



# Host versus home country influence on the immigrant entrepreneurial process: an imprinting perspective

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Received: 31 July 2023 / Accepted: 1 January 2024  
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## Abstract

Since its first use in organisational research, nearly five decades ago, imprinting has gained recognition in entrepreneurship studies. Accordingly, this study utilises the behavioural concept to develop new theorisations to account for the entrepreneurial processes of immigrant entrepreneurs. It pays attention on its effects on immigrant entrepreneurs, particularly when it comes to their decision-making and behaviours towards business creation in Canada. A comprehensive analysis of a dataset generated from a systematically selected group of immigrant entrepreneurs revealed the complexity of their imprints at various stages of their entrepreneurial cycle in the North American country. It emerged that imprinting not only modified their behaviours, attitudes and cognition, but also shaped the trajectory of their entrepreneurial processes. That is, their imprints had an effect on how they identified business opportunities, the types of businesses they pursued, their level of entrepreneurial drive, and the types of resources they acquired or accessed in their new environment. Notably, following a period of normalisation in their new surroundings, their original imprints changed due to diminishing affinity with their country-of-origin. This holds research and policy implications as it uncovers an unfolding but less-understood entrepreneurship phenomenon.

**Keywords** Economic development · Entrepreneurship · New firms · Start-ups

**JEL Classification** F63 · L26 · M13

## 1 Introduction

Entrepreneurship, in general, has been studied from various perspectives including networking (Birley 1985; Kanndorp et al. 2020), internationalisation (Dekel-Dachs et al. 2021; Jones and Coviello 2005; McDougall and Oviatt 2003) social (Lumpkin et al. 2013) and economic development (Audretsch 2018). Whilst this body of knowledge yielded important insights, on the one hand, it eschewed immigrant entrepreneurship on the other (Dabić et al. 2020) and yet, many people would agree

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that immigrant entrepreneurs make notable economic contributions in their host countries (Fairlie and Lofstrom 2015; Kerr and Kerr 2017).

Immigrant entrepreneurship is a process whereby immigrants (i.e., individuals born in a given country, who subsequently moved to a different country at some point in their lifetime) identify, create, and exploit economic opportunities to start new ventures in their country of destination (Dheer 2018; Malki et al. 2022). The limited literature on immigrant entrepreneurship points to the economic value immigrant entrepreneurs bring to their host nations (Aliaga-Isla and Rialp 2013; Bates et al. 2018; Dabić et al. 2020). It describes how their ventures create local jobs, and how they can be a source of innovation through the unique knowledge and skills they bring to their host nation and by facilitating international information exchanges (Anderson and Platzer 2006; OECD 2010; Ensign and Robinson 2011; Martínez et al. 2013; Robertson and Grant 2016). The economic potential immigrant entrepreneurs have has attracted interest in immigrant entrepreneurship from various stakeholders including academics, private and public institutions (Kalu and Okafar 2021; Dabić et al. 2020). But such interest has not been matched by empirical studies that focus on the entrepreneurial processes inherent in immigrant entrepreneurs.

Much of the available literature is in the form of government reports and tends to be politically motivated *plus* it does not clearly distinguish types of immigrants. We therefore contend that with increasing migration and global economic challenges, research focusing on immigrant entrepreneurship can provide new knowledge for use in targeting and maximizing the economic value of immigrant entrepreneurs. Thus, with this research we analyse and develop new theorisations to account for the social interconnections occurring at the individual–and macro–level in the context of Canada. Specifically, we focus on how these types of entrepreneurs recalibrate their actions and behaviours to align with the conditions in their host country. Recent research suggests that immigrants entrepreneurs face various challenging situations that make them psychologically and cognitively distinct (see Khaw et al. 2023; Mayuto et al. 2023). Based on that, we address the following important question in order to develop an in–depth understanding of the processes they go through as they adjust to their new environment:

### **1.1 What are the main causes of the changes in the entrepreneurial processes of immigrant entrepreneurs in a host country?**

To develop such in–depth insights we apply imprinting (Stinchcombe 1965). We take the view that immigrant entrepreneurs are different from their native counterparts because of their different backgrounds and approach to entrepreneurship (Mayuto et al. 2023). Connecting imprinting with immigrant entrepreneurship opened a rare window that enabled the identification and comprehensive understanding of the intrinsic characteristics of immigrants involved in business creation in Canada. This is consistent with recent research (e.g., Dabić et al. 2020; Kraus and Werner 2012; Shepherd and Wiklund 2020) that suggests that borrowing concepts from other fields of management enriches entrepreneurship and it advances understanding on immigrant entrepreneurs' participation in business. Canada was chosen as

the research setting because of its vast communities of immigrant communities who have established various types of businesses from low technology to high technology companies. The unique characteristics of its entrepreneurship landscape makes it a suitable setting for this study. Through using imprinting we were able to identify how the business approaches adopted by immigrant entrepreneurs evolved and their nature. Our intensive explorative process offers new and informative insights into their distinctive entrepreneurial processes and our contributions to entrepreneurship research are manifold.

First, our findings theoretically contribute to the extensive field of entrepreneurship by showing the trajectory immigrant entrepreneurs from Vietnam, Tunisia, France, Columbia and Belgium in Canada follow in developing their business ventures in a new environment. We contend that overemphasising the role of culture, enclaves and social capital in immigrant entrepreneurship research leads to an over-estimation of the supply aspect of immigrant entrepreneurship and that does not allow for a full understanding of its complexity (Dabić et al. 2020; Kloosterman 2010). Second, we develop new literature at the immigrant entrepreneurship and imprinting nexus by empirically examining the interplay between immigrant entrepreneurs, their imprinting environment and affinity at various stages of the entrepreneurial cycle of immigrant entrepreneurs in a host nation.

Third, the new insights into immigrant entrepreneurs' activities, that we develop, provide a better understanding on why and how they act, as well as remain resilient in their pursuit for opportunities even when success is not imminent. Fourth, understanding how they shape their actions and behaviors help to identify their struggles in their new environment. Such knowledge has implications for private and public institutions in terms of knowing how to best serve immigrant entrepreneurs while harnessing their potentials. For academics it provides alternatives theoretical perspectives on the entrepreneurial cycles of entrepreneurs and thus enriching entrepreneurship and management research.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Research on entrepreneurship process

Entrepreneurship has been subjected to extensive research. But, and despite such attention scholars and practitioners have not produced a unifying definition of what entrepreneurship consists of (Gartner 1990). However, for the purpose of this study, we align with the school of thought that entrepreneurship is a temporal experience (Bird and West III 1998; Morris et al. 2012; Xu et al. 2020) which is largely unscripted, unpredictable, and uncontrollable with its richness inherent in how it can be personally experienced (Schindehutte et al. 2006). It is a process that involves all the functions, activities, and actions associated with the perception of opportunities and the creation of a business to pursue them (Bygrave and Hofer 1992; Ucbasaran et al. 2003).

The literature on entrepreneurship presents opportunity recognition as an entrepreneurial activity (e.g., Khanin et al. 2022), and it debates individual patterns of

recognition abilities (Ozgen and Baron 2007), entrepreneurial alertness (Ardichvili et al. 2003) or the influence of social networks (Leyden and Link 2015; Zimmer and Aldrich 1987) on business creation. Other aspects of the entrepreneurial process associated with the discovery of opportunities (Suddaby et al. 2015; Shane and Venkataraman 2000) their creation (Alvarez and Barney 2007) and the transformative impact of “imprinting” (Mathias et al. 2015) have also been studied and presented in the literature.

Drawing on this wide range of scholarly works, it is unequivocal that the process of engaging in entrepreneurship is an inherently strenuous process from the first thoughts to eventually starting a business (Brixy et al. 2012). Moreover, it is very much depended on personality traits and environmental scanning activities (Bygrave 2004; Mason et al. 2009). The interplay between personal attributes and the exogenous factors undoubtedly complicates the process of engaging in entrepreneurship. The manner in which entrepreneurs process events (arising in their environment) has implications for the types of ventures they establish (Gittins et al. 2015; Morris et al. 2012). Thus, they have to activate their individual decision-making (cognitive processes) (Mathews 2017). But, and despite that mistakes are unavoidable, changes are often emergent (Mintzberg and Water 1985; Plowman et al. 2007) and many actions are unplanned (Gartner 1993); they are rather an unexpected phenomenon (Morris et al. 2012).

