

Against all odds – migrant entrepreneurs in entrepreneurial ecosystems with constraints

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Abstract

Purpose – The study aims to explore the entrepreneurial agency, focusing on migrant entrepreneurs' ability to reshape societal structures and initiate endeavours despite limitations in entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs) with constraints.

Design/methodology/approach – Through 23 qualitative interviews in an EE with constraints and using a grounded theory-inspired abductive approach, the study uncovers coping mechanisms and responses to barriers and imitations and explores entrepreneurial agency within these EEs.

Findings – The findings show that migrant entrepreneurs overcome constraints through a bricolage approach involving seizing opportunities, leveraging family and friend networks, collaborating strategically, adapting and innovating. Moreover, they exhibit a strong “entrepreneurial gene”, displaying resilience and determination to succeed despite challenges.

Research limitations/implications – Interviewees' subjective perceptions and language barriers may bias the results due to the narrow spatial focus. Advancing the understanding of entrepreneurial agency in EEs with constraints helps practitioners design training programmes fostering adaptive capabilities and forward-thinking mindsets. At the same time, ecosystem actors can implement inclusive practices and strategies to mitigate regulatory hurdles, promote cultural competence and facilitate collaborative initiatives among entrepreneurs.

Originality/value – Delving into the entrepreneurial agency of migrant entrepreneurs reveals the importance of inclusive EEs in fully exploiting migrant entrepreneurs' economic and societal value.

Keywords Migrant entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurial agency, Entrepreneurial ecosystems, Constrained EEs, Bricolage, Opportunity-taking, Strategic cooperation, Entrepreneurial gene

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs) play a crucial role in fostering entrepreneurship (Wurth *et al.*, 2022; Malecki, 2018) by providing access to diverse forms of capital, skilled labour and infrastructure (Spigel, 2017). The topics around migrant entrepreneurs and inclusion are critical to the conversation about the role of EEs, as they challenge the notion that EEs are universally supportive. For example, the benefits of EEs are often unevenly distributed, particularly affecting marginalised groups (Neumeyer *et al.*, 2019). When included in EEs,



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migrant entrepreneurs bring unique perspectives that enhance competitiveness and societal benefits. However, in non-inclusive or constrained EEs, migrant entrepreneurs encounter significant barriers that hinder their success (Hameed *et al.*, 2023).

Constrained EEs refer to environments where entrepreneurs encounter limitations or barriers that hinder their ability to start, grow and scale businesses (Freiling, 2022; Guerrero and Wanjiru, 2021; Neumeyer *et al.*, 2019; Williams and Krasniqi, 2018). This may arise from the fact that EEs are often spatially constrained because they are geographically bound (Audretsch and Belitski, 2021). The concept of inclusive EEs (Zhao *et al.*, 2021) emphasises the need for accessibility and support for all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic background or ethnicity (David and Terstriep, 2023; Wurth *et al.*, 2022; Schäfer and Henn, 2018). In contrast, non-inclusive EEs (Hameed *et al.*, 2023) refer to environments that fail to provide equal opportunities and support for all entrepreneurs (Bolzani and Mizzau, 2019). The literature primarily emphasises the positive aspects of EEs, leaving a significant gap in understanding their constraints, especially concerning marginalised communities (Refai *et al.*, 2024).

This study aims to explore the coping strategies of migrant entrepreneurs within these constrained EEs, shedding light on how they navigate challenges and use their agency to reshape or resist their contexts. Consequently, migrant entrepreneurs often operate within institutional constraints, thus becoming underprivileged entrepreneurs (Gittins *et al.*, 2022). Entrepreneurial agency is the ability to reshape societal structures and initiate entrepreneurial endeavours, even in challenging circumstances (McMullen *et al.*, 2021). Purposeful action and strategic decision-making are deemed essential for entrepreneurs navigating complex situations, particularly outside supportive environments (Neumeyer *et al.*, 2019). Thus, this study investigates migrant entrepreneurs' responses to limited resources and opportunities, asking:

RQ1. How do migrant entrepreneurs use entrepreneurial agency to navigate challenges in EEs with constraints, ultimately reshaping and resisting these contexts?

Though being a heterogeneous group, the article applies the term "migrant entrepreneur" to refer to individuals with a migrant background engaging in business activities, encompassing recent migrants to those who have lived in the country of residence for several decades, as well as their descendants. Based on 23 semi-structured interviews, this qualitative study explores a representative EE with constraints. It aims to enhance scholarly understanding of potential factors shaping EEs with constraints, uncovering the multiplicity of challenges faced by migrant entrepreneurs and strategies for overcoming them, with a focus on entrepreneurial agency. The article proceeds as follows: Section 1 contextualises the study within theoretical frameworks on EEs and constrained contexts; Section 2 outlines the study's background and methodology; Section 3 presents and discusses the findings in the existing scientific discourse; and Section 6 (conclusion) addresses policy implications, acknowledges limitations and suggests future research directions.

2. Theoretical considerations

2.1 Migrant entrepreneurs' in entrepreneurial ecosystems with constraints

Entrepreneurs operate within socio-spatial and socio-political contexts (David and Schäfer, 2022; Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013). EEs, recognised as regional network-based agglomerations (Stam and van de Ven, 2021), facilitate entrepreneurial activities by providing diverse actors and resources. These ecosystems offer various forms of capital, support entities and skilled labour, fostering innovation-driven cultures (Spigel, 2017). EEs

are critical drivers of competitiveness, growth and broader societal benefits (Wurth *et al.*, 2022).

Research on inclusive EEs (Hameed *et al.*, 2023; Zhao *et al.*, 2021) emphasises the benefits of embracing diversity, particularly migrant entrepreneurs, to enhance system effectiveness. These entrepreneurs contribute unique perspectives and skills, fostering creativity, innovation and resilience (Schäfer and Henn, 2018; Solano *et al.*, 2022; Wurth *et al.*, 2022). However, disadvantage theory emphasises that EEs can impose significant constraints on migrant entrepreneurs due to economic downturns, regulatory hurdles and social barriers (Guerrero *et al.*, 2021; Neumeier *et al.*, 2019). According to scholars such as Bourdieu (1986), marginalised groups often lack the social, cultural, financial and human capital necessary for success, leading to what is known as constrained entrepreneurship among migrants (Gittins *et al.*, 2022). These constraints are not merely challenges but systemic barriers that create unequal opportunities for migrants, impacting their ability to access essential resources. Disadvantage theory further posits that migrants are frequently pushed into entrepreneurship as a result of the obstacles and limitations they encounter in the labour market of the host country.

Constrained entrepreneurship refers to the limitations imposed by regulatory barriers, resource scarcity and restricted market access (OECD/European Commission, 2023; David and Terstriep, 2023; Sithas and Surangi, 2021). These challenges extend beyond mere disadvantages, impacting opportunities for market access, networking and funding (Refai and McElwee, 2023). In addition, they contribute to social exclusion, detachment and feelings of not belonging (David and Terstriep, 2023; Gurău *et al.*, 2020; Rashid and Cepeda-García, 2020).

Discrimination remains a pervasive issue affecting various aspects of migrant entrepreneurs' businesses. Pinto *et al.* (2024), Freiling (2022) and Teixeira *et al.* (2007) highlight the enduring challenges arising from discriminatory practices, which impede individual aspirations and hinder the growth of migrant-led enterprises. Language barriers also play a significant role, affecting effective communication and ultimately business growth. Guerrero and Wanjiru (2021) illustrate the substantial impact of these barriers on migrant entrepreneurs' ability to thrive in their host countries' entrepreneurial landscapes.

Moreover, constraints also limit access to social capital and networks within EEs, influencing the formation of partnerships, recruitment processes and mentorship availability. Lassalle *et al.* (2020) demonstrate how restricted social capital contributes to the isolation of migrant entrepreneurs within EEs. Legal barriers related to immigration status and business initiation further complicate entrepreneurial endeavours. Solano *et al.* (2023) discuss the intricate challenges stemming from legal complexities that often hinder the initiation and growth of migrant-led businesses. Understanding these interrelated constraints through the lens of disadvantages theory is essential for formulating effective policies and interventions that foster more inclusive and supportive EEs for migrant entrepreneurs.

