

David, Alexandra; Terstriep, Judith; Freiling, Jörg

**Article — Published Version**

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International Migration

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*Suggested Citation:* David, Alexandra; Terstriep, Judith; Freiling, Jörg (2025) : Rethinking Support Policies: The Role of Belonging in Entrepreneurial Ecosystems, International Migration, ISSN 1468-2435, Wiley, Hoboken, NJ, Vol. 63, Iss. 6, <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.70110>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/336864>

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Rethinking Support Policies: The Role of Belonging in Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

Alexandra David<sup>1</sup>  | Judith Terstriep<sup>1</sup>  | Jörg Freiling<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>Institute for Work and Technology, Westphalian University of Applied Sciences Gelsenkirchen, Gelsenkirchen, Germany | <sup>2</sup>LEMEX Chair in Small Business and Entrepreneurship, University of Bremen, Bremen, Germany**Correspondence:** Alexandra David ([david@iat.eu](mailto:david@iat.eu))**Received:** 16 April 2025 | **Revised:** 17 August 2025 | **Accepted:** 14 October 2025**Keywords:** belongingness | connectedness | ecosystem integration | embeddedness | entrepreneurial ecosystems | migrant entrepreneurship

## ABSTRACT

This article explores the importance of belongingness in migrant entrepreneurs' (MEs) engagement within entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs), focusing on emotional and social dimensions often overlooked in favour of structural factors. Through two case studies in Germany's Ruhr area, the article demonstrates how a strong sense of belonging enhances resilience, trust and social capital, essential for business success. The experiences of two MEs, Ilyas and Elif, illustrate belongingness as a catalyst for connectedness and embeddedness, enabling access to networks and resources while countering discrimination. The study suggests that policy frameworks should acknowledge and support the emotional and relational aspects of MEs' integration in EEs. Emphasising informal support systems, community engagement and tailored interventions could help overcome structural barriers and foster more inclusive ecosystems. Future research should further examine these dynamics across diverse cultural and geographical contexts to offer a more comprehensive understanding of MEs' entrepreneurial trajectories.

## 1 | Introduction

Entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs) are recognised as key for fostering innovation, job creation and economic prosperity, particularly in diverse societal contexts (Mason and Brown 2014). They constitute interconnected networks of actors, institutions and resources—including entrepreneurs, investors, support organisations, universities and policy frameworks—that collectively enable and constrain entrepreneurial activity within specific territories (Stam 2015; Spigel 2017). Though research highlights both contributions and challenges of migrant entrepreneurs (MEs) in EEs (David et al. 2025; Jones et al. 2018; Solano et al. 2023), most studies focus on structural and economic factors (Stam 2015; Fernandes and Ferreira 2021), while emotional, social and cognitive aspects of integration remain underexplored (Azmat 2013; Neumeyer et al. 2019; Wurth et al. 2022).

Central to this integration is belongingness—the psychological need to feel accepted, valued and connected (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Adler and Kwon 2002). MEs navigate complex socio-cultural and economic landscapes that can facilitate or hinder engagement with local ecosystems (Azmat 2013; David and Terstriep 2025). Belongingness influences how MEs build relationships, access resources and develop trust within entrepreneurial environments whilst underpinning personal motivation and identity formation. By framing belongingness as a bridge between subjective experience and objective ecosystem structures, this study expands EE theory toward a more holistic understanding of MEs' engagement and participation.

At the core of this triadic interaction lies the interplay between belongingness, connectedness and embeddedness. Connectedness refers to the extent and quality of social ties

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with ecosystem actors (David et al. 2025; Burt 2000), shaping how MEs perceive opportunities and overcome institutional barriers (Granovetter 1985; Bourdieu 1986; Ram et al. 2017). Embeddedness denotes integration depth into the economic, social and cultural fabric of host and transnational contexts (Kloosterman et al. 1999; Solano et al. 2022), encompassing access to networks, resources and institutional support (Jack and Anderson 2002). These three dimensions are dynamically interrelated rather than sequential. Belongingness serves as a relational foundation for entrepreneurial legitimacy and cooperation—without it, efforts to connect or embed remain tenuous (Baumeister and Leary 1995), potentially leading to disengagement or hindering long-term entrepreneurial activity.

Despite increasing academic attention to these relational dynamics, EE policy frameworks largely overlook them, prioritising economic incentives, infrastructure and regulatory efficiency and neglecting social and emotional dimensions of entrepreneurial integration (David et al. 2025; Bolzani and Mizzau 2020). Such a narrow focus risks perpetuating exclusion and missing opportunities to enhance MEs' full potential (Neumeyer et al. 2019; Putnam 2000).

This study addresses this gap by foregrounding belongingness as a crucial yet under-theorised element in EE research and policy. Drawing on empirical insights, it conceptualises belongingness as a precursor linking connectedness and embeddedness, shaping the extent to which MEs integrate in local ecosystems (De Coninck and Solano 2023; Solano et al. 2023). This triadic, reciprocal relationship forms a self-reinforcing cycle facilitating resource access, strengthening legitimacy and sustaining entrepreneurial engagement (David et al. 2025). Rather than transactional generic approaches, this calls for holistic, context-sensitive frameworks integrating emotional and social dimensions alongside structural factors.

