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## How Has Entrepreneurship Opportunity Formation Amongst Immigrants Been Influenced by the COVID-19 Pandemic?

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# How has entrepreneurship opportunity formation amongst immigrants been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic?

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate how entrepreneurship opportunity formation amongst immigrants has been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, given that environmental changes and irregularity can contribute to entrepreneurship opportunity formation in the immigrant set-up.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study employed a comparative narrative analysis of literature relating to entrepreneurship opportunity formation, immigrant entrepreneurship, environmental change (e.g. COVID-19 pandemic) and demand expansion (e.g. market extension resulting from environmental changes) and primary dataset from 11 semi-structured interviews.

**Findings** – The triangulation of the literature from these diverse topics leads to the conclusion that environmental changes and irregularity creates demand expansion that can drive entrepreneurship in any climate.

**Research limitations/implications** – The limitation to the present study is the inability to use more than 11 primary dataset for this study, so future research on this topic should ensure the use of more primary dataset to validate the literature review.

**Originality/value** – This article contributes to existing knowledge by suggesting that irregular events within the environment (not stable economic growth alone) can positively influence entrepreneurship opportunity formation amongst immigrants.

**Keywords** Entrepreneurship opportunity formation, COVID-19, Change, Economic environment, Immigrants  
**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide, plus it caused unprecedented challenges to public health services, food systems, work habits, insecurity, global lockdown and the general way of living (Béné, 2020; Liguori and Winkler, 2020; Bacq et al., 2020). It has also led researchers such as Maritz et al. (2020), Knuppel (2021) and Harima (2022) to question how a crisis such as COVID-19 challenges impacts entrepreneurship opportunity formation. Wood (2021) proposed that entrepreneurial opportunity represents individuals taking action to introduce new products, services, or ways of organising, and that it is a bedrock of entrepreneurship research, but little is known about how a crisis such as COVID-19 might impact entrepreneurship opportunity formation amongst immigrants.

A study by Barney et al. (2018) identified two mechanisms that have an impact on the emergence of entrepreneurial opportunities, namely: top-down planned processes and bottom-up autonomous processes. Neuman (2016) argued that in the general environment, social and demographic changes create the potential for entrepreneurship opportunity formation, while Acs and Szerb (2007) suggested it was influenced by entrepreneurship,



economic growth and public policy. [Simón-Moya et al. \(2014\)](#) emphasised institutional and economic as drivers of entrepreneurship, while [Wasdani and Mathew \(2014\)](#) discussed the potential for opportunity recognition along the different stages of entrepreneurship. Research by [Habiyaakare et al. \(2009\)](#) and [Osaghae \(2020\)](#) on immigrant entrepreneurship described immigrant entrepreneurship as a bottom-up autonomous process that normally occurs in the presence of adversity and a discriminative environment. Therefore, due to its diverse nature immigrant entrepreneurship is mostly found in the bottom-up process.

A study by [Sharma et al. \(2022\)](#) claimed that entrepreneurship is critical during crises because it provides a constructive perspective on changing circumstances. [Harima \(2022\)](#) described COVID-19 pandemic as an exceptional context and entrepreneurial agent. COVID-19 in this form becomes a unique agent of adversity that can create an opportunity for an entrepreneurial immigrant to engage in entrepreneurship. The aim of this article is to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced entrepreneurship opportunity formation amongst immigrants specifically. To achieve this, the study employed a comparative narrative analysis of literature on entrepreneurship opportunity formation, immigrant entrepreneurship, environmental changes (e.g. COVID-19 pandemic) and demand expansion (e.g. market resulting from environmental changes), plus a primary dataset to analyse how entrepreneurship opportunity formation amongst immigrants has been influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic. To guide this enquiry, the study asked the following research questions:

*RQ1.* What is the relationship between environmental change and entrepreneurship opportunity formation amongst immigrants?

*RQ2.* How did demand expansion that occurred during COVID-19 influence entrepreneurship opportunity formation amongst immigrants?

The decision to concentrate closely on this knowledge gap was motivated by the suggestion that environmental changes (particularly uncertainty within the environment) may act as an external enabler that creates demand expansion for entrepreneurship activity ([Doblinger et al., 2016](#); [Maritz et al., 2020](#); [Davidsson et al., 2021](#)). This article contributes to the mainstream literature on entrepreneurship opportunity formation by advancing previous studies that have asked the question “where does opportunity come from”? From the literature reviewed and primary dataset used, the study draws conclusions to suggest that environmental changes (not stable economic growth alone or Schumpeter’s notion of creative destruction) can contribute to entrepreneurship opportunity formation by immigrants, even in a time of a global pandemic.

