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Embedded yet excluded: Relational outsidership and strategic readjustment among African diaspora entrepreneurs

Abstract

How do migrant entrepreneurs navigate double outsidership, – simultaneous exclusion from host-country institutions and their own ethnic migrant networks? While ethnic migrant communities are commonly viewed as protective, internal relational dynamics can reproduce exclusion even within co-ethnic networks. Drawing on a qualitative multiple-case study of African migrant entrepreneurs, we theorize within the Finnish host-country context to show that migrant embeddedness is conditional, shaped by informal hierarchies and calculative trust that restrict access to strategic resources. In response, migrant entrepreneurs enact *strategic readjustment*—a proactive reconfiguration of cultural positioning and diversification of network ties beyond the diaspora. We advance international management theory by reconceptualizing outsidership as a relational, continuously reproduced condition, shifting attention from mere absence within networks to the dynamics of power, recognition, and legitimacy within embedded networks. Our findings illuminate how migrant entrepreneurs navigate complex social and institutional landscapes in advanced economies.

Keywords: African Migrant; Diaspora; Finland; Migrant Entrepreneurs; Outsidership; Underdog Entrepreneurs

Embedded yet excluded: Relational outsidership and strategic readjustment among African diaspora entrepreneurs

1. Introduction

International management research has long emphasized the importance of social embeddedness in enabling entrepreneurial and internationalization processes, particularly in contexts characterized by uncertainty and institutional distance (Aluko et al., 2022; Dabić et al., 2020; Nachum et al., 2022; Johanson and Vahlne, 2009, 2015). Within this domain, network relationships are regarded as central mechanisms through which firms and entrepreneurs access opportunities, acquire knowledge, and build legitimacy across borders. However, this construct often involves social-relational margins, where migrants exist in a state of liminality regarding both institutional and social belonging (Elo et al., 2024; Kamara, 2022). The liability of outsidership—defined as exclusion from relevant business networks (Johanson and Vahlne, 2015)—has thus become a core explanatory construct in understanding why some actors struggle to internationalize while others succeed. Embeddedness, in turn, is assumed to mitigate outsidership by facilitating trust, learning, and relational commitment (Vahlne et al., 2012). For example, Gyensare et al. (2025) found that local embeddedness facilitates the work performance of Chinese migrants assigned to Ghana. They argued that relational attachment prompts migrants to leverage their local embeddedness to learn new skills that make them feel alive, energized, and awake at work.

Co-ethnic networks are widely portrayed as protective social infrastructures that compensate for institutional voids and liabilities of foreignness (Barnard and Pendock, 2013; Chand and Tung, 2014; De Lange, 2013). Shared ethnicity and migration histories are assumed to foster trust, solidarity, and resource exchange (Muñoz-Mora et al., 2022; Yang and Lin, 2022). For example, Dizo-Conteh et al. (2025) found that ethnic network ties play a crucial role by bridging institutional voids, transferring cultural and market-specific knowledge, enhancing credibility, expanding network access, and enabling the development of culturally adapted products and services in foreign markets. Barnard et al. (2019) also found that migrant ties and diaspora-linked institutions channel remittances, knowledge flows, and investment into cross-border entrepreneurial activities, showing that these shared social ties and ethnic networks can support business creation and international economic engagement among migrant members. Across both international management

and ethnic network scholarship, embeddedness is conceptualized as a pathway out of exclusion.

However, the relational dynamics within such networks remain underexplored. International management research has primarily conceptualized outsidership as a positional disadvantage relative to host-country institutions or dominant network actors (Aluko et al., 2022; Vahlne et al., 2012). Thus, a gap in our understanding exists of how outsidership may persist – or even be reproduced within socially proximate ethnic communities themselves. This need is particularly salient in advanced Nordic economy contexts, where highly individualistic tendencies, strong formal regulatory frameworks, and high societal trust prevail (Vorobeveva, 2019). Thus, given our limited insights into how and why migrant entrepreneurs who are structurally embedded in ethnic networks but remain excluded from meaningful participation within them in this context (Arslan et al., 2023), we ask, “How does outsidership operate when migrant entrepreneurs are simultaneously insiders by virtue of shared ethnicity and outsiders in terms of resource access and influence in an advanced economy context?”

Our research setting is Finland, a Nordic country often characterized as one of the most homogeneous in Europe until the late 1990s (Koivukangas, 2003). Given our limited understanding of how migrant entrepreneurs may be both embedded and excluded within the very ethnic networks assumed to facilitate access to opportunity in this context (Arslan et al., 2023), we use an inductive qualitative approach with a multiple-case study design (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Theoretically, we reconceptualize outsidership as relational rather than fixed and structural. Building on outsidership theory and underdog entrepreneurship, we argue that exclusion is continually produced through relational governance mechanisms—including informal hierarchies, status differentiation, and calculative trust—operating within identity-based networks. Outsidership is not merely a matter of network absence but of relational positioning within networks. Our findings show how and why migrant entrepreneurs face double outsidership. We identified two interlocking dynamics. First, migrant entrepreneurs experience *primary outsidership* (i.e., Finnish institutional actors), in which a lack of legitimacy and ethnic minority status constrain access. Second, they encounter *secondary outsidership* within their own ethnic migrant network communities, where opportunity flows are selectively activated and are *conditional*. These layered exclusions force migrant

entrepreneurs to strategically readjust, shifting relational ties and proactively adapting culturally to secure legitimacy beyond their ethnic migrant networks. Based on these findings, our study makes two contributions.

First, we deepen understanding of how and why outsidership persists among migrant entrepreneurs in the Nordic economic context, even after entry into ethnic migrant networks (Aluko *et al.*, 2022; Johanson and Vahlne, 2015), thereby reframing insidership as a *conditional* process. Rather than assuming that social proximity inherently reduces inequality or that ethnic network inclusion is a static achievement (Vahlne *et al.*, 2012), we develop new insights into *conditional embeddedness*, in which access is contingent on conformity to informal norms, perceived self-sufficiency, and status recognition. This helps us understand how and why embeddedness can reproduce layers of outsidership within ethnic minority networks.

Second, our study contributes to underdog migrant literature (He *et al.*, 2020; Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2017) by demonstrating how migrant entrepreneurs navigate compounded marginalization across institutional and community domains (Yang and Lin, 2022). Past research shows that migrant entrepreneurial outcomes are shaped by interacting institutional and relational determinants, including access to transnational ties, host-country support systems, and network legitimacy (Nkongolo-Bakenda and Chrysostome, 2013). For example, Cordova and Cancino (2020) show how social networks may simultaneously enable and restrict opportunity development depending on broader institutional and relational conditions. Thus, rather than portraying migrant resilience as a response solely to host-country barriers (Vorobeve, 2019), we show how strategic readaptation emerges in response to exclusion within ethnic migrant networks.

In sum, by exploring migrant entrepreneurship in a Nordic institutional context, this study provides a theory-revealing case for rethinking how insidership, legitimacy, and access to opportunity are constituted in an advanced economy. In this study, we use the term “African migrant entrepreneurs” as the overarching category referring to first-generation migrants operating businesses in Finland. We use “diaspora” more specifically to refer to socially and relationally organized co-ethnic formations through which migrants maintain shared identity, relational ties, and collective belonging in the host-country context. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. We first review the literature on outsidership, diaspora networks, and underdog entrepreneurship within international

management scholarship. We then describe our research design and methodology. Next, we present our findings and develop our conceptual framework of relational outsidership. Finally, we discuss theoretical and practical implications, acknowledge limitations, and outline directions for future research.

2. Theoretical review

2.1. Outsidership

Johanson and Vahlne (2009, 2015) draw on the revised Uppsala internationalization model to theorize outsidership as a structural condition that constrains actors' access to opportunities embedded in established market networks. They argue that firms lacking relevant network positions "suffer from the liability of outsidership and foreignness...with foreignness further complicating the process of becoming an insider within host-country networks" (Johanson and Vahlne, 2015, p. 1415). Outsidership is thus conceptualized not merely as geographic distance, but as exclusion from relationship-based knowledge, trust, and legitimacy that underpin opportunity recognition and commitment decisions (Almodóvar and Rugman, 2015). This condition has been used to explain why new and ethnic actors—such as migrant entrepreneurs (Elo et al., 2020), SMEs lacking institutional legitimacy (Vahlne et al., 2012), and firms operating in weak or fragmented institutional contexts (Ciravegna et al., 2014)—struggle to access resources and form partnerships. From this perspective, overcoming outsidership occurs through experiential learning, network embeddedness, and gradual trust-building, rather than solely through firm-specific advantages or strategic intent.