The study distinguishes between subjective and objective relational mechanisms: belonging encompasses emotional and psychological inclusion, whilst social networks constitute measurable patterns of ties and resource flows (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Waldinger et al. 1991; Granovetter 1985). Understanding how internal experiences of belonging relate to external social structures is essential for comprehending MEs' complex integration trajectories within EEs.

We advocate rethinking EE policy frameworks to acknowledge the interdependence of affective, relational and institutional dimensions (Yamamura 2023; Halabisky 2022). Enhancing MEs' sense of belonging strengthens connectedness and embeddedness, thereby improving entrepreneurial outcomes and societal contributions (Lassalle and Johnston 2018; Williams and Krasniqi 2018). The guiding research question is: *To what extent does a sense of belonging within a specific local community affect MEs' degree of connectedness and embeddedness and, thereby, their local engagement?*

To address the research question, the study employs original qualitative research conducted across two cities in Germany's Ruhr region, utilising an embedded multiple-case study design with 46 semistructured interviews involving MEs and

local stakeholders. Two illustrative cases facilitate in-depth analysis, enabling context-sensitive examination of how belonging is negotiated within structurally comparable yet institutionally distinct EEs.

## 2 | Migrant Entrepreneurs' Belongingness and Its Role in Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

Belongingness refers to the fundamental human need to feel emotionally and psychologically secure through acceptance, value and connection within a social group or community (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Imboden 2024). Belongingness can relate both to a specific EE and to the broader societal context within which that EE is embedded. Focussing on the first, within EEs, this encompasses one's sense of fitting into the socioeconomic fabric—such as feeling recognised within the entrepreneurial community or being included in the resource structures of the ecosystem (Sandbu 2020; Waller 2021). Belonging provides emotional validation and a sense of worth, which is foundational to forming identity and fostering active participation (David and Terstriep 2025). Thus, it is not only an emotional state but also a socio-structural condition that allows MEs to see themselves as legitimate and valued members of the local business landscape and as part of the larger society.

As Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue, the need to belong is as essential as basic physiological needs. It motivates individuals to form lasting, positive relationships that reinforce their sense of self and position within a given environment (Granovetter 1985). For entrepreneurs, especially MEs, this motivation plays a critical role in navigating and engaging with the local EE's socioeconomic structures. Without belonging, entrepreneurs may experience emotional detachment or marginalisation, reducing their willingness and ability to connect with other actors and institutions (David et al. 2025; Harima 2022).

At this intersection, it is crucial to distinguish between the *subjective experience* of belonging and the *objective structures* that shape it. Belonging reflects emotional inclusion, identity and psychological security (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Imboden 2024), while social network theory examines structural ties—who connects with whom, and how—based on measurable attributes like tie strength and centrality (Granovetter 1985; Waldinger 1996). While belonging centres on recognition and cultural fit, network theory emphasises access to resources, trust and influence (Waldinger and Lichter 2003; Waldinger 2005). Both perspectives are essential for understanding how MEs navigate inclusion and exclusion. Belonging captures internal integration, whereas network theory reveals the external relational structures that can enable or constrain it (Neumeyer et al. 2019).

Sandbu (2020) frames belongingness as inherently tied to economic opportunity and perceived inclusion within the economic mainstream, or else 'dominant logic' (Korber et al. 2022). Where individuals view opportunity as reserved for others, particularly elites, feelings of exclusion emerge, often intensified by inequality (Neumeyer et al. 2019). In the context of EEs, such exclusion can diminish the sense of belongingness for MEs and other actors,

leading to psychological outcomes such as alienation, insecurity or reduced engagement (Refai et al. 2024; David and Terstriep 2025). This hampers access to key resources, networks and collaborative opportunities vital for entrepreneurial development.

Psychological literature offers further support for the centrality of belonging. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs identifies belongingness as a precursor to self-actualisation, while Schachter (1959) shows that individuals actively seek social affiliation under stress. Harlow's (1958) attachment research and Cohen and Wills' (1985) work on social support further emphasise social bonds' developmental and stress-buffering effects. These foundational works underscore that belongingness is not a peripheral concern but a central motivational and regulatory force in human behaviour.

