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Exploration of the Role of Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Regional Entrepreneurial Food Ecosystems

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Abstract: Entrepreneurship is a key driver of economies through the creation of new opportunities and business ventures. Immigrant entrepreneurs have enriched global economies, particularly in high tech industries (Fairlie, 2008) and face numerous challenges in their host country. For small to medium sized enterprises, strategic networking in entrepreneurial ecosystems, creating rich resources, is vital to minimise these challenges (McAdam and Soetanto, 2018). These entrepreneurial ecosystems consist of interdependent actors and other factors integrated in a way that enables entrepreneurship within a particular region (Stam and Spigel, 2018). The objective of this research is to analyse the factors that contribute to the existence of entrepreneurial ecosystems in the Irish food industry and the types of networking immigrant food entrepreneurs participate in within these ecosystems. This methodology consisted of a quantitative empirical study using a questionnaire administered to immigrant food entrepreneurs in the Munster region of Ireland, selected through purposive sampling. The findings highlighted that these immigrant food entrepreneurs originated from 26 different countries, the majority founded their own business, with some businesses established over 40 years. The existence of different types of entrepreneurial food ecosystems and contrasting success factors are emerging in this research. The support of local farmer's markets and the community spirit with local producers leading to formal and informal networking for exchange knowledge and social engagement is vital for some immigrant food entrepreneurs, with support from entrepreneurial agencies driving the entrepreneurial ecosystem proving a greater importance for others. Entrepreneurial food ecosystems give immigrants, who do not have the same access to the employment market, an opportunity to make a living which was evident in this research where the immigrant food entrepreneurs demonstrated high levels of self-efficacy in terms of their contribution to local economies. Immigrants also enhance diversity in the food industry and give local consumers an opportunity to experience international and ethnic food experiences. This research provides a deeper understanding of immigrant entrepreneurs and their strategic networking and adds to research on how the model of entrepreneurial ecosystems can be utilised to measure the diversity and density of these networks.

Keywords: entrepreneurial ecosystems, immigrant entrepreneurs, entrepreneurship, food industry, networking

1. Introduction

This paper explores the role of immigrant entrepreneurs and how they network in regional entrepreneurial food ecosystems. Immigrant entrepreneurs have enriched global economies with reported evidence of significant socio-economic benefits by immigrants to international business incomes, employment and innovation through high levels of self-employment, particularly evident in technology, engineering and ICT sectors (Saxenian, 1999; Fairlie, 2008; Lofstrom, 2017; Drinkwater, 2018). The global food industry has also been heavily influenced by immigrant entrepreneurs resulting in a wide range of ethnic food choices available in all countries worldwide. This global food industry consists of a high proportion of small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) which contributes widely to rural economies (McKitterick *et al.*, 2016). This paper is structured as follows. Firstly, literature on immigrant entrepreneurs, networks and entrepreneurial ecosystems will be reviewed. This is followed by the research objective and questions, the methodology, presentation of results, discussion of these results and a conclusion. This paper will conclude with the limitations of this research and suggestions for future research.

1.1 Immigrant entrepreneurs

Immigrant entrepreneurs are heterogeneous, often considered more heterogeneous that indigenous entrepreneurs and especially entrepreneurial (Lofstrom, 2017) partly due to their migration to a host country. However, their heterogeneity makes it more challenging for researchers and policy makers to understand how and why they engage in networks. Entrepreneurs possess varying characteristics that influence their entrepreneurial decisions, with education and prior work experience considered important determinants of self-employment (Altinay and Wang, 2011; Drinkwater, 2018). Altinay and Wang (2011, p. 685) reported that a third level education enhanced an entrepreneur's ability to "*synthesise the market intelligence*" leading to increased innovation. In contrast, however, Drinkwater (2018) argued that higher education created greater opportunities for immigrants in paid employment, reducing their rate of self-employment. Prior experience is reported to develop the intellectual framework of the entrepreneur, to help manage risk associated with entrepreneurial behaviour and discover more entrepreneurial opportunities (Altinay and Wang, 2011). Entrepreneurs face several barriers or challenges when establishing a business and additionally immigrants encounter extra challenges when they relocate to another country. These challenges include access to finance, often cited as the most significant barrier to entrepreneurship, lack of business connections, lack of trust, lack of knowledge of support agencies, lack of familiarity with the legal environment and a language barrier (McKitterick *et al.* 2016; Drinkwater, 2018). The impact of these challenges can be minimised through engagement of immigrant entrepreneurs with other actors via strategic networking.