In the light of the forgoing discussion about the nature of the entrepreneurship process, it can be the case that context matters in terms of the decisions and actions immigrant entrepreneurs make. Thus, and during their process of creating a business, they may go through several stages of re-orientation (Gartner 1985; Korunka et al. 2003). Despite that, they arrive in their host nation with some pre-conceived ideas about their actions, it is the conditions that they face that often force them to recalibrate their thought process in order to align their behaviours (imprints) with their new surroundings. It is therefore plausible to suggest that the entrepreneurial processes immigrants go through can change overtime as they adjust in their new environment. To provide a holistic view of the complexity inherent in the entrepreneurial processes of immigrants, psychology related literature offers valuable frames to use for human cognition analysis. Particularly, imprinting, which is about human cognition (Heirman and Clarysse 2005), can be instructive towards explaining the thinking processes immigrant entrepreneurs go through in starting, launching and running a business. In psychology, a cognitive style is conceptualized as an important determinant of individual behaviour (Sadler-Smith and Badger 1998). It has also been described as “a high-order heuristic” that individuals engage when they approach, frame, and solve problems” (Brigham et al. 2007, p. 31).

Indeed, when immigrant entrepreneurs deliberate on the different stages they are likely go through in the process of establishing a new business, their cognitive style(s) (Kickul et al. 2009; Salmony and Kanbach 2022) form a big part of that process and they often determine their success or failure (entrepreneurial outcomes) (Matthews 2017).

Arguably, the new and often dynamic conditions immigrants have to sometimes navigate in their host nation, demand high-order-heuristics for opportunity identification, for new venture development, for marshalling resources, and implementing

ideas (Timmons 1989). The cognitive mediational and change process they go through may transform the environmental complexity in their host nation into usable forms of entrepreneurship (Mathews 2008). Also, their ability to unlock the complexity of their circumstances in the host nation can be bound in their prior knowledge (Lemes et al. 2010). Those that have experience may use their high order heuristics to guide their opportunity, and information search processes (Morris et al. 2012; Ucbasaran et al. 2003). But those with limited experience may use simplified decision models to process the new information they have never been exposed to before (Woo et al. 1992). In their search for resources, social and business networks have emerged as key factors (Kariv et al. 2009; Rodgers et al. 2020; Simba and Ojong 2018) that can determine their success or failure. Networks are patterned relationships between individuals, groups or organisations deliberately established for mutual benefit (Dubini and Aldrich 1991; Simba 2013, 2015). As much as networks provide a new start-up with an environment conducive for accelerated growth, the process is time consuming, and it may lead to nowhere (Turati 1998) because of its experiential nature (Corbett 2005). Moreover, networks may also result in differential advantages (Galaskiewicz and Zaheer 1999).

## 2.2 Research on immigrant entrepreneurship

As previously stated, immigrant entrepreneurs are recent arrivals in the host society who start a business (Chaganti and Greene 2002). Other related concepts include, for example: “ethnic entrepreneurs” who do not count as new arrivals anymore (Aldrich and Waldinger 1990) and “minority entrepreneurs” who are part of a minority in their society (Chaganti and Greene 2002).

Since overlaps between the concepts exist, many articles in the scientific literature are yet to clearly distinguish between the different cases or use the broader approach and definition of ethnic entrepreneurs in the first place (Dana 2007). In the search for the causes of immigrant entrepreneurship, the literature focuses mostly on the question about whether immigrants are “pushed” into self-employment, as a result of barriers hindering them to take regular jobs, or whether they are “pulled” into entrepreneurship because of its potential to offer high rewards (Amorós et al. 2019). Elsewhere, research shows that this does not only apply to immigrant entrepreneurs, but also to entrepreneurs in general, either entering entrepreneurship out-of-necessity or out-of-choice (Dencker et al. 2021; O’Donnell et al. 2020).

Previous research found that levels of immigrant entrepreneurship are very high in developed countries among foreign-born individuals than among the native population (Fairlie and Lofstrom 2015). This body of knowledge suggests that structural barriers (e.g., language, discrimination, etc.) in the environment and society often prevent immigrants from working in regular wage-paying jobs (Kalu and Okafar 2021) forcing them to consider entrepreneurship. Migration commentators and scholars agree that, when compared with native-born populations, immigrants have a greater “intention” to develop a business (Irastorza and Pena 2014; Malki et al. 2022). In describing entrepreneurship in the context of immigrant entrepreneurship, the literature is clear on the five basic phases of business development amongst

immigrants. These include the entrepreneurship drive, opportunity identification, entrepreneurial orientation, business formation and exit. The immigration literature acknowledges that entrepreneurship amongst immigrants is driven by necessity and a lack of employment opportunities (Fairlie and Lofstrom 2015) because of the challenges immigrants face including racial discrimination, segregation etc. (Dana 2007; Dana and Morris 2007) in their host nation.

So, in order to identify business opportunities in their new surroundings they are known to rely on their friends and family and enclaves (Rajman and Tienda 2003) for support to accelerate the growth of their ventures. With regards to the business orientations of immigrants, much of the available literature suggest that immigrants become transnational entrepreneurs (Aluko et al. 2019) or diaspora entrepreneurs (Simba and Ojong 2018). But, in terms of business development in their new environment they are known to rely on ethnic resources for support during the early stages of their business development processes (Gold and Light 2000; Portes and Manning 1986; Zhou 2007). Research about their exit strategy is mainly conceptual (see DeTienne 2010) and it does not often account for the underlying mechanisms, at the individual level, the complexity and dynamic nature of the entrepreneurial processes and the experiences of immigrant entrepreneurs.

### 2.3 Operationalising imprinting

The imprinting phenomenon has been extensively studied in psychology (Wilkins 2009) and education for several decades. The literature emerging from these traditional domains acknowledges that personality and behavior are shaped by imprints from parents (Konishi et al. 2014), general education, and experience with the surrounding environment. This body of knowledge suggests that environmental conditions shape the hardwiring of the brain and the development of the gene (Wilkins 2009) in such a way that our present state and behavior can be somehow a reflection of historical experiences, conditions, and constraints. From this, it possible that imprinting can be cross-disciplinary. If we take for instance entrepreneurship and define it as a temporal experience which is largely unscripted, unpredictable, and uncontrollable with its richness inherent in how it can be personally experienced (Morris et al. 2012), imprinting can be useful in analyzing how people navigate through the complexity associated with entrepreneurship.

Since imprinting was first used to study organizational theory by Stinchcombe and March (1965), its broader application in management has been on the rise. It has been applied to study entrepreneurial adaptation (Bryant 2014), the evolution of networks (Marquis and Tilcsik 2013; Milanov and Fernhaber 2009), organisational bricolage (Perkmann and Spicer 2014), the intertwined fates of individuals and organisations (Tilcsik 2014) and organisational innovation (Hsu and Lim 2014). A common feature of this broad range of studies that have used imprinting to provide a theoretical base for research is that, the interplay between the actions of individuals and their environment affects how they are imprinted (Judge et al. 2015; Leung et al. 2013; Lee and Battilana 2013).

These studies suggest that individuals do not need to directly experience an environment for it to imprint them. People may be imprinted by an environment through interacting with those that have been socialised by that environment (Lee and Battilana 2013). Against that backdrop, similarities can be drawn with the notion of networks in which individuals are exposed to new knowledge and experiences that they may not have been exposed to before. Indeed, for immigrant entrepreneurs this may be true given that they can activate their enclave connections to learn about the social, cultural and political dynamics in their new environment.

Much of the research that focused at the organisational level (Marquis and Tilcsik 2013; Tilcsik 2014; Stinchcombe and March 1965) acknowledges that although the imprinting phenomenon pertains to how the environment stamps particular elements onto new organizations, there is a greater need to start any analysis at the individual level in order to better comprehend the phenomena. From this, it is clear that this process is facilitated by individual agents (Lee and Battilana 2013) who carry relevant elements from their experience and, via interactions with their environment (directly and indirectly) to formulate the knowledge and imprint it onto their organizations (McEvily et al. 2012). Key questions that still remain relate to the mechanisms that define individual transformations, persistence of imprinted behaviour, amplification of their imprinted behaviour, and the point at which their prior behaviours loose effect amongst immigrant entrepreneurs. Thus, addressing these questions, as this research attempts to do, offers understanding on the behaviours of immigrant entrepreneurs and their entrepreneurial processes.

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative case research approach to study the complex process immigrant entrepreneurs go through when they decide to create a business in Canada. From that it develops new theoretical explanations and insights emerging from the field (Baxter and Jack 2008; Eisenhardt 1989) i.e., from studying immigrant entrepreneurs in their social environment.

