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Article

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Understanding the importance of home-country skills of African immigrant entrepreneurs in South Africa

Bernard Lama Ngota, Elroy Eugene Smith, Ayanda Pamela Deliwe

ABSTRACT

Objective: The article aims to understand and describe the impact of home-country skills on African immigrant entrepreneurial endeavours in a host country. Furthermore, the article investigates how home-country entrepreneurial skills affect immigrant entrepreneurial motivations, activities, and outcomes.

Research Design & Methods: Following an interpretivist research paradigm, we applied a qualitative research approach. We identified 12 African immigrant entrepreneurs through purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews with the participants. We then analysed the collected data using a content analysis.

Findings: We observed that African immigrant entrepreneurs who migrate with skills obtained through owning or being involved in a business, and apprenticeship in their home country, are much more prepared for entrepreneurship in their host country. Furthermore, the findings suggested that African immigrant entrepreneurs associated with a family business gain entrepreneurial skills and are more ready to start up a business venture in their host country.

Implications & Recommendations: The study identified a gap in the literature regarding the entrepreneurial skills and knowledge of African immigrant home-country residents in the host country context. The obtained results are useful for immigrant entrepreneurial practice, particularly for immigrants considering going international.

Contribution & Value Added: It is the first study in a developing country that investigates the significance of African immigrant home-country skills in motivating entrepreneurship in the host country.

Article type: research article

Keywords: African immigrant entrepreneurship; entrepreneurial skills; home country; entrepreneurship; African business; South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Research on immigration and immigrant entrepreneurship has gained significant attention in recent decades (Duan *et al.*, 2023; Guzi *et al.*, 2023). The literature attributes this growing interest to the potential development impacts of both migration and immigrant entrepreneurship, which scholars consider important topics for many countries (Duan *et al.*, 2023). The increasing number of research articles on immigrant entrepreneurship highlights its role in regional and global economic development (Duan *et al.*, 2023). Despite the growing body of research, there is a lack of understanding about the impact of home-country context on African immigrant entrepreneurship in host countries (You & Zhou, 2018; Duan *et al.*, 2021).

Studies have shown a sharp rise in research on immigrant entrepreneurship since 2000 (Dabić *et al.*, 2020). Research has also emphasised the impact of immigrant entrepreneurship on host country economies (Ngota *et al.*, 2019a; Asoba & Mefi, 2020; Dabić *et al.*, 2020; Omorede & Axelsson, 2022). In the USA, skilled immigrants have contributed to the economy through high entrepreneurship and

in-ovation (Fairlie, 2013). Similarly, in New Zealand and South Africa, immigrant entrepreneurs have made significant economic contributions despite challenges (Omisakin, 2017; Ngota *et al.*, 2018).

Scholars have found immigrant entrepreneurs to be highly entrepreneurial, contributing to economic growth and innovation (Fairlie, 2013). Studies in Turkey and Korea have also shown that immigrant entrepreneurs create significant opportunities in the economy despite facing challenges (DeLancey, 2014). Moreover, the literature sees immigration as a key economic driver that boosts the entry of newer, more creative, and entrepreneurial immigrants (Brenner *et al.*, 2006). Overall, immigrant entrepreneurship plays a vital role in economic development, and we should not underestimate its impact.

Research has consistently shown that immigrant entrepreneurs are twice as likely to start a business as their native counterparts (Vandor & Franke, 2016; Duan *et al.*, 2021). This is particularly significant in countries like South Africa, where unemployment rates are alarmingly high (32.6% as of 2023) (StatsSA, 2023). Immigrants, especially Africans, bring valuable skills and expertise from their home countries and use them to start businesses in their host countries (Ngota *et al.*, 2019b). However, they often face significant obstacles, including discrimination and skill mismatches, making entrepreneurship a vital alternative career path.

Studies have highlighted the importance of immigrant entrepreneurs in driving innovation and economic growth. In the U.S., skilled immigrants have contributed to a higher rate of high-tech startups compared to the UK (Brenner *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, a Canadian study found that immigrant entrepreneurs exported ten times more goods to their home countries than all Canadian exporters combined, due to their familiarity with and access to these markets (Head & Ries, 1998). Overall, immigrant entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in economic development, job creation, and innovation, making it essential to support and encourage immigrant entrepreneurs in their endeavours.