Aluko et al. (2022) investigate how African transnational entrepreneurs (TEs) overcome the liability of outsidership in the UK. Drawing on fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) of 21 primary data sets from African TEs, they identify the configurations of conditions that enable these entrepreneurs to gain insider status within mainstream host-country networks. Their findings show that while TEs face significant challenges from marginalization in host markets, conditions such as co-ethnic embeddedness, prior host-country work experience, and recognition of their outsidership are integral to overcoming this liability and accessing critical network resources.

Weerasekera et al. (2025) systematically review the literature on how international business scholars address outsidership, drawing on diverse sources that engage with institutional theory, foreign market entry research, and network embeddedness to

consolidate understanding of outsidership challenges. Their analysis synthesizes findings across firm-level and country-level studies. They reveal two main themes that structure current knowledge: firm-specific determinants of outsidership (including managerial attributes, market entry decisions, and business characteristics) and country-specific conditions (encompassing economic, social, and political environments that influence local network access). In addition, they highlight key insights into strategies used to mitigate the liability of outsidership, such as leveraging relational capital to embed in host-country networks, while also pointing to critical gaps in the literature — particularly a need for more empirical research that integrates institutional, strategic, and network perspectives to explain better how firms overcome outsidership barriers in practice.

Ong et al. (2022) also examine how SMEs negotiate outsidership through network positions and cooperative strategies. Drawing on case study evidence from Italian SMEs operating in both native-run and migrant-run industry segments, they show how collaborative engagements within and across business networks enable these firms to access the knowledge and resources needed to enter new customer segments and mitigate outsidership. Their findings reveal that while both migrant-run and native-run SMEs initially occupy peripheral positions with limited access to established network resources—reflecting outsidership—engagement with valued customers, competitors, and intermediaries helps them develop network positions at the edges of multiple networks, avoiding direct competition and building industry-evolution pathways.

Similarly, extensive research has examined how various forms of outsidership, marginalization, and contextual disadvantage shape migrant entrepreneurial behavior and their business outcomes (see Arslan et al., 2022; Butticè and Useche, 2022). Collectively, these studies explore how migrant entrepreneurs may encounter legitimacy deficits within host-country and diaspora contexts characterized by exclusionary institutional and relational dynamics. Despite these contributions, the literature offers limited explanation for situations in which migrant entrepreneurs are formally embedded in ethnic migrant communities yet remain excluded in practice (Vershina and Rodgers, 2019).

2.2. Diaspora Entrepreneurship and Embeddedness

Diaspora entrepreneurship research has long emphasized the enabling role of migrant and co-ethnic networks in facilitating migrant entrepreneurial activity across borders and within host-country markets (Elo et al., 2018; Ram and Deakins, 1996; Riddle and

Brinkerhoff, 2011; Vaaler, 2013). Ethnic diaspora communities are commonly portrayed as socially embedded systems characterized by trust-based relationships, shared norms, and dense transnational ties that provide migrant entrepreneurs with access to financial capital, market knowledge, and legitimacy, which are otherwise constrained by host-country institutional barriers (Barnard and Pendock, 2013; Elo et al., 2020). Within this literature, shared ethnicity, migration history, and national origin are assumed to generate inclusion and belonging, positioning diaspora networks as protective social spaces that help entrepreneurs overcome the liability of foreignness and outsidership (Butticè and Useche, 2022).

Previous classic sociological research has long cautioned against treating co-ethnic communities as homogeneous support systems. Instead, migrant communities are understood as internally layered social and economic fields in which access to social capital, legitimacy, and entrepreneurial opportunities varies across actors (Portes and Jensen, 1989; Waldinger, 1996). Entrepreneurial outcomes are often shaped by pre-migration resources, differential access to networks, and the ability to establish bridging ties beyond co-ethnic communities (Putnam, 2000; Kloosterman and Rath, 2001). Despite these insights, ethnic entrepreneurship research has continued to predominantly portray co-ethnic embeddedness as a broadly enabling mechanism through which migrant entrepreneurs overcome institutional exclusion and liabilities of foreignness.

Elo et al. (2020) demonstrate that ethnic diaspora entrepreneurs often act as relational intermediaries connecting ethnic producers, distributors, consumers, and mainstream market actors across institutional contexts. Through processes such as ethnic value creation and ethnic crossover, migrant entrepreneurs mobilize cultural authenticity and diasporic ties to extend products and services beyond co-ethnic communities into wider host-country markets. This perspective suggests that ethnic migrants are not merely support structures but dynamic relational marketplaces in which legitimacy, trust, and strategic positioning determine who gains access to valuable market opportunities. Consequently, inclusion within ethnic migrant networks depends not only on shared ethnicity but also on entrepreneurs' ability to occupy credible intermediary positions within evolving relational market structures.

Recent studies increasingly acknowledge that ethnic migrant communities are internally differentiated rather than cohesive wholes (Elo et al., 2024; Ojo et al., 2013).

Variations in class position, migration trajectory, legal status, cultural capital, and access to transnational resources generate layers within ethnic groups, shaping who benefits from migrant embeddedness and who does not (Elo et al., 2018; Vorobeva, 2019). For example, some migrant entrepreneurs can mobilize transnational arbitrage opportunities and diasporic agility to access new markets and resources (Elo and Silva, 2022; Abd Hamid and Teng, 2025), while others remain confined to peripheral positions within ethnic enclaves, facing restricted access to finance, information, and influential networks (Arslan et al., 2022).

Emerging research on African migrants further shows that co-ethnic communities are often differentiated along tribal, regional, religious, hometown, and migration-pathway lines that shape access to influence, information, and support within diaspora formations (Adogame, 2013; Horst, 2006; Lindley, 2010). These distinctions often persist after migration and may reproduce pre-migration hierarchies and social cleavages within host-country contexts. Such dynamics help explain how selective support and relational exclusion emerge within diaspora entrepreneurial environments (Vershina et al., 2025), reinforcing internal hierarchies that marginalize certain migrant entrepreneurs from decision-making, resource flows, and collective support mechanisms.

Although emerging research has begun to recognize these internal asymmetries (Nachum et al., 2022), ethnic scholarship has yet to develop a coherent theoretical framework for explaining how exclusion is produced within ethnic migrant communities themselves; this limitation highlights the need to move beyond static notions of embeddedness toward a relational understanding of how power, status hierarchies, and moral evaluations shape entrepreneurial inclusion and exclusion within ethnic contexts.

Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993) argue that migrant networks are sustained not only through solidarity but also through mechanisms of bounded trust, enforceable expectations, and social closure. From this perspective, embeddedness is relationally produced and continuously negotiated rather than automatically derived from shared ethnicity or migration history. Co-ethnic communities may therefore simultaneously generate support and exclusion by regulating who is perceived as trustworthy, legitimate, or morally aligned with collective expectations. Such relational governance mechanisms help explain why some migrant entrepreneurs remain peripheral within ethnic networks despite formal ethnic belonging.

Research shows African diaspora entrepreneurs use transnational ties to navigate home and host country environments (Ojo, 2012; Ojo et al., 2013). While ethnic diaspora networks provide vital social capital and opportunities in uncertain markets (Simba & Ojong, 2018; Elo et al., 2022), literature often views this embeddedness as solely beneficial, overlooking internal hierarchies and exclusion within these communities. This limitation matters in underexplored Nordic contexts, where African migrant entrepreneurs navigate not only host-country institutional barriers but also complex relational dynamics within co-ethnic entrepreneurial spaces. Consequently, less is known about how outsidership may persist despite embeddedness within ethnic networks, and how African migrant entrepreneurs strategically respond to such conditional forms of inclusion.