2.2 Migrants' entrepreneurial agency in entrepreneurial ecosystems with constraints

Entrepreneurial agency, as highlighted by Refai *et al.* (2024), is a crucial element in entrepreneurship, particularly in constrained contexts. It involves purposeful actions and strategic decision-making that enable entrepreneurs to overcome challenges (McMullen *et al.*, 2021). This concept emphasises their capacity to identify opportunities, manage risks and innovate, ultimately reshaping societal frameworks (*ibid.*). Entrepreneurial agency encompasses both individual and collective actions, as entrepreneurs collaborate with stakeholders to influence their business environment.

López and Neves (2020) suggest that entrepreneurs' perceptions of constraints can either motivate or hinder their responses. Brändle and Kuckertz (2023) link social class origins to entrepreneurial self-efficacy, indicating that early experiences can shape entrepreneurial beliefs. EEs with constraints underscore the significance of entrepreneurial agency, as entrepreneurs face numerous challenges threatening their operations and growth (Bolzani and Mizzau, 2019). To navigate these hurdles effectively, entrepreneurs leverage their agency to ensure the survival and success of their ventures, using multifaceted strategies.

The disadvantages theory is particularly relevant here, as it emphasises the structural barriers that immigrant entrepreneurs must navigate. These entrepreneurs adopt innovative problem-solving approaches and bricolage practices, creatively using available resources (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Griffin-El and Olabisi, 2024; Heilbrunn, 2019; Zapata Campos, 2024). Mateus and Sarkar (2024) identify various forms of bricolage, such as network/external, institutional, organisational, ideational, market and spatial bricolage, all of which may be evident in migrant entrepreneurs' coping strategies. In addition, strategic networking enables entrepreneurs to establish collaborative relationships and access valuable resources and insights (Yang and Leppäaho, 2023).

According to Ipek (2022), entrepreneurial agency can also manifest in advocacy and activism, allowing entrepreneurs to influence systemic changes that reduce regulatory burdens and social inequalities. Continuous learning and adaptation are integral to entrepreneurial agency, as entrepreneurs must stay informed about market trends, technological advancements and regulatory shifts (Verwaal *et al.*, 2022). Community engagement helps mitigate social barriers, fostering positive relationships and solidifying the entrepreneur's role within the local socio-economic fabric (Sommer, 2020). Diversifying resources in terms of funding and partnerships ensures resilience against constraints (Möller and McCaffrey, 2023). Cultural competence is particularly vital in diverse contexts, where understanding and respecting cultural nuances can facilitate smoother interactions with stakeholders and contribute to entrepreneurial success (Überbacher *et al.*, 2015).

In the context of migrant entrepreneurship, the literature explores how these businesses navigate challenges in EEs with constraints and establish themselves in the market despite external adversities. This exploration examines how resource voids and the absence of certain types of capital (Portes and Martinez, 2019; Turkina and Thai, 2013) can be addressed through the mixed and multifocal embedding of migrant entrepreneurs, even in transnational contexts (Ram *et al.*, 2017; Solano *et al.*, 2022; Yamamura and Lassalle, 2022; Gomez *et al.*, 2020; Kloosterman *et al.*, 1999), or through their resilient attitudes and actions (Vershina and Rodgers, 2023; David *et al.*, 2023).

Table 1 summarises the key constructs of the characteristics of EEs with constraints and the actions in entrepreneurial agency identified in the literature.

The following theoretical framework consolidates the literature on EEs with constraints and the entrepreneurial agency of migrant entrepreneurs as a response to it. EEs with constraints are characterised by social barriers, institutional limitations and discrimination, each encompassing various aspects (see Figure 1). Social barriers, for instance, manifest as limited networking opportunities, restricted access to resources or a lack of partnerships. As a further influencing factor, institutional constraints become evident in regulatory barriers such as "legal status", which might inhibit entrepreneurial activities. The second construct of the framework, entrepreneurial agency, is considered vital for enabling migrant entrepreneurs to navigate and overcome these constraints. It comprises networking and community engagement, allowing access to relevant resources and a bricolage attitude (i.e. seizing opportunities, using what is available). However, more abstract aspects, such as the

Table 1. Identified theoretical constructs

Characteristics of EEs with constraints		Actions in entrepreneurial agency	
Construct	Authors	Construct	Authors
Social barriers	Bolzani and Mizzau (2019); David and Terstriep (2023); Guerrero and Wanjiru (2021); Gurău <i>et al.</i> (2020); Lassalle <i>et al.</i> (2020); Neumeyer <i>et al.</i> (2019); Rashid and Cepeda-García (2020)	Networks/ community engagement	İpek (2022); McMullen <i>et al.</i> (2021); Möller and McCaffrey (2023); Sommer (2020); Yang and Leppäaho (2023)
Institutional constraints	Neumeyer <i>et al.</i> (2019); Refai and McElwee (2023); Solano <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Bricolage	Baker and Nelson (2005); Griffin-El and Olabisi (2024); Heilbrunn (2019); McMullen <i>et al.</i> (2021); Mateus and Sarkar (2024); Zapata Campos (2024)
Discrimination	Freiling (2022); Pinto <i>et al.</i> (2024); Teixeira <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Entrepreneurial gene Cultural adaption/ multifocal embeddedness	López and Neves (2020); McMullen <i>et al.</i> (2021); Verwaal <i>et al.</i> (2022) Gomez <i>et al.</i> (2020); Kloosterman <i>et al.</i> (1999); Ram <i>et al.</i> (2017); Solano <i>et al.</i> (2022); Yamamura and Lassalle (2022); Überbacher <i>et al.</i> (2015)

Source: Authors' own work

“entrepreneurial gene”, are also evident in entrepreneurs’ risk management and identifying opportunities, closely related to adapting to the “new”, including cultural adaption.

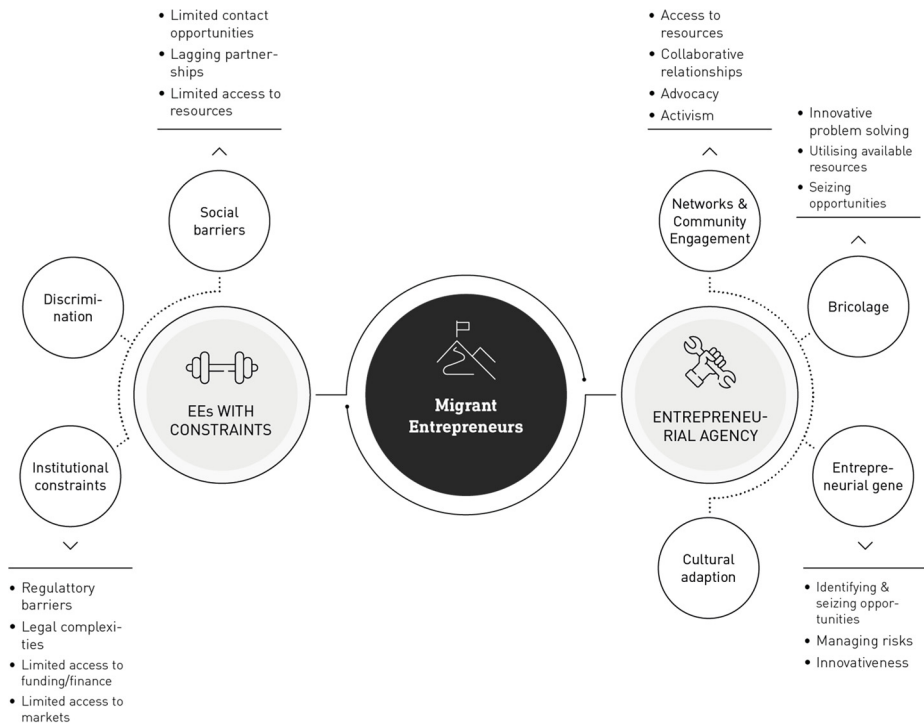
3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

While this study is driven by deductive reasoning based on the theoretically derived framework (see Figure 1), it uses an exploitative abductive approach (Bamberger, 2018; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012; Vila-Henninger *et al.*, 2022). By iterating between established knowledge (deductive reasoning) and insights derived from qualitative data (inductive reasoning) to investigate entrepreneurial agency EEs with constraints, abduction is particularly well-suited for revealing less-explored factors.