The key motivation is on understanding ways in which immigrants create their own businesses in a host country and their developmental and behavioural steps in doing so (Miles and Huberman 1994). As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), our study adopted a recursive process of data collection, data coding, comparative analysis and theoretical sampling. At the beginning of our study, the focus remained on the exploration of categories and thus an open sampling approach was used. Before undertaking the main study, we conducted preliminary research which involved a Vietnamese entrepreneur who established several businesses in Canada. Our interaction with him yielded our first set of categories on imprints and crucially the activities that shaped his entrepreneurial process. After we became clear about these categories, the focus of our data collection and analysis shifted from category discovery to the exploration of relationships between the categories. As such, we implemented variational and relational sampling, i.e., active search for opportunities



to gather data about the relationships of the emergent categories (i.e., impact of immigrant imprints on the entrepreneur's activities).

After the categories and relationships were discovered, we used discriminate sampling to identify any data that would falsify or challenge category properties and relations. From our pilot case we developed interim propositions (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The other cases we used thereafter, were selected for theoretical replication (producing contrasting results for predictable reasons) and literal replication (producing the same results) along theoretical dimensions of imprints and entrepreneurial process (Seawright and Gerring 2008; Yin 2011). We stopped when we got to 23 cases (Table 1) because we felt we had reached a saturation point (Bouncken et al. 2021; Saunders et al. 2018) (i.e., the chances of generating new theoretical insights from new cases were negligible). Our informants were identified through a variety of channels, such as chambers of commerce, entrepreneurship support institutions, immigrant associations as well as the internet in general. We used both a cold-acquisition approach (simply contacting any start-ups fitting our criteria, inquiring about the migration status of the founders and their willingness to participate in our study) and a reference approach (i.e., our informants introduced us to new potential informants).

### 3.2 Data collection

Our data came from semi-structured interviews with the entrepreneurs (and their partners, family members, and employees in the few cases that revealed themselves to yield new theoretical insights) as well as information gathered from their companies' websites, social media, job postings, and publications in the popular press. This triangulation strategy allowed us to obtain thick descriptions of how imprints influence the entrepreneurial process of immigrants from Vietnam, Tunisia, France, Columbia and Belgium who came to settle in Montreal, Toronto and Edmonton urban towns. The first interview guide was developed based on the themes in the literature related to entrepreneurial process (e.g., Leyden and Link 2015; Selden and Fletcher 2015) and imprinting (e.g., Stinchcombe and March 1965; Marquis and Tilcsik 2013; Bryant 2014). The literature enabled us to cover a variety of pre-determined topics (Berg 2001; Silverman and Marvasti 2008; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011) and encourage the informants to reflect on their historical experiences, conditions, and constraints. Subsequent interview guides were prepared with clues from our preliminary case involving a Vietnamese entrepreneur and constant comparison with the literature (Maxwell 1996; Creswell 1998).

Since an entrepreneurial process cannot be defined as a single event but should be considered as a process, which, in this context, is further complicated by an immigrant status, we asked the informants to retrospectively describe their migration background, life stories leading to the formation of their current business, and future plans. Further questions were based on their motivation to migrate to Canada in general and to their respective cities in particular as well as their experiences as immigrants in Canada. Questions that focused on their start-ups, dealt with the products or services of their companies, whether they had a company before, how



**Table 1** Case summaries

Case Origin	Arrival to Canada	Motivation to come to Canada	Education and skills	Professional experience prior to Canada	Professional experience prior to Canadian business	Business entry and market focus	Business exit	Business description
C1 Vietnamese	1973	- Refugee, illegal immigrant	- Graduate degrees in biology in Vietnam - Pre-doctoral degree in biology in the USA	- Biology professor in Vietnam (in the 1970s)	- Various unrelated jobs in the black market such as porter, machine operator, etc. until granted immigrant status in 1975 - A few years in various position in a restaurant	1975 (Montreal) 1980 (Montreal) 2015 (Canada)	1989 - -	Food processor Restaurant Stones for tomb building
C2 Vietnamese	1972	- Refugee	- MBA degree in Finance, - Certified Financial Analyst	- None	- Several years as a financial broker	1987 (Canada) 1997 (Canada)	1997 2017	Financial brokerage Venture capital fund

Table 1 (continued)

Case Origin	Arrival to Canada	Motivation to come to Canada	Education and skills	Professional experience prior to Canada	Professional experience prior to Canadian business	Business entry and market focus	Business exit	Business description
C3 Vietnamese	1980 1997	- Study engineering - Set up business in Canada (second entry)	- Bachelor of Chemistry in 1986 in Canada - Master of Chemistry in 1988 - Doctor of Energy Sciences in 1990 in Canada	- Chemical engineer in global companies in the USA	- None	1997 (Montreal) 2000 (Global) 2008 (Global) 2011 (Global)	2004 2015 - -	Materials for optoelectronics Printing media Printing supplies Materials for optoelectronics Foods Inkjet solutions Fertilizer IT services
C4 Vietnamese	1985	- Adopted by his uncle at the age of 11	- Bachelor degree in IT in Canada in 2000	- None	- None	2015 (Vietnam) 2015 (Global) 2016 (Vietnam)	- - -	IT services
C5 Vietnamese	2005	- Study communication	- Bachelor degree in English in Vietnam in 1992 - Master's degree in communication in Canada in 2007	- Teacher of English	- None	2007 (Vietnam and Canada)	-	Consulting in import-export and education services

Table 1 (continued)

Case Origin	Arrival to Canada	Motivation to come to Canada	Education and skills	Professional experience prior to Canada	Professional experience prior to Canadian business	Business entry and market focus	Business exit	Business description
C6 Vietnamese	1998	- Study finance (follow her high-school sweet heart)	- Bachelor degree in Finance in Canada in 2003	- None	- Financial advisor for a major consulting company	2015 (Vietnam) –	–	Asset management
C7 Vietnamese	1996	- Married to a Vietnamese-Canadian	- Bachelor degree in French in Vietnam in 1994	- None	- None	1998 (Montreal) 2013	2013	Clothing and artwork import-export
C8 Chinese-Vietnamese	1979	- Refugee	- Short courses in English in Canada in early 1980s	- Army officer	- Various jobs in China town	1995 (Montreal) –	–	Distributing imported perishable and consumer goods
C9 Vietnamese	1985	- Married to a Vietnamese-Canadian	- None	- None	- None	1990 (Montreal) 2014	2014	Restaurant
C10	1978	- Refugee	- None	- None	- Various jobs in construction	1990 (Montreal) 2015 (Montreal) 2016	2014 2016	Restaurant Seafood distributor Restaurant

Table 1 (continued)

Case Origin	Arrival to Canada	Motivation to come to Canada	Education and skills	Professional experience prior to Canada	Professional experience prior to Canadian business	Business entry and market focus	Business exit	Business description
C11 Vietnamese	1992	- Study music	- Bachelor degree in music in Vietnam - Doctoral degree in music in Canada in 1998	- Piano performer	- None	1998 (Montreal) –	–	Self-employed (Private piano classes) Music school
C12 Vietnamese-Canadian	Born in Canada		- Bachelor degree in Finance in 2015	- None	- Various jobs in restaurant	2014 (Montreal) –	–	Online sales of furniture
C13 Tunisian	2008,	- Study to find jobs in NGOs to fight poverty and humanitarian relief	- Bachelor degree in Finance in Canada in 2011 - Some short courses in entrepreneurship in France	- None	- Few months as analyst intern at a major bank in Montreal	2011 (Tunisia) 2012 (Montreal) 2015 (Montreal)	2015 2015 2016	Communication and media Adapt tablets for business use Mobile application for restaurants Coffee shop recommendation for tourists

Table 1 (continued)

Case	Origin	Arrival to Canada	Motivation to come to Canada	Education and skills	Professional experience prior to Canada	Professional experience prior to Canadian business	Business entry and market focus	Business exit	Business description
C14	French	2009	- Set up business	- Diploma in software engineering and programming	- Founder of a company in France	- Five years as a programmer in a major game developer/software company in Montreal	2014 (Global)	2015	Two-sided platform for mobile application developers
C15	French-Spanish but raised in Colombia	1974	- Set up business	- Bachelor degree in Spanish - Certificate in film production	- None	- Several years as lecturer at a major university in film studies in Montreal	1984 (Montreal)	1985	Self-employment in diverse branches such as film, photography, internet Mobile application for board members to share information

Table 1 (continued)

Case Origin	Arrival to Canada	Motivation to come to Canada	Education and skills	Professional experience prior to Canada	Professional experience prior to Canadian business	Business entry and market focus	Business exit	Business description
C16 French	2015	- Set up business	- Bachelor degree in business administration - Four years of technical training by his employer (global software company)	- Founder of a company in France - Ten years in a global software company	- None	2015 (subsidiary of his company established in 1991 in France)	-	Data escrow service
C17 Belgian	2010	- Set up business	- Graduate degree in fine arts (advertising, painting, etc.) - Several marketing certificates	- UNIX designer	- Freelancer in advertising	2014 (Canada)	-	Mobile phone plans