### Understanding entrepreneurship opportunity formation

Considerably different perspectives of entrepreneurship opportunity formation centre on the discovery and creation approaches. The core of the discussion lies between discovered realist opportunities and created evolutionary realist opportunities ([Osaghae and Cooney, 2020](#)). According to [Ramoglou and Tsang \(2016\)](#), the reality is independent of an individual’s perception that plays a role in the selection and editing of an individual’s beliefs and perceptions. Conversely, constructionists argue that reality is a social product based on the social interactions of individuals and does not have an existence independent of individual perception ([Osaghae and Cooney, 2020](#)). However, this does not suggest that constructionist or evolutionary realist views are not important in opportunity formation, but it does offer an indication that individual beliefs and perceptions of “what is an opportunity” form the main foundations for the exploitation of an opportunity. [Shane \(2003\)](#) labelled the realist view as the individual/opportunity nexus or discovery approach, which has been more generally adopted

as an approach to entrepreneurship opportunity formation. This perspective suggests that there is a reality that is independent of an individual's perception, that the way one sees things enhances an individual's ability to engage in entrepreneurship opportunity formation.

Kirzner (1997) claimed that opportunity is discovered (exogenously recognised) when individuals seize opportunities when they are alerted to them. Santos and Eisenhardt (2005) contended that opportunity formation occurs only when an entrepreneur perceives new opportunities for the creation of value and the construction of a market around these opportunities. Scholars such as Kirzner (1997) argued that opportunities stem from imperfect knowledge, subject to the specific knowledge of time and place possessed by an entrepreneur. Additionally, such scholars advocated that opportunities are there for the taking, but only for those who possess the qualities necessary to discover and exploit them (Block *et al.*, 2017; Henrekson and Sanandaji, 2020). In entrepreneurship activity, opportunity is discovered (exogenously recognised) when individuals seize opportunities when they are alerted to them (Kirzner, 1997). The understanding is that entrepreneurship opportunity formation occurs only when an entrepreneur perceives new opportunities for the creation of value and the construction of a market around the recognised value (Santos and Eisenhardt, 2005). Morris and James (2017) propounded that the desire to pursue these opportunities depends on the market circumstances, objectives and infrastructure. In this context, entrepreneurship opportunity formation can be the result of a complex interplay between political/economic, environment and socio-cultural factors.

Using the relational and temporal approach, Alvarez and Barney (2007) argued that opportunities are endogenously created, not discovered. Sarasvathy and Dew (2005), and Alvarez and Barney (2013) were able to demonstrate that the process of opportunity recognition involves both creation and discovery, and that creation and discovery of opportunity occur simultaneously. According to the reality approach, unobservable opportunities exist independent of individual perception and therefore these opportunities can only be seen to be discovered (Kirzner, 1973). Thus, for opportunity to happen in an already existing reality, individual formality with the norms and laws or truth of this reality is significant to the recognition or discovery of an opportunity. In this case, reality occurs when an individual recognises and interprets the external elements that aid entrepreneurship opportunity formation within a given environment.

Given the complex nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ability of an individual to interpret a phenomenon, raw data or resources and give it a meaning that is different from another's interpretation puts such an individual in the position of identifying an opportunity. Katz and Gartner (1988) and Ramoglou and Tsang (2016) claimed that individuals create realities and then mould their actions towards that reality. In this way, an entrepreneur designs their future based on the environment and the resources available within a given environment for entrepreneurial opportunity formation. Maritz *et al.* (2020) suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic has not only had a significant and catastrophic effect on business and economies globally, but it has impacted the external and internal enablement of new venture creation. Hence, this paper explores how the current changes in the environment (i.e. COVID-19 pandemic) creates market demands that drives entrepreneurship opportunity formation for the entrepreneurial individual within immigrant communities.