1.2 Networks

To facilitate engagement between immigrant entrepreneurs and other actors, connections or relationships are necessary through networking, formally or informally, forming strong or weak ties (McAdam and Soetanto, 2018). Actors in networks vary from other business individuals, family members and formal entrepreneurial and state organisations. They assist entrepreneurs source resources, by exchanging information or incremental knowledge, access finance, increase trust and feelings of respect and reciprocity among members and reduce risk for the business (Saxenian, 1999; McKitterick *et al.* 2016). Identification of the correct agencies to obtain support from, and how to access these supports, was reported as problematic for entrepreneurs where "*a lack of cohesion or joined-up approach between institutional actors*" was described as a factor contributing to the uncertainty about appropriate agencies (McKitterick *et al.* 2016, p. 46).

To facilitate engagement with the relevant actors, strategic networking is important to ensure that there are no barriers that restricts resource flow. This is particularly important for SMEs, where they may lack the necessary competencies or skills to participate in a network and consequently fail to form strategic or dynamic networks to convert "*limited resources into rich resources*" (McAdam and Soetanto, 2018, p. 88). As entrepreneurs can behave in an "*adaptive way*", they rely on their local environment where they interact through their various connections (Alvedalen and Boschma (2017, p. 893) which is important for immigrants when they set up and embed in a locality. Initially, social networking is an essential component to allow them to become part of the local structure and to identify opportunities, but formal business networks are necessary for immigrant entrepreneurs to grow and expand their business, through mentoring and growing contacts (Saxenian, 1999). Networking as a result is important on a regional basis with different actors involved on a formal or informal basis.

1.3 Entrepreneurial ecosystems

The elements of the entrepreneur, formal support institutions and networks can be combined together through their interdependency into an organised structure such as an entrepreneurial ecosystem which has been defined as "*a set of interdependent actors and factors coordinated in such a way that they enable productive entrepreneurship within a particular territory*" (Mason and Brown, 2014, p. 5). Stam and Spigel (2018, p. 409) reported that entrepreneurial ecosystems were intrinsically geographical in nature and focused on the "*cultures, institutions and networks*" that develop over time in specific regional areas, with the level and type of connectivity between actors determining the strength and success of entrepreneurial ecosystems. However, there are limitations or weaknesses in research on the concept of entrepreneurial ecosystems. Alvedalen and Boschma (2017, p. 894) stated that existing literature had not yet produced a detailed approach to networks that would help identify why some entrepreneurial ecosystems were successful through making those "*vital connections"* and suggested that the network literature could potentially enrich the concept of entrepreneurial ecosystems Stangler and Bell-Masterson (2015) similarly agreed that the analysis of networks would be

beneficial in terms of tracking the connectivity of the different organisations in the network. Acs, Stam and Audretsch*, (*2017, p. 9) further suggested that added research was needed in areas of "*resourcing, network interactions, power relationships and cultural or social fit among actors within the entrepreneurial ecosystem*" and argued that the apparent heterogeneity among the actors made it difficult for policy makers to target specific areas for improvement.

The research objective of this paper is to determine if an entrepreneurial ecosystem is a valid perspective for understanding the experiences of immigrant food entrepreneurs. In Ireland, the agri-food sector is its largest indigenous industry, with revenues of €26 Billion in 2015 and consisting mainly of SMEs (DAFM, 2015). Traditionally, the food sector in Ireland consisted mainly of indigenous businesses but an increasing number have been established by immigrant entrepreneurs which is consistent with global trends where the rate of nascent or new business establishment is higher in foreign born than native born persons (Lofstrom, 2017). The entrepreneurial ecosystem lens has been applied extensively in research to study high-tech or high growth businesses but there is a gap in the literature in the application of this lens to smaller scaled enterprises. This creates an opportunity to research immigrant entrepreneurs and explore how they interact in regional food networks, to give a greater understanding of entrepreneurial ecosystems and to guide policy makers.