Table 1 (continued)

Case Origin	Arrival to Canada	Motivation to come to Canada	Education and skills	Professional experience prior to Canada	Professional experience prior to Canadian business	Business entry and market focus	Business exit	Business description
C18 Vietnamese	1993	- Set up business	- MD degree in France in the 1960s - Certificates in financial management in the USA in 1990 - Short courses in real estate management	- Several years as a psychologist in France (until late 1980s) - Few years as financial analyst for an appliance manufacturer in the USA	- None	1994	1999	Consulting for foreign students seeking to study in Canada Real estate agent Car services
C19 Vietnamese	2002	- Set up business	- Master of Business Administration in Vietnam	- General manager of a large investment company in Vietnam	- None	2002 as investor (Montreal)	-	Jewelry and money exchange
C20 Vietnamese	1976	- Refugee	- Bachelor degree in IT	- None	- None	1995 (Canada and USA)	2003	IT services
C21 Vietnamese	1984	- Refugee	- Bachelor in accounting in Canada	- Family business in Vietnam	- Various temporary jobs	2003 (Vietnam) 1987 (Edmonton)	1996	IT services Auto service Telecommunication
						1996 (Edmonton)	2004	



Table 1 (continued)

Case Origin	Arrival to Canada	Motivation to come to Canada	Education and skills	Professional experience prior to Canada	Professional experience prior to Canadian business	Business entry and market focus	Business exit	Business description
C22 Vietnamese	2012	- Set up business	- Bachelor degree in civil engineer Russia	- Founder and General manager of a real estate and infrastructure development company	- None	2012 as investor (Montreal)	2013	Restaurant
C23 Canadian	1980	- Born to Vietnamese parents in Canada	- Bachelor in business administration	- Founder	- Helping parents in their restaurant business since teenage years	2015	2018	Furniture

they recognised and evaluated business opportunities, whether they conducted market research and how they finally made a choice from different business ideas.

The order of the topics varied, depending on the general course of the interview and the necessity to sometimes clarify previously discussed topics.

Interviews with Vietnamese entrepreneurs were done at the early stage of the research project over several occasions in private meetings or during events organised by the Association of Vietnamese Businesspeople (ranging between 30 min and 4 h in various settings). But interviews with the European entrepreneurs were done at a later stage of our study in settings that were familiar to them e.g., their offices. Depending on the informants' consents, some interviews (15) (C3, C5, C7, C10, C11, C12, C13, C14, C15, C16, C17, C18, C19, C20, C21, C22) were audio-recorded and transcribed while others (8) involved note-taking and off-record due to informant's reluctance to be recorded.

### 3.3 Validity

First, the credibility of this research was enhanced through triangulation. That is data from semi-structured interviews, companies' websites, social media, and other public documents were integrated to ensure a multidimensional view of the entrepreneurial process. The interview guide was developed and refined based on the literature, lending credence to our approach. The iterative nature of our study, where subsequent interviews were adjusted based on initial findings and continuous literature comparison, further underscores its dependability. We also employed thick descriptions to ensure that the findings could be transferable to similar contexts, while the diversity of our interviewees—spanning various nationalities and business types—augments this transferability. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, were rigorously followed to bolster the dependability of our data. We openly discuss any limitations, such as some interviews not being recorded due to informants' preferences, acknowledging their potential impact on data quality. Overall, these elements collectively affirm the quality, credibility, and trustworthiness of the data generated for this research.

### 3.4 Data analysis

We started by splitting the individual interviews into single statements and coded them with a first set of rough (or “working”) codes. As we progressed, certain topics and patterns began to emerge. For each case, we created a single-case model around the life history of the entrepreneur to detect the genesis of his/her important imprints (from both home and host country), metamorphosis of these imprints, and the manifestation of imprints during his/her entrepreneurial process. In the subsequent in-depth analysis we refined the coding system to be better able to identify emerging constructs (Table 2).

Following the open coding process, we proceeded with axial coding with the goal of detecting relationships between the various categories (Saunders et al. 2003; Strauss and Corbin 1998). We analysed the relationship between co-occurring

Table 2 Code book

Categories	Major codes	Memos	Sub codes	Coded segment examples
Imprints	Formal education and training	This concept (1) reflects abilities acquired from education providers and (2) is operationalized by breadth and depth of training programs	University education	Bachelor degree; Master's degree; Doctoral degree; Short courses;
			Professional certificate or designation	Certified financial analyst (CFA); Structured Query Language (SQL) Server Certification; Oracle Certified Professional (OCP) Certification; Law Society's Paralegal Licensing Exam;
			Company training	Our company provided regular internal training; I attended a few seminars provided by our company; I was assigned to a very good mentor the day I arrived in the company;
	Work-related knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA)	This concept (1) reflects abilities acquired through work-related activities and (2) is operationalized by exposure and experience	Industry experience	I have been developing apps for the last 10 years; Before coming to the United States in late 1980s, I had been a practising psychologist for several years;
			Industry knowledge	I keep myself updated regularly on what's happening in our field; I have insider knowledge; I did not know anything about jewelry business until I got here;
			Professional network	I am well connected in the restaurant business; I have lots of friends in the government; all of my friends are in construction business;
			Internship	I went to France for summer internship; I saw a lot of things from my apprentice at IBM; I would not be allowed to operate the machine alone without at least 1000 h of practice under supervision;
			Business experience	I already created a start-up before; I participated in start-up weekend events and learned a lot from my team;

Table 2 (continued)

Categories	Major codes	Memos	Sub codes	Coded segment examples
Emotion	Emotion	This concept (1) reflects subjective durable conscious experience and (2) is operationalized by manifestation of the emotion (Meiselman 2016)	Nostalgia	I just want to return to the carefree days; My life was wonderful before the communists killed my parents;
			Belonging	I am always Vietnamese at heart no matter where I am; I never felt home here;
			Love	Home land is a sweet carambola; I like Quebecer life style; My native land nourished my soul; I love apps, I love design, design applications, I do a lot of design for other companies;
			Hatred	I am done with Vietnam now; Vietnamese betrayed me; Millions of us were killed by pirate, hunger, and disease when fleeing on boats;
Culture	This concept (1) reflects networks of knowledge, consisting of learned routines of thinking, feeling, and interacting with other people, as well as a corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world and (2) is operationalized by shared beliefs and behaviors	Societal norms	It is very hard to manage older people because my culture tells me to respect their ideas and listen to what they say;	
		Customs	It is very hard to set up an altar to pray our God at business premise as we would do in Vietnam; I would rather go to banks than friends, even for business, because with banks I know exactly how much I have to pay back whereas with friends it's a life-long debt;	

Table 2 (continued)

Categories	Major codes	Memos	Sub codes	Coded segment examples
Conditions in which imprints manifest	Favorable local conditions	This concept (1) reflects conditions in the business environment that encourage business activities and (2) is operationalized by ease of doing business	Social expectations	As the first born child, I am expected to continue my family business; Entrepreneurs were seen as exploiter class, so badly viewed;
			Social resistance	In the communist system wanted to depress all private interests but it did not work out;
	Favorable local conditions	This concept (1) reflects conditions in the business environment that encourage business activities and (2) is operationalized by ease of doing business	Favorable market conditions	The market is booming; We are in the era of apps and mobile devices; Montreal is the hub of creativity; here it's the cheapest you can find in north America, it's really cheap;
			Favorable government policies	Tax credits; Innovation grants; Government-organized commission tours; You end up not paying taxes for the first 5 years
	Psychic distance	This concept (1) reflects a lack of context knowledge, or at least large knowledge gaps, and (2) is operationalized by awareness, perceptions, and understanding (Nebus and Chai 2014)	Ethnic integration	French in Quebec are just like the local; Everyone loves Vietnamese food now; Vietnamese are doing very well in Canada, especially in pharmaceutical, medical and restaurant businesses;
			Linguistic distance	I will never be able to speak French; French spoken here is not the same as French we speak in France; I have to face serious communication barriers;
			Cultural distance	I cannot believe that here they do not allow me to add my parents on family insurance plan; The relationship between colleagues is purely professional such that I would be seen odd when sharing my family affairs; I cannot tell my children what to do as my friends back home can do to theirs;

Table 2 (continued)