One such factor, explained by the disadvantage theory, is that migrant entrepreneurs often face structural barriers such as economic constraints, regulatory challenges and limited access to social and cultural capital. The theory suggests that these systemic barriers create unequal opportunities for migrants in EEs, often pushing them into entrepreneurship as a survival mechanism rather than a purely opportunity-driven endeavour (Gittins *et al.*, 2022; Bourdieu, 1986). These constraints are not just challenges but fundamental disadvantages that affect migrant entrepreneurs’ ability to access resources and opportunities in their host countries.

Given that “EEs with constraints” is a nascent scholarly field and, as yet, evidence on how migrant entrepreneurs deploy entrepreneurial agency within these contexts remains inconclusive, advocates for abductive reasoning. Such an approach facilitates a concurrent analysis of how empirical data supports or demands revisions to existing theories



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 1. Theoretical framework

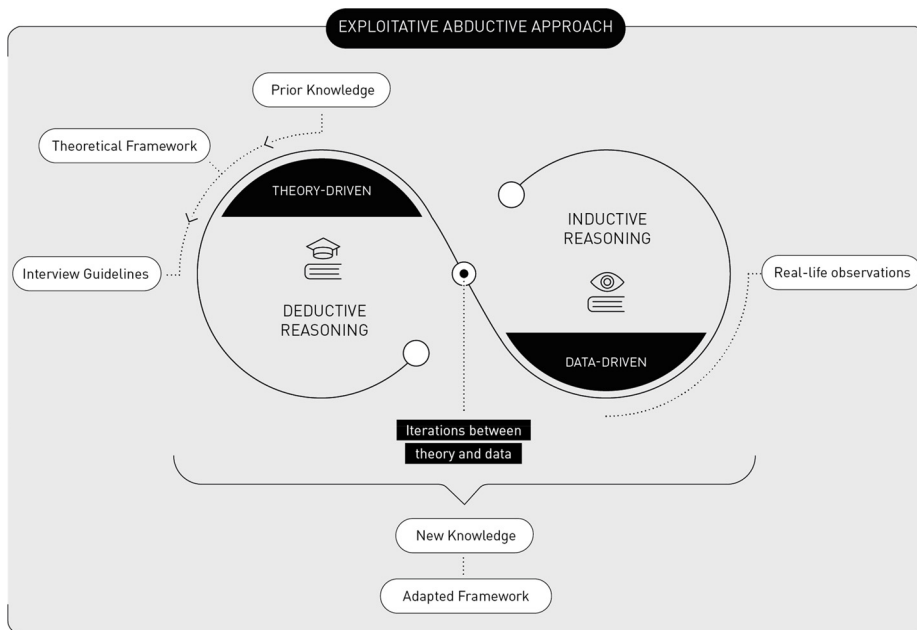
(Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Kennedy and Thornberg, 2018). It entails identifying novel ideas and explanations by uncovering phenomena, events and assumed functions or features that current knowledge fails to explain adequately. As Ann Langley suggests, “both deduction and induction are intertwined in a cyclical process. This is referred to as abduction, which involves linking empirical observations with theoretical constructs” (Gehman *et al.*, 2017: 297). Consistent with Bamberger (2018), our approach can be characterised as exploitative, as it seeks to develop provisional explanations grounded in data. These explanations are closely tied to existing theoretical frameworks while contributing to generating new theoretical insights.

Moreover, rooted in social constructionism (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009), which underscores how individuals construct (social) actions through everyday interactions (Phillips, 2023) and derive meaning through language (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2002), this study strongly emphasises amplifying the voices of migrant entrepreneurs to delve into their day-to-day experiences and the coping strategies they use.

Focusing on a single city in Western Germany recognises the context-specific nature of EEs (Isenberg, 2010; Spigel and Harrison, 2018), allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the factors shaping entrepreneurs' connections within the local ecosystem. This choice allows for a thorough examination of the unique factors influencing connections among migrant entrepreneurs in the local ecosystem, highlighting the city's socio-economic

conditions, institutional frameworks and cultural nuances that shape entrepreneurial behaviour. The insights from this case study can be adapted to other EEs with similar constraints, informing strategies tailored to specific challenges and opportunities. However, reliance on a single case study has limitations, as findings may not apply universally due to the unique characteristics of each EE. This underscores the need for further research in varied contexts to validate and extend the findings. Future studies could involve comparative analyses across multiple regions to better understand how different factors affect entrepreneurial agency and success, contributing to a more robust theoretical framework and practical guidance for fostering entrepreneurship in constrained environments. This approach aligns with the contextuality inherent in abductive reasoning, which relies on the particularities of the situation. Thus, a single case study (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2018) is essential at this preliminary research stage.

As depicted in Figure 2, our study unfolds as a cyclical process (Kennedy and Thornberg, 2018), commencing with abductive reasoning grounded in authors' professional experiences, an extensive literature review and the deduced theoretical framework model informing the interview guidelines, followed by intervening data-driven inductive reasoning. Authors' in-depth knowledge of multiple theories is deemed necessary in abduction to identify what "is missing or anomalous" (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012: 173). Furthermore, the integration of "systematic combining" as an iterative process of interaction between theory and data, as discussed by Dubois and Gadde (2002), enhances the rigour of the abductive process.



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 2. The research process of abductive reasoning

3.2 *Sampling and data collection*

The study aimed to collect data that provide insights into migrant entrepreneurs' perceptions of the EE and actions within entrepreneurial agencies. Considering that migrant entrepreneurs are among the "hard-to-reach" survey groups (Willis *et al.*, 2014), our sample did not mean to be representative. Instead, purposive sampling (Campbell *et al.*, 2020; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Schreier, 2018) was used to select information-rich cases.

Various purposive sampling strategies are available, including homogeneous, heterogeneous, snowball or theoretical sampling (cf. Patton, 2015; Flick, 2018). For this study, we opted for cases within a homogeneous demographic, wherein entrepreneurs share a common reality characterised by the same EE, local entity and migration background. However, the sample was heterogeneous in terms of generational attributes, gender, place of birth, sector affiliation and social strata. The selection process involved on-site examinations, direct engagement and recommendations from initial participants using snowball sampling. As a result, 23 in-depth interviews with migrant entrepreneurs in the city were conducted, adhering to ethical standards and securing informed consent. The sampling of participants persisted until the authors ascertained that theoretical saturation had been achieved. At this point, additional interviews provided only marginal incremental insights (Eisenhardt, 1989), and no new themes emerged (Corbin and Strauss, 2015); instead, further interviews disclosed recurring perceptions of the EE and patterns of actions. However, it is important to acknowledge some voices or experiences may have been excluded due to the snowball sampling method and the sample size which can lead to underrepresentation of certain groups.

The semi-structured interviews at the entrepreneurs' premises – conducted in German and lasting 40–90 min – were guided by theoretically informed interview guidelines, which had been pre-tested with three entrepreneurs. These guidelines, structured according to the theoretical framework, comprised three sections:

- (1) socio-demographic data;
- (2) entrepreneurial activity; and
- (3) entrepreneurial ecosystem.

They included 17 primary questions and 55 detailed follow-up questions, most open-ended, aside from those about socio-demographic data. For example, asking for "any particular challenges during the founding phase" was intended to understand whether the entrepreneurs perceived constraints within the EE hampering their entrepreneurial journey. The question "[w]hat was the most important motivation for you to start your business?" was designed to elicit insights into the constructs of "entrepreneurial gene" and "cultural adaptation/multifocal embeddedness". As these examples illustrate, the constructs and their dimensions were examined indirectly rather than through direct inquiry. This proceeding aligns with the principles of social constructivism, which emphasises understanding phenomena through the lens of the subject's experiences and perspectives (Phillips, 2023). Throughout the interviews and subsequent translations, the authors critically reflected on their positions and potential influence on the interviewees and the resulting data (Flick, 2018). To ensure the reliability of the findings, the authors consistently cross-validated the interview outputs with participant observations and oral histories. This self-reflective approach aimed to minimise potential research biases arising from the authors' backgrounds (Chenail, 2014).

To triangulate our primary data, we also build on an extensive set of secondary data from internal and external sources, including firm-level data from websites and field notes (Magnani and Gioia, 2023; Stoyanov and Stoyanova, 2022). The interviews were recorded,

transcribed *verbatim* and anonymised with unique identification numbers (IDs). For an overview of participants, see [Table 2](#).