Our concept of conditional embeddedness builds on, yet departs from, existing work on mixed and multiple embeddedness in migrant entrepreneurship (Kloosterman, 2010; Kloosterman et al., 1999; Kloosterman & Rath, 2001). While these established frameworks show how migrant entrepreneurs navigate host-country structures, social networks, and transnational environments, they offer limited insight into how exclusion can emerge directly within co-ethnic relational structures. We therefore conceptualize conditional embeddedness as a relational condition in which migrant entrepreneurs may be socially embedded within migrant communities while simultaneously experiencing restricted access to strategic resources, legitimacy, and opportunity flows due to internal hierarchies, moral evaluations, and calculative trust dynamics.

2.3. Underdog Entrepreneurship

Building on a challenge-based view of entrepreneurship, Miller and Le Breton-Miller (2017) argue that enduring life hardships can compel adaptive behaviors that both constrain and enable entrepreneurial action. Within this view, underdog entrepreneurs are typically conceptualized as individuals who may face economic, sociocultural, institutional, or legitimacy-based disadvantages, yet can develop resilience, creativity, and a strategic approach in response to such constraints (Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2017). Empirical studies have examined these dynamics among migrants and ethnic minorities (He et al., 2020), and migrants navigating host-country institutions (Lerner and Hendeles, 1996), demonstrating how adversity can catalyze entrepreneurial persistence and innovation (Arslan et al., 2024). We view African migrant entrepreneurs not as an inherent underdog

identity, but as a condition constructed through context-specific institutional exclusion, legitimacy constraints, and resource asymmetries (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2017).

African migrant entrepreneurs operating under conditions of institutional and relational marginalization must overcome these challenges through community belonging, ethnic solidarity, and intra-diaspora support mechanisms (Abd Hamid et al., 2019; Elo et al., 2020; Tan and Lester, 2025). Past research also demonstrates that ethnic minority entrepreneurs frequently operate within constrained relational and institutional environments shaped by discrimination, informal exclusion, labor market disadvantage, and uneven access to mainstream economic opportunities (Ram and Deakins, 1996).

Rather than treating ethnic networks as uniformly supportive or migrant entrepreneurs as a homogeneous group, research shows that co-ethnic ties can simultaneously generate solidarity, heavy obligations, and exclusion (Ram and Deakins, 1996). More recent research similarly cautions against treating migrant entrepreneurs as homogeneous underdog actors, emphasizing instead that entrepreneurial experiences are shaped by differentiated relational positions, liminalities, and varying access to institutional and social capital within both host-country and co-ethnic environments (Elo et al., 2024).

Extant literature typically treats migrant entrepreneur marginalization as an external force imposed by host societies, overlooking exclusion within the migrant communities themselves (He et al., 2022). This creates a blind spot for layered marginalization, where migrant entrepreneurs face simultaneous exclusion from host-country institutions and their own ethnic communities (Arslan et al., 2024). Ultimately, shared ethnicity does not guarantee inclusion. Instead, migrant entrepreneurs must continually negotiate legitimacy and access to resources through community interactions and moral boundary work (Elo et al., 2018; Kamara, 2023). Consequently, exclusion is not just a structural disadvantage from the host country, but a relational, recursive process internal to migrant groups (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2017). This highlights a need to investigate how intra-community hierarchies shape entrepreneurial action, particularly for African migrants' entrepreneurs operating as outsiders among outsiders.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and context

We adopted a qualitative multiple-case study design (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) to explore how outsidership unfolds relationally across institutional and

diaspora contexts. This design is appropriate for theory extension where constructs require refinement rather than testing (Gioia et al., 2013).

We used purposive theoretical sampling to identify information-rich informants who could explain the phenomenon of interest (Flick, 2013; Eisenhardt, 1989). Our sample consists of 16 African migrant entrepreneurs operating in Finland across diverse sectors, including retail, professional services, and consultancy. Many of these sectors were highly relational and customer-facing, making legitimacy, trust-building, and network positioning central to entrepreneurial survival and access to opportunities. We employed the following selection criteria: first-generation migrants from Sub-Saharan African countries who actively engage with both Finnish institutional actors and ethnic diaspora communities within the Finnish host-market context.

We intentionally sought heterogeneity across informants' years of migration to avoid overreliance on a single informant group. At the time of the interview, informants had lived in Finland for 6 to 15 years. We identified initial informants through a community church in Oulu, Finland. We engaged additional informants through snowball sampling, which is appropriate for studying socially embedded populations (Flick, 2013). We ensured that our snowballing was not confined to a single diaspora cluster to mitigate homogeneity bias. Accordingly, our data includes informants from 8 African countries (Cameroon, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Zambia). Although Sierra Leonean entrepreneurs made up a relatively larger subgroup in the sample, patterns associated with conditional embeddedness and relational gatekeeping emerged consistently across informants from Nigerian, Ghanaian, Kenyan, Liberian, Guinean, and Zambian communities.

Our sampling also captured variation across distinct migration trajectories. For example, Nigerian and Ghanaian migrant communities in Finland represent older, more institutionally established migration flows. In contrast, Sierra Leonean and Liberian migration patterns were more strongly shaped by conflict-related mobility. By contrast, migrant inflows from Cameroon, Guinea, and Zambia were comparatively smaller and more recent. While our study was not designed as a comparative ethnic migrant analysis, these differences sensitized us to how migration histories, including conflict-related mobility, diaspora institutional maturity, and pre-migration experiences, may shape relational positioning and embeddedness dynamics across cases. To mitigate geographical

bias within Finland, we purposively sampled migrant entrepreneurs across seven municipalities, including Helsinki, Espoo, Tampere, Turku, Oulu, and Rovaniemi. This spatial dispersion enabled us to examine how the liability of outsidership manifested unevenly across distinct municipal ecosystems, increasing analytical variation while highlighting the place-contingent nature of embeddedness in international entrepreneurial processes.

We positioned our study within the host-country experiences of African migrant entrepreneurs in Finland, excluding transnational business activities or return-migration motivations. This context offers unique opportunities to explore the impact of relational outsidership among migrant entrepreneurs (Hokkinen and Barner-Rasmussen, 2023). Firstly, until recently, Finland has experienced a less pronounced immigration pattern, with the notable exception of Finnish returnees from Russia and Sweden (Stalker, 2002). Thus, offers a theory-revealing context for exploring relational outsidership (Aluko et al., 2022). Second, distinct racial and cultural dynamics shape how migrants are perceived in social and business contexts across Finland (Katila and Wahlbeck, 2012). Migrant entrepreneurs across the country operate at the intersection of institutional marginalization and social embeddedness within co-ethnic communities (Arslan et al., 2024).

Third, the Finnish context matters because relatively small African diaspora communities may intensify competition over limited relational resources (Katila and Wahlbeck, 2012). Compared to larger migrant-receiving economies with more established co-ethnic infrastructures, African diaspora formations in Finland often possess fewer business associations, support systems, and bridging institutions linking migrants to mainstream markets. Consequently, access to legitimacy, information, and opportunities may become more contingent on network position, prior status, and relational endorsement, amplifying internal hierarchies, relational gatekeeping, and dependence on co-ethnic ties and external brokers. This positioning exposes exclusion as a multifaceted process, shaped not only by Finnish institutions but also by internal dynamics within African migrant communities (Elo et al., 2018).

3.2. Data collection

Our primary data collection spanned January 2024 to December 2025 and relied primarily on semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face and by telephone, including during on-site visits to informants' homes (Yin, 2003).

We conducted 27 interviews in total. We conducted an initial round of interviews with all 16 migrant entrepreneurs, followed by 11 semi-structured follow-up interviews with the first 11 informants to capture changes over time. The interviews explored opportunity recognition processes, interactions with Finnish institutional actors, and evolving ties with ethnic diaspora network communities across Finland. This focus aligns with recent research on the intersection of context, situatedness, positionalities, and identities in migrant entrepreneurship in developed economies (Vershina et al., 2025).

The interviews were conducted in English, Pidgin English, and Krio to preserve the informant's narrative authenticity, averaged 76 minutes, and were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim (see Table 1). One co-author, a dual national (Sierra Leone and Finland), translated the Pidgin English and Krio interviews using a meaning-based approach (Yin, 2003). In addition to interviews, we consulted supplementary materials where available, including company websites, public grant information, and business registration records, primarily to contextualize participants' accounts. To increase analytical variation across municipal ecosystems, we used temporal follow-up interviews with the first 11 informants and systematic cross-case comparisons across migrant backgrounds and municipalities. These procedures enabled us to examine changes in entrepreneurs' accounts over time and identify recurring and divergent relational patterns across cases.