Notwithstanding their significant entrepreneurial contributions, the impact of the home-country context on African immigrant entrepreneurship in host countries remains understudied. Most research has focused on Asian immigrant entrepreneurs in the US (Duan *et al.*, 2021), neglecting the experiences of African immigrants. Furthermore, studies have primarily examined how host country environments and co-ethnic communities affect immigrant entrepreneurship, overlooking the influence of home country contexts (Aliaga-Isla & Rialp, 2013; Nkongolo-Bakenda & Chrysostome, 2020; Duan *et al.*, 2021). Duan *et al.* (2021) argue that African immigrant entrepreneurship in host countries like South Africa is shaped by sociocultural, political, and economic factors in their home countries. However, few studies have holistically examined the home-country effects on African immigrant entrepreneurship (Brzozowski *et al.*, 2017; Bagwell, 2018; Duan *et al.*, 2021). These authors suggest that there is a lack of research on how home-country socioeconomic, cultural, and political environments impact African immigrants' entrepreneurial endeavours in host countries. Addressing this knowledge gap is crucial to understanding the complexities of African immigrant entrepreneurship.

If the analysis accurately represents the reality, it is essential to investigate ways to encourage African immigrant entrepreneurship, business development, and growth (Brenner *et al.*, 2006). One approach is to explore how African immigrant entrepreneurs' home country skills prepare them for entrepreneurship in the host country. Understanding the contributions of home country skills is crucial to recognizing the role of immigrants in entrepreneurship. This study aims to bridge the gap between African immigrant entrepreneurship and the impact of their home country skills. It raises important questions about the role of home country skills in entrepreneurial motivation and how we can harness them to support migrant entrepreneurship. By examining the complex relationship between home country skills and entrepreneurial motivation, this study sheds light on the experiences of African immigrant entrepreneurs and the factors driving their success, ultimately informing strategies to support their entrepreneurial endeavours.

This article is structured as follows. Firstly, we will discuss the research questions and literature review, entrepreneurial skills transfer, home country context, and entrepreneurial ecosystem perspective. Then, we will present the research methods and design, including the study's design, population, sampling, data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations. Finally, we will discuss the empirical findings concerning the research questions, followed by conclusions and recommendations based on the findings.

Research Questions

The study aimed to investigate whether entrepreneurial home-country skills play a role in assisting African immigrants to venture into entrepreneurship in a host country such as South Africa. To make this happen, we determined the following research questions:

- What is the role of entrepreneurial home-country skills in assisting African immigrant entrepreneurs in starting up a business?
- What is the impact of the home country context on the entrepreneurial efforts of African immigrants?
- What is the role of the entrepreneurial ecosystem towards entrepreneurship?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Entrepreneurial Skills Transfer From Home to the Host Country

African immigrant entrepreneurs transfer valuable skills from their home countries to their host countries, enabling them to start and manage businesses successfully (Ngota *et al.*, 2019b; Asoba & Mefi, 2021). Research by Ngota *et al.* (2019b) highlights the significance of entrepreneurial skills acquired in the home country, which one can apply in host countries. There is support for this phenomenon in studies showing that firm-appropriate training and skills are often acquired through co-ethnic firms (Waldinger *et al.*, 1990; Boadu *et al.*, 2023; Minja *et al.*, 2023).

In West and Central Africa, people transmit entrepreneurship skills through apprenticeships lasting three to five years, equipping young individuals with hands-on experience and skills. Next comes a settlement through the apprentice in a similar business (Ngota, 2017; Ezenwakwelu *et al.*, 2019). This training enables them to become successful entrepreneurs, contributing to economic growth in their host countries. African migrants in South Africa, for instance, bring unique entrepreneurial skills, starting and managing commercial ventures that help address the country's skills shortage (Czaika, 2018; Hyndman-Rizk & de Klerk, 2019; Boadu *et al.*, 2023; Minja *et al.*, 2023).

By leveraging their skills and experience, immigrant entrepreneurs contribute to their host countries. Their ability to disseminate entrepreneurial skills acquired in their home countries enables them to establish successful businesses, creating jobs and stimulating economic growth. This highlights the importance of recognizing and supporting immigrant entrepreneurship, which can positively impact the host country's economy.

The Impact of the Home Country Context on Entrepreneurial Efforts

Dabić *et al.* (2020) emphasise the home country's significant impact on entrepreneurial ventures, differing from traditional theories focused on host countries. Researchers (Wang & Liu, 2015; Brzozowski *et al.*, 2017) agree that personal attributes, host country environment, co-ethnic community, and home country context influence immigrant entrepreneurship. Social networks and family ties from the home country positively impact immigrant entrepreneurship (Brzozowski *et al.*, 2017; Duan *et al.*, 2021). The home country's entrepreneurial ecosystem benefits immigrant entrepreneurs, enabling them to capitalise on opportunities in both countries. African immigrant entrepreneurs rely on resources from their home country to pursue opportunities, launch businesses, and improve performance. These resources enable them to establish businesses in host countries, contributing to economic development (You & Zhou, 2018; Ngota *et al.*, 2019a; Duan *et al.*, 2021). The home country context significantly influences African immigrant entrepreneurship, providing valuable resources and skills to succeed in host countries. This highlights the importance of considering the home country context in understanding immigrant entrepreneurship and its economic impact.