3.3 Data analysis

The study used an abductive approach to thematic analysis ([Timmermans and Tavory, 2022](#); [Thompson, 2022](#); [Vila-Henninger et al., 2022](#)), well-established in EE and migrant entrepreneurship research as is evidenced in prior studies ([Lassalle et al., 2020](#); [Heilbrunn, 2019](#)). Thematic analysis has gained popularity as a method for analysing qualitative data, as it identifies patterns within the raw data and organises them into coherent and meaningful themes ([Braun and Clarke, 2019](#); [Braun and Clarke, 2006](#); [Campbell et al., 2021](#)). Following the abductive approach outlined by [Dubois and Gadde \(2002\)](#) and [Vila-Henninger et al. \(2022\)](#), the authors began by transcribing the data and familiarising themselves with it (Step 1). This initial step was followed by abductive coding (Step 2), which commenced with identifying themes derived from the theoretical framework upon which the deductive codebook (Step 2a) was developed. A consensual coding approach ([Kuckertz and Mandl, 2016](#)) was taken, in which the authors independently coded the data sections using MAXQDA, followed by a consensus meeting to discuss and resolve discrepancies in the coding. Adhering to [Dubois and Gadde's \(2002\)](#) recommendation to remain open and responsive to the data, the process transitioned to an inductive logic as empirical insights emerged that were not captured by the deductive codebook.

Table 2. Participants

ID	Sector	Business location	CoC	Gener-ation	Gender	Age (years)	Residency (years)
III/A1	Event management	District III	Turkey	1	Female	55	52
I/F1	Electrical appliances	District I	Turkey	2	Male	58	Born in GER
I/H2	Travel agency	District I	Turkey	1	Male	52	50
III/A2	Bakery	District III	Turkey	1	Male	47	27
III/A3	Food services	District III	Turkey (Kurd)	1	Male	36	5
III/A4	Industry	District III	Turkey	1	Male	50	50
III/A5	Food services	District III	Afghanistan	1	Male	48	31
V/AE1	Crafts	District V	Turkey	1	Male	46	30
V/AE2	Garage	District V	Turkey	1	Male	39	21
I/W4	Human health	District I	Turkey	1	Female	41	11
VI/K1	Transport	District VI	Turkey	2	Male	47	Born in GER
I/13	Security service	District I	Lebanon	1	Male	54	46
VII/S1	Food services	District VII	Syria	1	Male	23	9
V/AE3	Cosmetics	District V	Turkey (Kurd)	1	Female	33	22
B1	Tech	Remote	India	1	Male	28	4
I/15	Recruiting	District I	Palestine/Lebanon	2	Male	29	Born in GER
VII/S2	Café	District VII	Turkey	2	Male	46	Born in GER
VII/S3	Tailor	District VII	Syria	1	Male	44	7
VII/S4	Food services	District VII	Palestine/Israel	1	Male	47	3
VII/S5	Grocery store	District VII	Turkey/Iran	2	Male	48	Born in GER
B2	Tech	Remote	Turkey	2	Male	41	Born in GER
B3	Tech	Remote	Iran	1	Female	40+	14
B4	Tech	Remote	Ghana	2	Female	28	Born in GER

Source: Authors' own work

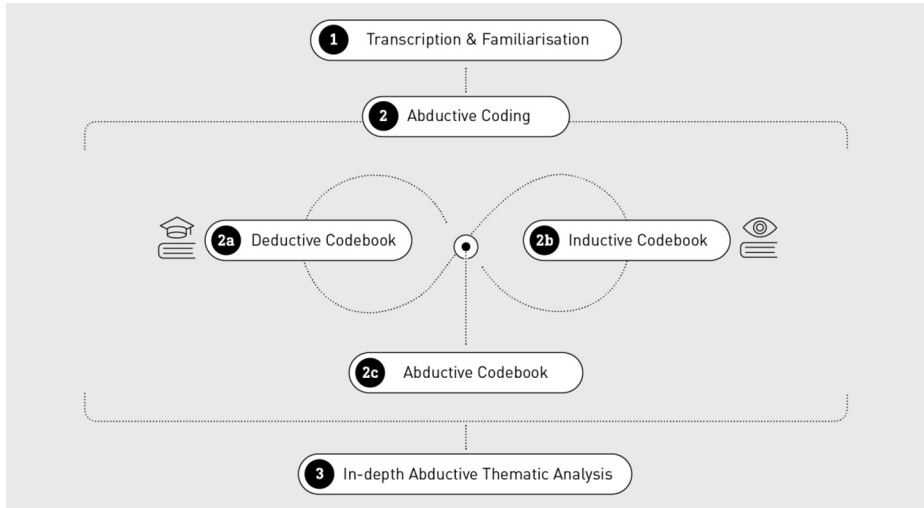
Further consensus meetings led to the elaboration of an inductive codebook (Step 2b). For example, the data showed that migrant entrepreneurs explicitly seek networking with non-migrant entrepreneurs. This iterative process, involving moments of deduction and induction, culminated in developing the abductive codebook (Step 2c; see [Appendix 1](#) and [2](#) for the coding scheme and an extract from the codebook), which the authors subsequently used to re-examine the data. Finally, an in-depth abducting thematic analysis was conducted ([Figure 3](#)).

The process identified 287 excerpts representing seven themes. The quotes were translated into English and back-translated to German, maintaining consistency with the original statements. Research notes, including observations and information from company websites, were incorporated to contextualise interviewees' narratives.

4. Findings

4.1 Data overview of migrant entrepreneurs and the contained context

To better understand the constrained context, we initially analysed the distribution of foreign residents and migrant entrepreneurs across the five districts we investigated before conducting interviews. These districts were chosen due to their higher foreign population and significant presence of migrant entrepreneurs. Situated in a North Rhine-Westphalian city with a population of approximately 600,000 and a notable industrial history in coal and steel, our study focuses on five districts known for their sizeable non-German population and migrant entrepreneurship. The region has transitioned towards knowledge-intensive industries, with migration dating back to the 1950s when guest workers settled in the Ruhr region, contributing to a diverse population spanning multiple generations. Recent additions include late repatriates, EU migrants and refugees, including those from Ukraine, in 2022. As of 31 December 2022, out of the total 593,489 inhabitants, 114,069 (19.2%) were foreigners, and 66,862 (11.3%) held dual citizenship. This foreign population proportion



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 3. Abductive thematic analysis

exceeds the state average of North Rhine-Westphalia by almost two percentage points. In addition, 38.3% of residents have immigration and refugee backgrounds, although comparable data for self-employed individuals or entrepreneurs are unavailable. The district profiles exhibit significant variations in the proportions and compositions of individuals with foreign and dual citizenship across the five examined city districts.

The proportion of non-Germans in the city is 19.2%, varying across districts from 19.8% (District VII) to 33.2% (District I). Similarly, the proportion of residents with dual citizenship ranges from 10.9% (District III) to 16.6% (District V), with a citywide share of 11.3%. Districts I and VI notably have shares approximately five percentage points higher than the other districts. Among the three most common nationalities, Turkish (13.4%), Polish (11.3%) and Syrian (9.6%) residents dominate among non-Germans and dual citizens citywide, with rankings varying based on the differentiation. Syrians constitute the highest proportion among non-Germans at 13.7%, followed by Turkish (12.6%) and Polish (5.9%) nationals. Polish residents lead among dual citizens at 20.6%, ahead of Turkish residents (14.9%). Syrians represent only 2.5% in this category due to their shorter duration of stay. Notably, the proportion of Polish residents holding “only” a Polish passport is slightly higher than that of Ukrainian residents.

As of mid-August 2023, there were 12,322 self-employed individuals with foreign passports aged 18–64 in the city, constituting about 14.9% of the total foreign population in this age group. The self-employment rate is likely higher, considering not all individuals in this age group are reported as employed. Nonetheless, it exceeds the overall self-employment rate in North Rhine-Westphalia, which was 8.6% in 2020. Polish entrepreneurs rank first at 13.1%, followed by Turkish (11.2%), Syrian (5.3%), Romanian (4.4%) and Dutch (3.9%) entrepreneurs, together comprising over a third of all foreign entrepreneurs. Polish and Turkish entrepreneurs account for nearly a quarter of the total.