Categories	Major codes	Memos	Sub codes	Coded segment examples
Entrepreneurial process	Entrepreneurial drive	Entrepreneurial drive reflects the motivation to engage in entrepreneurial activities	Religious distance	There is a subtle discrimination here for my religious belief; I cannot believe in what I read "A Quebec school board was wrong to tell a 12-year-old Sikh boy he could not wear his ceremonial dagger in the classroom, as his faith requires, Canada's top court ruled unanimously Thursday";
	Opportunity conception	Opportunity conception reflects the process in which business opportunities are identified and developed (Ardichvili et al. 2003)	Economic distance	They are too rich to understand what I went through; It costs 10 times hiring a person here versus hiring the same talent back home; The IT infrastructure is here is much better than backhome;
			Political and legal distance	The law is too complicated; I did not know where to file my complaints when my suppliers ditched me; the communists would not allow you to trade freely;
			Opportunity driven	I quit my job to focus on this venture; I just wanted to be my own boss and I had enough with that bad supervisor;
			Necessity driven	I could not find any job here;
			Discovery	Everybody loves Vietnamese food so I opened this restaurant;
			Creation	Few people had any idea about Vietnamese cuisine in the 70s so I had hard time to create a regular customer base; We made a mistake of setting prices so low that now people perceive Vietnamese food as cheap and are not willing to pay the same price as Japanese food although our food is better;

Table 2 (continued)

Categories	Major codes	Memos	Sub codes	Coded segment examples
	Market exploitation	This concept reflects markets that the entrepreneurs tap into to generate sales and/or acquire factors of production and operationalized by the degree of internationalization	Domestic	All of our sales are local; We buy local and sell local; I only cover West Islands; I don't think international business is for us;
	Business formation	Business formation reflects a process in which the entrepreneurs mobilize resources to form their business	International	I buy all of the materials from China; We are a born-global company; It does not make sense to restrict our business to the Canadian market;
	Business formation	Business formation reflects a process in which the entrepreneurs mobilize resources to form their business	Local resources	We looked for investment from Canadian angel funds; I have to work with Canadian; Montreal has the best pool of talents in creativity;
	Business exit	Business exit reflects a process in which the entrepreneurs remove themselves from ownership and decision-making structure of the business. Exit can happen after opportunity recognition but before business start-up (ex-ante selection) or after opportunity exploitation (ex-post selection)	Ethnic resources	Most of our employees are Vietnamese; We wanted to create jobs for our immigrant community; We grouped in St-Denis to help each other;
	Business exit	Business exit consists primarily of two routes: (1) failure and (2) voluntary disbanding (DeTienne 2010)	New entrepreneurial pursuit	I am a serial entrepreneur;
			Options other than new business creation	I just found a good job so no more time for the business; The pain from this failure is too much to make another attempt;



codes (i.e., codes that thematically overlap) and between proximity–occurring codes (codes are that do not overlap directly but are closely related). The data gained from this analysis was used to create relationship maps to visualise the interdependencies and connections of the various factors, in which the number of occurrences and co–occurrences decided on their importance. With the help of the preliminary topics and visual maps we identified a number of interdependencies thereby narrowing down the actual factors influencing key activities in the entrepreneurial process through selective coding (Saunders et al. 2003) (see Fig. 1). It should be noted that Fig. 1 does not include imprints that are not uniquely relevant to immigrants (such as family and friends, mentors, peers at the workplace, hobbies, etc.) even though they do show to have strong impacts on the entrepreneurial process that our informants went through.

## 4 Findings

In the following sections of our findings, we present the views of our participants using the entrepreneurial process framework as a guide in delineating their ‘sensitive periods’ identifiable through their entrepreneurial journey(s) in Canada. Moreover, we provide an interpretation of their views relative to the literature.

### 4.1 Entrepreneurial drive

The drive immigrants have for better opportunities in the host country regardless of their reasons to immigrate is far greater. It is manifested through their risk–taking and opportunistic behaviors. The following quotes illustrate such type of behaviour, motivations, and drive:

It is much easier here to form a company, costs less money, the office costs you less money, in France you have a lot of taxes, problems Excerpt from C13, a Tunisian immigrant who got high education as well as work experi-

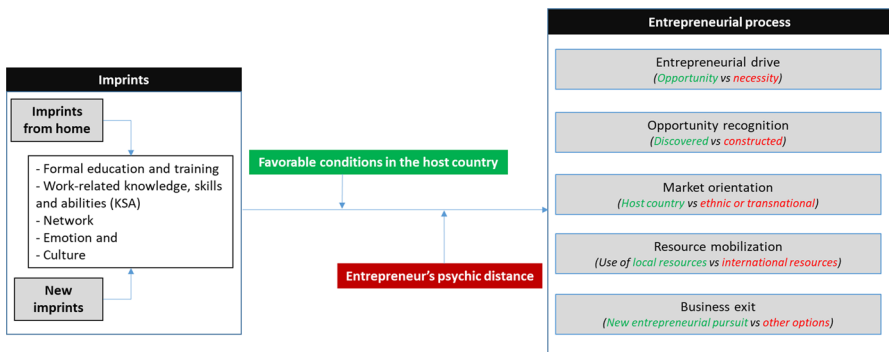


Fig. 1 Influence of imprints on immigrant entrepreneurial process Source Authors’ ideas

ence in both France and Quebec before setting up his business in Montreal, Quebec [Excerpt 1].

The urge of being recognized by the new society, the people of your new country and the urge of surviving, even if you are educated, [...] but you choose to come here, [...] you choose to have a better life, and you try to make yourself a better person, so you risk your life even just by coming here, [that] makes you an entrepreneur. Excerpt from C15, a French-Spanish entrepreneur raised in Colombia [Excerpt 2].

The strong drive for better life and business opportunities explains why immigrants have high entrepreneurial propensity, resulting in higher rates of entrepreneurship (e.g., Portes and Yiu 2013; Kerr and Kerr 2017; Duhamel and St-Jean 2021). Insights from our participants indicate that there are other types of necessities besides financial needs that drive them into entrepreneurship. From our analysis, it emerged that immigrant entrepreneurs that were highly likely to secure employment entered into entrepreneurship because of their psychological need for proving their self-worth in their host community. The following excerpt provides insights into how immigrant entrepreneurs in Canada felt.

Compared to Canadians, we have to work twice as hard and deliver thrice as much to gain respects. There is always a subtle discrimination. They see us as profiteers who come to take advantage of the good system they have built, and they treat us like second class because we come from a third-world country. If you don't prove your values, you will not be accepted. When you are a boss, they look at you with a different eye. Excerpt from C11, founder of a music school and a piano teacher who came from an affluent family, earned bachelor's degree in music in Vietnam and a doctoral degree in music in Canada [Excerpt 3].

Furthermore, we uncovered new evidence that provides alternative explanations concerning the creation of high-performance companies resulting from high-growth opportunities in the market. Creators of high-performing firms, in our sample, did not start their businesses on the basis that they had recognised high-growth potentials, nevertheless they ended up with strong companies because of their constant need for acceptance and to prove their value to their host nation. Another interesting finding was related to the immigrant's level of education. Educated immigrants stressed the challenges of securing employment opportunities commensurate with their educational qualifications and thus suffered from personal complexity problems triggered by bitterness and the urge to restore their self-esteem. Consequentially, they resorted to entrepreneurship as a mean to satisfy their psychological needs. The following excerpts demonstrate that.

I was already a professor at a university in the South of Vietnam when I went to the United States in 1971 for my doctoral studies... I came to Canada in 1973 as a refugee. At first, I had to work illegally, and my degree was of no use in the job market.

To make ends meet, I learned how to make Vietnamese traditional food to sell to the [Vietnamese] community.

I always wanted to find a real job related to my training, but I just had no chance. Now with my franchise model, I train new restaurateurs and in a way I am a teacher. Excerpt from C1, founder of a large Vietnamese restaurant franchise empire [Excerpt 4].

To that end we propose that:

**Proposition 1** *Motivational imprints for better opportunities and acceptance in the host country encourage immigrants to enter entrepreneurship.*

Evidence in our dataset suggests that the vast majority of these entrepreneurs who were highly-educated and skilled immigrants were pushed into entrepreneurship because they could not find a job that reflected their credentials. They became entrepreneurs because of low self-efficacy and pessimism about their chances of getting a job in Canada as illustrated by the following quotes from two Vietnamese immigrants. These individuals highlighted that the education and skills they acquired before coming to Canada was inadequate and did not help them to secure employment in the host market. Accordingly, they were forced to create their own jobs and take any opportunity even if it does not present any room for growth. In other words, people coming to the host country with a package of a high level of education and strong KSA can be driven into entrepreneurship out of necessity rather than opportunity. The excerpts below capture these challenges.

I was so well-trained to do business in [a closed centralized economy of] Vietnam before coming to Canada. My education back then framed me into a different mode of thinking. Excerpt from C7, founder of clothing companies [Excerpt 5].