****Insert Table 1 Here****

Table 1. Informant's characteristics and interviews

Importantly, our analysis foregrounds migrant entrepreneurs narrated and experienced perceptions of exclusion and embeddedness, as these shape how they interpret opportunities, engage with networks, and enact strategic adaptations within both host-country and diaspora environments. Given some co-authors' cultural proximity to the informants, we used reflective notes to document key insights and mitigate bias, while leveraging contextual understanding.

3.3. Data analysis

We followed the systematic procedures of the Gioia Methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), moving iteratively between data and theory, drawing on the literature on outsidership,

diaspora, and underdog entrepreneurship to inform the coding. First, we documented each of the 16 African migrant entrepreneurs as a standalone case. We began with open coding, using informants' own terms to preserve their voice, and assigned labels to meaningful text segments in short sentences (Flick, 2013). These short texts informed our first-order analytical categories (Gioia et al., 2013). For example, informants described the initial phase of their journey as establishing legitimacy in Finland, as indicated by statements such as "I had first to convince them that I planned to stay in Finland before we even discussed the business," as reported by Ides. Later, they "had to learn how things are done here" (Emma). As "it becomes easier to work directly with Finnish people" (Kadiatu).

****Insert Figure 1 Here****

Figure 1. Data structure

Next, we coded patterns across our first-order categories and abstracted them into second-order themes, as the informant's quote shows. Here, we focused on identifying recurring relational mechanisms and shared interpretive patterns that emerged across multiple cases, interviews, and migrant backgrounds. This iterative comparison enabled us to distinguish individual experiences from broader relational dynamics associated with outsidership, conditional embeddedness, and strategic readjustment. For example, we grouped experiences of exclusion from "Finnish banks" and "reliable networks" under "*primary outsidership*." We also classified narratives about "selective support" within "ethnic diaspora network communities" as "*secondary outsidership*." Through iterative comparison, we consolidated second-order themes into broader theoretical categories. Finally, we further distilled the second-order themes into three aggregate theoretical dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013). Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the transition from informant quotes to aggregate dimensions in our conceptual framework (Flick, 2020). To enhance the reliability and confirmability of our data, we used regular peer feedback among co-authors and external colleagues at the Sheffield University Management School and the Oulu Business School.

4. Findings

Our findings showed that for African migrant entrepreneurs in Finland, social proximity within ethnic diaspora communities does not translate into economic inclusion. Instead, three analytical constructs shaped their entrepreneurial experiences: outsidership (primary and secondary) as a structural condition; embeddedness through calculative trust and

informal hierarchies; and strategic circumvention and reconfiguration as a way to navigate double outsidership and conditional embeddedness. Table 2 provides additional insights into our empirical findings and categorization.

****Insert Table 2 Here****

Table 2. Extended quotes and overview of findings

4.1. Double outsidership

We define outsidership as a structural condition in which African migrant entrepreneurs experienced exclusion not only from Finnish society as a host country (primary), but also within their own African ethnic diaspora communities (secondary). Contrary to assumptions that shared migration experiences foster solidarity, our findings showed that pre-existing regional and class-based distinctions persisted after migration, undermining social cohesion and limiting professional inclusion.

Informants described persistent feelings of invisibility and displacement despite ethnic proximity. These divisions, rooted in pre-migration social stratification, were frequently reinforced rather than dissolved in Finland, challenging the assumption that ethnic diaspora association alone provides meaningful embeddedness. For instance, some of our interviewees from Nigeria acknowledged the difficulty of staying connected with fellow Nigerians, given that “it does not start here [in Finland]. Back home, it is hard to see the Northerners with us together... of course, it is supposed to be different” (Abi). Some of our interviewees from Sierra Leone and Ghana, Emma and Kofi, also acknowledged the problems associated with their ethnic diaspora communities:

There’s a specific kind of loneliness in this country...not the cold weather... when you realize that the sisterhood you expected to find is still fractured by the same regional ghosts you thought you left behind...gossip. We are in the same boat, yet we are still sitting in different sections – Emma.

We cross oceans, thinking we will become one people...we have brought our fences. ...Personally, I think the distance from home does not automatically bridge the distances between us – Kofi.

These tensions appeared to manifest differently across migrant formations. Informants from conflict-affected migration contexts, particularly Sierra Leone and Liberia, more frequently described persistent regional and historical divides carried into the host-country

environment. By contrast, informants from more established migrant communities, such as Nigerian and Ghanaian groups, more commonly emphasized professional gatekeeping and selective access to strategic networks and opportunities. This condition was further intensified by institutional lack of legitimacy within the Finnish business ecosystem. Banks and other support agencies perceived African migrant businesses as temporary or high-risk, limiting access to credit, partnerships, and growth-oriented support. For instance, Moses observed that banks "will ask you all sorts of questions to discourage you, assuming that... you might be on your way out of the country... They don't view you as a long-term investment. I think there's a negative connotation associated with our identity," while Olu noted that without a "solid guarantee" or long-term residency, securing credit was nearly impossible. Other African migrant entrepreneurs also voiced similar challenges across the country:

Two years ago, I applied for funding from Finnpartnership and was told I could receive it only if the business were established in Finland or if I had a Finnish business partner. Where can I get a business partner just like that? – Sharon.

As a migrant [entrepreneur]... securing funding is like fighting a battle you can hardly win... the connections are so valuable – Haja.

In sum, outsidership captured a persistent condition of compounded exclusion, in which African migrant entrepreneurs lacked both the formal legitimacy required by Finnish institutions and the unqualified trust often assumed within ethnic diaspora communities.

4.2. Conditional embeddedness

Our findings revealed that, for African migrant entrepreneurs in Finland, social proximity within diaspora communities does not automatically translate into economic inclusion. Instead, embeddedness was a negotiated and conditional status, governed by informal relational mechanisms that regulated access to resources. We identified calculative trust and informal hierarchies as two interrelated sub-themes through which African migrant entrepreneurs' ties were activated, restricted, or withheld, shaping how far they could convert social belonging into economic support.

4.2.1. Calculative trust among African migrant entrepreneurs

Our findings indicated a critical threshold in entrepreneurs' ability to leverage social capital, where support depended solely on the absence of financial liability. When African

migrant entrepreneurs faced the challenge of shifting from social cohesion to economic interdependence, we observed clear friction in their ability to secure financial support from their diaspora networks. Successful entrepreneurs understood that "relational ties" remained strong during socio-cultural interactions but weakened when a "money problem" arose. We define conditional embeddedness as "the maintenance of social cohesion provided that participants remain economically self-sufficient, whereby the diaspora community functions as a social safety net but actively resists serving as an economic one."

For example, while the Nigerian and Guinean communities in Finland provided "emotional support to keep pushing" (Olu) and helped build "mental strength" (Bintu), this support was often strictly non-monetary. This suggested that embeddedness is not absolute but is mediated by the African migrant entrepreneur's perceived self-reliance. As Natu observed, the "moment you cry out" for financial assistance reveals the tie's structural limits, instantly transforming a peer into a perceived burden. Consequently, successful African migrant entrepreneurs developed calculative trust—a strategic understanding that shared belief was a prerequisite for, rather than a guarantee of, financial capital. Neneh, for instance, bridged this gap by demonstrating his "vision and potential" to the point that "trust translated into financial support." As some of the African migrant entrepreneurs explained:

Within my community, trust went beyond formal contracts... What made this system work was not just the money, because there wasn't any. But the belief – Abi.

We all need that one person... someone who sees the value in what you are doing, your roots, and introduces us to others... someone who paves the path we all carve when we come to this country – Haja.

It's not just about the products; it's also about the trust and relationships that come with these connections. They always trusted me to uphold the integrity of what I sell – Natu.

[The community provides] emotional support to keep pushing... [it is] a psychological attachment in the face of isolation and uncertainty – Olu.