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Perspective Towards Entrepreneurship

The entrepreneurial ecosystem framework highlights the significance of the business environment in supporting entrepreneurial ventures. Scholars argue that this environment promotes entrepreneurship by providing opportunities and resources, leading to high-growth businesses (Nicotra *et al.*, 2018;

Duan *et al.*, 2021). The entrepreneurial ecosystem offers a systematic framework for conducting entrepreneurship research across disciplines and regions (Duan *et al.*, 2021). It refers to a system of socio-economic, political, and infrastructural elements that promote innovative businesses and increase productivity (Isenberg, 2011; Stam, 2015).

African immigrant entrepreneurs engage in international business activities, leveraging their ties to their home country (Bagwell, 2018; Duan *et al.*, 2021). They are more likely to start businesses out of perceived opportunity rather than necessity (Duan *et al.*, 2021). These entrepreneurs obtain necessary information through ethnic group members and social media, finding opportunities in ethnic and mainstream markets (Duan *et al.*, 2020; Duan *et al.*, 2021).

The resource-based view and opportunity structure theory suggest that disparities in entrepreneurial activities and business performance between African immigrant entrepreneurs and their native-born peers are due to differences in resources and opportunities. Despite the entrepreneurial ecosystem's recognition as an economic development strategy, current studies have been primarily typological and theoretical, with little exploration of its influence on entrepreneurial activities (Spigel & Harrison, 2017). African immigrant entrepreneurship studies under the entrepreneurial ecosystem framework remain largely neglected, despite gaining global recognition among researchers (Von Bloh *et al.*, 2019).

This article examines how the home-country context equips and influences African immigrants to become entrepreneurs in host countries like South Africa. By exploring the entrepreneurial ecosystem's impact on African immigrant entrepreneurship, this study aims to fill the existing research gap and provide valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Regarding the literature on the transferability of skills from one's home country to the host country among African immigrant entrepreneurs, there is a lack of consensus on the most accurate and trustworthy way to measure this phenomenon and the motivations behind the involvement in entrepreneurship. Selecting the appropriate measurement technique is the primary concern in analysing the factors that influence African immigrant entrepreneurship in a host country's economy. In general, we may distinguish qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches. The most prevalent qualitative methods include interviews, focus groups, and observation. On the other hand, the main quantitative research methods include surveys, online polls, and questionnaires, while there could be mixed methods which will combine an element of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Creswell & Plano, 2018).

To explore the home country skills of African immigrant entrepreneurs in South Africa, we used the results from the semi-structured interviews conducted among African immigrant entrepreneurs (owners/managers) in 2023. The adequate sample comprised 12 interviews, derived from a non-probability sampling, namely convenience and purposive sampling. To accomplish the research objectives, we used an interpretative research paradigm (phenomenological research) together with a qualitative research methodology. According to Hammersley (2013), the interpretivism paradigm is based on the idea that humans cannot understand knowledge in the social sciences in the same way as they can in the physical sciences because humans interpret their surroundings and take action based on that understanding while the rest of the world does not. A qualitative research methodology was the most applicable and successful strategy for answering the study's research question by collecting data from African immigrant entrepreneurs operating in South Africa. Based on prior studies and the nature of the study, it was obvious that the main question under investigation required a qualitative response. Therefore, to obtain rich data, we chose cases of African immigrant entrepreneurs and administered personal interviews.

Moreover, we adopted the qualitative technique to get an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and viewpoints, as well as to examine the research questions in a nuanced and contextualised manner. The representativeness of this study was ensured by using convenience and purposive sampling since there is no readily available database of all African immigrant entrepreneurs in South Africa (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). The sample selection was guided by the recommendations of Green and Thorogood (2004) who for example, noted that most qualitative researchers who perform an interview-based study with a particular research question find, that after interviewing 20 or so people from

one analytically specific participants 'category,' the research generates little new information (Daher, 2023; Rahman, 2023). Within the African immigrant group, the researcher approached potential participants, associations, and networks, explained the study, and screened them for eligibility (must be an owner/manager of African descent other than South African, been in business for at least a year, and at least 18 years old). The researcher selected 12 participants who met the predefined criteria for inclusion. The participants included African immigrant business owners/managers. Given the possible interview limitations, the researcher used an interview protocol to guide the questions regarding the home country skills context. In particular, we formulated the skills from home country question as follows: Do entrepreneurial skills acquired in their home countries significantly influence the possibility of African immigrants venturing into entrepreneurship in South Africa?

