

Empowering immigrant entrepreneurship through digitalization: understanding the role of digital social capital

Autonomiser l'entrepreneuriat immigré à travers la digitalisation: quel rôle pour le capital social digital

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Abstract:

Entrepreneurship research field is undergoing a transformative shift, with immigrants increasingly contributing to the canvas of innovation and economic growth in host countries. This article explores the pivotal role that digital social capital plays in facilitating and enhancing the entrepreneurial journey of immigrants. As nations grapple with the challenges of immigration and integration, harnessing the power of technology and virtual networks has emerged as a critical factor in facilitating the emergence of immigrant entrepreneurship.

Drawing upon a comprehensive review of existing literature and studies, this research elucidates how digital platforms have revolutionized entrepreneurial processes, serving as invaluable knowledge repositories, providing newcomers with vital services and funding sources. Moreover, they foster a sense of belonging and cultural exchange, thereby enhancing the resilience and adaptability of immigrant entrepreneurs in unfamiliar environments.

Online communities, as a subset of digital platforms, are explored for their unique contributions. These virtual networks facilitate cultural preservation and identity formation, enabling immigrants to draw strength from their heritage while navigating the complexities of entrepreneurship in a foreign land.

Our narrative review emphasizes the vital importance of digital social capital in empowering immigrant entrepreneurs, providing them with essential resources, networks, and opportunities that may not be readily accessible through traditional means. The findings of this research underscore the need for ongoing exploration and in-depth analysis to understand and harness the potential of digital tools fully. Moreover, it calls for sustained efforts in the form of targeted policy initiatives, research endeavors, and collaborative efforts between industry stakeholders, academic institutions, and government agencies. Such a comprehensive approach is essential to optimize and maximize the benefits that digitalization can offer to immigrant entrepreneurs, ensuring they are well-equipped and supported as they navigate the complexities of entrepreneurship in their new environments.

Keywords: Immigrant entrepreneurship, digitalization, social capital, networks.

Classification JEL: M13.

Paper type: Theoretical Research.

Résumé:

Le champ de la recherche en entrepreneuriat connaît une transformation profonde, où les immigrants jouent un rôle croissant dans l'innovation et la croissance économique des pays d'accueil. Ainsi, face aux défis posés par l'immigration et l'intégration, l'exploitation des technologies et des réseaux virtuels émerge comme un levier fondamental pour stimuler l'entrepreneuriat immigré.

En s'appuyant sur une revue exhaustive de la littérature et des études pratiques, cette recherche démontre comment les plateformes digitales ont révolutionné les dynamiques entrepreneuriales. Elles deviennent des réservoirs indispensables de savoirs, apportant aux nouveaux arrivants des services cruciaux et des sources de financement inédites. De plus, elles favorisent un sentiment d'appartenance et d'échange culturel, renforçant ainsi la résilience et la capacité d'adaptation des entrepreneurs immigrés dans des environnements inconnus et parfois hostiles.

Les communautés en ligne, en tant que sous-ensembles spécifiques des plateformes digitales, sont explorées pour leur rôle unique. Ces réseaux virtuels facilitent la préservation des identités culturelles et la formation d'un sentiment de communauté, permettant aux immigrants de puiser dans leurs racines tout en relevant les défis de l'entrepreneuriat dans un contexte étranger.

Notre *narrative review* met en lumière l'importance cruciale du capital social digital pour autonomiser les entrepreneurs immigrés, en leur fournissant des ressources, des réseaux et des opportunités difficilement accessibles par des moyens traditionnels. Les résultats de cette recherche soulignent la nécessité d'une exploration approfondie et continue pour comprendre pleinement le potentiel de ces outils. Ils appellent également à la mise en place d'initiatives politiques ciblées, de projets de recherche et de collaborations entre les parties prenantes du secteur, les institutions académiques et les agences gouvernementales. Une approche coordonnée et globale s'impose pour optimiser et maximiser les bénéfices que la digitalisation peut offrir aux entrepreneurs immigrés, afin de les doter du soutien nécessaire pour achever leurs potentiels.

Mots clés : Entrepreneuriat immigré, digitalisation, capital social, networks.

JEL Classification : M13.

Type du papier : Recherche Théorique.