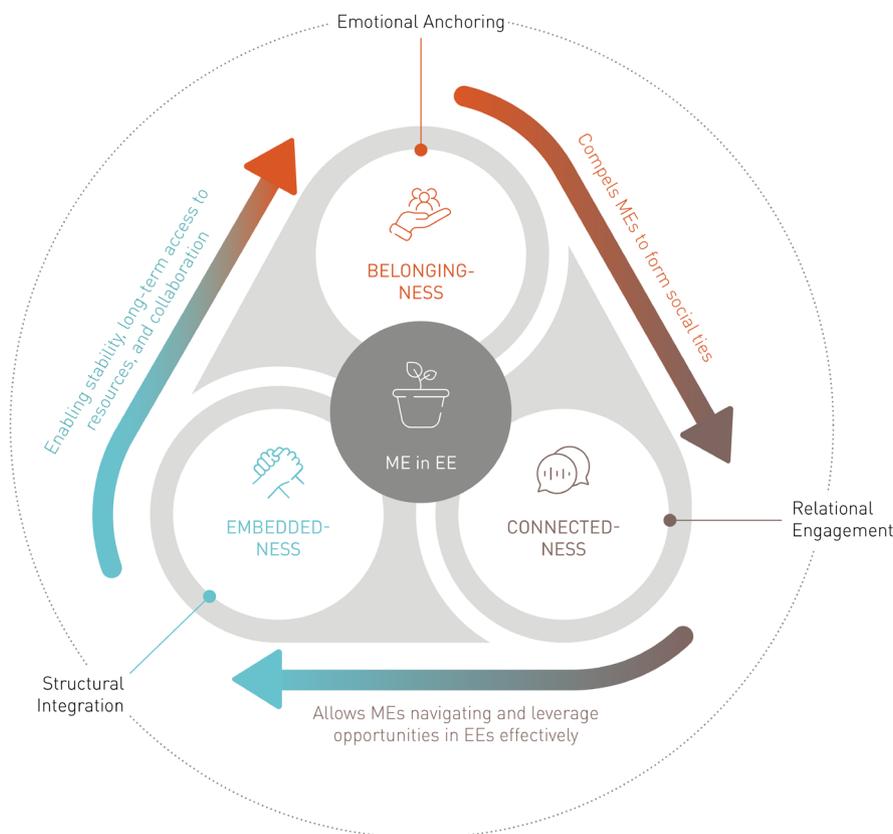
For MEs, belongingness is not merely about social acceptance—it is about being anchored in a place—or 'save space'—where they can succeed economically and feel a sense of agency in contributing to and reshaping their communities (Redhead and Bika 2022; Sandbu 2020). Belonging fosters the emotional and psychological conditions necessary for building trust, developing collaborative relationships, and engaging with local networks (Baumeister and Leary 1995; David et al. 2025). As such, it serves as a gateway to broader participation and knowledge exchange, essential for risk-taking, innovation and resilience—core components of entrepreneurial activity (Terstriep et al. 2025). At the same time, what constitutes 'belonging' may differ significantly across individuals and cultural backgrounds—highlighting the need to view it as an evolving, subjective construct.

Conversely, the absence of belongingness may result in negative emotional states—loneliness, anxiety, depression or low self-esteem—which constrain entrepreneurial engagement (Allen et al. 2021, 2022). These emotional barriers are often compounded by structural factors such as cultural distance, language barriers or cognitive diversity (Harima 2022), reinforcing unequal access to ecosystem benefits (Azmat 2013).

Against this backdrop, drawing from inclusive and intersectional frameworks (Crenshaw 1989; Fraser 1995) and resource perspectives (Williams and Krasniqi 2018; Bourdieu 1984) belongingness is a dynamic relational resource critical for navigating EEs (Bolzani and Mizzau 2020). As depicted in Figure 1, together with connectedness and embeddedness, it forms a conceptual triad that shapes how MEs engage with their environments (David and Terstriep 2025; Solano et al. 2023).

Being in a complex relation, connectedness builds on belongingness by describing how individuals form meaningful ties to local actors, institutions and resource flows (David et al. 2025; Bourdieu 1986). It allows MEs to navigate opportunities and overcome constraints in the ecosystem through relational proximity and access to diverse forms of capital. However, such connectedness only develops where a prior sense of acceptance and value—belongingness—is present.

The relationship between belongingness and connectedness is not strictly linear. MEs may also seek connectedness in the hope of fostering a sense of belonging. This reciprocal dynamic reflects empirical cases where actors, despite marginalisation,



**FIGURE 1** | Triadic interrelationship between belongingness, connectedness and embeddedness.

engage with networks and institutions to gain social validation and economic footholds. Belongingness and connectedness thus operate in a mutually reinforcing, bidirectional dynamic. As entrepreneurs build relationships within the ecosystem, these ties generate feedback loops that strengthen emotional anchoring and create the relational stability needed for deeper embeddedness (David et al. 2025). This conceptual flexibility allows for multiple entry points into the triad—be it emotional, relational or structural.

Over time, sustained connectedness facilitates embeddedness—the deep-rooted integration of entrepreneurs into the ecosystem’s economic, social and cultural life (Granovetter 1985; Kloosterman et al. 1999). Embeddedness reflects a durable alignment between entrepreneurial activities and local contexts, enabling stable access to resources and collaboration. Slightly simplified, it marks the culmination of a gradual process: emotional anchoring (belongingness) enables relational engagement (connectedness), which then fosters structural integration (embeddedness).

Thus, a strong sense of belonging lies the foundation for meaningful connectedness and, ultimately, embeddedness. However, the pathways are not uniform: some entrepreneurs may begin with strong ties (connectedness) and only gradually develop emotional anchoring (belongingness). Others may feel they belong before finding pathways to active participation.

This progression enables MEs to establish a long-term presence and impact in local and transnational networks (Freiling 2022; Elo and Freiling 2015). While traditional EE literature often emphasises economic enablers such as funding and infrastructure (Solano 2024), these must be complemented by a deeper understanding of the psychosocial dimensions that shape the lived experiences and participation patterns of entrepreneurs (David et al. 2025; Bolzani and Mizzau 2020; Neumeyer et al. 2019).