4.2 Manifestations of entrepreneurial ecosystems with constraints

In this section, we delve into the sense of belonging, collaborations, affiliations and networking within the EE, examining interactions with other actors in the EE and institutions, including value chains and relationship structures.

4.2.1 Social barriers and segregation. EEs are often portrayed as hubs for innovation and growth (Wurth *et al.*, 2022). However, they are not closed systems but are embedded in a social environment of diverse actors (Brown and Mason, 2017) and a broader socio-spatial context (David and Schäfer, 2022) from which they draw and to which they contribute. Interviews indicate that the segregation experienced by entrepreneurs in adulthood, leading to feelings of exclusion, often begins in their early education years, as outlined in what follows. Social barriers, as nuances of segregation, echo struggles beginning in education and teaching entrepreneurship. In this vein, a Turkish salesman recalled: *After primary school, I went to secondary school, which was disappointing because I was meant to attend a comprehensive school. Unfortunately, nobody paid attention to this issue. Since I had spent my entire childhood there, it was evident to me and everyone else that I would continue living where I had grown up. This largely influenced my future life.* (ID: I/F1).

Such segregation tendencies and social barriers extend beyond the dichotomies of Germans versus migrants to neighbourhoods with distinct migrant groups, impacting access to opportunities. A Turkish baklava producer surrounded by Arabic and Syrian counterparts underscores patterns of exclusion: *Here on this street, I'm the only Turkish Kurd. All the others around me are Arabic and Syrian. They say we are all brothers, but when you do not speak Arabic, they do not accept you as one of their kind* (ID: III/A3).

Several migrant entrepreneurs expressed a feeling of segregation as a feeling of not belonging to the society, a kind of alienation that impacts their connection in general and to the EE, making them feel marginalised. For example, a Turkish female entrepreneur recounts facing severe bullying during the early days of migrating to Germany, highlighting the challenges of being among the first arrivals: *We were among the first [Turks] to come to Germany, and it was a real struggle. I've experienced severe bullying; I skipped school a lot out of fear because I was physically attacked by German students [. . .] I felt isolated and not being part of the community. This is what has remained until today – a feeling of not being good enough as an entrepreneur* (ID: III/A1). This sense of being an outsider transcends educational experiences, extending to professional settings where subtle prejudices may contribute to a context burdened by biases. A Turkish entrepreneur born in Germany reported resentment in crucial situations: *I don't know if it's because of my appearance or Turkish surname, but in certain crucial situations, you feel certain resentments. You sense it!* (ID: I/F1). A second-generation Palestine entrepreneur posited, *Germany does not value what I do [as an entrepreneur]. I will always be a refugee from Palestine. I invest my money in Dubai and Turkey meanwhile. Apart from that, I pay high taxes here. Is this not enough?* (ID: I/15).

These sentiments also extend within migrant communities, as individuals may struggle to fit into perceived cultural identities, affecting interactions and opportunities but also access to resources: *So, I'm not the "right" Turk, especially there. There's a certain certainty in Turkey that I just don't possess. It's not in my mentality* (ID: I/F1).

4.2.2 Institutional constraints. Concerning EEs' formal institutions (e.g. economic development agencies or chambers of commerce), migrant entrepreneurs encounter difficulties accessing institutional support. Migrant entrepreneurs' voiced that their practical expertise and experiences are often overlooked and that they are not represented in these institutions, resulting in disparities in accessing crucial support systems. *As a migrant entrepreneur, I often feel invisible within these [formal] institutions. There are only Germans, leaving us without representation. If I knew there was someone with the same cultural background, I think my issues would be addressed better*, posited a Kurdish entrepreneur in food services (III/A3). Likewise, an Indian tech entrepreneur (ID: B1) claims the German EE to be *closed migrants*. Despite efforts to engage with entities like the city council and the economic development agency, targeted support remains elusive, perpetuating their challenges. A Turkish entrepreneur's rejection of a business location due to her Turkish background exemplifies as follows: *So when I was looking for a location [. . .], I was rejected without even having an appointment for a viewing when they heard my Turkish name* (ID: III/A1).

The imbalance extends to regulatory barriers and bureaucratic complexities inhibiting entrepreneurial support, with lengthy procedures such as visa acquisition significantly delaying entrepreneurial initiatives. An Indian tech entrepreneur highlighted the nine-month struggle to obtain a visa, emphasising the need for more efficient processes and multilingual assistance: *I was working after studying for 1.5 years in a startup first in Germany. I left the company, and it took me nine months to get my visa to start my business. Nine months, I had to survive somehow. I could not work somewhere else, as the visa depends on the job and the company you tell them you work for [. . .]* (ID: B1). Likewise, a Kurdish entrepreneur posited: *When I call, it's not easy even during the phone call. I want to make my residence permit indefinite. I've been trying for a year* (ID: III/A3). Both examples underscore that local EE business development institutions are difficult to access and lack capacities to assist. The underrepresentation of minority groups in the institutional context leads to a lack of knowledge and information.

A female entrepreneur from Ghana emphasised the importance of awareness and knowledge sharing within minority communities. She narrated: *Even my black sisters have never heard of it [the support offered]. They're like: Does Germany have pots where they distribute money? And I think I live here and don't even know it myself* (ID: B4).

In addition, despite entrepreneurs' ambitions, governmental support remains limited, with financial assistance sparse and bureaucratic complexities hindering progress. When starting his business, a second-generation Turkish/Iranian grocery owner recounted the lack of financial support from the government and the city: *Financial support from the government or the city, zero. I've submitted numerous applications, had several phone calls, and had no chance* (ID: VII/S2). Existing grants often overlook sole proprietors. Despite available counselling services from bodies such as the chamber of commerce, these services remain underused due to low awareness.

4.2.3 Discrimination. Also, interviewees regularly broached the topic of discrimination in the EE. A Kurdish entrepreneur describes discrimination during a chamber of commerce exam, highlighting the impact of societal biases on EE endeavours (ID: III/A3): *We were all foreigners during the exam, and none of us passed. Before entering the room where the exam was supposed to take place, we were asked what we were doing there and if we had gotten lost.* On the contrary, a second-generation tech entrepreneur with Turkish roots experienced a form of "positive" discrimination: *I was told that I don't look Turkish, and even though I am Turkish, I am well-integrated and a good entrepreneur* (ID: B2). A Kurdish female entrepreneur pondered how Germany treated her: *My father and I have finally done everything to get recognition here. We earned here, paid taxes, reinvested, and yet we were always Kurds, Turks, never successful entrepreneurs in the eyes of the Germans.*

An Iranian female doctor from an entrepreneurial family runs a medical practice and has founded several tech start-ups in the medical field. She reported hearing from colleagues that she has too few employees and is probably being subsidised by the state. *I've heard them trying to say something indirectly, but what hurts me the most is that, as a migrant woman, I've worked so hard here and provided opportunities for my employees and their families. None of that is recognised* (ID: B3).

4.2.4 Summary of the analysed constrained context. The interviews with migrant entrepreneurs unveil a complex landscape marked by persistent challenges in the constrained context of the portrayed EE. The struggles, from education to entrepreneurship, depict an EE with constraints. Societal biases, social barriers and discrimination are evident, such as business location rejections based on names and cultural backgrounds. This extends to neighbourhood dynamics, influencing access to opportunities and perpetuating exclusion and segregation. Efforts towards inclusive collaboration face resistance, leading to (self-) segregation and hindering diversity within the EE.

Moreover, migrant entrepreneurs encounter obstacles in obtaining representation within institutions such as chambers of commerce, with their unique experiences often overlooked and faced with regulatory hurdles. Limited support from governmental bodies, bureaucratic complexities and difficulties securing appointments or essential documents hinder their progress. The imbalance extends to regulatory barriers, where lengthy procedures, such as visa acquisition, significantly delay entrepreneurial initiatives. The interviews underscore that local EE business development institutions are inaccessible and unwilling to assist. Existing grants often do not readily support sole proprietors, and misunderstandings about eligibility criteria create additional obstacles.

4.3 Entrepreneurial coping strategies to overcome challenges in the constrained context

Findings indicate that migrant entrepreneurs' coping strategies manifest in strategic networks and community engagement, bricolage and "entrepreneurial gene" and leveraging migrant backgrounds, presented in the following.