### **Drivers of entrepreneurship in a climate of crisis**

Within current entrepreneurship frameworks, there is an understanding that factors within a given geographical environment become enablers for entrepreneurship opportunity formation. Burue and Van Stel (2011), Toutain *et al.* (2017) and Davidsson *et al.* (2020) described enablers as factors that aid the formation of an activity. In this case, environmental changes and the various elements required for the prevention of COVID-19 become the drivers of entrepreneurship. Researchers such as Chamlee-Wright and Storr (2010), Correa

and Giron (2013), Devece *et al.* (2016) and Martinelli, *et al.* (2018) have investigated the possible consequences of crises and natural disaster in entrepreneurship, and they identified a possible correlation between crises and opportunity formation. Harima (2022), while suggesting that crises drives opportunity formation, defined a crises as “an extreme, unexpected or unpredictable event that requires an urgent response from an organisation and creates challenges for them” According to Harima (2022), a crisis such as COVID-19 limits cross-border mobility for immigrant entrepreneurs and also fundamentally changed the global value chain.

Bourdieu's (1997) theory of practice stated that external social structures sharpen how an individual perceives the world and how they act in it. Although the social structures embodied in *habitus* do not determine behaviour, an individual is predisposed to act in accordance with the social structures and environmental changes that may occur at a point in time. Therefore, acting on the difficulties arising within an environment can create irregularities leading to market niches and market demand for some special type of product or service (e.g. demand for cultural goods by immigrants during the COVID-19). According to Chen *et al.* (2020), different types of agents will address the difficulties by implementing entrepreneurial responses to the crisis and resulting countermeasures. Davidsson *et al.* (2021) propounded that different entrepreneurs manifest at different lead times. This suggests an understanding that individuals react to any given opportunity differently, and therefore discovery and opportunity creation varies by individual. Hence, the literature would suggest that opportunity recognition during the COVID-19 pandemic occurred at the point when an entrepreneurial individual identified the market niche that the change in environment provides and acts upon it.

### Immigrant entrepreneurship

A study by Habiyakare *et al.* (2009) claimed that the propensity of immigrants to engage in business is frequently reactive or situational. In some cases, an immigrant's propensity to start a business is triggered by cultural predispositions within an environment (Osaghae and Cooney, 2021). Immigrant entrepreneurship describes a process whereby an immigrant establishes a business in their country of residence (COR), frequently serving the niche ethnic needs of fellow enclave inhabitants (Dalhammar, 2004; Neuman, 2016; Golob and Giles, 2017). Typical examples would be small shops providing ethnically preferred food or beauty salons catering to ethnic requirements. These enterprises represent immigrants using experience acquired in their country of origin (COO) to contribute to entrepreneurial activities in their COR. Golob and Giles (2017) defined immigrant enclave entrepreneurial activity as: “a venture created by a person born in one country and subsequently moved to another country and starting a business on arrival in a country of residence serving fellow immigrants”. This definition indicates that immigrant entrepreneurship ventures are primarily aimed at meeting the needs of immigrants in a specific geographical area in a country of residence (COR).

According to Podoshen (2006) and Habiyakare *et al.* (2009), immigrant entrepreneurship is an activity that is dependent upon the presence of a high level of interpersonal and social contacts within the environment. In other studies, scholars such as Lam *et al.* (2009), Berger (2014) and Golob and Giles (2017) claimed that an immigrant's interpersonal and social activity is normally a process driven by word of mouth, and suggested that immigrant activity is goal driven and served key functions such as emotional regulation and societal bonding. In line with Berger's views, an immigrant's business is an emotional bonded activity that increases bonding and the desire to communicate with someone of the same ethnic or immigration background. From this perspective, an immigrant's activity can best be described as a community bonding exercise that drives people to share and talk about things they have in common.

It is important that one differentiates immigrant enclave entrepreneurship from immigrant entrepreneurship. While enclave entrepreneurship is limited to the immigrant enclave itself, immigrant entrepreneurship more closely resembles that of the native population as it aims to serve both immigrant residents and mainstream society (Golob and Giles, 2017). Kerr and Kerr (2016) defined immigrant entrepreneurship as an activity (set up by an immigrant) that is dependent on both immigrant and native-born populations for the undertaking of entrepreneurial activity.

### Effect of COVID-19 on immigrant entrepreneurship

Researchers such as Chakraborty and Maity (2020), Nicola *et al.* (2020) and Merchant Savvy (2021) claimed that the year 2020 was difficult for small business owners, since they not only had to deal with the normal challenges of running a business, but they also had to tackle the hardships that arose due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the constant closing and reopening of businesses during the pandemic restricted activities, while for many immigrant entrepreneurs the limits placed on international travel significantly interrupted their ability to source and distribute supplies for their target communities, plus engage in informal agreements. (Kloosterman *et al.*, 1998; Kloosterman *et al.*, 1999) described an informal contract as any kind of agreement (i.e. verbal agreement, handshake) that one enters without any formal legal binding contract and this can frequently transpire with immigrant entrepreneurs. However, during the various COVID-19 lockdowns, informal interpersonal contact, trustworthiness based on COO culture, and community networking was at a minimum, which triggered reduced immigrant entrepreneurial activity. While mainstream businesses were able to use online marketing campaigns to drive their businesses, immigrant entrepreneurs missed the ability to sell through personal contacts.

