk sharing, and innovation—core components of entrepreneurial vitality (Kusa et al., 2022).

The absence of community belonging frequently triggers adverse psychological outcomes such as loneliness, anxiety, and diminished self-worth, which in turn undermine entrepreneurial initiative and persistence. These effects are often exacerbated by structural challenges, such as cultural dissonance, linguistic obstacles, and cognitive diversity, all of which complicate integration into established communities and restrict equitable participation in ecosystems (Harima, 2022; Azmat, 2013). Thus, belongingness within communities emerges as a dynamic and relational resource critical to MEs' navigation of EEs (Bolzani & Mizzau, 2020; Hähnlein et al., 2025). Belongingness, connectedness, and embeddedness collectively form a conceptual triad, elucidating how entrepreneurs move from emotional acceptance within communities to active participation and deep structural integration (David et al., 2025). For inclusion versus exclusion of MEs in EEs, this triad plays a pivotal role. In this vein, belongingness serves as the affective foundation enabling connectedness—meaningful social ties and interactions within and across communities—that facilitate access to diverse forms of capital and overcome systemic constraints (David et al., 2025; Bourdieu, 1986). Sustained connectedness then cultivates embeddedness: the enduring incorporation of entrepreneurs into the cultural, social, and economic life of entrepreneurial communities and the broader ecosystem (Granovetter, 1985; Kloosterman et al., 1999).

3 Rethinking Bounded and Unbounded EEs through the Lens of Belongingness

In the literature on EEs, a recurring distinction is made between bounded and unbounded ecosystems, typically understood through their spatial and functional characteristics. Bounded ecosystems are commonly associated with specific geographic locations, such as cities or regions, and emphasise proximity, institutional thickness, and local interactions (Stam, 2015; Spigel, 2017). These ecosystems are often framed as territorially anchored, benefiting from place-based assets such as universities, incubators, networks, and a supportive policy environment (Fisher et al., 2022). They aim to foster entrepreneurship through physical clustering and embedded support infrastructures.

By contrast, unbounded ecosystems are not constrained by geographic borders. They emerge in digital or translocal spaces where technological infrastructures (e.g., platforms, virtual communities, open-source networks) enable entrepreneurs to operate across national and spatial boundaries (Lamotte, 2025; Audretsch et al., 2024; Freiling et al., 2022; Terstriep et al., 2023). These ecosystems prioritise connectivity and scalability over physical proximity, and are often associated with globalised tech entrepreneurship, digital nomadism, and virtual forms of collaboration. Most of the existing literature treats this distinction as primarily functional: bounded ecosystems are seen as fostering local resilience,

embeddedness, and place-based innovation, while unbounded ecosystems offer access to global markets, remote knowledge flows, and digital scalability. This dichotomy has shaped how researchers and policymakers understand the spatiality and operational logics of ecosystems (Butzin et al., 2025).

What remains largely unexplored, however, is how this bounded/unbounded distinction affects the social and emotional dimensions of entrepreneurial participation, particularly the sense of belonging. While it is often assumed that proximity in bounded ecosystems naturally fosters trust, inclusion, and identification with place (Terstriep et al., 2023), these assumptions do not always hold, especially for MEs or other marginalised entrepreneurs. Similarly, unbounded ecosystems may offer connectivity, but can lack the relational depth, cultural recognition, and communal anchoring that foster a genuine sense of belonging. We argue that belongingness is not merely an outcome of spatial or functional design, but a central condition for meaningful participation, resilience, and productivity. Building on this, we propose that belongingness functions as a relational reference point that shapes how actors perceive and navigate bounded and unbounded EEs, informing their sense of place, legitimacy, and connectedness within diverse spatial and institutional configurations.

4 A Qualitative Inquiry into MEs' Belonging Across Ecosystem Types

Our ongoing study adopts a qualitative, ecosystem-sensitive approach to investigate how MEs in Germany experience and negotiate belonging across various types of EEs. Drawing on the principles of abductive thematic analysis (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022), the research begins with established theoretical constructs such as 'sense of belonging' and iteratively refines analytical categories based on patterns that emerge from the data. Between January 2021 and the present, 109 semi-structured interviews in different locations and settings (cf. Table 1) have been conducted¹, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. The accomplished interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using MAXQDA, applying both inductive and deductive techniques. The coding process followed established procedures in ecosystem and entrepreneurship research, incorporating coder triangulation and iterative memoing to enhance analytical rigour. Coder triangulation (Flick, 2018) involved multiple researchers independently coding the same data, ensuring reliability and transparency by incorporating diverse perspectives. Iterative memoing constituted an ongoing reflective practice throughout data analysis, capturing thoughts, ideas, patterns, and theoretical reflections. These memos