4.3.1 Strategic networks and community engagement. Echoing findings in the literature (Yang and Leppäaho, 2023), entrepreneurs often leverage strategic networks of family and friends to overcome barriers. These networks act as facilitators, providing social, financial and human capital. For instance, a Turkish entrepreneur facing difficulty finding a business location due to her migrant background sought help from a German acquaintance, who, being her client, contacted various property owners on her behalf, vouching for her credibility and securing a space for her business: *Shortly after our conversation, I found a letter in my mailbox from a person, including details about this location where we are currently sitting and two others. But, I must say, it was quite challenging* (ID: III/A1).

When asked how he managed the start-up phase and the daily business, a Turkish car mechanic described his trust in the family business: *My brother-in-law is my partner; he has been in the profession for 30 years. Therefore, without his support, I cannot do anything* (ID: V/AE2). In this line, a female Kurdish cosmetician remembers being neglected by the local bank when searching for a financial source: *One colleague who borrowed me money told me that I could repay him in three months. Also, as I was uncertain, my uncle registered the business, and I decided to be officially employed by him for the time being in the initial phase* (ID: V/AE3). In addition, a Syrian tailor who just started a business reported: *My brothers also, my siblings. Each contributed a bit, like 50 or 100 euros* (ID: VII/S3). *I financed everything myself with my son-in-law, who is a doctor but who works here at the weekends when he is not working in the hospital*, a Turkish-Iranian grocery owner reported (ID: VII/S5). Hence, family support has become evident as another relevant strategy in migrant entrepreneurs' response to institutional constraints, where small contributions have been crucial for survival, rent payments and machinery purchases but concerning consultation. A female entrepreneur sought the assistance of her family when it came to developing a financial plan: *Writing a financial plan: I received support from my family, both financially and partially from the bank. Additionally, a close German friend of mine helped me with the concept we had to write for the bank* (ID: III/A1). Another entrepreneur narrated how he coped with institutional constraints when financing her business: *So I tried to set up my business. Unfortunately, I lacked any financial support. So, I borrowed money from friends and relatives and then paid it off in instalments* (ID: V/AE3).

In addition to family and friend networks, some entrepreneurs tap into further strategic networks with fellow business owners, supporting each other in their ventures. In this context, a car mechanic narrated: *In the neighbourhood, we collaborate with Audi and BMW. If they don't have time to replace a windshield, they send the car to us* (ID: V/AE2). A restaurant owner added: *We have many restaurants and diners here [in the quarter], but we recommend each other. We exchange information. Before starting my own business, I spoke with the others here to understand how things work* (ID: III/A5). The travel agency owner remembered the beginning of his cooperation with his co-founder: *We founded the company together with Fatih, investing €150 each, because we didn't know where the journey would take us. We founded the travel agency cooperation in 2016. That was sometime in September, and by the end of 2016, we already had over 250 travel agencies joining us* (ID: I/H2).

Moreover, it became apparent that migrant entrepreneurs' community engagement manifests in self-organising. A Turkish-origin entrepreneur recounts the establishment of her association for self-employed women, initiated in collaboration with six other Turkish women and further narrates: *Before the pandemic, we were almost 100 people. We all have a*

migrant background, a very diverse group and a colourful variety. It's nice, very much like a family (ID: III/A1). Community engagement also extends beyond the own business as a female migrant from tech-entrepreneur explained: *I am involved in an initiative where we are active in primary schools with a high number of migrants, and perhaps one out of a hundred children goes on to attend grammar school. So, I would say, based on the people I know [. . .], either they lack the language skills to pursue higher education, or their parents aren't pushing for it. They enter society with limited education [. . .]. So, they open a kiosk, drive a taxi, or start a restaurant – all businesses (ID: B3).*

4.3.2 *Bricolage and entrepreneurial gene.* Interviews point to a bricolage practice of migrant entrepreneurs as a further coping strategy. It can be viewed as the capability to reach the target by taking alternative trajectories, including “thinking beyond”, “alternative problem-solving” and opportunity taking. For instance, a second-generation Turkish entrepreneur recalled that he detoured when he did not get into the desired school to pursue the intended career and business training: *Yes, but that doesn't matter. After secondary school, I attended the School for Metal and Technology. There, I obtained the intermediate school leaving certificate. Right after that, I started my apprenticeship in Monheim and here in the Rhineland. After completing the apprenticeship, I returned to this city, attended trade school for two years, completed it, and then went to the University (ID: I/F1).* Another Palestine entrepreneur working in recruitment in the second generation described a similar way of reaching his educational paths: *And then I started working, dropped out of school, but had my university entrance qualification and began a dual study program—Bachelor of Arts in Fitness Economics (ID: I/I5).*

In addition, seizing opportunities as they arose served as a coping strategy. An Iranian doctor reported: *Yes, after completing my training and specialisation, I had my first venture at the age of 30, which involved taking over a specialised medical practice in one of the most challenging neighbourhoods in this area, right in the northern part of the city. Now, it is a large practice, the laryngologist-centre in this area (ID: B3).*

On top of networks/community engagement and bricolage, qualitative data analysis indicates that the intrinsic drive to socially ascend and achieve social mobility paired with the so-called “entrepreneurial gene” emerged as a motivational factor in overcoming constraints. In this line, an Afghan restaurant owner describes his motivation for starting a business as follows: *Entrepreneurship is probably also somewhat in my nature. I can't see myself as a working-class child [. . .]. Independence means nothing other than taking responsibility independently, and that was the case for me (ID: III/A5).* In addition, the Palestine entrepreneur reported: *The kick factor is building something. How can you make a cent out of nothing? Building something is, of course, related to status; let' be true. One wants a different and higher status in society, especially as someone with a migrant background (ID: I/I5).*

Another Indian tech entrepreneur narrated this entrepreneurial journey: *Of the last eight years since I have been working, I was working either at a startup or for my own. Now, this is my fourth startup – two of them failed miserably [. . .]. All of them were, on the one hand, in health, wellness, and fitness, and on the other hand, in IA, emotion tracking, etc. This one comes from a personal experience; I am personally a cancer survivor, and after that, I had to learn a lot of physical education from scratch when I saw the problem (ID: B1).* The intrinsic motivation for entrepreneurship was also described by a Turkish event food provider who reopened several times and never gave up: *Yes, for me, it's pretty much about the personal aspect. I can't just work for someone. It led me to, let's say, become self-employed because it's essential for me that one not only looks a bit ahead but also much further (ID: VII/S1).*

In this context, a Turkish industrial entrepreneur stated: *I believe that this inner drive is incredibly powerful, propelling someone forward, and I think it will change at some point, somewhere along the way. This inner drive to create something is essential. An entrepreneur must wake up every morning and think, "Today, money must be earned, and costs must be covered". However, it is ultimately a motivation. One must have that vision and energy to try something new and take risks* (ID: III/A5).

4.3.3 *Leveraging socio-cultural migrant backgrounds.* Finally, some entrepreneurs reported leveraging their socio-cultural migrant background to gain business development advantages or overcome hurdles. These experiences can be attributed to their learning, adaptability and cultural competence. In this vein, a Turkish bakery owner pictured: *If I can't find any skilled workers here, I sometimes bring in employees from Turkey, and if they don't have residence status, I have them placed in a temporary employment agency in Poland and bring them in from Poland* (ID: III/A2). In the context of customers, a Turkish entrepreneur running a travel agency stated: *So, I have the advantage that I can speak German and Turkish. I understand both customers' and Turkish hotels' needs and how we can lease or provide that from German parties. Therefore, new business models are constantly emerging, and they are also very interested in us because we can explain to them much better how, for example, they need to present themselves in the German market* (ID: I/H2). Finally, a Turkish entrepreneur selling electrical appliances remembered his relationship building with China: *I had a colleague in Turkey. He was in touch with a Chinese woman who was working in a coffee factory at that time, and she got in touch with me. She introduced me to China because I just hired her for a fee. So, it sounds silly, but it's a common practice to have someone guide you there. You won't manage in China on your own; it's not possible, not even with English. She accompanied me the entire week I was there, translating and arranging everything beforehand and afterwards* (ID: I/F1).