Osaghae and Cooney (2021) claimed that the additional and distinctive challenges faced by immigrant entrepreneurs influences the nature of their entrepreneurship opportunity formation and leads to the development of idiosyncratic social bonds for immigrants in their COR. In an immigrant entrepreneur's position, trust is a two-way process: (a) the trust by customers for an entrepreneur to provide them with genuine COO goods and cultural artefacts; and (b) the personal interaction resulting from cultural bonding (people you know) and COO norms that allows an immigrant entrepreneur to conduct business in a COR as if located in their COO (Osaghae, 2020). However, during the COVID-19 lockdowns there was reduced personal contact and social activity, factors that normally enable immigrant entrepreneurship to thrive. However, this adversity and global readjustment caused immigrant entrepreneurs to reimagine their business activity. It should be noted that within the context of immigrant entrepreneurship, while adversity usually refers to unpleasant situations such as the lack of recognition of academic qualifications from an immigrant's country of origin, language difficulties, or barriers to finding gainful employment due to racism, the adversity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic affected every entrepreneur within every society.

There were also other factors that hindered immigrant businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic and these included: (1) environmental changes: adhering to social distancing measures in immigrant communities where the shops are frequently relatively small; (2) inability to travel between a COR and COO: immigrant businesses are habitually dependent on goods from their COO for onward sale; (3) the struggle to secure government funding: many immigrant business owners had no previous knowledge of securing government funding and so they struggled to secure government aids for their business; and (4) advancement in technology: immigrant entrepreneurs have only recently embraced the use of technology in sourcing goods from their country of origin for sales in their country of residence and were unlikely to be engaged in online sales. These influences aligned with the



findings from a study by [Maritz et al. \(2020\)](#) who determined that entrepreneurial actions can be influenced by external enablers such as new technology, economic, natural environments or even a pandemic like COVID-19. [Berger \(2014\)](#) claimed that strong ties among members of an in-group would more likely activate social communication and help transmit information quickly within the group. This suggests that the eventual embracement of technology by immigrant entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed them to reconnect, network, and bridge the travel gap between their COO and COR.

## Methodology

The research question posed by this paper explores how entrepreneurship opportunity formation amongst immigrants was influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The research is thus exploratory, with a focus on theory building rather than theory testing, with the resultant undertaking of qualitative methodology to answer the research question. [Zhang and Chun \(2018\)](#) claimed that using a qualitative approach for a study like this allows the researcher to start with a research question, note the relevant theories to apply to the study, the limitations of the study, and detect new theoretical ideas and insights emerging from the field of study. In line with [Zhang and Chun \(2018\)](#), using a qualitative approach helped the researchers to capture thick descriptions of the experiences of immigrant entrepreneurs and to understand the true meanings attached to immigrant entrepreneurial opportunity formation and to explore issues that may have been overlooked.

The participants in this study are all Nigerian immigrants residing in the Blanchardstown area of Dublin for at least seven years. All have become naturalised Irish citizens. They are entrepreneurs serving the Nigerian community and have commercial links with Nigeria. A query of the collected data revealed that all eleven participants had some level of entrepreneurial activity between Ireland and Nigeria. Among Africans living in Ireland, 13,079 Nigerians represent the largest ethnic group ([Osaghae and Cooney, 2021](#)). The majority of Nigerians in Ireland live in Blanchardstown, an area with an estimated 16 ethnic shops serving over 4,000 men, women and children of Nigerian origin ([Osaghae and Cooney, 2021](#)). The high concentration of Nigerians in Blanchardstown facilitates a confluence of Nigerian culture, population, environmental resources, market niche and enclave economy, all of which are elements believed to aid immigrant entrepreneurship opportunity ([Portes and Jenson, 1989](#); [Neuman, 2016](#)). The sample in this work consists of female and male Transnational Diaspora Entrepreneurship (TDE) practitioners, all of whom transcend business between Ireland and Nigeria. This sample profile facilitates cross-comparison, which will contribute to the depth and richness of the analysis. [Mills and Huberman \(1994\)](#) recommended that a qualitative researcher should go to the most study-relevant sources, and the sample selection for the present study followed this advice. For reasons related to privacy and research ethics, the participants' names and business addresses are anonymised in the present study.