1- Introduction

The evolution of scientific research on immigrant entrepreneurship has undergone significant transformation over the years. From studies describing the economic contributions of immigrant entrepreneurs to host countries, to scholars exploring the unique challenges they face, and the sociocultural factors that influence their processes; there has been a growing interest on the intersectionality of immigrant entrepreneurship, considering variables such as institutional support, digitalization and gender. Overall, the field has evolved from a primarily descriptive approach to a more comprehensive and nuanced approach of the complex dynamics shaping immigrant entrepreneurship.

In a context where migration has become a defining feature of human existence, millions of individuals seek opportunities beyond their countries of origin, driven by various factors, navigating unfamiliar territories, immigrants often encounter numerous challenges. Entrepreneurship can serve as a perspective to economic integration and empowerment, offering them the chance to not only sustain their livelihoods but also contribute significantly to the host society's economic and social fabric.

This article explores the role played by digital platforms and online communities in order to promote immigrant entrepreneurship. These digital tools have revolutionized the traditional entrepreneurial model and leveled the playing field, providing immigrants with the means to overcome some of the structural barriers they face when starting and scaling businesses in their host countries.

But first, it is important for us to highlight immigrant entrepreneurs within the scientific literature of entrepreneurship, which is crucial for developing a more inclusive and representative understanding of entrepreneurial dynamics. By integrating their unique challenges, opportunities, and contributions, our research structure can shed light on previously underexplored facets of entrepreneurship. This not only broadens the academic discourse but also offers valuable insights into the role of diversity and cross-cultural influences in shaping entrepreneurial identities. Such a focus enriches the field by presenting immigrant entrepreneurs not as outliers, but as integral contributors to the global narrative of innovation and economic development.

Our literature review has also provided us with a clear pathway, moving from foundational, classic studies to more recent and critical reviews of entrepreneurship. This progression allowed us to connect traditional theories with contemporary approaches, offering a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of how the entrepreneurial landscape has evolved, particularly in the context of immigrant entrepreneurship.

Drawing on a wealth of empirical research, case studies, and theoretical frameworks, this article seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which digital platforms and online communities have transformed the immigrant entrepreneurship model. It will delve into the specific mechanisms through which these tools facilitate immigrant entrepreneurship, examine the challenges and opportunities they present, and offer insights into the implications for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars interested in fostering inclusive and vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Through a multidisciplinary lens encompassing sociology, economics, information technology, and migration studies, this article aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on the intersection of digitalization and entrepreneurship. By elucidating the dynamic relationship between digital platforms, online communities, and immigrant entrepreneurship, we seek to offer valuable insights that can inform policies and initiatives aimed at harnessing the full potential of immigrant entrepreneurs.

In the subsequent sections, we will explore the theoretical foundations of this research, review relevant literature, analyze studies, and present some understanding elements on how these

digital mechanisms are reshaping the typical model of immigrant entrepreneurship? Ultimately, this article underscores the transformative power of technology in fostering economic empowerment and social integration for immigrant communities.

2- Diving into the origins of “immigrant entrepreneurship”

In our literature review on necessity entrepreneurship, we found significant critiques of the concept itself. Several studies have pointed out its "imperfection." Baket T. and Welter F. (2015) refute simplistic theories and classifications, stressing the complexity of entrepreneurship, which involves diverse individuals, contexts, and situations. They argue that these dichotomies (necessity vs. opportunity entrepreneurship, lifestyle vs. entrepreneurial business, social vs. standard entrepreneurship, etc.) oversimplify the messy reality of entrepreneurial behaviour.

In this context, we view the concept of necessity entrepreneurship as too generalized and therefore not a valid construct. Several studies confirm the need to clarify this concept (Couteret P., 2010; Palmroos J., 2012; Tipu S., 2012; Dawson C. & Henley A., 2012). By focusing on individuals officially classified as necessity entrepreneurs, we aim to explore different situations, better define the terminology, and assess whether these situations are truly comparable or differentiated.