### 3 | Methods

This article draws on original qualitative research conducted in two cities in Germany’s Ruhr region within an embedded multiple-case study design (Yin 2018). The research investigates how MEs experience and negotiate a sense of belonging within their EEs, and how this affects their social embeddedness, connectedness, and particularly their local engagement. We acknowledge the limitations of qualitative case studies in terms of generalisability, but justify this approach based on the exploratory nature of our research aim and the need to capture nuanced, context-specific experiences of belonging. While quantitative data offer valuable macro-level insights (cf. BAMF—Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat and Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2025), they are less suited to unpack relational and affective dimensions of entrepreneurial integration. We also reflect on existing integration frameworks and support mechanisms developed in comparable cities illustrating the importance of localised, inclusive support structures for MEs (David et al. 2019).

### 3.1 | Research Design and Case Selection

Case study methodology is particularly appropriate for investigating complex, context-dependent phenomena shaped by dynamic interactions between individual agency and structural conditions (Flyvbjerg 2006; Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Yin 2018). It supports a holistic and relational understanding of how entrepreneurial practices unfold within specific institutional, social and cultural settings, especially where meaning-making and lived experience are central (Merriam 1998). Given this methodological foundation, the empirical investigation was operationalised through a data collection strategy designed to capture the nuanced experiences of participants within their specific contexts. The semi-structured interview guide was developed through an iterative process combining existing theoretical frameworks on belonging, EEs, and ME with preliminary exploratory interviews and stakeholder feedback. The interview guide included questions regarding the ‘entrepreneurs’ socioeconomic situation, the founding and start-up phase, barriers and the entrepreneurial pathways in general as well as connectedness to networks and institutions. This approach ensured that questions captured both predefined thematic areas and emergent issues, allowing respondents to reflect freely on their subjective experiences and perceptions. The guide was regularly refined throughout data collection to incorporate new insights and enhance depth and relevance.

The study draws on 46 semi-structured interviews with MEs, local business actors and community stakeholders, conducted between January 2023 and October 2024 in two neighbourhoods of the Ruhr area—Duisburg-Marxloh and Essen-Altendorf—selected through theoretical sampling (Campbell et al. 2020). While both neighbourhoods are marked by socio-economic deprivation and high migrant populations, they differ in migration histories, community configurations and institutional infrastructures, allowing for a context-sensitive comparative analysis and analytical generalisations on how belonging is negotiated across distinct EE configurations (Stake 1981, 2010).

Across the 46 interviews (see Appendix S1), MEs described contested experiences of belonging and exclusion—both symbolic and practical—that shaped their entrepreneurial trajectories, from accessing networks to gaining recognition. Racialisation, perceived marginalisation, and the search for legitimacy emerged as recurring themes in the interviews, alongside strategies to build connectedness despite structural barriers. These broader patterns inform the study’s empirical grounding.

From this sample, two illustrative cases were selected based on their narrative richness, empirical depth and relevance to the research question. Both reflect recurring patterns across the complete set of interviews—particularly concerning belonging, informal networks and institutional navigation—and allow for the reconstruction of theoretically relevant mechanisms. The selected cases offer analytical insight into broader trends. The chosen case-focused approach follows established methodological logic (Patton 2015; Yin 2018; Flyvbjerg 2006), enhancing internal validity by enabling more profound exploration of causal dynamics.

## 3.2 | Data Collection

Interviews were conducted primarily in German, with English used when participants preferred it. Data sourcing followed a mix of theoretical and snowball sampling strategies (Campbell et al. 2020; Chamberlain and Hodgetts 2018), appropriate for engaging hard-to-reach groups such as MEs. Interviews explored personal migration and business trajectories, local networks, experiences of (non-)belonging, and the role of formal and informal support structures. Narrative techniques were used (Schütze 1983) to invite participants to reflect on the affective and social dimensions of their entrepreneurial practice in their terms.

Moreover, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in both neighbourhoods, including participant observation in community spaces, local business events and public venues. These observations provided insight into everyday interactions, informal support networks and the spatial organisation of entrepreneurial activity (Emerson et al. 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). Document analysis—of local media reports, policy papers and business records—complemented the primary data and provided contextual depth, helping to situate individual experiences within broader economic restructuring and urban inequality patterns.

## 3.3 | Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two interrelated phases following an abductive logic, moving iteratively between empirical material and theoretical concepts. In the first phase, an inductive thematic approach was employed to identify recurrent patterns across interview transcripts, field notes and documents. Qualitative data analysis software supported the iterative coding process, which facilitated the systematic refinement of categories and the identification of emerging themes and dynamics. During this process, new codes such as discrimination, alienation and sense of belonging were defined, reflecting participants' lived experiences and the complexity of their entrepreneurial trajectories.

In the second phase, a deductive reading was undertaken, drawing on conceptual frameworks of belonging, embeddedness and connectedness (Stake 1981, 2010) to interpret how social, cultural and economic dimensions shape entrepreneurial agency. The two selected cases were subsequently subjected to a deeper layer of analysis that combined thematic and narrative methods. This enabled the reconstruction of lived experiences and the identification of mechanisms through which belonging and embeddedness influence local entrepreneurial engagement. A 'most similar systems' comparative logic guided this interpretive process, accounting for variations in community dynamics and institutional environments.

By integrating multiple strands of qualitative data—interviews, ethnographic observations and document analysis—the research adheres to the principle of data triangulation, thereby enhancing construct validity and analytical robustness (Yin 2018). The study offers a rich, empirically grounded account of how

migrant entrepreneurs forge belonging in structurally constrained settings, contributing to ongoing debates on entrepreneurship, migration and urban development.