The researcher collected both primary and secondary data. Secondary data came from books, internet, and journal articles. The researcher used a semi-structured interview schedule to collect primary data from African immigrant entrepreneurs. We designed the instrument to collect data from African immigrant entrepreneurs on whether skills acquired in their home countries influence their entrepreneurial endeavours in the host country. The themes and questions developed underwent critical validation by key entrepreneurship experts and supported by the literature. We conducted a pilot study on three immigrant entrepreneurs regarding the semi-structured personal interview schedule and protocol. The researcher administered semi-structured personal interviews to the participants from June 2023 to September 2023 at the participants' business locations. The interviews were in person, face-to-face, allowing for rich and nuanced data collection. The researcher conducting the research maintained a neutral and empathetic stance, ensuring that respondents felt comfortable sharing their experiences and opinions. The researcher's positioning was that of a curious and non-judgmental inquirer, seeking to understand the respondents' perspectives and experiences.

Participants Profile

The demographic characteristics of the African immigrant entrepreneurs who participated in the study were business owners/managers. They were of African descent other than South Africans, had been in business for at least a year, and were at least 18 years old. The majority of the participants in the study were men (11; 1 woman). The study found that more African men than women migrate, likely due to cultural factors where men are typically the breadwinners and women are expected to prioritize household duties (Ngota & Rajkaran, 2016). We may see this gender imbalance also in entrepreneurship, where African men are more likely to take high-risk ventures than women. The study's findings on age distribution revealed that most men immigrant entrepreneurs were between 50-60 years old, while women entrepreneurs were between 30-40 years old. This aligns with previous research indicating that young people are more open to migration than older individuals (Ngota & Rajkaran, 2016). The majority of African immigrant entrepreneurs were between 20-50 years old, with few above 60 years old. This is supported by authors (Azmat & Zutshi, 2012; Ngota & Rajkaran, 2016; Dana & Ratten, 2017) who argue that younger individuals in African populations are more likely to take risks, such as migrating for better opportunities, while older individuals prioritize family and cultural responsibilities. The majority of the African immigrant entrepreneurs were from Cameroon (05), followed by those from Nigeria (04), about two participants came from Ghana, and only a few came from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The researcher targeted specific countries and sectors based on their relevance to the research topic and the need to capture diverse perspectives. Furthermore, the majority of the participants were engaged in services, and services and trading businesses (05 respectively), and only one African immigrant entrepreneur was into service and agricultural businesses. Many of the African immigrant entrepreneurs (05) seem to have been operating their businesses for about 10 to 20 years, followed by the group (03) that have been operating their businesses between 5 to 9 years, and four have been operating their businesses for less than 5 years. The majority of the entrepreneurs (08) employ between 1 and 4 people, while four (04) employ between 5 and 10 employees.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The researcher reduced and coded the data gathered from the semi-structured in-depth interviews. The researcher created a coding framework that took into consideration a list of themes, preliminary codes, and categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Khoa *et al.*, 2023). The researcher coded the data manually to be able to engage with the rich data collected. The researcher then analysed the data using the qualitative content analysis method, which allows for the investigation of the 'occurrence, meanings, and associations of specific themes, words, or concepts' (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Khoa *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, the researcher employed content analysis to identify and interpret patterns and themes in the data.

To ensure trustworthiness and evaluate the data credibility, we used four criteria, *i.e.*, confirmability, credibility, transferability, and dependability (Johnson & Rasulovala, 2016). To ensure confirmability, audit trails were provided that highlighted all the procedures that were employed in the process of data analysis, to offer the basis for the results (Johnson & Rasulovala, 2016). The researcher employed techniques that included persistent observations, prolonged engagement, data collection triangulation, and member checks to ensure data credibility (Johnson & Rasulovala, 2016). The collected and transcribed qualitative data were transferable by subjecting the issue under study to undergo adequate thick description; this was to permit the readers to properly understand the topic (Tobin & Begley, 2004). The researcher ensured dependability by making sure that the qualitative data that was collected went through an inquiry audit (Shenton, 2004). Therefore, to assure consistency in the findings and the possibility of repeating the study, the researcher sought the services of another, experienced researcher to assist with the review and examination of the study's procedures and the data analysis approach.