To achieve this, we adopted a model of necessity entrepreneurship proposed by Christel Tessier Dargent in her thesis on the effectual dimension of necessity-driven entrepreneurial processes. This typology, based on literature and qualitative exploratory research, seeks to group necessity entrepreneurs into homogeneous subgroups with common characteristics, facilitating differentiated support approaches, public policies, success potential, and process management. The typology consists of eight categories based on internal or external factors:

- "Les déclassés": long-term unemployed, temporary workers, or experienced professionals laid off due to restructuring.
- "Les détachés": forced subcontractors from various sectors (construction, art, journalism, accounting).
- "Les démunis": retirees with minimal pensions or those living on social welfare.
- "Les de lieu": individuals who relocate but can't find work or who want to stay in specific areas like rural environments.
- "Les d'héritage": those forced to take over family businesses.
- "Les désabusés": those fleeing salaried work due to difficult conditions like harassment or lack of career prospects.
- "Les déclarés": entrepreneurs in the informal economy forced to adopt a legal status.
- "Les discriminés": ethnic minorities, immigrants, young mothers, divorced women over 40, and others stigmatized and excluded from the labor market.

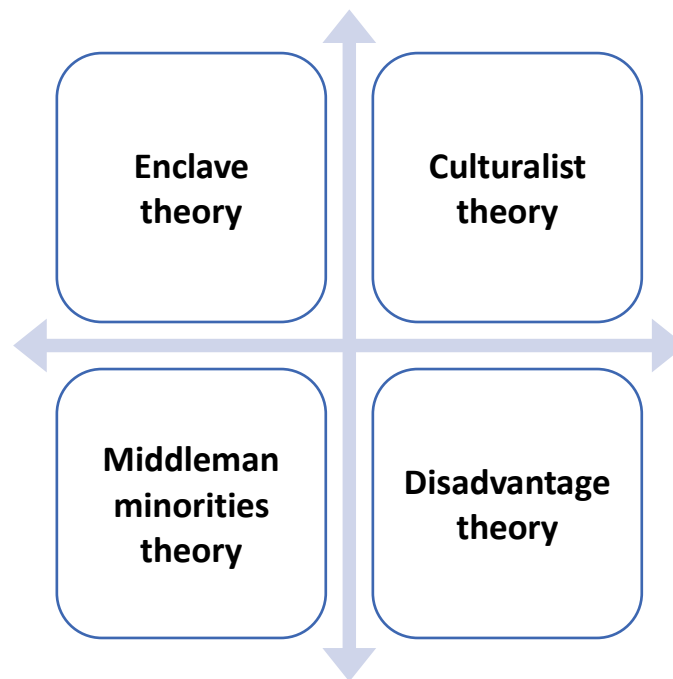
As a matter of fact, to acknowledge the existence of a minority, in our case the immigrant entrepreneurial minority, means recognizing the existence of a cultural identity that distinguishes it from the whole social body. It also raises questions about how individuals belonging to such minorities can integrate into a hostile environment and assert themselves (potentially through entrepreneurship).

A significant body of literature has developed to address this question. While several approaches have been explored, the one that has dominated most of the debates is based on the notion of ethnicity. This concept has been used far more in North America and Britain than in continental Europe and has become central to studies on immigrant entrepreneurship—so much so that the term "ethnic business" is commonly used to refer to immigrant-run businesses.

In fact, there are four major theoretical perspectives that highlight different factors to explain immigrants' propensity for entrepreneurship, either external factors such as the market or social organization, or internal factors like cultural traits. For example, enclave theory emphasizes

economic factors, culturalist theory focuses on cultural factors, while the Middleman Minorities theory points to situational factors, and the disadvantage theory stresses structural factors.

Fig 1: Explanatory Theories of Immigrant Entrepreneurship



Source: Authors

These major theoretical frameworks—enclave theory, culturalist theory, Middleman Minorities theory, and disadvantage theory—provide valuable insights into the factors driving immigrant entrepreneurship, emphasizing both external and internal determinants. However, these traditional approaches primarily focus on historical, social, and economic contexts. In recent years, the rapid advancement of digital technologies has transformed the entrepreneurial landscape, offering new avenues for business creation and development. This shift prompts the need to examine how digitalization intersects with immigrant entrepreneurship, particularly in terms of access to resources, market reach, and the role of digital platforms in overcoming structural and situational disadvantages. The following section will explore this evolving relationship, focusing on how digital tools and platforms may redefine the opportunities and challenges faced by immigrant entrepreneurs in the digital era.

3- Digitalization and immigrant entrepreneurship

From early investigations into immigrant economic contributions to contemporary studies on innovation and technology-driven entrepreneurship, the research landscape has evolved significantly.