Qualitative research requires a description of the geographical location, including any related information that may contribute to the data analysis ([Bryman and Bell, 2011](#)). The identification of Blanchardstown as an area with high concentration of the Nigerian community in Ireland provided an opportunity for the researchers to carryout qualitative data collection to explore how COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced immigrant entrepreneurship opportunity formation. At the initial stage of the data collection process for this study, analysing the theoretical findings from the literature allowed the formulation of questions for semi-structured interviews. As [Corbin and Strauss \(2008, p.36\)](#) pointed out, "it is impossible to know prior to the investigation what salient problems or what relevant concepts will be derived from this set of data". The construct of semi-structured interviews based upon theoretical concepts from the literature gave the researchers an insight into how the interviews should be structured.

Following initial familiarisation with the Nigerian diaspora in Blanchardstown (Dublin, Ireland), contact was established with some entrepreneurs through telephone and e-mail contact details taken from their business websites and Facebook pages. It was intended that the interviews would be conducted during a six-month period, but slow responses to emails and initial unwillingness of some entrepreneurs to participate prolonged the data collection process by an additional two months. By the end of the data collection process (December, 2021), initial findings indicated clear parallels that COVID-19 has changed the business mindset of the Nigerian diaspora entrepreneurs in Blanchardstown. The study focused on a small enclave community (4,600 men, women, children; 16 shops) and adopted an objective, in-depth micro approach. The advantage of this technique and procedure lies in its ability to use small sample data for analysis in order to draw conclusions in relation to the research question (Cunliffe, 2011).

The interview questions for the present study were designed to reassure participants who are sensitive about their culture and somewhat reluctant to talk about their business activities. The Nigerians residing in Blanchardstown hold their culture close to their heart and rarely give information regarding their businesses to people from outside their enclave community. Adopting this intimate style of questioning opened up conversation between the principal researcher and the interviewees. Table 1 below shows the characteristics of the participants and their businesses, with 5 males and 6 females (who were transnational diaspora entrepreneurs) identified for the study.

In order to gain a better insight into their activities, the interviews were conducted on the participants' own business premises. The interviews lasted one hour or more, depending on the experience and knowledge of each participant. Answers were audio recorded, notes were taken, and consent forms were signed by the participants.

The researchers selected the exponential discriminative snowball sampling technique for sampling the participants. This approach invited each initial interviewee to nominate another two Nigerian TDE practitioners for interview. This process greatly reduced the difficulty of

Name	Current nationality	Previous nationality	Years in Ireland	Business location	Business type	TDE practitioner
AK	Irish	Nigerian	11+	Blanchardstown	Ethnic Consultancy Firm	Yes
AD	Irish	Nigerian	13+	Blanchardstown	Hairdressing Salon	Yes
BO	Irish	Nigerian	12+	Blanchardstown	Africa Food shop	Yes
BN	Irish	Nigerian	15+	Blanchardstown	Transportation/ Cargo	Yes
JE	Irish	Nigerian	11+	Blanchardstown	Pedicure and Manicure	Yes
JU	Irish	Nigerian	13+	Blanchardstown	Cargo/Remittance	Yes
IF	Irish	Nigerian	11+	Blanchardstown	African Food Shop	Yes
MA	Irish	Nigerian	8+	Blanchardstown	Barbering Salon	Yes
OS	Irish	Nigerian	12+	Blanchardstown	African Food Shop	Yes
RI	Irish	Nigerian	13+	Blanchardstown	Hair and Food Shop	Yes
ST	Irish	Nigerian	15+	Blanchardstown	Beauty and Hair Salon	Yes

**Table 1.**  
Characteristics of the participants and their businesses

**Source(s):** Authors' own creation



gaining the trust of the enclave entrepreneurs. The interview questions were designed to help participants to recreate their entrepreneurial experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic with regard to entrepreneurship opportunity formation. For example, each interview started with the ice-breaker of “could you tell me your story of the COVID-19 pandemic?” and a move to the research topic of “Was COVID-19 a barrier or an advantage to entrepreneurial opportunity formation?” The use of an interview guide provided both structure and flexibility for the study, plus it allowed the researchers to ask probing questions, and then transcribe the audio recorded interview immediately after the interview.