Indicating the entrepreneurial culture in her ethnicity, a female migrant entrepreneur posits: *So, entrepreneurship here is different. For us [Iranians], it holds great significance. Entrepreneurship is a given for us. In Iran, people retire early at 45 or 50 but don't actually retire; they receive so little money that they venture into entrepreneurship, drive taxis, or start a business. So, it's natural for us [...]. I grew up with entrepreneurship as part of our culture.* (ID: B3)

4.3.4 *Summary of coping strategies.* Despite the prevailing narrative of EEs as thriving environments for entrepreneurial activities, the interviews unveiled a nuanced reality, shedding light on the multifaceted constraints faced by migrant entrepreneurs. Instead of succumbing to challenges or refraining from business start-ups, the findings indicate a spectrum of strategies and actions to navigate these constraints. These include leveraging strategic networks and community ties, engaging in bricolage, trusting one's entrepreneurial instinct/gene and actively using the migrant background.

Within this context, individual strategies are not always clearly delineated; instead, various combinations emerge in the realm of entrepreneurial agency. For instance, the results suggest an interaction between using strategic networks/the community and bricolage to address institutional constraints. Similarly, the entrepreneurial gene and its associated self-perception are intertwined with the active utilisation of entrepreneurs' migrant backgrounds to navigate issues of segregation, social barriers and discrimination.

5. Discussion

This study explored how entrepreneurial agency enables migrant entrepreneurs to navigate challenges in EEs with constraints and whether they reshape and resist constrained contexts. Aligned with contemporary EE research, the findings highlight the significance of inclusive

EEs in fostering entrepreneurial activities (Spigel, 2017; Bolzani and Mizzau, 2019). However, interviews with migrant entrepreneurs reveal persistent challenges, including societal barriers and institutional constraints, exacerbating the constrained context (Neumeayer *et al.*, 2019).

One key finding challenges the belief that institutional barriers unequivocally limit market access for migrant entrepreneurs. Contrary to expectations, leveraging their migrant background emerged as a critical coping strategy, enabling the internationalisation of business activities and multifocal embeddedness. This resilience, highlighted in interviews, is linked to their entrepreneurial culture and multilingualism, which facilitate innovative business models. This insight modifies the initial theoretical framework, which assumed that institutional barriers would strictly inhibit market opportunities. Instead, the data suggest that migrant entrepreneurs' socio-cultural backgrounds can be a resource in overcoming these barriers, supporting new forms of international collaboration and communication that were not previously discussed in the literature.

As noted by Bolzani and Mizzau (2019), migrant entrepreneurs demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness despite the constraints. Strategic networks, primarily composed of family and friends, played a pivotal role in their coping strategies. These social ties served as crucial resources in navigating the constrained ecosystem, reinforcing the importance of relational capital in entrepreneurship. The practice of bricolage – innovative problem-solving – enabled them to create value out of limited resources, reflecting a core aspect of their entrepreneurial agency. However, the study also modifies the understanding of these networks. While previous research has suggested that community engagement and advocacy networks could be important, the data from this study did not find evidence supporting their use for activism or advocacy purposes. Instead, migrant entrepreneurs relied on personal and informal networks, raising questions about the extent to which more formal or institutional networks are accessible to them.

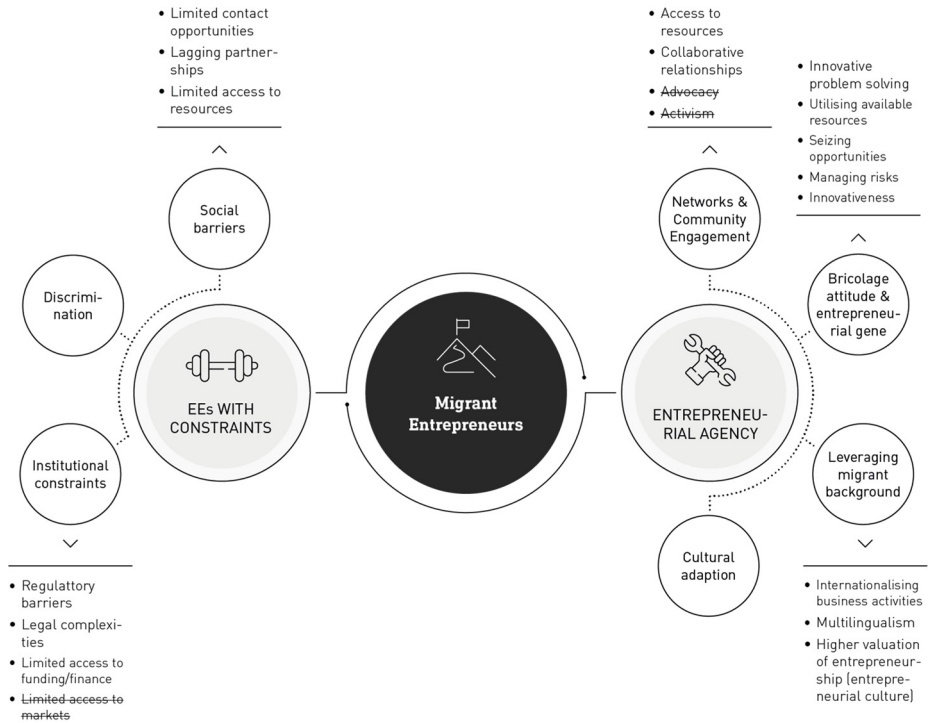
Migrant entrepreneurs were also driven by a strong desire for societal advancement and social mobility, consistent with McMullen *et al.* (2021). The pursuit of higher social status, coupled with an inherent entrepreneurial inclination (often referred to as the “entrepreneurial gene”), emerged as a critical motivating factor. This motivation was closely tied to their entrepreneurial agency, influencing their resilience and long-term business strategies. The combination of ambition and mobility shaped their actions in the constrained ecosystem, further challenging the notion that migrant entrepreneurs are inherently disadvantaged in such contexts.

Based on the study's findings, the theoretical framework was adapted to better reflect the realities of migrant entrepreneurship in constrained EEs (see Figure 4). *Firstly*, institutional barriers were not found to limit market access in the ways initially theorised. Instead, the migrant background served as a strategic advantage in expanding business activities internationally. This insight revises earlier assumptions and emphasises the role of cultural and multilingual competencies in enabling entrepreneurial success.

Secondly, though distinct, we merged the bricolage attitude and the “entrepreneurial gene”, as the two concepts are closely intertwined in their contribution to coping strategies in EEs with constraints. That is, we propose bricolage as a key ability that enhances and complements any innate entrepreneurial tendencies (“entrepreneurial gene”), which is vital in transforming entrepreneurial potential into actual business success. *Thirdly*, we did not find evidence in the data for using networks and community engagement for advocacy and activism.

6. Conclusion

While existing research on EEs emphasises their pivotal role in fostering entrepreneurship, innovation and robust economies – often with a positive connotation – the non-inclusivity



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 4. Adapted theoretical framework

of EEs, also referred to as EEs with constraints posing severe challenges for specific groups in unfolding their entrepreneurial endeavour, is often overlooked. The interviews uncovered factors constituting a constraint context, i.e. segregation/social barriers, institutional constraints such as regulatory hurdles and underrepresentation in institutions, and discrimination limiting migrant entrepreneurs' business activities. The experiences of migrants frequently involve negotiating their roles and positions pointing to the restrictions within the intricate power dynamics and cultural hierarchies of EEs should be discussed further.

In the realm of entrepreneurial agency, migrant entrepreneurs have demonstrated the application of diverse coping strategies and activities, encompassing strategic networking and community engagement, bricolage, using their entrepreneurial spirit (referred to as the "entrepreneurial gene"), and leveraging their migrant background. Hence, migrant entrepreneurs demonstrate remarkable determination and creativity in navigating the constraint context.

The study contributes valuable insights into the scholarly debate on the interconnectedness of migrant entrepreneurs within local EEs. Identifying "leveraging migrant background" as a further action of entrepreneurial agency underscores the significance of cultural competence, community building and strategic networking for their

success. The study's findings call for extending the "positivist" view on EE by shedding light on their "dark side". Moreover, it is a call to action for policymakers to reevaluate existing structures that hinder the full participation of migrant entrepreneurs in EEs. The study advocates for more than incremental adjustments, urging systemic changes to promote inclusivity, streamline processes and eliminate discriminatory practices. By embracing systemic changes, policymakers can foster an environment that genuinely values and harnesses the diverse talents and perspectives that migrant entrepreneurs bring to the table. In doing so, they can create a more inclusive and vibrant EE.