The typical story is: if you want to work as a car mechanic, you must go to school to be certified first. When you apply for a job, they'll ask if you have a degree or experience? If you have a degree without Canadian experience, it is also not good. You need money to live so your only option is to create your own job. That's the story of my parents. Excerpt from C12, an entrepreneur born in Canada to Vietnamese immigrant entrepreneurs, worked for his parents during his teenage years, and founded his own company selling furniture online during his final year at college [Excerpt 6].

The dominant view in the extant literature on entrepreneurship is that experienced and skilled entrepreneurs start new businesses because of the opportunities in the market. However, this was not the case with our informants. They decided to start a business even though they did not see a real opportunity in the business sense.

I have a bachelor's degree in civil engineer Russia. I am also the Founder and General manager of a very big real estate and infrastructure development company that is running well in Vietnam. But none of this has any real value here when I look for a managerial job. Rather than sitting idle and spending my

savings, I have got to do something even though I have not found any real business opportunity here yet. Excerpt from C22, founder of a small restaurant who created his business for fear of being judged as a jobless person [Excerpt 7].

Taking the above into consideration, we propose the following:

**Proposition 2** *Education and KSA imprints coupled with high psychic distance force immigrants into entrepreneurship out-of-necessity, which is driven by financial, psychological or social-psychological factors.*

## 4.2 Opportunity recognition

The findings of this research extend Suddaby et al.'s (2015) study by highlighting that imprinting imprinting leads to opportunity discovery and reflexivity leads to opportunity creation. In some way, it elaborates on how entrepreneurial opportunities can be recognised and constructed simultaneously in a variety of combinations and recognised or constructed individually. Entrepreneurs are information processors who use more or less of both approaches in order to identify opportunities (Vaghely and Julien 2010). Based on the stories told by our informants, it was unequivocal that their approaches to business creation were contingent on their circumstances. Faced with psychic distance in terms of language, knowledge of the host context, culture, and societal variations, they simultaneously adapted their business creation approaches and utilised imprints from their home country. The following quote from a Vietnamese immigrant entrepreneur demonstrates that her imprints forced her to create the first business opportunity but her reflexivity during the execution of the first business led her to the discovery of new opportunities.

I was desperate to find a job but couldn't because [employers] don't consider my years of experience [teaching English] in Vietnam to be of any value. My Canadian master's degree in communication did not help either. Admittedly, my English cannot be compared to native speakers despite my formal training in the English language. But deep down in my heart, I always knew that I am a good mentor who can help people to learn well and create opportunities for themselves. I thought, why not create my own opportunities. After lots of research, I finally recognized that I could do something related to my relative strength in English and physical presence in Canada. That's how I started my business to teach English and connect Vietnamese students with schools across Canada. A year after running the business, I got a better understanding of how things work in Canada and became good at manoeuvring through myriad of political and legal requirements. Then by chance, I discovered that I could also help Vietnamese companies who want to do business in Canada in term of language and connection to local business here. Now my main business is in import-export consultation. Excerpt from C5, founder of import-export trading company [Excerpt 8].

An explanation for why this evidence is contrary to findings elsewhere lies in that, her imprints created a high psychic distance in the host market. This pattern was consistent across our sample. Moreover, our informants were inclined to go through the discovery phase first because most of them started their entrepreneurial journey with a deliberate and systematic search for exploitable opportunities. But a poor fit between what they could offer and what the host market wanted rendered this approach ineffective. Nevertheless, their discovery of the true opportunities came about when they were not actively searching for them, but rather based on their recognition of the value of newly received information and by gaining a better understanding of how things work in their host country. Our informants also suggested that the discovery approach (accidental discovery and/or systematic search) would be fruitful only when the market conditions of the host country are favourable for their sector and suitable for their KSA. Indeed, recognising an opportunity requires preceding entrepreneurial alertness, which is the propensity to notice and be sensitive to information about objects, incident, and patterns of behavior in the environment, with special sensitivity to maker and user problems, unmet needs and interests, and novel combinations of resources (Ardichvili et al. 2003).

After earning my degrees in Canada [Bachelor and Masters' degree in Chemistry and a Ph.D. in Energy Sciences], I worked for 7 years in the USA as a chemical engineer in global companies. There, I learned a lot about global opportunities in optoelectronics, so I returned to Montreal to set up my business in 1997. Based in Montreal for customers' relations, my company has factories in Vietnam [where skilled labour is cheap]. In fact, we create jobs for thousands of people and become an important driver for local economic development [and received favourable support from the Vietnamese government]. Excerpt from C3, a serial entrepreneur with offices in Canada and factories in Vietnam [Excerpt 9].

Furthermore, our analysis revealed that alertness is not always a result of a deliberate search for opportunities, but a general scanning and search for information at any given time, not restricted to working hours or the workplace. Alert individuals have a different mental model or schema, representing an individual's knowledge and convictions about the physical and social world than non-alert individuals (Gaglio and Katz 2001). With superior schemata, alert individuals can draw correct conclusions during environmental changes and recognise new opportunities. Prior research also acknowledges that entrepreneurial alertness is a requirement for successful opportunity recognition and development (Ardichvili et al. 2003). Not every individual is equally able to recognise an emerging opportunity because of differences in experience and knowledge on how to serve markets or solve customer problems, which are the major determinants of opportunity recognition (Hills et al. 1999; Baron and Ensley 2006; Zhou 2007). Individuals with special knowledge are able to recognise opportunities without actively searching for them (Vandor and Franke 2016). On the other hand, not every entrepreneur is superior at recognising opportunities but might be simply knowledge-driven (Shane and Venkataraman 2000). Therefore, an important factor is the educational level of entrepreneurs.

Research points to a positive correlation between an entrepreneur's university education and her/his likeliness to discover good business opportunities in the area s/he lives in, compared to the rest of the local population (Ramos-Rodríguez et al. 2010). However, our data showed a reverse trend for immigrants with a university education but large psychic distance in terms of differences in culture, language, political and legal knowledge. Excerpt 5 illustrated the differences of mindsets due to our informants' education and experience from Vietnam. She could not see the opportunity discovered by her husband and she ended up creating her own opportunity with her mother in Vietnam. Excerpt 10 confirms how she created her own opportunity.

I just cannot comprehend how the idea he saw could be a business opportunity, so he ended up doing his business alone. I couldn't stand being a housewife, so I created my own opportunity with the help of my mother, who owned a large well-known fashion company in Vietnam. I created a movement of appreciation for Vietnamese culture, including its food and lifestyle. I also have to turn my apparent weakness of heavy Vietnamese accent in speaking French into an advantage. In fact, in contexts where culture is not the focus, you are discriminated against if you speak with a foreign accent and behave differently from the locals. I participate in lots of cultural events and student activities at universities. That's how I have been selling clothes designed and produced by my mother's company. Excerpt from C7, founder of clothing companies [Excerpt 10].

Based on this statement its clear that some immigrant entrepreneurs follow a different entrepreneurial process. These different routes immigrant entrepreneurs follow in their entrepreneurial journeys can reveal different opportunities even when they are presented with the same information as the native entrepreneurs. Taking into consideration the discussion about the education levels, entrepreneurial opportunities and the journeys immigrant entrepreneurs follow in a host country, we propose that:

**Proposition 3** *Education and KSA imprints enable immigrants to discover entrepreneurship opportunities when the environment of the host country is pro-entrepreneurship.*

### 4.3 Market orientation

Empirical evidence generated through interviews involving our informants suggested that in the majority of cases they pivoted their businesses towards the markets they were familiar with. Indeed, in the first instance, immigrants prioritised their home country or other countries where they had already developed some networks. Consistent with Bourdieu's (1972) theory of social practice, immigrants are social agents whose imprints from both home and host countries create various types of

capital and entrepreneurial habitus for cross-border opportunity recognition and exploitation.

Excerpt 1 above demonstrated that immigrants' KSA and network imprints encouraged them to be transnational intermediaries. But people without an established network had to overcome their liability of foreignness by focusing on ethnic markets (Zhou 2004a; Gurău et al. 2020). Contrary to prior research and assumptions about enclave dependency (Werbner 2001; Zhou 2004b; Greve and Salaff 2005), evidence in this research suggests that immigrant entrepreneurs' choice of market is more of opportunistic behavior and thus conditioning them to orient towards the markets with better business opportunities, not necessarily related to their ethnic ties. As such, they orient their business towards the host country market when they present attractive incentives that outweigh the risks associated with the unknown and the legacy of newness. This phenomenon is illustrated in the quote from a Vietnamese immigrant who used his French connections to exploit the opportunities created by the government of Quebec and later pursued other business opportunities in the host country.