The first author was the primary data collector and organiser using NVivo software. The understanding from the data collection and transcribing processes provided both researchers with the opportunity to contextualise the entrepreneurs’ interviews and to get a better sense of the influence of COVID-19 on the immigrant entrepreneurship. A deep analysis of the data by the first researcher allowed the data to be compared, checked and theoretical themes sought from the dataset, while the second researcher checked the initial themes identified for the data organising process. Afterwards, both researchers discussed and refined the themes and categories until a consensus was reached, and this help to ensure validity for the study. NVivo software was then used to assist the organisation and management of the text into folders. Folders were created and labelled as “Entrepreneurship Opportunity Formation”, “Environmental Changes” and “Demand Expansion”. This phase was pivotal in the process of data organisation as it provided the researchers with further insight into the data corpus, comparing elements from both the literature review and the data set.

To check that the right comments were extracted into the right folders, transcripts of participant’s interview were reviewed and, by clicking “Memo Link” in NVivo, links were created between the folders and the transcribed interviews. Switching between the transcribed interviews and the folders facilitated identifying which material belonged in which data node. This process allowed for extracts that were not in the right folders to be eradicated, before moving on to data analysis. The analysis was composed of three steps as follows: (1) reading and rereading of the transcripts for extraction and identifications of participants comments with the right themes; (2) working through the organised dataset, data entry were counted in their folders to know the number of comments in each set-up folders (Entrepreneurship Opportunity Formation’, “Environmental Changes” and “Demand Expansion” set-up in NVivo; and (3) the extracted dataset were compared with the findings from the literature reviewed. At the conclusion of the process, patterns emerged showing a correlation between the literature review and the dataset. The study then employed a comparative narrative analysis of the literature relating to entrepreneurship opportunity formation, immigrant entrepreneurship, environmental change (e.g. COVID-19 pandemic) and demand expansion (e.g. market extension resulting from environmental changes) in conjunction with the primary dataset to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced immigrant opportunity formation.

## Findings

The study set out to examine the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on entrepreneurship opportunity formation amongst immigrants, and so this paper reviewed the relevant literature and primary dataset to answer the following questions:

- (1) What is the relationship between environmental change and entrepreneurship opportunity formation amongst immigrants?
- (2) How did demand expansion that occurred during COVID-19 influence entrepreneurship opportunity formation amongst immigrants?

Using a comparative narrative analysis of both the dataset and themes from the literature review, this paper describes how immigrant entrepreneurs were influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and how environment uncertainty created entrepreneurial opportunity. Figure 1 below shows the process the researchers used to explore how environmental changes and demand expansion creates opportunity for immigrants.

As shown in Figure 1 above, using this method of analysis enabled the researchers to understand that entrepreneurial opportunity formation often thrives in environmental uncertainty, and that COVID-19 create entrepreneurial opportunities for immigrants.

So what is the response to the RQ1: What is the relationship between environmental change and entrepreneurship opportunity formation amongst immigrants? When seeking to establish the relationship linkages between opportunity formation, environmental changes and demand expansion, the literature suggests that environmental dynamism motivates entrepreneurs to engage and collaborate with the resources within the given environment to engage in entrepreneurship opportunity formation (Jap, 1999; Maritz *et al.*, 2020). As found in the data extracts, environmental changes that create dynamism creates opportunities, according to BA and JU, plus the environmental changes resulting from COVID-19 “helped me to understand how the embracing of technology can aid business progression” In the words of AK, “I got creative by adding services that I would normally not offer”. Jap (1999) and Maritz *et al.* (2020) appreciated that organisations react to environmental conditions in an effort to protect themselves from external forces and cope with environmental demands. Data extracted from BN states that “before COVID-19 I was selling African foods only, but as COVID-19 started, I started the sale of things like sugar, milk, biscuits and some other foods stuffs that my customers usually buy at stores like Tesco, Aldi, and Lidl”. Drawing from these discussions, it could be argued that while COVID-19 pandemic initially hinders both native and immigrants businesses, it eventually allow the immigrant’s entrepreneur to understands that their venture goes beyond the sale of the immigrant’s country of origin cultural goods.