## 4 | Results: Case Studies

### 4.1 | Case 1: The Role of Belongingness in Migrant Entrepreneurship and Neighbourhood Development in Duisburg-Marxloh

#### 4.1.1 | Background

This case study explores the entrepreneurial journey of Ilyas (name changed), a long-established business owner in Duisburg Marxloh, a neighbourhood known for its diverse migrant population. It examines the challenges and opportunities Ilyas, aged 55, originally from Turkey, has encountered since living in Germany for 50 years. The case highlights the discrimination experienced by MEs and their strategies for overcoming these barriers through active community engagement. Ilyas has operated a tax advisory business in Marxloh for over 30 years, with additional branches in Düsseldorf. His clientele includes Turkish, Syrian, Afghan, Russian, African and German communities. Over the years, he has witnessed significant demographic shifts, noting, 'In the past, we mainly had Turkish clients, but now, especially with the influx of Syrians and Afghans, the demographic has changed considerably'. This has prompted Ilyas to diversify his staff, ensuring they speak Russian, Persian and Arabic to meet the needs of his growing clientele.

Despite the diversity of his customer base, Ilyas observes that discrimination persists in the neighbourhood, particularly between established migrant groups and newcomers. He reflects on the lack of social and economic connections between MEs and their German counterparts: 'In a neighbourhood like this, where bridal shops dominate, we tend to have German customers. But there are no real connections between German and migrant entrepreneurs because many Germans retreated from this area'. While the neighbourhood has become more challenging for all businesses, migrant-run businesses face additional hurdles: 'It's been tough for all businesses, not just migrant ones, due to the reputation of this neighbourhood and the construction work that cut us off from the main access roads'.

#### 4.1.2 | Community Involvement and Networking

Given the negative perception of Marxloh as a deprived area, Ilyas has actively participated in the local community, notably as chairman of the 'Werbering Marxloh', a local business association: 'We all know each other here; networking is a natural part of life in Marxloh'. The network supports local entrepreneurs, particularly when navigating bureaucratic challenges such as permit applications. 'In recent years, we've applied for permits for outdoor dining. It's not just about getting permission but about working together as a community. The city is open as long as you follow the rules', he explains. Ilyas stresses the importance of mutual support, especially for smaller businesses: 'Many of us don't have the legal knowledge or language skills, so we help each other out'. He underscores the value of

collaboration: ‘If one person faces an issue, the whole group steps in. We are all part of this community and care for one another. It’s like our own insurance, helping each other stay afloat when times are hard’.

#### **4.1.3 | The Role of Belongingness in Entrepreneurial Success**

Ilyas views belongingness within the local network as essential. He argues that trust and solidarity play a crucial role in overcoming the barriers MEs face. ‘Being part of the local network is crucial. It’s how you get to know the community and build trust, attracting customers and support’. This sense of community is vital in overcoming the discrimination migrant businesses face in accessing finance and networks, often struggling to gain the same recognition and support as their German counterparts. Ilyas notes, ‘When you’re an outsider, it takes longer to be accepted. But once you’re in, people trust you, and that’s what keeps you going’. He adds that the success of migrant-run businesses directly relates to the strength of these networks: ‘Without that support system, many of us wouldn’t have survived. It’s like a family here, and that’s why we stay, even when things get difficult’.

#### **4.1.4 | Overcoming Discrimination Through Entrepreneurial Endeavours**

Ilyas speaks candidly about how discrimination has shaped the experiences of MEs. He points to broader socioeconomic changes, such as the decline of industries like coal mining and steel manufacturing, which have contributed to increased pressure to become self-employed. This environment has forced MEs to work harder to establish and sustain their businesses. He explains: ‘Migrant entrepreneurs have to fight harder because they face not just economic pressures but also social ones. (...) When they started rebuilding Weseler Straße, the whole area shut down for more than two years. Businesses struggled, and I had to send new directions to my customers every three months to ensure they could find me. Many businesses closed, but my community stuck with me.’ He highlights the resilience of migrant-run businesses: ‘When big chains left, it was migrant businesses like kebab shops and bridal shops that took over and helped revive the area’.

#### **4.1.5 | The Importance of Family and Cultural Networks**

Ilyas attributes much of his success to strong family and cultural networks underpinning his business operations. ‘In our culture, we have a strong sense of family and friendship. When we start a business, we don’t go to a bank for loans; instead, we borrow from friends and family, pooling small amounts to make it happen’. This informal support system is particularly valuable for MEs without access to traditional financial resources. He contrasts this with the challenges German entrepreneurs face, who may not enjoy the same level of flexibility or mutual trust within their communities. ‘You can’t just go to someone and ask

to borrow €10,000 to start a business. But among us, if you need money for a short-term investment, you can get it, and it’s understood that you will pay it back. (...) We help each other out because we understand each other’s situations. It’s not just about business—it’s about family and trust’.

#### **4.1.6 | Conclusion and Learnings**

This case study highlights the resilience of MEs who contribute significantly to the local economy despite facing discrimination and economic challenges. Their active participation in local networks (‘Werbering Marxloh’) fosters a vital sense of belonging and solidarity essential for success. Although the neighbourhood of Marxloh is often portrayed negatively, Ilyas argues its vibrant community of migrant-run businesses has been crucial to its revitalisation.