4.2.2. *Informal hierarchies within ethnic diaspora networks*

To manage access to non-financial strategic resources, African migrant entrepreneurs navigated informal hierarchies, which we define as "internal governance structures within diaspora communities through which status, legitimacy, and resource access are regulated

via negotiated positioning and tacit norms rather than formal authority.” These hierarchies functioned as gatekeeping mechanisms that determined who is granted voice, endorsement, and collective support. Rather than fostering ethnic diaspora solidarity, our findings showed that these structures often produced selective inclusion based on classed and professional markers. For instance, Haja explained that her legal education led to systematic marginalization from internal governance: “Because I have a law degree, they think I am being too proud. So, they don’t include me in some of their meetings and discussions... I am stuck in the middle” (Haja). This suggested that, unlike the aligned capacity building observed in successful migrant businesses, upward mobility within the diaspora could paradoxically undermine access to the very forums through which information and opportunity circulated.

These hierarchies actively disciplined entrepreneurial behavior by enforcing unspoken rules regarding community loyalty. Attempting to bypass these internal structures to seek external help was often viewed as a violation of community norms. Amina reflected on the emotional and reputational cost of seeking legitimacy outside these informal bounds, describing the difficulty of “acknowledging my struggle to a total stranger” when internal endorsement was withheld. These accounts showed that hierarchies not only distributed resources but also regulated where and how entrepreneurs could seek legitimacy, effectively shielding established subgroups from perceived reputational risk.

In fact, we observed that class-based signaling and social labeling continuously governed inclusion. Entrepreneurs were assessed against implicit norms regarding dress, demeanor, and perceived economic positioning, which structured their relative influence. Natu noted that “class-driven norms” controlled access, highlighting how informal layers governed everyday interactions. For those in unfavorable positions, the cumulative effect was entrepreneurial isolation. Bola’s experience captured this outcome: “Running a business in this country can be isolating... not having a network deprives you of support.” We did not observe the same level of mutual support or incentive alignment found in traditional social enterprise models; instead, the hierarchy excluded those who failed to conform to status expectations.

Informal hierarchies within ethnic diaspora networks functioned as internal governance systems that regulated legitimacy and controlled access to strategic relational resources. This mechanism mattered because most entrepreneurs, despite their professional

qualifications, faced rigid intra-group social labeling, and traditional networking benefits “were just not possible, as people prefer status-based conformity over professional collaboration that feels socially distant” (Haja). Consequently, successful navigation required more than economic self-sufficiency; it necessitated a nuanced ability to manage power dynamics that are often as restrictive as the external Finnish institutional environment.

4.3. Circumventing double outsidership and conditional embeddedness

All 16 African migrant entrepreneurs acknowledged the dual pressures of both (1) institutional exclusion and (2) relational ties and conditional embeddedness. To tackle these pressures, these entrepreneurs developed adaptive capacities to secure legitimacy and survival—tapping into foreign networks outside of their own ethnic African diaspora communities, attending counseling services provided by the Finnish local authorities, selling to Finnish and other customers outside their own diaspora network, and collaborating closely with local Finnish government authorities to showcase African goods and services across the country. For instance, the entrepreneurs’ focus on proactive cultural adaptation was crucial to “understand the Finnish people and why they behave the way they do...In Ghana, things are very different. People are very open and social, and the culture is much more common and collective” (Kofi). This approach led African migrant entrepreneurs to leverage cultural adaptation to sustain their livelihoods and businesses.

4.3.1. Proactive cultural adaptation as a readjustment approach

To overcome the double outsidership (i.e., Finland’s institutional and ethnic African diaspora challenges) inherent in Finland, the African migrant entrepreneurs embarked on a strategic readjustment, which we define as “adaptive, resilient, and proactive measures undertaken by African migrant entrepreneurs to navigate the effect of compounded marginalization.” They focused, for instance, on deepening socio-cultural understanding and reducing perceived distance as “breaking an unspoken rule” (Amina). Although many of our interviewees felt the sting of being outsiders, “networking was difficult...due to language and cultural distances” (Haja). African migrant entrepreneurs, for instance, embraced counseling for bridging social-cultural gaps:

I had to learn that Finnish people express interest differently...they don’t complete you as an outsider, but...understanding this cultural difference helped me settle down in this country – Abi

Going to counseling helped me understand the Finnish people...at first, you want to be around your own people, you know...I quickly learned that people (Finnish people) tend to be more reserved, and it took me a while to understand that there is no personal issue or hatred about how they behave, just a cultural difference – Flavius

...here, people value silence over small talk. It's really hard for me to understand this at first...I had to learn a new way of engaging with people and really make this place a home – Kofi.

This approach also prompted African migrant entrepreneurs to align their business offerings with broader Finnish culture and the entrepreneurial landscape. These entrepreneurs were keenly attuned to the broader societal shift in attitudes towards international goods and services, including those from Africa. For instance, the increased visibility of African goods and services, particularly following Finland's Northern City of Oulu being voted as the 2026 European Capital of Culture¹ which Olu noted means "demand for foreign products is rising." Some of our interviewees described their proactive outreach beyond their own ethnic African diaspora communities and towards local Finnish networks for integrating into the mainstream Finnish economy:

I have a new wave of customers in my market. The demand for African spices, ingredients, and traditional products has increased. It's encouraging to see the Finns embracing our culture and traditions. (Sharon)

Sharing my entire story in my own words was a unique experience. It enabled me to reflect on my progress and how much my business has evolved since I started it. I felt truly understood in my journey. (Flavius)

This increased African migrant entrepreneurs' ability to sustain their business operations across Finland; for example, Natu told us, "As a single mother in this country, it was not easy...but the Oulu 10 (i.e., the Hub) helped me build a reputation and customer base that continues to sustain my small shop in the city center for ten years." Joy explained that "Ignoring my own people and really adapting to the Finnish digital culture was the main turning point for me...of course I sell to some of them (own people), but half of my customers are Finnish."

¹ See the Guardian news report on (<https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2025/dec/30/oulu-finland-european-capital-of-culture-2026>)

In sum, these readjustment approaches went beyond proactive cultural adaptation-enhancing cultural intelligence, understanding Finnish norms and values, and communication styles- and reflected how readjustment is crucial to strengthening business operations, the entrepreneurial process, and survival despite exclusion within their own ethnic African diaspora communities. Our empirical insights helped us understand the double outsidership African migrant entrepreneurs faced in Finland and how they overcame double marginalization (He et al., 2020) in the Nordic Finnish context, as discussed next.

5. Discussions

This study aimed to deepen understanding of how African migrant entrepreneurs experience and navigate outsidership in the Finnish context, where social embeddedness is usually assumed to generate inclusion and opportunity (Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2017; Johanson and Vahlne, 2015). We distinguish between our idiographic findings (the context-specific relational, institutional, and migrant dynamics in Finland) and our broader theoretical contributions, which extend beyond this empirical setting to refine concepts of embeddedness, outsidership, and relational network theory.

By theorizing outsidership as a relational condition, our findings extend dominant assumptions in international business and ethnic entrepreneurship research, and extend underdog entrepreneurship theory to account for layered, internally produced marginalization (Aluko et al., 2022; Johanson and Vahlne, 2009). In doing so, we position African migrant entrepreneurship as a theory-revealing context that highlights dynamics of exclusion that remain less visible in research on migrant entrepreneurship focused on dominant or more homogeneous entrepreneurial groups. We make two main theoretical contributions.

****Insert Figure 2 Here****

Figure 2. Relational outsidership and strategic readjustment

5.1. Reconceptualizing outsidership as relationally reproduced within embedded networks

Across the 16 African migrant entrepreneurs in Finland, outsidership did not disappear with network participation or ethnic embeddedness. Instead, our findings show that entrepreneurs who were formally embedded in both co-ethnic and host-country networks often remained excluded from high-value opportunities such as strategic partnerships, endorsements, and critical information flows. This exclusion was not structural in a simple

inside-or-outside sense, but relationally produced through conditional trust, informal hierarchy, and status-based gatekeeping in everyday network interactions. Even within diaspora communities—often assumed to function as protective and inclusive spaces—access and recognition were uneven, with legitimacy continuously negotiated rather than granted.