After earning my MD degree in the late 1960s in France, I worked for several years as a psychologist there until the late 1980s. In 1990, I moved to the United States with my family. I could not practice my MD, so I studied for a financial management certificate and then worked for a few years as a financial analyst for an appliance manufacturer in the USA. When I arrived in Canada, I could not find a job in any of these fields. To make a living, I used my connections in France to set up a company that brought French students to study here. Quebec had a very generous policy to attract French people to come and work here. Five years later, I entered the real estate business when the market was booming. When it was no longer as lucrative as I wanted, I changed to the car services business. It is so easy to do business here. There are so many opportunities to get seed funding and government grants.

You can easily find and hire highly qualified people in any field. In fact, Canada has so many overqualified immigrants who struggle to find jobs, especially those from developing countries, so you employ good people on your own terms. Excerpt from C18, a serial entrepreneur who founded companies in the education, real estate, and car services sectors [Excerpt 11].

Although the literature on immigrant entrepreneurship stresses immigrants' inclination to ethnic markets and resources (e.g., Light and Bhachu 1993; Dabić et al. 2020), our data shows that immigrant entrepreneurs have high levels of opportunistic behaviors that go beyond their ethnic networks. The search for business opportunities and for profit is a powerful force behind the re-definition of traditional forms of loyalties and belonging and may incite entrepreneurs to leave their familiar groups (Pécoud 2010). This opportunistic approach in their market orientation is also highlighted in excerpt 14 under the sub-heading resource mobilisation. This reflects our earlier observations about immigrant entrepreneur's constant need for showing their successes for personal satisfaction. Furthermore, ethnic entrepreneurs and workers may seek out more favourable relations with employers and labour or consumer markets beyond their own community (Gold and Light 2000). In certain



cases (Gold 1994; Kim 1999), ethnic ties may become a burden once the business grows and access to non-ethnic customers is often central to entrepreneurs and further motivates strategies to open up. To that end and in view of the evidence from our participants presented above, we propose that:

**Proposition 4** *KSA and network imprints encourage immigrants to orient their business to transnational markets but reorient to the host country market when the environment of the host country is pro-entrepreneurship.*

#### 4.4 Resource mobilisation

Our field data showed that immigrants first exploit host resources for their business operations because of favourable conditions for entrepreneurship in the host country. Contrary to the literature, evidence from our informants indicated that they did not depend on ethnic strategies or resources provided by ethnic groups even when they enter the local ethnic market or ethnic enclave market. This was common among high-skilled entrepreneurs. Social sources of information, such as informal industry networks (e.g., customers and suppliers) or mentors, as well as participation in professional forums like conferences, meetings, and seminars is important for entrepreneurship (Ozgen and Baron 2007). Thus, individuals (or immigrant entrepreneurs) with established connections in their social network are more likely to do business in their local area (Ramos-Rodríguez et al. 2010).

If you have an employee you can cut his contract in 2 weeks, and so it's very easy to hire and fire, so because it's easy to fire, it's easy to hire.

But in Belgium, just like in Germany and France,... once you have worked with an employee for more than 6 months it's like a marriage, you are married with him, one big thing that blocks the expansion, and here it's not the case. Excerpt from C17, founder of a mobile phone service company [Excerpt 12].

Although prior research shows that the feelings and moods individuals experience (i.e., their affect) influence many aspects of cognition and behavior (Baron 2008), our field data suggested that when immigrants develop emotional ties to their new home country they wish to stay, they create ties that induce them to look for host resources. Some even avoid ethnic resources because of their dislike of their home country's business culture.

Being French here, I never had any problem. But I am Canadian now. I invest a lot of my time and energy in Canada, so I wanted to make sure I keep what I build. That's the main reason [for becoming a Canadian]. On top of that, I also really like the values of Canada. It's a different culture, for sure different than European culture. Still at the same time, I don't have any problems. I think I have more situations in France than in here. It's better here than in anywhere else I have been. You can discuss with people, everyone is very respectful, of what everyone thinks and says. Everybody is a very hard worker. They are not selfish; they understand the problems. When you start a company, you are taking a lot of risk. It's very complicated. People here respect that. They say

things like ‘wow, great job, *bon courage*,...’. In France, people will try to discourage you, saying things like ‘Why are you doing this? It’s complicated. Stupid’... Of all the people I hire, only two are immigrants from France - one is an intern, one is an employee. The rest of the team is from Canada. As a start-up, we don’t attract the average person. We attract people that are a bit more passionate about doing their job instead of just doing 9 to 5. That’s particular, and to me it’s definitely not French people that are here. Excerpt from C14, founder of a mobile application company [Excerpt 13].

Contrary to prior literature, on immigrant entrepreneurs, which emphasises dependency on ethnic resources in situations where opportunities are scarce (e.g., Zhou 2004b; Neto 2006; Klostermann 2010), our research evidence suggested that immigrant entrepreneurs direct significant amounts of effort towards integrating into the host country. They also work extremely hard to make connections with the native population. In a pro-entrepreneurship context, host resources become the backbone of immigrants businesses. Our field data showed that highly skilled and well-integrated immigrants, who are physically not recognisable as foreigners and proficient in the language spoken in their host country behave in the similar way as the native population with regard to their business processes compared to immigrant minorities recognisable as such. This is due to the fact that they do not feel discriminated against in the market. These entrepreneurs organise and manage their companies to a similar level as the companies set-up by the native entrepreneurs. They compete with the companies both founded by natives and immigrants. However, immigrant entrepreneurs are more likely to mobilise resources from their home country if they have a strong cultural identity (Robertson and Grant 2016) and positive emotion towards their home country (Meiselman 2016).

There are people whose love for their native land is too strong. Like me, even though I have settled down here for almost 40 years, my heart is still with Vietnam. I always feel a stranger in this land, and I always have the urge to go back to contribute to my motherland and to show Vietnamese pride to the world. That’s why I opened my factory in Vietnam to create jobs for thousands of people. My headquarters is still here, and it is no different from any other Canadian company in this sector. You see that we have a big mix of people from all kinds of countries. Canada is a land of immigrants, not a land of any particular ethnics... Thinking back of the day I started the company, I did not look into the Vietnamese community here to build my business. As entrepreneurs, we have to find the most cost-effective resources. I do not see why start-ups, who are extremely resource-constrained by default, have to stick to hiring their co-ethnic people if they can find cheaper labour in other groups. Even in China town where you see lots of Chinese working in Chinese companies, I do not think that it is because those Chinese companies prefer Chinese ethnics because they cannot find workers elsewhere. Rather, it is because Chinese immigrants are cheap abundant laborers whose only chance is to work for Chinese bosses. If tomorrow these Chinese labours become more expensive for them, I am sure that those Chinese companies will hire other people. Excerpt from C3, a serial entrepreneur who founded several global companies [Excerpt 14].

Our data revealed that some immigrants who returned to their ethnic resources did so after exploiting the opportunities presented by the host market. The following quote illustrates how cultural distance made him return to working with ethnic resources to serve the host market.

I came as a war refugee. I struggled a lot because I did not speak the language or have a degree. I worked for other Vietnamese in the construction business. But the job was never stable. Fortunately, I am very good at cooking, so I started selling food to construction workers in the Vietnamese community. When I had enough capital, I opened my own restaurant that serve Vietnamese food. Since 1990, I have been so lucky with my many restaurants. [Vietnamese restaurants are popular in Canada as sources of healthy and cheap food]. But I never got over the language barrier. In 2015, I sold all my restaurants to venture out to the seafood distribution business.

Being in the food business for so long, I was so convinced that I would be able to capture the opportunities in this new segment despite strong discouragement from my friends who are also business owners like me. They advised me to stay with the Vietnamese community like them. Oh,... how wrong I was. It underestimated the difficulties of working with local companies because of clashes between Vietnamese and Quebecois business cultures. So now I come back to the restaurant business. Excerpt from C10, founder of several restaurants and a seafood distributor [Excerpt 15].

**Proposition 5** *Imprints of culture and positive emotion with the host country and culture motivate immigrants to build their business on host resources when the host context is pro-entrepreneurship.*

**Proposition 6** *Imprints of culture and positive emotion with the home country underlying a high psychic distance encourage immigrants to build their business on ethnic and home country resources.*

#### 4.5 Business exit

Entrepreneurial exit strategies are an important aspect of the entrepreneurial process (DeTienne et al. 2015). Although the literature does not differentiate business exit with entrepreneurial exit, we contend that it is important to distinguish these two concepts. Business exit is an act of liquidation of financial investment in the business, whereas entrepreneurial exit is a career choice. The decision to exit a business does not have to be a result of failure, and there are many options to exit at different phases of the company's life cycle (DeTienne 2010). An entrepreneur's exit route is often determined by his/her venture performance (Wennberg et al. 2010).