The exploration of immigrant entrepreneurship can be traced back to the late 20th century when researchers began to recognize the economic contributions of immigrant communities in host countries (Patterson, 1963; Ward & Jenkins, 1984; Waldinger, 1984; Bonacich, 1987). M. Dabic et al. (2020) claims that early studies often focused on identifying the role of immigrants in traditional industries and examined factors such as the immigrant's country of origin, social networks, and access to resources as key determinants of their entrepreneurial activities.

As the field matured, researchers started to emphasize the diversity and dynamics of immigrant entrepreneurship. Studies began to recognize that immigrant entrepreneurs were not a homogeneous group, and their experiences varied based on factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and class (J Nazareno et al, 2018). This shift in focus highlighted the importance of

considering intersectionality when analyzing immigrant entrepreneurship. Researchers also began to explore the cultural and social capital that immigrants brought with them, which played a crucial role in shaping their entrepreneurial ventures (E Chrysostome, 2010; Aliaga-Isla & Rialp, 2013).

The late 20th century witnessed a growing interest in the role of policy and integration in immigrant entrepreneurship. Researchers started to investigate how government policies and programs affected the entrepreneurial activities of immigrants. This era saw an increasing emphasis on the importance of providing support and resources to facilitate immigrant entrepreneurship (N Kushnirovich, 2009; Couteret, 2010; Nakara & Fayolle, 2012; I. Bozhikin et al, 2019). Scholars such as Elie Chrysostome (2010) and then Azmat and Zutshi (2012) also delved into issues related to social integration, exploring how immigrants' sense of belonging, regulatory environment, and inclusion influenced their entrepreneurial success.

Meanwhile, scientific research on immigrant entrepreneurship has evolved in response to globalization and technological advancements. The emergence of the digital economy and the rise of technology-driven entrepreneurship have reshaped the landscape. Researchers now explore how immigrants contribute to innovation, startups, and high-tech industries (T. Orrensalo et al., 2022). The concept of "global diaspora networks" has gained prominence, emphasizing the interconnectedness of immigrant entrepreneurs across borders and their ability to tap into global markets and resources (M. Elo & Minto-Coy, 2019).

The digital revolution has transformed nearly every aspect of modern life, and its impact on entrepreneurial startups has been particularly profound (M. Bejjani et al., 2023). Scientific research on digitalization has evolved over the years, reflecting the changing landscape of technology and entrepreneurship.

A. Dabbous et al. (2023) states that Digitalization has profoundly impacted entrepreneurial activities in various ways, shaping their strategies, operations, and competitiveness. It has lowered entry barriers for startups to access global markets. Also, digital platforms, online advertising, and digital marketing have enabled startups to reach a wider customer base without the need for physical presence (Srinivasan & Venkatraman, 2018; J-M. Sahut et al., 2019).

K. Andrejuk (2022), in a study on entrepreneurship at a "super-digitalization" context, claims that startups have leveraged digital tools for rapid innovation. Cloud computing and open-source software have reduced IT infrastructure costs, while agile development methodologies have accelerated product development cycles.

A.-S.T. Olanrewaju et al (2020) believes, on the other hand, that social media, online communities and digital networks have transformed customer engagement. Startups can interact directly with customers, gather feedback, and build brand loyalty through digital channels (H.Ajjan et al., 2015; Orrensalo et al., 2022).

The evolution of scientific research on digitalization and its effects on entrepreneurship reflects the dynamic nature of technology and business. From the emergence of the Internet to the era of IoT, digitalization has reshaped how startups operate and compete. While presenting numerous opportunities, it also poses challenges that demand ongoing research (M.M. Meurer et al., 2022).

4- Challenges and bias encountered by immigrant entrepreneurs

Despite their potential contributions, immigrant entrepreneurs face a unique set of challenges that can hinder their success. We will try to explore these challenges from a theoretical perspective, drawing upon research and empirical evidence to shed light on the obstacles faced by immigrant entrepreneurs and the potential solutions to address them.

4-1- Access to Financial Capital

One of the primary challenges faced by immigrant entrepreneurs is access to financial capital.