For Ilyas and others, entrepreneurship is not merely about business: ‘We don’t just build businesses; we build relationships, and that’s what helps us survive in a place like Marxloh’. This echoes the broader findings from the 46 interviews, emphasising MEs’ societal engagement and ‘giving back’ through local networks and community initiatives, which not only help them overcome challenges but also contribute to their neighbourhoods’ social and economic development.

Ilyas’s role in the local business association is a prime example of how MEs engage in and contribute to neighbourhood revitalisation. Many interviewees similarly spoke about their memberships in or sponsorship of local associations, sports clubs and community initiatives. These actions reflect a broader commitment to community-building, with many entrepreneurs viewing their sponsorship of local sports clubs as a way to foster unity and offer a sense of belonging, particularly for migrant youth. These efforts demonstrate how MEs are integral to strengthening local ties and improving the well-being of their communities. Such ‘giving back’ creates a reciprocal relationship: MEs benefit from local support while contributing to the collective good. Such community engagement helps MEs like Ilyas navigate barriers and build more inclusive, thriving local ecosystems.

This highlights the need to consider both migrant networks and native communities as sources of belonging for MEs. Theoretical frameworks should acknowledge that host society embedding is neither uniform nor necessary for entrepreneurial success. Jones Christensen and Newman (2023) demonstrate how refugee entrepreneurs’ involvement in local networks fosters belonging and solidarity vital for overcoming challenges, showing that community engagement drives both individual resilience and neighbourhood revitalisation. Policies supporting entrepreneurs should recognise diverse forms of belonging across migrant and native communities. Fostering these reciprocal relationships can enhance social cohesion and unlock MEs’ potential as agents of inclusive, sustainable urban development. Ilyas’s case exemplifies how local engagement builds belonging and revitalisation, suggesting policies should facilitate migrant participation in business and community initiatives to enable vital contributions to inclusive local development.

## 4.2 | Case 2: The Role of Networks in Promoting Belongingness Amidst Experiences of Discrimination

### 4.2.1 | Background

This case study explores the entrepreneurial journey of Elif (name changed), a 55-year-old Turkish-German entrepreneur who has lived in Germany since 1971, when her father brought the family from Turkey. Born in Konya, Turkey, Elif has been running a business in the events industry since February 2005. Her story highlights the pivotal role of local community networks in fostering a sense of belonging, especially following early experiences of discrimination. Through her journey, Elif sheds light on the challenges migrants face when establishing businesses and how community support is vital in overcoming these barriers. Despite acquiring German citizenship and contributing significantly to the local economy through her business, Elif faced considerable challenges rooted in racial discrimination during her early years. As a schoolchild, she was subjected to bullying and harassment, which initially hindered her academic progress: 'I attended Hauptschule [lower secondary school] and trained as a hairdresser, eventually managing and training at the salon. However, I wish I had attended a different school. Being one of the first families in Germany, I faced severe bullying, which made school difficult and affected my grades, leading me to Hauptschule'. Despite these setbacks, Elif pursued vocational training, built a career in the hairdressing industry and eventually transitioned into entrepreneurship.

### 4.2.2 | Challenges of Discrimination

During the early stages of her entrepreneurial journey, Elif encountered systemic discrimination. When reflecting on her specific obstacles when starting her business, Elif points to discrimination: 'Yes, there were challenges. When searching for an event location, I was consistently denied viewings. Despite speaking with little accent, my Turkish surname often led to rejection, suggesting I wasn't of German descent'.

Notwithstanding living in Germany for decades, her Turkish surname seemed to close doors, and her attempts to secure a business location were rejected: 'That was a handicap, limiting my ability to secure locations. Finally, a former client from a large corporate group helped by referring me to a real estate agent and vouching for me. Though I couldn't hear their full conversation, it was clear it wasn't entirely positive'. These experiences underscore the latent barriers MEs often face in accessing resources and opportunities, irrespective of their qualifications or acculturation levels.

### 4.2.3 | The Role of Networks in Fostering Belongingness

Despite these challenges, a significant turning point in Elif's entrepreneurial journey came through her engagement with professional and community networks. 'I thought, even if I get rejected, I'll try again. I hoped to become part of some networks

and then make public what had happened to me to create change'. Through previous clients and business connections, Elif entered informal networks and eventually secured the necessary business premises and financial support. Encouraged by a friend, she joined the local Chamber of Industry and Commerce (IHK) and DEHOGA (association for the hospitality sector). Her involvement enhanced her business acumen and provided political advocacy opportunities: 'Of course, I'm a member of the Chamber of Commerce and with DEHOGA. I've been a member there since day one, and I was immediately elected to the board that same year'.

Elif's role in both organisations allowed her develop her networks. 'These voluntaries have kept me informed and significantly advanced my professional life. Similarly, my repeated election to the IHK has bolstered my independence'.

Building on these experiences, Elif became an advocate for migrant women entrepreneurs, aiming to empower them for greater success. 'Under the guidance of the ministry, we were all brought together. (...) At that time, I was already self-employed, and they gathered us all to work on a project. The goal was to unite women with a migrant background who had entered self-employment to support each other'. This initiative led to the foundation of Petek, an association Elif co-founded with six other women of Turkish descent. 'We later distanced ourselves from the ministry because we wanted to continue on our path'. The name Petek, meaning 'hive' in Turkish, symbolises hard work and unity. 'Bees are hardworking creatures, and that's what we wanted to represent—the solidarity and diligence we aimed to bring together', Elif explains.