Ethical Considerations

The study acknowledged all ethical considerations proposed by Sekaran and Bougie (2016) while engaging with participants. Informed consent was obtained from respondents by disclosing the survey procedures and how the data would be used later, emphasising the importance of participation. Whenever possible, we used fictitious names and codes to anonymise the transcribed data collected.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section highlights and analyses the research findings based on the responses of the 12 participants. We believe that the immigrant entrepreneurial process begins in the entrepreneur's home country, where the African immigrant entrepreneur's home country context can shape their entrepreneurial motivations and facilitate their venture into entrepreneurship in the host country. When we examined the context, three themes emerged:

- Entrepreneurial background.
- Entrepreneurial skills acquired from home country.
- Home country skills as entrepreneurial motivation.

We will discuss the emerging codes identified during data analysis in greater detail in the subsequent section.

Entrepreneurial Background

The next section reveals participants' entrepreneurial backgrounds, including business ownership experience and family business involvement. This data sheds light on the characteristics and influences that shape their attitudes and behaviours. Notably, most participants had previously owned businesses in their home countries before relocating to South Africa. P#1 comments: 'When I graduated from the university, I spent a few years running a business of my own before I left for South Africa.' I had a business where I was selling second-hand clothes. After that one closed, I moved on to another business where I was selling Nigerian films.' This sentiment was shared by other entrepreneurs, such as P#7, who explains: 'I used to have a business back in my home country.' Similarly, P#3 comments:

'I had a clothing retail business back home.' P#4 elaborates: 'I was involved in agriculture, with a poultry farm of 1200 chickens and a pig farm with over 18 pigs.' Retail businesses were a prominent business that some participants indicated they owned in their home country, P#9 stated: 'I ran a mixed provisions retail business, selling basics like toiletries.' Similarly, P#11 affirmed: 'I had a provision shop, what is known here as a spaza shop, back in my home country.' In line with being involved in retail businesses, it was also discovered that some participants were engaged in other service businesses. P#10 notes that: 'I had a similar business like this one back in my home country. I had a motor mechanic workshop.' Participants' desire to own businesses in their home countries motivates them to pursue entrepreneurship in their host country, South Africa. This supports findings by Brzozowski *et al.* (2017), Bagwell (2018), and Duan *et al.* (2021) that immigrant entrepreneurship is influenced by individual qualities and home country factors.

Some entrepreneurs also reported a sense of skill acquisition stemming from their involvement in a family business. P#1 describes: 'In my lifetime, I have grown up in a family business.' P#1 further explains: 'Growing up in a business environment instilled a passion for entrepreneurship in me. I helped my uncle at his store and my mother at village markets, learning the ins and outs of business. These experiences made the business a part of my being.' P#9 also remarks: 'I grew up in a family of business owners. Helping my parents at their liquor store during holidays inspired me to consider starting my own business one day.' This can be likened to a study by Evans *et al.* (2019) who attested that trust in a family is a motivator for familial learning processes, making family a significant role player in the entrepreneurial learning framework. Moreover, some researchers (Rwigema & Venter, 2004; Nieman & Nieuwenhuizen, 2009) indicated, that individuals who grow up in a family environment where the family members are businesspeople, are more likely to start up their own businesses or can become part of the family business.

Although the study suggests that many African immigrant entrepreneurs have a background in business ownership or family enterprise in their home countries, not all participants shared this experience. Some African immigrant entrepreneurs contradicted this finding, stating that they had no prior involvement in business ownership or family businesses in their countries of origin. P#2 explains: 'I have never been involved in any business operations back in my home country because I was a student. This is my first ever business I am involved in here in South Africa.' P#8 also noted: 'I was not involved in any business back at home. This is my first business that I am getting involved within this country.'

Entrepreneurial Skills Acquired from Home Country

The analysis of the data collected from African immigrant entrepreneurs showed evidence of entrepreneurial skills acquisition from their home countries before their relocating to South Africa. Entrepreneurship knowledge can be acquired formally or informally. One may acquire formal knowledge in entrepreneurship through formal education such as from business schools, entrepreneurship programmes, and courses (Adams *et al.*, 2013; Ezenwakwelu *et al.*, 2019). On the other hand, people may acquire informally knowledge in entrepreneurship through informal learning including mentorship, apprenticeships, and hands-on experience (Adams *et al.*, 2013; Ezenwakwelu *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, one could acquire entrepreneurial knowledge informally through apprenticeship in the home country. P#3 explains: 'I learned this work and the training to operate this form of business back from my home country in the form of traineeship.' In the same light, P#2 comments: 'I acquired business knowledge through an apprenticeship after my studies.' P#5 remarks: 'The skills I learned as an apprentice in my home country have made me confident and knowledgeable in this field.'