The study addresses the following research questions.

RQ1: How do the characteristics of immigrant entrepreneurs influence their networking with other actors in a regional area?
RQ2: How do immigrant entrepreneurs perceive their role and that of other actors in the context of an entrepreneurial ecosystem structure?

These research questions are addressed using the following methodology.

2. Methodology

This research adopted a quantitative approach involving a questionnaire administered to immigrant food entrepreneurs in the Munster region of Ireland, consisting of six counties, Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Clare, Waterford and Tipperary. Purposive sampling was utilised to select this geographical region due to its long history of food production (Patton, 2002). As no official directory of food producers existed for this region, the population sample of immigrant food producers was identified from varying sources including regional food organisations, Bord Bia (Irish Food Board) and farmers markets. From these sources, a population sample of over 170 immigrant food entrepreneurs was identified. These entrepreneurs were contacted to request their participation in the research study. Several of the entrepreneurs were no longer in operation, some did not respond to the request and a small number declined to participate due to time constraints.

A sample population agreed to participate in this study and a quantitative questionnaire was administered to 119 immigrant entrepreneurs at farmer's markets, food specific events and various food festivals in the Munster region. A total of 82 questionnaires were completed providing a 69% response rate. This quantitative approach was selected for the initial stage of this study to gain an understanding of how variables, that were identified in previous research on entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial ecosystems, influence how and why these immigrant food entrepreneurs' networked and participated in entrepreneurial ecosystems (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This questionnaire was designed into thematic areas including characteristics of entrepreneurs, business establishment challenges, networking and entrepreneurial ecosystems. The self-administered questionnaire was administered offline, either directly to the entrepreneur at food events or farmer's markets or posted to increase the level of convenience for the respondents as many were under time constraints (Bryman, 2016). For the purpose of this research study, an immigrant food entrepreneur is defined as a first- or second-generation immigrant, who has established a food manufacturing business in the Munster region of Ireland. The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires was coded and inputted into IBM SPSS Statistics 26 for statistical analysis and the qualitative data inputted into Microsoft Excel and was analysed thematically, corresponding to the research questions (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

3. Results

3.1 Characteristics of immigrant entrepreneurs

As is outlined in Table 1, the immigrant food entrepreneurs in this study were heterogeneous in nature, with a broad age profile ranging from 18 to 65+ years, and an equal number of males and females. The majority (95.1%) founded their own food business and several had prior experience of running a business or being employed in another business, prior to establishing their existing business. Most of the food businesses (72%) were considered established businesses, being established for more than 4 years. There was a high number of female business owners for newly established businesses. In terms of education, 76.8% had attained a post-secondary qualification and 19.5% had attained a postgraduate degree. They originated from 26 countries and were located mainly in two counties of the Munster region. They produced a diverse range of food products and sold these products mainly at farmer's markets, food events and speciality food stores.

Table 1: Profile of Immigrant Food Entrepreneurs

Characteristic of Immigrant Entrepreneur (n = 82)	Percentage of Immigrant Entrepreneurs
Age of Entrepreneur	18-29 - 2.4%; 30-39 - 18.3%; 40-49 - 30.5%; 50-64 - 35.4%; 65+ - 9.8%
Formation of Business	Founder of own business (95.1%); took over established business (2.4%); took over family business (2.4%)
Time business established	Established business (>4 years) (72%); New Business (<4 years) (27%)
Gender	Male (48.8%); Female (47.6%); Both (1.2%); no reply (3.7%)
Country of Origin	UK (34.1%); France (11%); Germany (8.5%); Poland (6.1%); Italy (4.9%); Canada, America and Netherlands (3.7%); Australia (2.4%); remaining 17 countries (1.2% each)
County Location	Cork (56.1%); Limerick (1.22%); Kerry (19.51%); Clare (7.32%); Waterford (3.66%); Tipperary (6.1%); outside Munster but trading in Munster (4.88%)
Level of Education	Post-secondary (76.8%); Undergraduate degree (31.7%); Postgraduate degree (19.5%)
Prior work experience	Owned own business in home country (22%) and in Ireland before setting up current food business (16%); employed in a business in Ireland (56%)
Number of employees	No employees (37.8%); <10 employees (90.2%); < 50 employees (100%)
Income in previous year	<€100,000 (77.5%); <€2,000,000 (97.5%); >€2,000,001 (2.4%)

All these immigrant food entrepreneurs had established SMEs, with the majority (90.2%) considered micro enterprises, employing less than 10 staff and having a turnover less than €2,000,000, as seen in Table 1.