¹ Interviews with entrepreneurs in unbounded ecosystems are ongoing.

deepened the understanding of the data, facilitated the emergence of new insights, and systematically advanced the analytical process (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

The interview guideline comprised open-ended questions focused on the entrepreneurs' relationships with networks and institutions. These included ethnic, place-based, sectoral, hybrid, and transnational dimensions, reflecting the diverse and multilayered nature of ecosystem embeddedness. The use of semi-structured interviews is particularly well-suited for capturing the complex and often fluid experiences of MEs, enabling participants to express nuanced perspectives across both bounded and unbounded ecosystems. Based on the interview data, we developed a fourfold typology of EEs—bounded, unbounded (ethnic and sectoral), and hybrid—based on their spatial and social configurations (see Table 1).

Table 1. Types of Ecosystems

Ecosystem Type	Location/ Description	No. Interviews	Status	Key Focus on Sense of Belonging / Identity
Bounded Ecosystem	Essen, Duisburg, Bremen, Gelsenkirchen (Germany)	73	completed	Place-based (neighbourhood, city)
International Hybrid Ecosystem	Berlin	14	completed	Identity and the city
Ethnic Unbounded Ecosystem	Afro-German diaspora	7	in progress	Ethnicity
Sectoral Unbounded Ecosystem	Knowledge- intensive sectors	14	completed	Identity as entrepreneurs and sectoral affiliation

Source: Own compilation

Bounded Ecosystems are anchored in specific localities—in our case, mid-sized cities in Germany such as Essen, Duisburg, Bremen and Gelsenkirchen. Here, entrepreneurial activity is largely shaped by neighbourhood-level dynamics, localised support infrastructures, and a strong sense of place-based identity and belonging.

The International Hybrid Ecosystem, centred in Berlin, represents a blend of local and transnational logics. Entrepreneurs in this setting often register their businesses in Berlin and maintain ties with the city's vibrant start-up scene, yet live and operate remotely, sometimes from abroad. Their sense of belonging is closely tied to the symbolic value of Berlin as a cosmopolitan entrepreneurial hub (ecosystem represented as a mind map).

The Ethnic Unbounded Ecosystem comprises members of the Afro-German diaspora, who are geographically dispersed across Germany but form a cohesive

entrepreneurial community, a kind of hybrid diaspora, through a dedicated start-up hub. This ecosystem is characterised by strong identity-based affiliation rather than spatial proximity, and provides culturally specific resources, peer support, and visibility for Afro-German entrepreneurs.

Finally, the **Sectoral Unbounded Ecosystem** encompasses migrant actors embedded in knowledge-intensive industries, such as digital technologies, biotechnology, or creative sectors. These ecosystems transcend geography; entrepreneurs may be based anywhere in Germany or beyond, and their affiliations are defined by professional identity and sectoral expertise rather than ethnic or spatial belonging. In many cases, the anonymity of origin and registration location is preserved, making the ecosystem more accessible to those who may otherwise experience exclusion. This occurs, for example, with Ukrainian or Russian entrepreneurs who deliberately conceal their origin to avoid becoming entangled in political discourses or conflicts.

5 Interim Results & Outlook

Our ongoing study set out to explore how MEs experience and negotiate belonging across different types of EEs. The analysis of 109 in-depth interviews reveals a clear and consistent pattern: a sense of belonging emerges as a critical factor in shaping both the entrepreneurial journey and the structure of ecosystem engagement.

Rather than treating belonging as an intangible or emotional ‘add-on’, our findings underscore its status as a structuring condition of entrepreneurial behaviour. MEs who expressed a strong sense of belonging to a place, a community, or a professional domain reported markedly higher levels of engagement with their ecosystem. They invested locally, built stable support networks, and accessed institutional resources more effectively. By contrast, those reporting weak or fractured belonging were more likely to engage in ‘ecosystem hopping’—moving fluidly between different support environments in search of validation, trust, and access. This phenomenon was particularly evident among entrepreneurs with hybrid identities—such as second-generation migrants—who frequently navigate multiple cultural and institutional logics, yet do not experience complete belonging within any single one.

In ecosystems where entrepreneurs encountered alienation or exclusion stemming from bureaucratic barriers, racialization, or symbolic misrecognition, we observed a tendency towards outward-oriented investment, and in some cases, eventual business relocation. Some interviewees had formally registered their companies abroad, while others sought to tap into transnational markets or diaspora networks to circumvent perceived constraints within local structures. What unites these accounts is the sense that belonging is not merely emotional; it is strategic. When

entrepreneurs do not feel seen or valued, they tend to withdraw—not only psychologically, but economically.