What began as a small initiative soon expanded to nearly 100 members across North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. The group with women from diverse backgrounds, such as Indian, English and French, exemplifies a rich mix of cultures and experiences. 'It's like a family', Elif says warmly. 'We meet once a month for breakfast and once a month for dinner. It's all about networking, mainly'. In addition, they organise quarterly seminars featuring prominent women speakers. Although initially supported by state funding, the association now operates independently, illustrating the empowerment that comes from migrant-led initiatives. Elif remarks, '[w]e believe that if we submit applications, we would still be funded. But we don't see it as necessary anymore. (...) We're doing just fine without it'.

Through these efforts, Elif and her fellow members have built a growing community rooted in solidarity, hard work and a commitment to creating opportunities for migrant women in business.

### 4.2.4 | Community Initiatives and Personal Advocacy

Elif's active involvement in networks like Petek underscores the crucial role of community engagement in reinforcing a sense of belonging. As a multicultural women's network, Petek fosters mentorship, skill development and cultural exchange, promoting socio-economic empowerment among minority women. The network's independence from state funding further highlights the strength and sustainability of migrant-led initiatives.

#### 4.2.5 | Conclusion and Learnings

Elif's journey reflects insights that align with the experiences of the 46 MEs interviewed, particularly migrant women supporting each other. Her founding of Petek illustrates how solidarity among migrant women can powerfully drive personal and collective empowerment. Many interviewees described leveraging personal networks for emotional support, business opportunities and mentorship to overcome gender- and migration-related challenges (Aldrich and Zimmer 1986; Aldrich and Cliff 2003; Jack 2005).

Elif's case underscores the role of perseverance in facing discrimination—a recurrent theme among the women interviewed. Many reported overcoming similar forms of systemic bias by drawing on close community ties and shared cultural experiences, facilitating a sense of belonging, which enabled them to establish and grow successful businesses despite structural barriers (Ahl and Marlow 2020). Moreover, Elif's narrative highlights the vital role of migrant women in fostering inclusive and diverse EEs (Baughn et al. 2006). They create networks that contribute to socio-economic integration and empowerment by supporting one another. Such collective action—observed across interviews—involves business benefitting both their owners and broader communities through mentorship, advocacy and promoting diversity.

For policymakers, this case points to the need for accessible support systems capable of addressing the specific challenges faced by MEs. Practices that encourage diverse representation in local business communities, coupled with supportive regulatory frameworks, can enhance the inclusiveness of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Meanwhile, for practitioners, fostering inclusive networks that embrace diversity can provide the emotional and professional support necessary for MEs to thrive amidst adversity.

## 5 | Discussion

EEs are increasingly recognised as critical arenas for driving innovation, job creation and economic growth in diverse and rapidly evolving environments (Mason and Brown 2014). Within these ecosystems, MEs constitute a vital yet understudied group whose success depends not only on structural and economic conditions (Stam 2015; Jones et al. 2018) but also on emotional and social dimensions that have received limited scholarly attention (David et al. 2025). This study addressed this gap by exploring the role of belongingness—the fundamental psychological need for acceptance and connection—and its impact on MEs' connectedness (David et al. 2025) and embeddedness (Harima 2022) within local communities and EEs.

In the first case, Ilyas has developed strong communal bonds and trust-based networks over 30 years (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). Despite ongoing discrimination and limited integration into the mainstream German business community, Ilyas's adaptability—evident in strategies such as employing multilingual staff—and his leadership of informal networks like the 'Werbering Marxloh' exemplify how belongingness fosters connectedness and provides essential support

systems. His narrative highlights the migrant community's social ties as an informal 'insurance system' that buffers economic hardship and institutional exclusion (Kloosterman et al. 1999).

In the second case, Elif's trajectory demonstrates the transformative potential of belonging through formal institutional and professional networks. After initial exclusion and discrimination, she sought support from organisations such as the Chamber of Commerce, which enhanced her entrepreneurial knowledge and empowered her political advocacy (Rath and Kloosterman 2000).

Subsequently, Elif founded a multicultural women's network, turning personal adversity into collective empowerment. Her experience illustrates how belongingness—anchored in emotional resilience and formal connections—enables MEs to overcome systemic barriers and actively contribute to the broader EE.

Building on the results, a comparative analysis reveals common mechanisms and contextual nuances shaping belongingness within EEs. Ilyas and Elif mobilise different networks—informal/local to formal/institutional—to build resilient entrepreneurial paths amid discrimination. Whilst Ilyas's approach centres on neighbourhood solidarity and ethnic community trust, Elif's reflects multi-level mobilisation spanning local to regional spheres. Both translate psychological and social belonging into concrete actions: Ilyas through community leadership in marginalised areas, Elif through empowering migrant women and political advocacy. These contrasting but complementary paths illustrate that belongingness is place-dependent yet influenced by gendered experiences and institutional access.