3.2 Networking

In relation to the importance of networking, over 63% of the immigrant entrepreneurs considered it important for their business. The heterogeneous engagement by these entrepreneurs in formal and informal networks was demonstrated by the diversity of actors they networked with. Informal networking with family, friends and local food producers and formal networking with entrepreneurship specific support agencies and regional specific food agencies were considered important for their business. Family members were valued in terms of business advice, finance and assisting sales and distribution. Most of the producers (78%) networked with indigenous or local producers and some networking was evident with food producers from their own and different nationalities. This networking with other producers occurred through various means, including in person and through social media, on a frequent basis where almost half (44%) networked once a week or more. Networking with other food producers was in response to different needs which ranged from social purposes to multiple business purposes that included sourcing of ingredients, knowledge exchange, mentoring and distribution.

In relation to networking with formal entrepreneurial and educational organisations, 24% of producers reported no networking, with time reported as the main constraint, followed by poor support and entrepreneurial agencies being too money focused. As is evident in Figure 1, Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) (government organisations in Ireland, operating at regional level, to promote entrepreneurship and develop micro and small businesses), banks and county specific food support organisations were the main formal stakeholders the immigrant entrepreneurs networked with for business. Enterprise Ireland (a government organisation responsible for the development and growth of Irish enterprises in global markets) and Area Partnerships, regional business support organisations in Ireland, were the main organisations least engaged with for business support.