Parents promote their children's informal acquisition of entrepreneurial knowledge since it is evident that they recognise its value as the cornerstone of sustainable economic growth and development. P#2 comments: 'My parents sent me to learn entrepreneurial skills with a successful business owner.' To guarantee sufficient knowledge transfer, gaining entrepreneurial skills informally through an apprenticeship requires rigorous mentoring and quick learning. P#12 explains: 'My boss taught me business skills throughout my apprenticeship.' Apprenticeship can transmit entrepreneurial skills in various areas, such as motor mechanics, as described by P#11: 'I did my apprenticeship as a motor mechanic in my home country.' P#3 added: 'I learned electrical work through a train-

eeship back in my home country.’ Moreover, P#6 remarks: ‘I did my apprenticeship in a big electronic workshop as an electrician for phones, laptops, and any electronic device in my home country.’ Other artisan skills, like hairdressing, can be learned through apprenticeships, as noted by P#8: ‘I received training at a salon.’ Acquiring entrepreneurship knowledge this way can take time, with P#3 commenting: ‘My traineeship lasted from 1999 to 2004, which was five years.’ Similarly, P#4 remarks that ‘as for these skills that I possess, I was trained for it for a complete five-year duration.’ P#11 states: ‘I received training for about five years as an apprentice in another mechanical workshop.’ P#3 added: ‘I was trained in this business for about five years.’

Apprenticeship transmits entrepreneurial skills, but training also contributes to business skill acquisition (Hernandez *et al.*, 2023). African immigrant entrepreneurs highlighted that training played a significant role in contributing to their entrepreneurial skills from their home country to the host country. P#8 explains: ‘I received training for my current business, perfecting my hair styling skills learned in my home country with further training in South Africa.’ She added: ‘Another entrepreneur taught me what I know.’ According to P#2, other entrepreneur businesses serve as avenues for acquiring entrepreneurial skills, with entrepreneurs acting as mentors. He describes: ‘Someone taught me how to do this business back at home, I was trained and mentored to operate this line of business by someone who took me in as an employee, and it took me about two years before I could own my own business.’ Traditionally, entrepreneurship is taught in schools to equip students with knowledge. Education in their home country may have formally prepared some African immigrant entrepreneurs, providing the necessary knowledge and skills to venture into entrepreneurship in the host country (Ngota *et al.*, 2019b). According to P#6, ‘I studied economics in the high school. So, what I studied in school and the business that I was operating back in my home country, the coaching I received from friends who were already in the business environment back at home prepared me for business ventures. This experience enabled me to venture into business in South Africa.’ These findings affirm Nieuwenhuizen’s (2003) study showing that individuals who have been noted for entrepreneurial success, owes it to the direct connection to education, signifying that entrepreneurship skills and abilities can be learned. As such, the study suggests that valuable entrepreneurial abilities can improve when African immigrants attend tertiary education (Nieuwenhuizen, 2003; Olutuase *et al.*, 2023).

Home Country Skills as Entrepreneurial Motivation

Migrant and diaspora entrepreneurs leverage skills from their home countries to drive innovation, job creation, and economic growth in their host countries, despite facing numerous challenges. Their home country skills and knowledge motivate entrepreneurial ventures, fostering resilience and success in new environments (Duan *et al.*, 2023; Ngota *et al.*, 2017; Ngota *et al.*, 2019b). P#3 remarks: ‘I ventured into business in this country because I needed to survive and be my own boss.’ P#3 attributed his entrepreneurial motivations in the host country to his home country’s acquired entrepreneurial skills and said, ‘My entrepreneurial knowledge and skills that I had acquired back from my home gave me all the needed motivation to venture into entrepreneurship.’ Kushnirovich and Heilbrunn (2008) and Ngota *et al.* (2017) indicate that immigrants can be pushed into self-employment due to the inherent bias and discrimination in the host country labour market. P#5 remarks: ‘The fact that I was unemployed in South Africa motivated my desire to apply my previous business knowledge to venture into a business to survive.’ There is also a real sense of entrepreneurial motivation from friends towards starting up a business in the host country, as described by P#9: ‘I saw my brother doing well in his business, which motivated me to start my own.’ The home country business knowledge and experience are also entrepreneurial-driven. P#5 explains: ‘My business experience, unemployment, and friend’s motivation drove me to venture into entrepreneurship.’ P#7 adds: ‘Unemployment in South Africa led me to start a small business to survive.’ The importance of home country business knowledge and skills is highlighted by P#3: ‘I wanted to do what I learnt back home – have a business to control my finances. Unemployment made me realize I have skills to survive.’ According to P#5, unemployment drives individuals to pursue entrepreneurship: ‘Unemployment drove me to follow my dream and start a small business.’ She adds: ‘Unemployment, survival needs, and home country business experience drove my desire to start up a business.’