For an understanding of how environmental changes creates entrepreneurial opportunity for immigrant entrepreneurs, the linkage is explored within the context of the “external enablers” concept suggested by Toutain *et al.* (2017) and Davidsson *et al.* (2020). An external enabler is a situation whereby external factors within the environment that normally have no link to opportunity formation can open doors for the formation of activity. The dataset extract

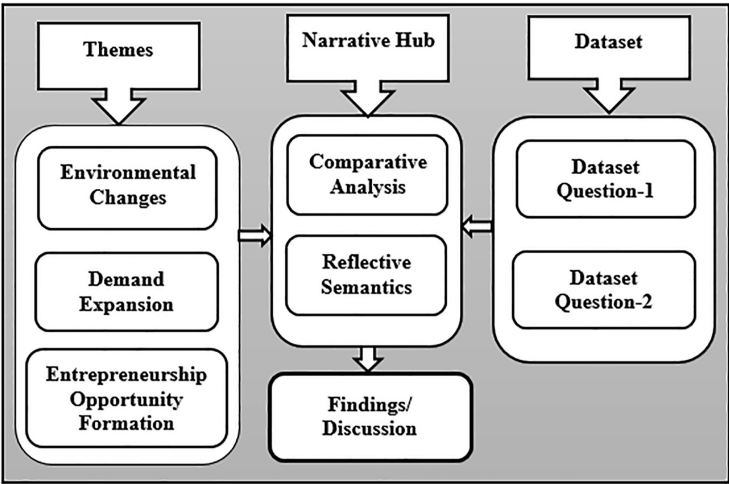


Figure 1.  
Interview extracts

Source(s): Authors own creation

from participant JE suggests how an external enabling factor can contribute to entrepreneurship opportunity formation. According to the extracted data from JE, “before COVID-19 I never used home delivery, but now I take orders by phone and I now make home deliveries to my customers”. In the data extracted from BN, it was suggested that “before COVID-19 I used to travel to Nigeria 3 or 4 times yearly to buy goods; now, I have a system in place that helps me reduce my travels”. AK stated that: “the period reduced my business activity, as my business depends on word of mouth; however it allowed me to embrace technology and the use of social media to promote my business and to avoid adversity at the height of COVID-19” Given that immigrant entrepreneurs are accustomed to seeing opportunities in adversity, the situation then creates an opportunity for immigrant entrepreneurs to embrace technology in sourcing goods from their COO for sale in their COR. Dataset extracts from BN, IF, JE and JU all agreed that technology played a key part in their entrepreneurial activity. Studies have been used to suggest that the strength of immigrant/diaspora entrepreneurs lies in their ability to carry out entrepreneurial activity in multiple settings (Riddle *et al.*, 2010; Bauböck and Faist, 2010; Portes and Fernández-Kelly, 2015).

Following the dataset extracts from BN, IF, JE and JU, it could be argued that the COVID-19 pandemic causing travel restrictions hindered travel between a COR and COO, and that the changes resulting from the lockdown became the drivers of opportunity for immigrant entrepreneurs in this study. The Schumpeterian notion of creative destruction can be understood as the decay of long-standing practices and procedures, or on the principle that old assumptions need to be broken so that new innovations can benefit from existing resources and energy (Schumpeter, 1934). Following a comparative narrative analysis of both the dataset and the reviewed literature, the understanding is that COVID-19 creates a market destruction that allows immigrants to change their entrepreneurship behaviour. Hence, the linkage between environmental changes and immigrant entrepreneurship opportunity formation is suggested as follows: (1) the environmental changes such as social distancing created the opportunity for entrepreneurs to embrace technology (e.g. social media usage to promote their business) and understand the process of sourcing funds from government; and (2) the environmental changes helped the immigrant entrepreneurs to understand that immigrant entrepreneurship should not be purely dependent on the travels between a COR and COO, but also on advancements in modern communication tools. This generates an understanding that environmental changes will lead to the eventual opening of new opportunities for immigrant entrepreneurs. Hence, this paper argues that although a stable economic climate supports entrepreneurship opportunity formation, environmental changes and irregularities can also contribute to immigrant entrepreneurship opportunity formation.

And what is the answer to the RQ2: How did demand expansion that occurred during COVID-19 influence entrepreneurship opportunity formation amongst immigrants? Demand expansion is a concept normally used to describe when demand increases as a result of a price fall (Mauser *et al.*, 2015; Bourreau and Jullien, 2018). According to Rob (1991), when a new market opens as a result of factors of production or when an existing market starts to expand due to uncertainty (random shocks or rare events - such as the COVID-19 pandemic), the demand for certain goods in large quantities is likely to prevail. According to the dataset extracted from RI, “as you know, Nigerians when they travel home to Nigeria, they often bring back with them lots of consumables, but with the restrictions, lockdown and the inability to bring in things from Nigeria, our business activity grew”. The data extracted from BN also supported RI’s claim and suggested that “with the lockdown, there was an increase in the demand for goods like milk, sugar, cereal, fruits and vegetables normally not available to buy in my shop, which I now sell”. The takeaway from this discussion is that an increase in the demand for goods creates an opportunity for an entrepreneurial individual to expand their activities.