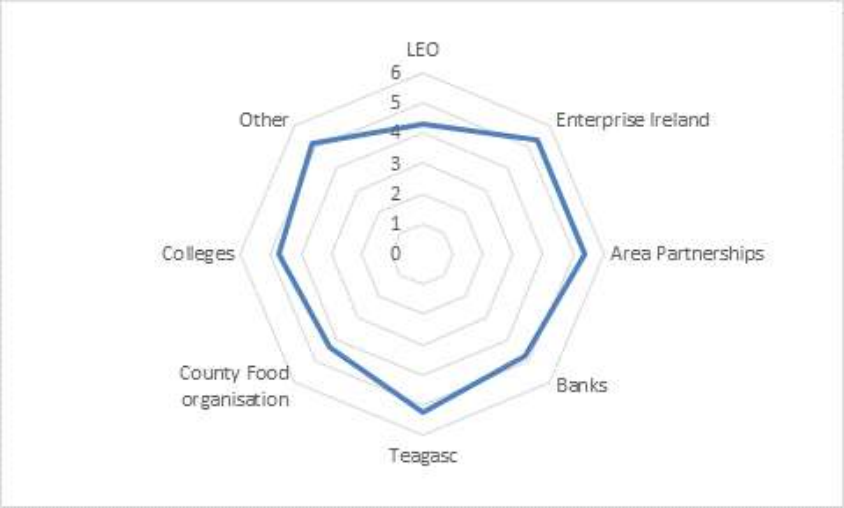


Figure 1: Mean frequency values for networking with formal support organisations

1 = most frequent (weekly); 5 = less than once a year; 6 = no networking

3.3 Entrepreneurial ecosystems

The majority of the immigrant food entrepreneurs (56%) stated they perceived an entrepreneurial ecosystem existed in their region. In term of geographical dispersion within the Munster region, most of the immigrant entrepreneurs located in Tipperary (100%), Waterford (100%) and Cork (66.7%) positively perceived the existence of an entrepreneurial ecosystem. The perceived presence of an entrepreneurial ecosystem was attributed to local food producers in some regions, for instance "great producers in our area", "multi-cultural artisan food production hotspot", "I am part of an artisan food culture in my region", " we have been strongly supported by other producers and the community", "we are lucky to have local food producers with great community spirit". Other attributing factors to the presence of an entrepreneurial ecosystem included farmer's markets and the presence and support of LEOs. A high proportion (67.1%) of the immigrant entrepreneurs sold their products at farmer's markets, which in part explained the importance of these as sales outlets for their food products. Of the immigrant entrepreneurs who agreed they perceived an entrepreneurial ecosystem existed, 90.9% agreed that an entrepreneurial spirit existed among food producers ($p<0.05$) which was particularly evident in Cork, Clare and Kerry. They were marginally more likely to attend formal networking events and a higher proportion (81.8%) knew what organisation to obtain business support from compared to those who did not know or only sometimes knew (18.2%) ($p<0.05$). In contrast, the immigrant entrepreneurs who did not perceive an entrepreneurial ecosystem existed cited reasons such as "programmes hard to reach" and "aware of its existence in other regions but not in mine".

With regards the immigrant's entrepreneurs' agreement with the level of support provided by formal support organisations, there was very strong evidence to show a relationship between perception of an entrepreneurial ecosystem and the support from financial and educational organisations ($p<0.05$) as is evident in figure 2. Entrepreneurial support organisations were also considered important. This correlated with findings on the frequency of networking with different agencies where banks and Area Partnerships were on average engaged with less than once a year as is evident in figure 1. In contrast, insufficient entrepreneurial resources and entrepreneurial and training programmes were perceived in some regions. The immigrant entrepreneurs who perceived a presence of an entrepreneurial ecosystem indicated a higher level of agreement overall with supports from formal organisations and the presence of resources and programmes in their regions than those who did not perceive an entrepreneurial ecosystem.

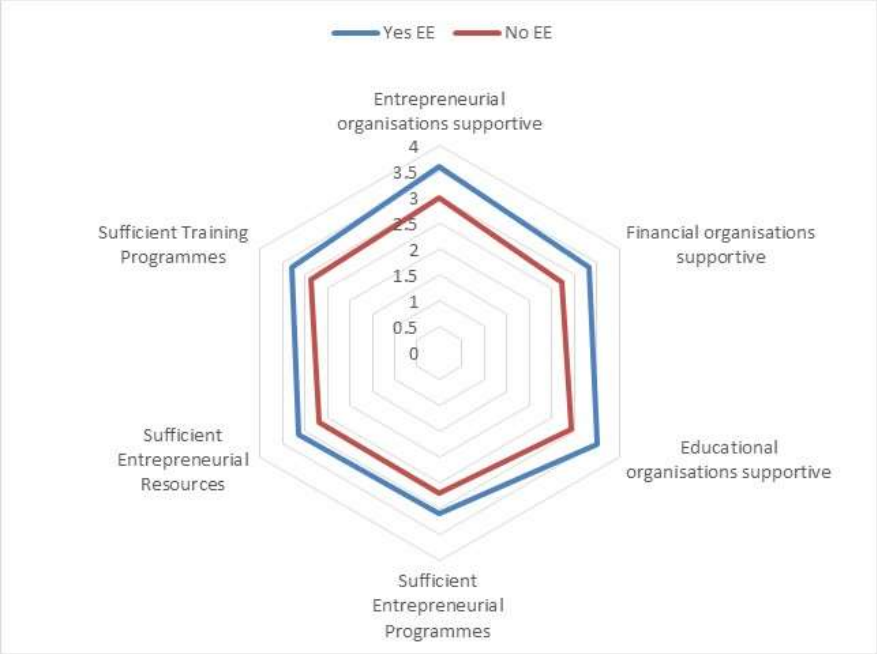


Figure 2: Mean values for immigrant entrepreneurs' agreement with support of formal actors in a region

1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree, Yes EE = perceived the presence of an entrepreneurial ecosystem in their region, No EE = did not perceive the presence of an entrepreneurial ecosystem in their region