This pattern extends outsidership theory in the revised Uppsala Model (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009, 2015) by challenging the assumption that increased embeddedness and experiential learning naturally transform outsiders into insiders. While prior research suggests that trust-building and network integration reduce outsidership over time (Almodóvar and Rugman, 2015; Ong et al., 2022), our findings show that outsidership may persist even under conditions of strong embeddedness. Relational dynamics within networks explain this persistence—specifically, how recognition, endorsement, and perceived credibility are socially distributed. We therefore advance the concept of relational outsidership, where exclusion is not a function of network absence but of differential status allocation within networks. Our findings suggest that relational outsidership may be more pronounced in host-country contexts with small migration formations, where relational resources, legitimacy, and bridging opportunities are scarce (Arslan et al., 2022). In such contexts, competition over limited opportunities can intensify status differentiation and gatekeeping within co-ethnic networks. These dynamics may therefore be more salient in smaller Nordic migrant ecosystems than in larger, more institutionally embedded diaspora contexts such as the United Kingdom or the United States.

More generally, these reframing shifts attention away from structural measures of embeddedness such as tie density or network size, toward the micro-processes through which belonging is produced. Outsidership, in this sense, is not resolved through network accumulation but reproduced through everyday relational practices that determine “who is trusted,” “who is endorsed,” and “who gains meaningful access.” Our findings also resonate strongly with emerging research on migrant entrepreneurial liminality, which conceptualizes migrant entrepreneurs as actors navigating ambiguous positions between insider and outsider statuses across institutional, social, and market domains (Elo et al., 2024). However, while prior studies primarily emphasize liminality between migrant entrepreneurs and host-country institutions, our findings extend this perspective by showing that liminal positioning may also persist within co-ethnic migrant networks.

African migrant entrepreneurs in our study were formally embedded within ethnic networks yet remained only conditionally accepted as insiders, with moral boundary work, trust, and access to opportunities continuously negotiated through informal hierarchies, moral evaluations, and relational expectations. This shifts the conceptual focus from static embeddedness toward conditional insidership, where belonging, legitimacy, and access remain socially negotiated and potentially reversible.

Taken together, these findings suggest that insidership is not a stable endpoint of network integration but a conditional and reversible relational accomplishment. Even when entrepreneurs are embedded in opportunity-rich networks, access remains dependent on ongoing recognition and validation. Recognition of exclusion and participation in ethnic or host-country networks therefore emerge as necessary but insufficient conditions for insidership. Meaningful inclusion depends not only on network access but also on relational recognition, legitimacy, and status validation within them. Across cases, entrepreneurs gained meaningful access when they demonstrated relational reliability, cultural adaptability, economic self-sufficiency, and alignment with dominant informal norms operating within specific relational environments. This advances outsidership research (Weerasekera et al., 2025; Aluko et al., 2022) by showing that overcoming outsidership is not a one-time transition from outsider to insider, but a continuous process of negotiating legitimacy across multiple relational contexts. The prominence of relational outsidership in our findings may also be partly conditioned by the highly customer-facing and interaction-intensive nature of informants' industries, where legitimacy, endorsement, and trust directly shape access to opportunities and venture survival.

The role of conflict-affected migration histories also warrants consideration. Although conflict and displacement were not the primary focus of our study, accounts from entrepreneurs from Sierra Leone and Liberia suggest that conflict-shaped migration trajectories may carry relational and psychosocial legacies into the host-country environment. Displacement disrupted social ties, and insecurity and historically embedded group divisions may influence how entrepreneurs interpret trust, reciprocity, belonging, and relational risk within diaspora communities. In this sense, conflict-affected backgrounds may constitute an important contextual condition through which entrepreneurs experience relational outsidership and strategic readjustment. Importantly, our data do not allow us to make claims about trauma or psychosocial outcomes systematically, as these were not directly measured. Rather, we identify conflict-related

migration histories as a sensitizing contextual factor that warrants more focused investigation in future research.

5.2. *Introducing strategic readjustment as endogenous adaptation*

Among African migrant entrepreneurs in Finland, embeddedness in ethnic diaspora and Finnish networks did not guarantee stable access to resources or legitimacy. Instead, our findings show that ethnic networks were internally embedded, shaped by migration trajectories, class position, and differential access to transnational capital. This produced conditional belonging (Esser and Benschop, 2009; Vershinina and Rodgers, 2019), where migrant entrepreneurs were simultaneously included and constrained within the same relational systems. Rather than facilitating smooth access to opportunities, these conditions often redirected entrepreneurial pathways by limiting recognition, trust, and strategic collaboration. Our findings therefore complicate dominant assumptions within migrant entrepreneurship research that ethnic embeddedness operates as a uniformly enabling mechanism for overcoming liabilities of foreignness and institutional voids (Barnard and Pendock, 2013; Kloosterman, 2010; Kloosterman and Rath, 2001; Kloosterman et al., 1999; Nachum et al., 2022).

In response to these constraints, entrepreneurs did not disengage from their networks or withdraw from ethnic ties. Instead, they engaged in what we term *strategic readjustment*—a reflexive and agentic process of reconfiguring market positioning, partnership structures, identity signaling, and resource orchestration in response to relational outsidership. This included recalibrating engagement across ethnic and host-country networks, selectively strengthening ties with Finnish actors, and adjusting cultural and professional positioning to enhance legitimacy. Strategic readjustment therefore emerged as a dynamic response to double outsidership, rather than exit or network abandonment. Understanding the strategic adjustments migrant entrepreneurs make to overcome double outsidership is particularly important, as many struggle to secure resources, legitimacy, and long-term venture sustainability within host-country institutional environments (Arslan et al., 2024; He et al., 2020; Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2017).

This finding extends prior research on migrant and underdog entrepreneurship, which has largely emphasized responses such as coping with discrimination, leveraging ethnic networks, or adapting to institutional voids (He et al., 2020; Arslan et al., 2024). Prior research on outsidership and network positioning suggests that actors facing relational

constraints may attempt to reposition themselves by cultivating alternative network ties and sources of legitimacy (Carney & Dieleman, 2024; Qi et al., 2026). However, our findings indicate a different pattern. Rather than relying solely on ethnic embeddedness or withdrawing from constraining networks, entrepreneurs actively diversified relational engagement by combining ethnic diaspora support with deliberate cultivation of local Finnish networks. This has important implications for understanding how migrant entrepreneurs navigate what they perceive as marginalized institutional contexts (He et al., 2020), where proactive cultural adaptation becomes a mechanism of strategic repositioning rather than simple assimilation.

Our findings also extend prior research on migrant entrepreneurial adaptability in the Nordic context. Earlier studies have emphasized how migrant entrepreneurs rely on ethnic diaspora communities to access finance, customers, and institutional support necessary for business survival (Arslan et al., 2022). Our multiple case findings deepen these insights by showing that counseling relationships, strategic engagement with Finnish actors, and selective movement beyond ethnic migrant networks enhance adaptability, legitimacy, and venture sustainability. At a broader theoretical level, we therefore extend network-based views of entrepreneurial adaptation by showing that relational constraint does not necessarily result in network withdrawal or exit but can instead generate strategic reconfiguration across existing and alternative relational arenas (Hallen et al., 2020; Klyver et al., 2026; Sydow & Schmidt, 2025). Strategic readjustment reframes adaptation as an ongoing, reflexive process through which entrepreneurs continuously reshape identity, legitimacy, and relational positioning across multiple institutional environments.

In sum, these findings advance underdog migrant entrepreneurship research by demonstrating that responses to double outsidership are not passive or purely reactive but involve proactive recalibration of relational embeddedness. Rather than treating migrant networks as uniformly beneficial, our findings reveal their conditional and hierarchical nature and show how entrepreneurs actively navigate these constraints through strategic, multi-level adjustment across both ethnic and host-country contexts (Arslan et al., 2022; Arslan et al., 2024). In doing so, we deepen understanding of how migrant entrepreneurs navigate perceived marginalized institutional environments (He et al., 2020), and how proactive cultural adaptation operates as a mechanism for overcoming relational constraints and sustaining venture development in the Nordic setting.

5.3. *Practical implications*

Our study offers several practical implications for African migrant entrepreneurs, diaspora community leaders, and business support agencies working with migrant and minority entrepreneurs. First, our findings are highly relevant to African migrant entrepreneurs operating in host-country contexts where formal institutional access remains constrained. While diaspora networks are often approached as default sources of support (Kamara, 2023), our study shows that embeddedness within these communities is conditional and uneven. Migrant entrepreneurs should therefore avoid overreliance on a single community or network and instead pursue selective and strategic networking across multiple relational arenas, including mainstream host-country business networks, professional associations, and other transnational ties. Actively diversifying sources of legitimacy and support can help entrepreneurs mitigate the risks associated with internal hierarchies and gatekeeping within diaspora communities.