6.1 Implications

The findings contribute to advancing the theoretical understanding of entrepreneurial agency in constraint contexts, specifically in EEs with constraints, shedding light on how migrant entrepreneurs navigate complex landscapes marked by segregation, social barriers, institutional constraints in the form of regulatory hurdles and underrepresentation and discrimination.

Firstly, the study's findings enrich existing theories by emphasising the role of determination, creativity and adaptive capabilities in overcoming hurdles. *Secondly*, merely being situated within an EE is not sufficient for the success of entrepreneurial ventures; instead, it may impose constraints in contexts marked by non-inclusivity. To this aim, research must also comprehend the "dark side" of EEs from distinct actors' perspectives (e.g. migrants and females). The study highlights the significance of strategic networks and adopting a bricolage practice in interaction with a culturally rooted entrepreneurial mindset. Theoretical frameworks in entrepreneurship can benefit from a deeper exploration of how entrepreneurs strategically leverage networks and combine resources in novel ways to cope with the challenges originating from constraint contexts, providing insights into the practical application of these concepts. *Thirdly*, the study adds to the scientific discourse by providing in-depth insights into migrant entrepreneurs' lived experiences in constraint contexts and their entrepreneurial agency.

Practitioners can use the findings to design training programmes that foster adaptive capabilities and forward-thinking mindsets, especially for migrant entrepreneurs. Actors within EEs can implement inclusive practices, recognising diverse talents and perspectives. Strategies such as reducing regulatory hurdles, promoting cultural competence and facilitating community building contribute to a more supportive ecosystem. Intermediaries can encourage collaborative initiatives among entrepreneurs, enabling resource-sharing. By promoting strategic networking and collaboration, managers create an environment where entrepreneurs can collectively overcome challenges.

6.2 Limitations

While the study contributes valuable theoretical and practical insights, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, relying on entrepreneurs' subjective perceptions and retrospective viewpoints may introduce biases. Language barriers could potentially hinder a true reflection of experiences, encompassing cultural understanding, expression capabilities and trust issues – especially among those who have recently arrived in Germany, struggle with the German language or are reluctant to report due to mistrust. Secondly, the study's focus on a specific geographical area may limit its generalisability to the broader experiences of migrant entrepreneurs, mainly neglecting representation from diverse migrant groups, notably migrant women. This absence may overlook variations in experiences among different demographics of migrant entrepreneurs. In addition, while the research acknowledges the value of using migrant origins, it does not adequately examine the power

dynamics and cultural aspects of EEs. The experiences of migrants often involve negotiating intricate power dynamics and cultural hierarchies, which were not sufficiently investigated in this article.

While the study asserts that access to markets for migrant entrepreneurs is not solely limited by institutional constraints, it also recognises that these entrepreneurs face well-documented obstacles such as prejudice, regulatory difficulties and legal restrictions. These barriers often hinder broader access to vital resources such as networks, capital and markets, creating a notable gap in understanding. The emphasis on family and friends as the primary social networks also raises questions of examining other forms of capital, such as access to larger commercial networks or institutional assistance.

Furthermore, the qualitative nature of interviews introduces the possibility of biases in participant selection or the interpretation of responses. Finally, while the research sheds light on significant constraints migrant entrepreneurs have to cope with, it may not comprehensively address all challenges or coping strategies. For example, the findings may only partially capture the nuances of institutional constraints in EE across various regions, industries or migrant groups.

As illustrated above, the study led to theoretically informed conjectures, allowing for initial theorising on how migrant entrepreneurs navigate EEs with constraints. As such, it provides fresh and updated insights and highlights contextual nuances often overlooked in earlier studies. However, the study did not strive to generate generalisable results or illustrate causalities between the single actions and the characteristics constituting an EE with constraints. Doing so necessitates future research.

6.3 Future research

Using the proposed theoretical framework, several avenues for future research emerge, offering opportunities to deepen and broaden the understanding of how migrant entrepreneurs navigate EEs with constraints.

Firstly, future research could build upon this study by broadening its scope to include EEs across various regions with differing contextual frameworks. In addition, incorporating more diverse representations of migrant groups, particularly underrepresented demographics such as migrant women, could provide deeper insights into EEs' varying degrees of inclusiveness or exclusiveness.

Secondly, from a scientific standpoint, it would be advantageous to conduct a comprehensive survey that includes not only migrant entrepreneurs but also other key actors within the EE, such as economic development agencies and business associations. In addition, incorporating entrepreneurs without a migrant background into the analysis would allow for identifying potential variations across different groups of entrepreneurs. This includes mixed-method approaches that combine purposive and random sampling techniques to ensure a broader representation of the migrant entrepreneur population and reduce bias. This broader sampling strategy could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by migrant entrepreneurs in various contexts.

Thirdly, expanding the study of cultural aspects and power dynamics within the EE may further advance the understanding of facets related to migrant entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial agency.

Fourthly, another avenue for exploration involves validating and modelling the identified interactions among the factors that shape the constrained context, including segregation/social barriers, institutional constraints and discrimination.

Finally, longitudinal studies could offer insights into the dynamics of EEs with constraints and unveil evolving challenges, coping strategies used by migrant entrepreneurs and the dynamics of EEs over time. Such studies could also help identify causal relationships between specific actions and the characteristics of a constrained EE, offering a more dynamic understanding of these processes.

By pursuing these research avenues, future studies can build on the insights provided by this study, further enhancing the understanding of how migrant entrepreneurs navigate and thrive within constrained EEs.

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Appendix 1

Table A1. Abductive coding scheme

Code	Themes	Higher-level construct
Participation Intermediary organisations Support measures Access to finance Networks	Institutional constraints	EEs with constraints
Labour market Neighbourhood Ethnicity	Discrimination	
Self-segregation External segregation Not belonging Feeling different Cultural divergence	Social barriers	
Family and friends Neighbourhood Memberships & networks	Networks and community engagement	Entrepreneurial agency
Self-organising Social mobility Seizing opportunities Self-help	Bricolage	
Alternative trajectories Ambition Self-confidence Self-esteem Self-empowerment	Entrepreneurial gene	
n/a Cultural competence Entrepreneurial culture Multilingualism Mixed embeddedness	Cultural adaption* Leveraging migrant background	

Note: (*) As no instances of cultural adaptation were identified in the data, this construct was not given further consideration

Source: Authors' own work

Appendix 2. Extract of the abductive codebook

1 Code

Seizing opportunities.

2 Theme

Bricolage.

3 Description

This code refers to instances where entrepreneurs identify and act upon potential business opportunities by creatively recombining available resources. It captures the entrepreneurial ability to recognise value in unexpected places and rapidly mobilise resources to exploit emerging possibilities. This code is part of the broader theme of bricolage, which describes the process of creating something new from a diverse range of available resources.

4 When to use

- Apply this code when entrepreneurs describe moments of insight or recognition of potential opportunities.
- Use when participants discuss taking quick action to capitalise on unforeseen circumstances or market gaps.
- Code instances where entrepreneurs repurpose existing resources in novel ways to address emerging opportunities.
- Apply when entrepreneurs describe improvising solutions or creating new offerings in response to sudden market changes or customer needs.
- Use for narratives about leveraging personal networks or unexpected partnerships to pursue new opportunities.

5 When not to use

- Do not use for general discussions about long-term strategic planning or formal opportunity analysis processes.
- Avoid applying to instances where entrepreneurs simply follow established business models or industry norms.
- Do not use for situations where entrepreneurs had abundant resources and followed traditional development processes.
- Avoid coding routine business operations or incremental improvements that don't involve creative resource recombination.
- Do not apply to missed opportunities or instances where entrepreneurs failed to act on potential openings.

6 Example

“I had my first venture at the age of 30, which involved taking over a specialised medical practice in one of the most challenging neighbourhoods in this area, right in the northern part of the city. Now, it is a large practice, the laryngologist-centre in this area.”

Source: Authors' own work

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