4. Discussion

The findings from this quantitative study concurred with previous research on the heterogeneity of entrepreneurs, immigrants and entrepreneurial ecosystems (Acs, Stam and Audretsch, 2017; Drinkwater, 2018; Lofstrom, 2017) as outlined in Table 1. The characteristics of the immigrant food entrepreneurs supported findings on age of migrant entrepreneurs by Drinkwater (2018) but contrasted with findings from the Irish GEM Report (2018) who reported more younger entrepreneurs and a higher rate of self-employment rates in men. The education level of the immigrant food entrepreneurs concurred with reported education levels for entrepreneurs in Ireland (Fitzsimons and O'Gorman, 2019). The high level of education, further enhanced by 72.1% having upskilled since coming to Ireland, was beneficial to provide these immigrant entrepreneurs with an enhanced ability to adapt to new situations, increased their capacity for self-direction and broadened their knowledge base (Altinay and Wang, 2011). Of the immigrant entrepreneurs who perceived an entrepreneurial ecosystem in their region. In terms of the first research question, there was very strong evidence of a relationship between age and the importance of networking for their business, with the majority of immigrant entrepreneurs aged 40 or over, considering networking important for their business ($p=0.05$).

Their engagement in formal and informal networks demonstrated the importance of strong and weak ties formed with different actors (McAdam and Soetanto, 2018). The networking with both local producers and own or different nationalities demonstrated embeddedness by the immigrant entrepreneurs in their region, enabling them to become part of the local structure, to grow contacts and form information networks to create opportunities and exchange networks to access resources and reduce barriers (Alvedalen and Boschma (2017). The networking by these entrepreneurs for multiple purposes supports findings by McAdam and Soetanto, (2018) on the importance of networking for socio-economic benefits in a region, This is evident where a higher proportion (84.1%) of the immigrant entrepreneurs who perceived an entrepreneurial ecosystem existed agreed they had contributed to the local economy ($p<0.05$) compared to 50% of those who did not perceive an entrepreneurial ecosystem existed. However, the main barrier faced by the immigrant entrepreneurs was lack of finance with 78% using their personal finance as their main source of funding which agreed with findings by Drinkwater (2018) on ethnic entrepreneurs.

In terms of the second research question on perception of the role of actors in entrepreneurial ecosystems, these have been classified into "bottom up" and "bottom down" ecosystems (Mason and Brown, 2014). The local food producer and the community spirit created the connectivity in the ecosystem from the bottom up for some entrepreneurs and the LEOs and other support agencies from the top down for others. Even though, the

entrepreneurial organisations were considered supportive, there was strong evidence of a relationship between the county the entrepreneur lived in and their agreement with the presence of entrepreneurial programmes and resources and training programmes ($p<0.05$) which Stangler and Bell-Masterson (2015) recommended were important indicators of connectivity in an entrepreneurial ecosystem.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to determine if an entrepreneurial ecosystem was a valid perspective for understanding the experiences of immigrant entrepreneurs. The literature demonstrated that the entrepreneurial ecosystems lens had been successfully utilised to explore the success of high-tech industries. This research has shown that it is also a valid research lens for exploring the role of heterogeneous immigrant entrepreneurs and small business development. These entrepreneurial ecosystems can be "bottom up" or "top down", which creates implications for policy makers in terms of promoting a community spirit among entrepreneurs in all regions, to grow entrepreneurial ecosystems from the bottom up as well as developing a top down approach. As the existence of entrepreneurial ecosystems has a significant impact on the presence of strategic stakeholders and the availability of resources and training for entrepreneurs within a specific geographical area, these top down initiatives need to be developed regionally. These initiatives are normally developed within a national policy framework and are not sufficiently focused on the specific requirements at a regional or local level. Further analysis of these entrepreneurial ecosystems is necessary to identify what connections and strategic networks are vital for their existence and development to facilitate their replication in other regions through entrepreneurial policies.

6. Future research

The main limitation of this research is that it is based on a small sample size and is limited to one regional area in one country. Future research creates opportunities to explore the presence of entrepreneurial ecosystems at regional levels in other countries. A deeper insight is needed on the causality of relations existing within entrepreneurial ecosystems and what factors have contributed to the emergence of these ecosystems. By using a case study approach, a more in depth understanding of the various actors and their entrepreneurial story at a local level would contribute to identifying the vital connections formed in these ecosystems.

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