Moreover, starting a new business in the host country seems to be an alternative route to escape the harsh discrimination found in the labour market of the host country as described by P#8: 'The job market was discriminatory, so I decided to start my own business to make a living.' Venturing into entrepreneurship gives entrepreneurs some degree of financial independence. P#8 explains: 'Being my boss, independent, making income, and previous business skills pushed me to establish my own business due to unemployment.'

Although the entrepreneurial skills acquired in their home country were a major factor in motivating African immigrant entrepreneurs to start their businesses in their new nation, language barriers may have made it difficult for them to find work. As P#11 comments: 'Language played a bigger role for me as a foreigner from a French country, so I had to start a business to survive.' Furthermore, P#2 remarks that 'Language was a barrier that prevented me from finding a job, so I looked at starting my own business as an alternative.' Van Tubergen (2005) argues that, in nations with high unemployment rates among natives, immigrants are pushed out of the labour market into self-employment with a high probability of venturing into entrepreneurship.

The entrepreneurial spirit of African immigrants has become a powerful catalyst for economic growth and job creation in their host countries. Their innovative ventures realize personal dreams, generate employment opportunities, and provide self-employment, showcasing their entrepreneurial flair in action. By doing so, they contribute significantly to the economic development of their host nations, leaving a lasting impact. For example, P#12, a Nigerian entrepreneur in South Africa, employs 10 people, noting, 'Nine workers are South Africans and one is a foreign national in the alignment department.' These immigrant entrepreneurs do not show discrimination in employment preference, as described by P#9: 'I employ five people, including three South Africans, and two foreign nationals.' African immigrant entrepreneurs offer employment and entrepreneurial skills training. P#11 explains: 'I have five employees, including two South Africans and three foreign nationals, who work as apprentices learning skills and knowledge.' P#4 adds: 'I have one employee in retail and 8-10 in the chicken business, with a minimum of five employees at all times, working for a wage due to fluctuating workload.'

Discussion

The findings of this study align with previous research (You & Zhou, 2018; Duan *et al.*, 2021) indicating that the home country context plays an important role in shaping the African immigrant entrepreneurial process. A significant majority of participants had prior business ownership experience in their home countries, which equipped them with valuable entrepreneurial skills. Notably, involvement in home country businesses can catalyse developing entrepreneurial capabilities. These findings align with You and Zhou's (2018) argument that African immigrants' pre-migratory entrepreneurial background and ability to leverage global networks in their home country can significantly influence their entrepreneurial success.

Moreover, prior involvement in a family business likely shaped their entrepreneurial skills and experiences. Brannon *et al.* (2013) and Adjei *et al.* (2019) identified two ways entrepreneurship can be related through family links: biological and spousal relationships. This study supports Adjei *et al.*'s (2019) notion that family relationships provide resources like networking opportunities, educational support, and economic assistance that can either constrain or facilitate entrepreneurial activities. The intersection of family and business systems impacts entrepreneurial processes and success (Nordqvist & Melin, 2010). Family businesses play a crucial role in shaping entrepreneurial skills, and providing resources, and competencies that influence business outcomes. Family relationships can either support or hinder entrepreneurial endeavours, highlighting the importance of considering the role of family in entrepreneurial development. This study sheds light on the complex factors that contribute to entrepreneurial success.

Further analysis of the data revealed that entrepreneurial skills in the home country context can be transmitted through two primary channels: training and apprenticeship. The training method aligns with findings from previous studies (Erasmus *et al.*, 2010; Ngota, 2017), which describe training as a systematic approach aimed at enhancing employees' knowledge, skills, and behaviour to achieve business objectives. Regarding apprenticeship, the study found that some African immigrant entrepreneurs gained knowledge and skills by working under their employers as apprentices. This finding is

consistent with existing literature (Adams *et al.*, 2013; Ngota, 2017; Ezenwakwelu *et al.*, 2019), which highlights apprenticeship as a traditional and informal training method prevalent in West African countries. This approach involves young individuals being mentored by experienced entrepreneurs, who impart their skills, knowledge, and expertise to empower the next generation of entrepreneurs. Ngota (2017) observed a stark difference between West and Southern African countries in terms of entrepreneurial training. While Southern Africa has a strong tradition of formal education for entrepreneurship, West and Central Africa relies on a strong tradition of informal apprenticeships, where young entrepreneurs learn through practical experience and guidance from experienced business owners, rather than formal education (Adams *et al.*, 2013; Ngota, 2017; Ezenwakwelu *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, training is designed to enhance employee performance within the organisation, especially when their work standards are low due to skill gaps, knowledge deficiencies, or unfavourable attitudes among certain groups or individuals (Ngota, 2017; Ezenwakwelu *et al.*, 2019).