A study conducted by Muchineripi et al. (2019) has shown that immigrants often encounter difficulties in securing startup funding for their businesses. These challenges stem from factors such as limited access to traditional financial institutions, unfamiliarity with local banking systems, and a lack of credit history in the host country. Högberg et al. (2015) even talked about « categorizing and labelling » entrepreneurs by financial organizations, which is often critical when we talk about immigrants, especially small business owners.

Research suggests that immigrant entrepreneurs may benefit from targeted financial support programs and initiatives designed to provide them with access to capital. Governments and financial organizations can play a critical role in bridging this gap by offering grants, loans, and mentorship programs specifically tailored to the needs of immigrant entrepreneurs (Kushnirovich N., 2009; Nakara & Fayolle, 2012; T. Lebègue, 2015).

4-2- Language and Cultural Barriers

Also, language and cultural barriers pose significant challenges to immigrant entrepreneurs (R M. Khosa & Kalitanyi V., 2014). Azmat & Zutshi (2012) have shown that language proficiency affects various aspects of entrepreneurship, including communication and social integration, as well as navigating regulatory and institutional requirements. Cultural differences can also impact business practices, negotiation styles, and the capacity of adaptation in the host country (Cruickshank, P., & Dupuis, A, 2015; V. Bogan & W. Darity Jr, 2019; C. Gurau et al. 2020).

4-3- Networking and Social Capital

Heilbrunn, S. and Kushnirovich, N. (2008) have demonstrated that immigrant entrepreneurs often face difficulties in building professional networks due to their limited social connections in the host country. C. Garau et al (2020) address the fact that foreignness can represent a liability for the immigrant which he should overcome. This lack of social capital can hinder their socioeconomic integration as entrepreneurs as well as their ability to access valuable resources, information, and networks (M. Price & E. Chacko, 2009; Cruickshank, P., & Dupuis, A. 2015).

4-4- Legal and Regulatory Complexities

Navigating the legal and regulatory landscape in a new country can be a daunting task for immigrant entrepreneurs. Hagos, S. et al. (2019) has highlighted the challenges they face in understanding and complying with institutional “discrimination”, local laws, licensing requirements, and tax regulations (Teixeira C. et al., 2007, Muchineripi, J et al., 2019). These complexities can divert their time and resources away from business development, and even, in some cases, expose them to criminal liability (Amarante, E. F., 2020).

4-5- Discrimination and Bias

Scientific studies have documented instances of discrimination and bias against immigrant entrepreneurs. A study orchestrated by R M. Khosa & Kalitanyi V. (2014) has shown that this can manifest in various forms, including unequal access to financial organizations, xenophobia, and challenges in securing partnerships or collaborations. Discrimination and bias can have a detrimental impact on the growth and sustainability of immigrant-owned businesses (J Muchineripi et al., 2019).

5- Digital platforms & online communities as support mechanisms to assist immigrant entrepreneurs

The research field of entrepreneurship is continually evolving, with immigrants playing an increasingly significant role in shaping economies and societies. Immigrant entrepreneurs bring

diversity, innovation, and a fresh perspective to their host countries, contributing to economic growth and cultural enrichment. In recent years, the emergence of digital platforms and online communities has revolutionized the way immigrants pursue entrepreneurship, providing them with valuable resources, networking opportunities, and support systems. In this last part of our article, we will explore the crucial role that digital platforms and online communities play in order to assist immigrant entrepreneurs.

5-1- Access to Information and Resources

One of the primary ways digital platforms empower immigrant entrepreneurs is by providing easy access to a wealth of information and resources.

Srinivasan, A., & Venkatraman, N. (2018) argued about entrepreneurship in digital platforms: they could offer essential guidance on starting and managing a business, complying with local regulations, and securing funding.

As we've seen previously, immigrants often face language and cultural barriers when navigating these processes, and digital platforms can bridge these gaps, offering content in multiple languages and formats. A paper written by Olanrewaju, A. S. T. et al (2020) has shed the light on the utility of social media, which had transcended marketing and it is now used in information seeking and resources pursuit.

Additionally, online communities and forums enable immigrants to share their experiences and insights, creating a peer-to-peer support system (Behnam Abedin et al., 2019). An analysis led by Martin, K. et al. (2020), on the business models of digital platforms in agriculture, pointed out that entrepreneurs can access information about local markets, consumer behaviors, and industry trends through these platforms, allowing them to make informed decisions and adapt their business strategies effectively.