To integrate these insights and support causal inference, this study proposes a conceptual framework synthesising three core dimensions of belongingness: (1) psychological belonging, (2) social network activation and (3) place-based commitment. These dimensions, grounded in empirical data, explain how MEs mobilise belongingness to build trust, activate social capital (Bourdieu 1986; Adler and Kwon 2002), and firmly anchor themselves within local EEs. These insights give rise to the following proposition:

P1: A strong sense of belonging within local communities enhances MEs' engagement in the EE, fostering active participation and proactive contributions to the local economy.

P2: Belongingness acts as a catalyst for connectedness and embeddedness by strengthening social networks essential for MEs' long-term survival and success, facilitating access to resources, collaboration and business growth through rootedness in the EE.

P3: Emotional and social support systems derived from belongingness help MEs overcome structural barriers by providing the resilience and trust necessary to navigate discrimination and challenges, thereby enhancing entrepreneurial experiences and outcomes.

Each proposition extends existing scholarship. P1 builds on research on local engagement and place attachment (Spigel 2017; Harima 2022; Sharafizad et al. 2022; David et al. 2025). P2 enhances embeddedness models grounded in network theory (Granovetter 1985; Kloosterman 2010) by emphasising the emotional foundations of social ties. P3 connects to studies on resilience and discrimination (Brzozowski 2019; Dheer 2018; Yeshi et al. 2024; Terstriep et al. 2025), highlighting the buffering role of emotional support.

Ultimately, this study advances a more holistic, human-centred understanding of ME, urging scholars and policymakers to recognise the emotional and social infrastructures underpinning entrepreneurial success. The findings affirm that MEs are not only economic actors but also social agents whose embeddedness in local communities fosters inclusive growth, innovation and social cohesion. Future research should investigate how belongingness interacts with structural opportunities across diverse migrant groups and local contexts further to elucidate the complex realities of entrepreneurship in pluralistic societies.

## 6 | Conclusion

In response to the research question, this study highlights the crucial role of belonging in MEs' engagement within EEs. By examining emotional and social dimensions of integration, it demonstrates how belongingness enhances social networks, trust and capital formation—all vital for entrepreneurial resilience. The case studies reveal that relational connections significantly influence MEs' capacity to thrive, particularly in diverse, challenging neighbourhoods. These insights advocate for holistic policy approaches addressing both economic and psychosocial needs.

While this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of belongingness in MEs' engagement with EEs, it has limitations. First, the geographical specificity of case studies may not fully capture diverse ME experiences across different contexts. Second, the temporal scope limits understanding of how emotional and psychological aspects of belonging evolve and affect long-term entrepreneurial success. Finally, while this study underscores the vital role of social and emotional connections in EEs, it falls short in fully exploring how these relational dimensions intersect with structural economic factors such as access to capital, market competition and regulatory policies.

### 6.1 | Future Research Directions

Responding to the above limitations offers several avenues for future research. First, future research should delve deeper into the intersections of the relational and structural dimensions of belongingness, aiming to develop more comprehensive and integrated frameworks that capture the complex realities MEs face within diverse EEs. Mixed method approaches combining qualitative insights with quantitative economic and policy data would prove particularly valuable. Comparative research across European contexts offers additional promising trajectories for contextualising findings within broader scholarship. Investigating how belonging and relational engagement unfold

across varying cultural, institutional and policy environments can reveal both context-specific and generalisable patterns.

A further direction involves examining the dynamic, bidirectional relationship between belonging and connectedness. Empirical evidence suggests that individuals experiencing initial exclusion actively seek social connections to cultivate inclusion. Future work should therefore explore how belongingness emerges through sustained relational engagement, considering how cultural, personal and situational factors shape diverse meanings and experiences of 'belonging'.

Building on these insights, advancing theoretical reflections on the interconnectedness of knowledge, language, affiliation, and belonging would significantly contribute to scholarly debates and practical applications. Developing nuanced conceptual models accounting for these overlapping dimensions can enhance the design of more inclusive and effective EEs.

### 6.2 | Policy Implications & Recommendations

From a policy perspective, these findings call for a paradigm shift from frameworks emphasising structural solutions—removing formal barriers and providing financial support—which, whilst necessary, prove insufficient alone. Without recognising emotional, symbolic and relational aspects of entrepreneurial engagement, policies risk perpetuating exclusion by neglecting psychological and social barriers limiting ecosystem participation.

We advocate moving beyond transactional, output-driven approaches toward relational, inclusive frameworks. This requires reimagining support programmes, incubators and partnerships to embed belongingness as a guiding principle. Policymakers should develop inclusive EEs, recognising emotional and social integration factors. Effective policies must foster trust, social ties and networking opportunities to build entrepreneurial resilience. Given the importance of family and cultural networks in MEs' success, interventions should strengthen informal support systems through community engagement, mentorship programmes and social capital expansion resources.

Policies must address unique challenges MEs face—discrimination, resource limitations and integration barriers—whilst providing culturally responsive business development services. Local governments can support MEs through financial incentives for community reinvestment and grants for community-based projects, fostering local engagement and innovation.

Achieving these objectives demands fostering inclusive narratives, ensuring diverse representation and establishing mechanisms for building trust and mutual respect within communities (Crenshaw 1989). Crucially, MEs' perspectives must be integrated into policy design to ensure interventions address lived realities.

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#### Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

## Peer Review

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/imig.70110>.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Appendix S1:** List of interviewees.