The study revealed that when African immigrant entrepreneurs combine their home-based skills, leverage available resources, and capitalize on environmental opportunities while navigating the host country's entrepreneurial ecosystem, they can successfully establish a new business venture. We may find support for it in the works of scholars (Nkealah, 2011; Adomako *et al.*, 2023; Ratten, 2023), who found that immigrants exhibit a higher propensity for entrepreneurial aspirations and activities compared to their South African counterparts, also, they observed a relatively lower entrepreneurial inclination among South Africans. Moreover, the study revealed that African immigrant entrepreneurs in the host country are motivated to start their businesses for a range of reasons, including overcoming discriminatory unemployment practices, ensuring survival and economic stability, addressing language barriers, pursuing self-employment and autonomy, fostering a passion for entrepreneurship, and capitalizing on potential business opportunities. These findings are corroborated by previous research (Guler, 2005; Nieman & Nieuwenhuizen, 2009; Khosa & Kalitanyi, 2015; Ngota *et al.*, 2018), which also showed that African immigrants in host countries like South Africa are driven to entrepreneurship due to factors such as high unemployment rates, currently at 32.6% (StatsSA, 2023), discrimination in the job market. These studies reinforce the notion that African immigrants are compelled to explore entrepreneurial opportunities as a means of overcoming employment barriers and securing economic stability as well as providing employment opportunities for others. According to Ngota (2017), the development and expansion of small businesses, including those founded by African immigrant entrepreneurs, are believed to play a crucial role in reducing poverty by generating employment opportunities. Fairlie (2013), who found that immigrant entrepreneurs have been instrumental in creating new jobs and wealth, supports this notion.

Research Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study explored a previously underexamined aspect of 'grey activities' in the immigrant entrepreneurial sphere, a topic that has received limited attention in existing research. However, the researcher acknowledges that the findings are subject to a degree of uncertainty, due to the subjective nature of the data and limitations in data quantity, which may impact the generalisability and accuracy of the results. A key limitation of using purposive sampling in this research is that the findings may lack generalisability, as the sample was intentionally selected based on specific characteristics, which may not accurately reflect the experiences and circumstances of all immigrant entrepreneurs. Despite the limitations, the researcher believes that this study's findings will contribute significantly to understanding the primary motivations of African immigrant entrepreneurs, thereby laying the groundwork for further research on the nature, extent, and economic impact of African immigrant entrepreneurship. Future studies can build upon this foundation by employing a larger, more diverse sample, including other immigrant groups, to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis of immigrant entrepreneurship.

CONCLUSIONS

This article concluded by highlighting the key insights gained into African immigrant entrepreneurship, particularly in relation to the home country context. It aimed to empirically assess the importance of home country entrepreneurial skills on African immigrant entrepreneurs in South Africa. The evidence supports the identification of various factors that can be harnessed to support and enhance African immigrant entrepreneurship, enabling businesses to reach their full potential. The research revealed that African immigrants' entrepreneurial drive and ambition are not solely a product of the host country environment, but are also influenced by their home country background, which contributes to the development of their entrepreneurial skills, knowledge, and experience. Moreover, the research found that entrepreneurial skills were being effectively transmitted to African immigrant entrepreneurs through a combination of training programs and a robust apprenticeship culture, a practice that is notably absent in many parts of the Southern African region. Moreover, we found that African immigrant entrepreneurs in South Africa are driven to start their businesses because of a diverse range of motivations, including unemployment and lack of job opportunities, language barriers that hinder employment prospects, a desire for financial independence and self-sufficiency, the need for survival and economic stability and the presence of untapped business opportunities. These complex motivations underscore the resilience and resourcefulness of African immigrant entrepreneurs in South Africa.

Thus, we recommend that apprenticeship programs, which are currently underutilised in South Africa, require formalisation and a mandate to provide entrepreneurship training to young South Africans aspiring to start their businesses. This initiative would empower them to improve their economic prospects amidst the country's escalating unemployment rates. Furthermore, the study suggests that policymakers should prioritise raising awareness about the social inclusion of African immigrant entrepreneurs and their business activities within the host country's communities. This increased awareness can foster a more inclusive environment, promoting integration and acceptance of African immigrant entrepreneurs, and ultimately supporting their entrepreneurial success.

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The contribution of co-authors is equal and can be expressed as 40% for the primary author, and 30% each for the other authors: B.L. Ngota prepared the introduction, literature review, and the material and methods section, carried out the analysis, drew conclusions including the references for the study, based on his Ph.D. thesis, while Prof. E.E. Smith and Dr Deliwe proofread, edit, and supervised the paper for publication.

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Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors declare that QuillBot tool was used to proofread the manuscript for fluency.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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