Second, our findings have important implications for diaspora organizations and community leaders who shape access to resources and opportunities (Chand and Tung, 2014; Dabić et al., 2020). The study highlights how informal hierarchies and moral boundary work can unintentionally reproduce exclusion among co-ethnic entrepreneurs. Community organizations aiming to support migrants may benefit from adopting more transparent inclusion criteria (Ram and Deakins, 1996), rotating leadership roles, and creating structured entry points for newer or less-connected migrants. Such practices can help shift diaspora networks from selective enclaves toward more inclusive platforms for collective advancement.

Third, our findings are relevant to incubators, accelerators, and business support agencies that work with migrant and minority entrepreneurs (Arslan et al., 2024). Many support programs implicitly assume that diaspora embeddedness functions as a protective resource that compensates for institutional exclusion. Our study cautions against this assumption. Instead of treating diaspora communities as homogeneous support systems, support organizations should recognize intra-community groups and tailor interventions accordingly. For example, mentoring schemes and funding programs could connect marginalized entrepreneurs within their own communities with external sponsors, cross-ethnic networks, and alternative legitimacy-granting institutions (Arslan et al., 2023).

6. **Conclusions and future directions**

This study has several limitations that open up promising opportunities for future research. First, our analysis focuses on African migrant entrepreneurs' narrated experiences of relational outsidership and conditional embeddedness. While this approach captures rich, processual insights into how exclusion is enacted within ethnic African diaspora communities, it relies on retrospective sensemaking. Entrepreneurial trajectories, however, may also be shaped by unintended interactions, chance encounters, and serendipitous network events that fall outside actors' conscious strategizing (Busch and Barkema, 2022). Future research could examine how unplanned relational moments—such as accidental cross-ethnic ties or informal encounters with institutional actors—reshape outsidership dynamics over time.

Second, the study entails methodological limitations concerning the scope of data triangulation. Our study primarily captures migrant entrepreneurs' narrated experiences and interpretations of exclusion, embeddedness, and relational positioning. Although we used follow-up interviews, supplementary documentary materials, cross-case comparison, and reflexive engagement among the research team to strengthen analytical depth and consistency, we did not systematically triangulate these accounts through interviews with diaspora leaders, institutional actors, co-ethnic peers, or sustained participant observation. We therefore cannot independently determine how other actors interpreted or enacted the relational processes entrepreneurs described. This limitation is consistent with the exploratory and interpretive purpose of our qualitative design rather than a deficiency to be retrospectively corrected. Future research could build on our findings through ethnography, participant observation, and multi-actor designs that examine relational outsidership from multiple positional perspectives.

Third, our findings emphasize the strategic and adaptive responses African migrant entrepreneurs develop to navigate layered marginalization (Arslan et al., 2024). While these strategies enable resilience and survival, they may also entail hidden costs. Future studies could explore the darker side of relational navigation, including entrepreneurial fatigue, emotional strain, and identity fragmentation, thereby complementing the predominantly adaptive view of underdog entrepreneurship (Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2017).

Fourth, the empirical setting of Finland provides a theory-revealing, but context-specific backdrop characterized by a relatively small African diaspora and distinctive institutional and cultural norms (Vorobeveva, 2019). Future research could examine the

external validity of our framework across different diaspora contexts, including larger African diaspora communities in Global North countries.

Finally, our study points to a broader implication that extends beyond ethnic diaspora entrepreneurship. The tension between social belonging and economic inclusion may also arise in other collectivistic or identity-based entrepreneurial contexts, such as Indigenous enterprises, minority family businesses, or community-oriented social ventures (Dabić et al., 2020). Future research could examine whether similar forms of conditional belonging emerge in these settings and how migrant entrepreneurs navigate them. We hope this study encourages further inductive and process-oriented research that treats marginalized entrepreneurial contexts not as peripheral cases, but as central sites for theory development on exclusion, embeddedness, and entrepreneurial agency.

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Table 1. Informants' characteristics and interviews

Informant (First name)	Gender	Country of Origin	Education	Year of migration	Business entity	Business operations (in years)	Interviews (in minutes)	Date the interview was conducted	Number of interviews
Olu	Male	Nigeria	MSc. Business	2012	Fashion Designer	8	105	12-Feb-24 & 18-Oct-24	2
Bola	Female	Nigeria	Diploma in Fashion Design	2015	Fashion Designer	7	122	20-Feb-24 & 25-Nov-24	2
Sharon	Female	Zambia	Diploma in Business	2016	Purveyors	8	123	05-Mar-24 & 10-Jan-25	2
Moses	Male	Kenya	MSc. Finance	2017	Financial Consultant	6	74	18-Mar-24 & 14-Dec-24	2
Bintu	Female	Guinea	MSc. Engineering	2018	Purveyors	5	81	02-Apr-24 & 05-Feb-25	2
Haja	Female	Sierra Leone	BA. Law	2015	Food Supplier	8	108	15-Apr-24 & 20-Mar-25	2
Neneh	Female	Liberia	High School	2017	Fashion Designer	6	83	30-Apr-24 & 18-Apr-25	2
Joy	Female	Nigeria	Computer Science	2018	Purveyors	6	110	12-May-24 & 06-May-25	2
Flavius	Male	Cameroon	BA. Business	2013	Garment Importer	9	64	25-May-24 & 20-Jun-25	2
Natu	Female	Sierra Leone	High School	2015	Fabric Trader	7	72	10-Jun-24 & 15-Jul-25	2
Kofi	Male	Ghana	MSc. Finance	2010	Catering	6	79	25-Jun-24 & 30-Aug-25	2
Kadiatu	Female	Sierra Leone	None	2010	Purveyors	10	30	15-Jul-24	1
Abi	Female	Nigeria	High School	2015	Fashion Designer	8	58	01-Sep-24	1
Amina	Female	Sierra Leone	High School	2012	Purveyors	8	45	15-Oct-24	1
Emma	Female	Sierra Leone	None	2012	Purveyors	10	33	20-Nov-24	1
Ides	Female	Sierra Leone	High School	2013	Home-Based Food	9	35	10-Jun-24	1

Table 2. Extended quotes and overview of findings

Quotes	Double outsidership	Conditional embeddedness	Strategic circumvention and reconfiguration
“I had to convince them that I planned to stay in Finland for a long time before we even discussed the business ideas I have...They sought commitment, but I needed their support to secure it.	Primary outsidership (host-country challenge)		
“The difficult part was not having anyone inside the system who could guide me informally. By then...my brother, every step felt like a challenge, you know. The language made it even more difficult.”	Primary outsidership (host-country challenge)		
“The first question they asked me was: “Do you have a resident permit and a permanent job? Honestly...it was like the first question. And I had to explain my plans and my status in the country then.”	Primary outsidership (host-country challenge)		
We’ve got people from the same country and speak the same language who ignored me, so? It stirred up frustration at the time because, of course, I was new to the country. I needed them, but everyone was playing busy.	Secondary outsidership (ethnic ties challenge)		
“There are levels. Those who arrive here early or have stronger connections tend to make the calls...I was struggling and often left behind. Unless it's about money...Timing matters big time.”	Secondary outsidership (ethnic ties challenge)		
Support becomes more selective and depends on what others see as beneficial to them...Yes, it's transactional, really. If your goal aligns with mine, then I will help you. If not, you're on your own. I experienced it, and I am still seeing it happening today.”		Calculative trust (among ethnic ties)	
“They all choose who they want to help. It's not like there's a common support system, but really, everyone is looking out for their own interest. Makes it a bit like a game.”		Calculative trust (among ethnic ties)	

Of course, because I am a Muslim, that's why only a few of them care...Back then, yes... It raised many questions. Because we are all here trying to survive.

"Trust rarely comes simply because you come from the same country. People are wicked...The church tried to help, but for some of our brothers, it's all about competition...Exactly, like you're coming to take the opportunities that belong to them."

"The opportunities do not circulate equally...some of the guys know the ins and outs, others, like me, had to learn it the hard way. And I thank God, because I don't owe that to anyone."

Informal hierarchy
(among ethnic ties)

Informal hierarchy
(among ethnic ties)

Informal hierarchy
(among ethnic ties)

"I had to learn how things are done here. It's a whole different culture, even in business...Everything. The pace, the communication, the timekeeping, everything. I am still getting used to it."