The relationship between belonging and entrepreneurial action becomes particularly salient when examined through the lens of entrepreneurial well-being. Drawing on the frameworks posited by Stephan (2018) and Kumaria et al. (2025), which emphasise how entrepreneurs feel and function in their work, we find that belonging serves as a *protective* and *enabling factor* for well-being along a multitude of different dimensions (see Table 2). Entrepreneurs who reported feeling emotionally safe, socially connected, and institutionally recognised exhibited greater confidence, lower stress, and more consistent business development.

Table 2. Intersections of Belonging and Dimensions of Entrepreneurial Well-being

Dimension	Entrepreneurs' Well-being	Sense of Belonging
Emotional/ Psychological	Resilience, stress management, motivation, self-efficacy	Feeling accepted, valued, and emotionally safe in a community
Social	Support networks, mentorship, peer exchange	Integration into local society, networks beyond co-ethnic circles
Economic	Income security, work-life balance, access to capital	Recognition as an economic actor, equitable access to opportunities
Cultural	Ability to express identity through business (e.g. food, services)	Recognition of one's background as an asset, not a deficit
Institutional/ Structural	Access to training, healthcare, and legal security	Fair treatment by institutions, representation in governance
Spatial/ Local	Embeddedness in the community, safety, and access to local resources	Connection to place, neighbourhood identity
Identity & Purpose	Meaningful work, personal growth, autonomy	Feeling of contributing to society, being 'part of something bigger'

Source: Own compilation

Conversely, where belonging was absent, entrepreneurs described persistent uncertainty, exhaustion, and disengagement from public and support structures. Belonging, therefore, intersects with multiple dimensions of well-being: emotionally, it cultivates resilience and motivation; socially, it facilitates peer exchange and mentorship; economically, it enhances access to capital and opportunity; culturally, it legitimises expression of identity through entrepreneurial practices; and institutionally, it influences perceptions of fairness and representation. Importantly, it also anchors entrepreneurs in space, creating a felt connection to neighbourhoods, cities, and local/regional consumer bases. In addition, our preliminary data indicate that belonging not only supports individual entrepreneurs but also contributes to ecosystem resilience and cohesion.

In addition to the dimensions presented in Table 2, barriers and stressors encountered by migrant entrepreneurs, such as discrimination, inadequate support networks, and erosion of cultural identity, may adversely affect their well-being (Brance et al., 2024; Dheer, 2024; Zhang & Lassalle, 2024). These challenges are particularly acute for first-generation skilled migrants, who often experience a profound disconnect between their migration expectations and reality, leading to what Kumaria et al. (2025: 11) conceptualise as a ‘well-being crisis’ that fundamentally disrupts their entrepreneurial identity functioning.

To summarise, these findings hold important implications for EE theory and governance. While much of the ecosystem literature emphasises institutional completeness and resource availability (Stam, 2015; Stam & van de Ven, 2021), our research adds a critical dimension: the symbolic and affective inclusiveness of the ecosystem. Belonging is not guaranteed by the mere existence of services or networks; it must be cultivated through trust, representation, and meaningful participation. Bounded ecosystems, such as those in specific neighbourhoods or cities, may provide dense support but risk exclusion through cultural or linguistic homogeneity. Unbounded ecosystems—ethnic, hybrid, or sectoral—offer higher levels of flexibility but often lack depth, continuity, or access to formal resources. The most effective ecosystems are those that integrate structural accessibility with a genuine ethos of inclusion.

In this light, ecosystem actors, comprising public institutions, incubators, chambers, and intermediaries, must recognise that belonging is not a soft factor, but a ‘heavy-weight’ factor for productive entrepreneurship. Policies should be evaluated not only in terms of efficiency or scalability, but also in their capacity to foster a sense of inclusion, recognition, and shared purpose. Without this, even the best-resourced ecosystems may fail to retain or support those who operate at their margins—and, thus, lose coherence, which may end up in fragmentation. Ultimately, our research suggests that belonging should be reframed as a relational infrastructure *and* an economic necessity. For MEs, whose journeys are often marked by systemic navigation, identity negotiation, and translocal mobility, belonging is not peripheral. It is the condition under which their entrepreneurial endeavours become possible, sustainable, and meaningful.

Our research suggests that belonging constitutes a powerful reference point for understanding how migrant entrepreneurs connect with, and become connected and embedded within, their respective ecosystems. It is not merely an individual emotional experience but rather a product of, and contributor to, collective dynamics and shared meaning-making processes. In both bounded and unbounded ecosystems, belonging emerges as a foundational element in how entrepreneurs locate themselves socially, culturally, and economically.

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