5-2- Networking Opportunities

Digital platforms facilitate networking, which is crucial for immigrant entrepreneurs looking to establish connections in their new countries. Song, Y. (2015) explain the transition from offline networks to online networks, enabling immigrants to connect with like-minded individuals, mentors, potential partners, and customers. These connections can lead to valuable collaborations, partnerships, and market insights.

Smith, C et al. (2017) built a conceptual framework that lay down the impact of networks on entrepreneurship, bridging online social capital. Digitalization could offer a lot of potential in order to help immigrants expand their professional networks and gain exposure to potential clients and investors, breaking down geographical barriers that may have hindered them in the past (Ughetto, E et al., 2020; Meurer, M. M et al., 2022).

5-3- Overcoming Isolation and Building Community

Schou, P. K., Bucher, E., & Waldkirch, M. (2022) mentioned “entrepreneurial learning” in online communities. At this standpoint, digital platforms and online communities offer a sense of belonging and camaraderie. Immigrant entrepreneurs can find communities that share their cultural background, language, or industry interests, providing a safe space to seek advice, share challenges, and reach *new opportunities for learning that are not limited by time, space, or social class*.

Online communities not only offer emotional support but also encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing. These platforms foster a sense of empowerment, helping immigrant entrepreneurs overcome isolation and build a strong, supportive community (Griffin-EL, E. W., & Olabisi, J., 2018; Gurău, C. et al, 2020).

5-4- Financial Inclusion

As we've witnessed before, access to financial resources is often a significant challenge for

immigrant entrepreneurs. Traditional financial institutions may be hesitant to provide loans or credit to newcomers without an established credit history or collateral. Digital platforms, however, have disrupted the financial landscape, offering alternative financing options such as crowdfunding, peer-to-peer lending, and microloans (Butticè, V., & Useche, D., 2018; Duan, C., 2022; Bejjani, M et al., 2023)

Chandna, V. (2022) states that “*digital platforms can avail crowdfunding, [...] entrepreneurs can overcome legitimacy issues and lack of traditional funding avenues*”. Online crowdfunding platforms allow immigrant entrepreneurs to raise capital by presenting their business ideas to a global audience, which not only provides access to funding but also serves as marketing tools, helping immigrants gain visibility and attract potential customers.

6- Conclusions

The role of digital platforms and online communities in supporting immigrant entrepreneurship cannot be overstated. Our research has shed light on the transformative potential of digital platforms and online communities in fostering immigrant entrepreneurship. The findings have underscored the multifaceted ways in which these digital tools have become invaluable resources for immigrants seeking to establish and grow their businesses in new host countries. Illustrating that these mechanisms could assist immigrant entrepreneurs by providing a portfolio of tools, such as access to information, resources, networks, and financial capital as well.

Moreover, this research has emphasized the importance of recognizing the diversity within immigrant communities and tailoring digital interventions to meet their unique needs and challenges.

Through our literature review, we came to recognize that the digital landscape is dynamic, and its implications for immigrant entrepreneurship continue to evolve. Therefore, ongoing research and monitoring are essential to keep pace with technological advancements and changing social dynamics. Additionally, policymakers, academics, and stakeholders must remain engaged in developing strategies that maximize the positive impact of digital platforms while mitigating potential risks and inequalities.

Future research should consider conducting longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of digital platforms and online communities on the process of immigrant entrepreneurship. This could provide insights into the sustainability and evolution of these digital interventions over time.

Furthermore, exploring the differences and similarities in the utilization of digital platforms among immigrant communities from various cultural backgrounds could yield valuable insights into the role of culture in shaping entrepreneurial strategies and engagement with online resources.

Moreover, researchers should collaborate with policymakers and practitioners to construct effective policies and interventions that leverage digital platforms to support immigrant entrepreneurship. Evaluating the effectiveness of these interventions in real-world settings would be interesting.

Another issue that might be addressed, also, is the challenges and ethical considerations associated with digital platforms and online communities in the immigrant entrepreneurial context.

In conclusion, this study has illuminated the transformative potential of digital platforms and online communities in empowering immigrant entrepreneurship. However, continued research and thoughtful interventions are needed to maximize the benefits of digital tools while addressing challenges and inequalities in this context.

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