In the case of high-performance ventures, entrepreneurs choose to harvest sales (i.e., the entrepreneur exits as majority owner, but the firm continues) or liquidation (i.e., the entrepreneur terminates the firm and distributes the value of its assets to the owners and creditors). In the case of low-performance ventures, the entrepreneurs

quit through distress sales (flight from loss where the entrepreneur sells the business before it accumulates further losses) or distress liquidation (i.e., an outright bankruptcy). The authors argue that education has a positive effect on the probability of making a harvest sale relative to continuation, but their data give the opposite results. They suggest education-induced overconfidence described by Clayson (2005) as a tentative explanation for the paradox but call for further research in the area. Although our data support the argument about venture performance as a determinant of business exit, we found nuances in their exit strategies. The literature suggests four quitting approaches (Maertz and Campion 2004):

- Impulsive quitters: the decision is driven by a sharp negative effect that makes them quit on the spot rather than the presence or attractiveness of alternatives.
- Comparison quitters: the decision is driven by the attractiveness of alternative arrangements.
- Preplanned quitters: the decision is made in advance to quit at a specific time in the future.
- Conditional quitters: the decision is planned against uncertain event or shock.

Necessity-driven immigrant entrepreneurs are comparison and preplanned quitters. They will exit the business as soon as they find better arrangements. Others pre-plan their exit after they upgrade their qualification to be more employable in the job market. On the other hand, opportunity-driven entrepreneurs are more likely to be impulsive and conditional quitters. Their decision to quit is usually related to poor integration due to cultural clashes and emotional strikes. However, highly educated people with good KSA and network remain positive attitudes toward entrepreneurship. When they sense a good chance of business success thanks to favourable stimuli from the environment, they will come back to entrepreneurial activities.

Previous empirical work shows that entrepreneurs are motivated to seek outside employment to avoid liquidation in the case of low performance (Carter et al. 2006). However, evidence from our field work suggested that it is not always the case. People with education, KSA, and network imprints quit altogether when they perceive low chance of overcoming the high psychic distance. For them, it is not just a business exit but an entrepreneurial exit.

Being in a new country with a completely different culture makes it hard for me to manage people. The effort put in is too much for the returns. I was a fool twice to think that my knowledge and skills, plus the government's support policies and a booming industry, would be good enough to make a career out of a new business. You need much more than that. I have found a better use for my knowledge and Canadian presence in working for a Vietnamese company's subsidiary here. Excerpt C21, founder of a family business in car services and telecommunication [Excerpt 16].

**Proposition 7** *When the local context is pro-entrepreneurship, education, KSA, and network imprints encourage immigrants to engage in new entrepreneurial pursuits.*

**Proposition 8** *Education, KSA, and network imprints coupled with high psychic distance drive immigrants to pursue non-entrepreneurial options after exiting their business.*

## 5 Discussion

People migrate to a new country for various reasons and immigrants do not necessarily have a prior plan to be entrepreneurs in their host country. But when they face numerous challenges including their liability of foreignness in their host country, culture, social, political, and institutional (Gurău et al. 2020) it forces them to engage in some form of entrepreneurial activity. In line with the theoretical framework proposed by Mathias et al. (2015), we uncovered empirical evidence suggesting that imprints influence the entrepreneurial processes of immigrant entrepreneurs. Admittedly, host country imprints led to different professional and organisational socialisation experiences, norms, schemas, and skills that shaped their entrepreneurial activities (Leyden and Link 2015; Zapkau et al. 2017). But and unlike previous studies on the influence of imprints on entrepreneurial actions, we discovered that the same imprints can have very different effects depending on the environment in which the imprints manifest.

Most notably, it was unequivocal in our research that other imprints were more salient than others when it comes to influencing the business decisions of immigrant entrepreneurs. Specifically, their impacts were moderated by psychic distance—the entrepreneur’s lack of local context knowledge, or large knowledge gaps (Nebus and Chai 2014)—and the degree to which the local conditions are favourable to entrepreneurial actions.

Furthermore, we found that immigrant entrepreneurs’ imprints change overtime just as predicted by the imprint literature. Indeed, the host country can create new imprints on the immigrants and the imprints they carry along from their home countries may decay, amplify, persist or transform. Consequentially, the same immigrants could have different responses to the same type of entrepreneurship stimulants depending on the nature of the combination of imprints they hold at the time of decision making.

### 5.1 Theoretical contributions

Drawing upon the concept imprinting to understand how, within the entrepreneurial processes of immigrant entrepreneurs, their behaviours and actions responded to conditions in their host nation, we developed new understanding of their ‘sensitive periods’ (Marquis and Tilcsik 2013). Such knowledge contributes to research by integrating immigrant entrepreneurship into mainstream entrepreneurship research. More specifically, these insights provide the following contributions. Theoretically, this study elaborates on how an immigrant entrepreneurs’ path is set by the way they think, reason, make decisions, plan and set goals (Baron 2014). Besides cognitive factors, the life experiences of immigrant entrepreneurs as well as the way they learn from their experiences in a new environment changes the way they recognise and

create opportunities. Thus, advancing the notion of imprinting which is often associated with how the environment stamps particular elements onto new organizations (Stinchcombe and March 1965) to incorporate changes at individual level in small entrepreneurial businesses. In some way, this understanding provides alternative theoretical explanations to account for the entrepreneurship processes of immigrant entrepreneurs.

Crucially, this integrates immigrant entrepreneurship into the mainstream entrepreneurship research. Moreover, such insights help to develop new perspectives about immigrant entrepreneurship. They showcase how immigrants can have an economic value to their host country through employment creation and the role they can play in regional development through the businesses they establish. This has profound implications for various stakeholders.

## 5.2 Research implications

The findings of this research stimulates debate on the support needs of immigrant entrepreneurs. Particularly, it encourages policy makers to establish policies that can be used to harness the potentials immigrant entrepreneurs have and can bring to their host nations. Moreover, the outcomes of this research can be informative in debates on integrating immigrants into their new communities which is crucial for social cohesion. From a business perspective this research has managerial implications. It helps immigrant entrepreneurs and owner managers to understand 'sensitive periods' (Marquis and Tilcsik 2013) in such a way that they are able to reflect on their entrepreneurial journeys a developmental phase which is essential in new venture creation. Academically, theorisations of how host nations' imprints influence the entrepreneurship processes of immigrant entrepreneurs overtime encourage scholars to initiate additional empirical studies that focus on understanding the relationship between immigrant entrepreneurship and the business context.

## 5.3 Research limitations

As with any research, our study has limitations. Although we demonstrated the importance of imprinting in the way immigrant entrepreneurs make decisions and behave when it comes to business creation we only established how they acquired these imprints. This means that we only explained the behaviors that resulted from a given set of imprints at the time of decision with regards to business creation. Accordingly, we propose future studies that look into ways of creating imprints that are favourable for the kind of entrepreneurship that the host country wants to promote.

## 6 Conclusion

Through studying the behaviours and actions of immigrant entrepreneurs when comes to business creation, this research has uncovered important underlying, but less-understood factors that account for the entrepreneurial processes of immigrant

entrepreneurs. The research utilised the theory imprinting to develop and advance alternative theorisations of the entrepreneurship processes of immigrant entrepreneurs. Indeed, by drawing on the imprinting constructs and components of the entrepreneurship process, the study offers new perspectives in entrepreneurship research and the migration debate. This is important in that it enables better understanding of the underlying mechanisms at the individual level as well as the complexity and dynamic nature of the entrepreneurial processes and the experiences of immigrant entrepreneurs. This holds important theoretical and practical implications.

The new propositions developed in this study offer theoretical avenues that help in understanding the complexity of entrepreneurial drive, opportunity recognition, market orientation, resource mobilisation and business exit in the context of immigrant entrepreneurs. Thus, providing entrepreneurship researchers a baseline for studying embeddedness and entrepreneurship behaviour in different entrepreneurial settings. In a way, the study enriches understanding about the differences contextual factors bring to the process of business creation paving way for future studies. With regards to entrepreneurship policy and to some extent migration policy, the evidence generated in the research can be a reference point that can be used to inform policy makers. Most importantly, it informs the debate pertaining to questions about how to best serve immigrant entrepreneurs while harnessing their potentials.

**Funding** The funding statement provided by Slovenian Research Agency, ([www.arrs.gov.si](http://www.arrs.gov.si)) within the research program P5-0441, Marina Dabic.

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**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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