Learning the language was very difficult. My brain wasn't ready for it. It took longer than I anticipated.

I established a strong, reliable friendship with the Finns who helped me. Besides my wife, my best friend now in this country is a Finn.

Proactive cultural adaptation
(within host country)

Proactive cultural adaptation
(within host country)

Proactive cultural adaptation
(within host country)

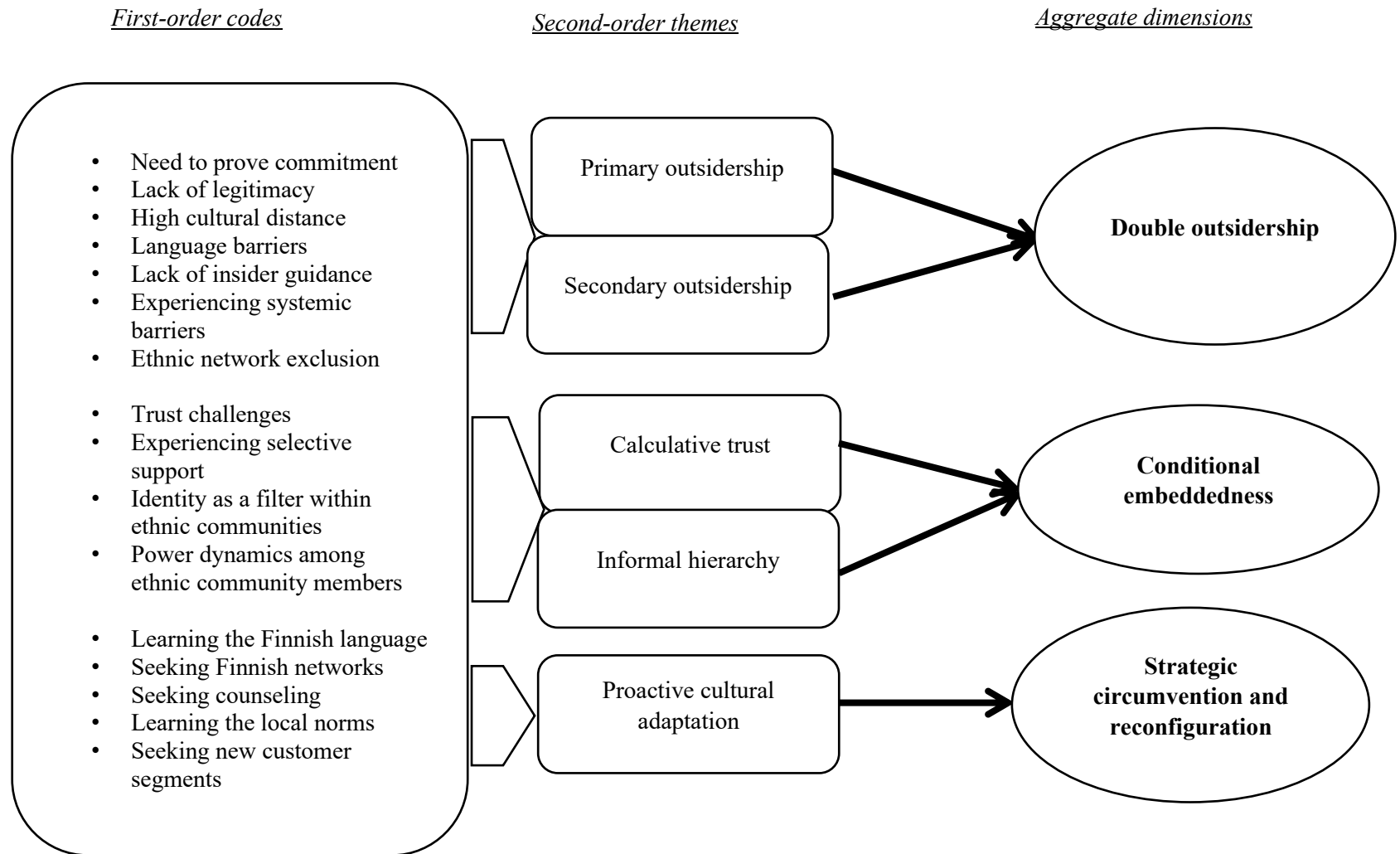


Fig. 1. Data structure

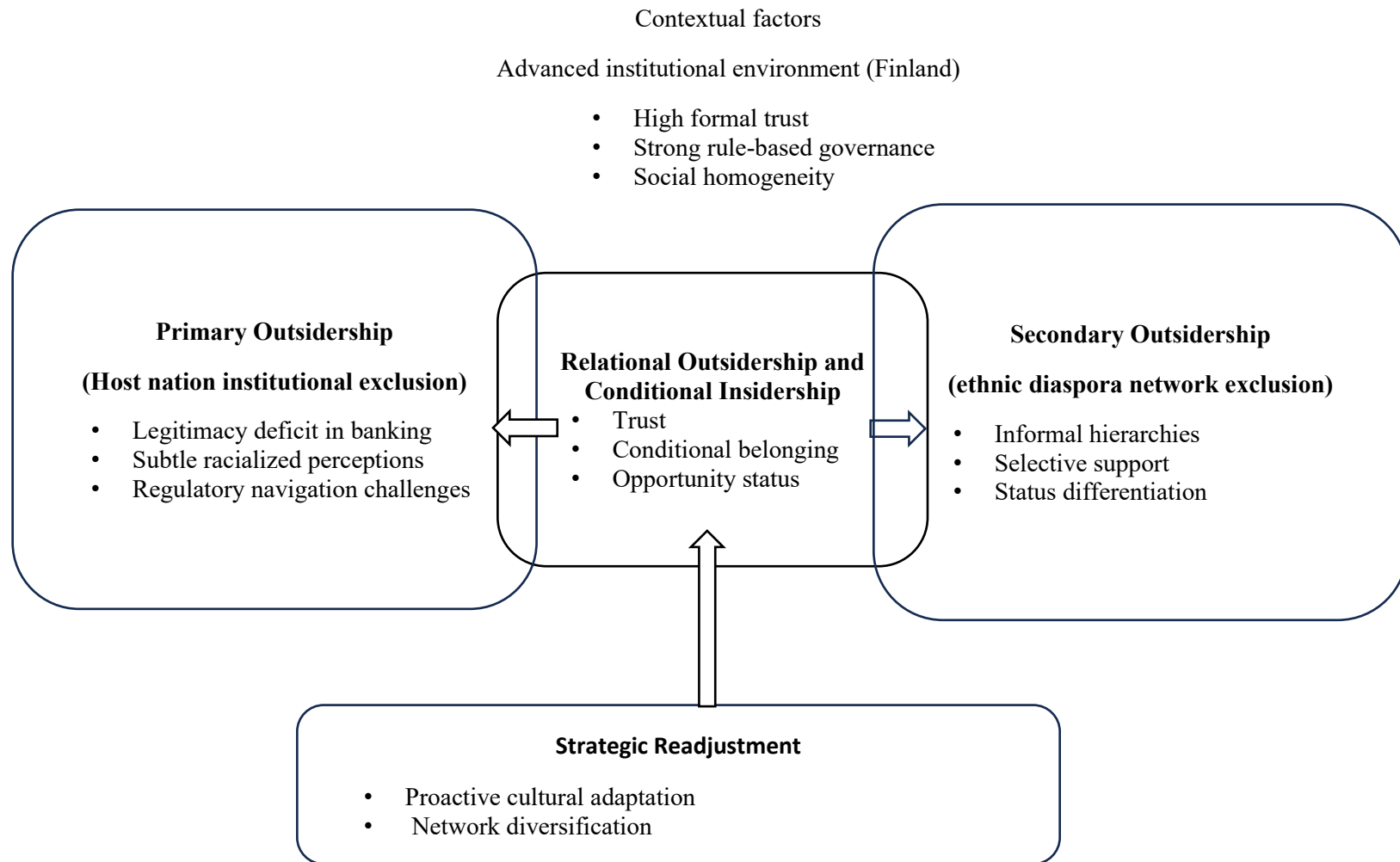


Fig. 2. Relational outsidership and strategic readjustment