As found in ST dataset extract, “the increase in the demand for COO goods allow me to set-up a system whereby goods are bought and shipped to me in Ireland”. The views of OS supported ST’s claim by suggesting that “travelling every three months to Nigeria for buying and shipping of goods was no longer the future of my business”, while according to AD, “as the lockdown restrictions on travels and an inability to personally sort goods for consumption from a COO continue, so also was the increase in demand for COO consumable goods from us by immigrants” In this case, the uncertainty resulting from the pandemic and lockdown created demand expansion and opportunities for immigrants with entrepreneurship experience to enter the market to engage in entrepreneurial activity in a different manner. Data extracted from MA claimed that “it has changed the way I usually do business and helped to understand the supports that are available to small businesses”. Hence, it is suggested that the demand expansion resulting from COVID-19 created a scenario whereby immigrants with strong country of origin networks and cultural knowledge, had goods bought by relatives and delivered to them in their country of residence.

Henceforth, it could be argued that the assumption that entrepreneurship opportunity formation is the result of a stable political environment is not solely true and economic stability is no longer the exclusive impetus to entrepreneurial success. Rather, environmental uncertainty (as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic) can create demand for certain goods and services, which eventually leads to the formation of entrepreneurship opportunity. This aligned with the dataset for the present study e.g. RI’s claim that “the lockdowns have helped to understand that immigrant’s ventures goes beyond the sales of cultural goods only” Hence, this paper argues that although a stable economic climate supports entrepreneurship opportunity formation, environmental irregularities (environmental changes) can also contribute to an immigrant’s entrepreneurship opportunity formation.

## Discussion

A body of research suggests that entrepreneurship is the quest for a business opportunity, and that the pursuit of entrepreneurial opportunity is the result of stable economic growth and political stability within a national context. However, despite the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and resulting global economic uncertainty, entrepreneurial activities and start-ups continued to happen. For example, in the USA, there were an estimated 28 million small businesses in 2020 and 32.5 million in 2021. Meanwhile, SMEs in the UK accounted for 52% of private sector turnover in 2020 and 60% of all private sector jobs ([Oberlo Statistical Data, 2022](#)). Furthermore, in the emerging economies such as India, China and Brazil, small businesses are the backbone of their national economy ([Oberlo Statistical Data, 2022](#)). This suggests that despite environmental irregularity and unfavourable economic conditions, entrepreneurship opportunity formation remains possible.

To examine the current drivers of immigrant entrepreneurship, this paper reviewed the relevant literature and undertook 11 semi-structured interviews to answer the research questions. Through this review, it has been suggested that entrepreneurship opportunity formation by an immigrant can be the result of a complex interplay between political, economic, environment and socio-cultural factors, and that a stable political situation helps to create increased entrepreneurial opportunities. For example, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, government action (e.g. lockdowns) and COVID-19 became a reality that stunted entrepreneurship opportunity formation initially. The understanding here is that the assumptions that entrepreneurship thrives under favourable economic climate and entrepreneurship policy enactment did not hold alone. Furthermore, before the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars and researchers generally held that immigrant entrepreneurship opportunity formation is dependent upon a high rate of immigrant concentration in a specific geographical area within a host country which also is not necessarily true.

From the literature reviewed and dataset, the principal finding is that demand increases the incentive of an entrepreneurial individual to work closely with the environmental changes and make the necessary investments to create strategic outcomes that allows for the effective exploration of available resources and opportunities. [Austin \*et al.\* \(2006\)](#) and [Davidsson \*et al.\* \(2020\)](#) claimed that change is motivated by the vision of the future that is better for the decision-maker, and by the credibility of the path presented to that desired future state. The environmental changes that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic created a large demand for products such as COO goods (artefact and culinary needs) that resulted in entrepreneurship opportunity for enterprising individuals within immigrant communities. Thus, the relationship between opportunity formation, environmental changes, and demand expansion lies in the ability of the environment to affect changes and allow for an increase in the demand for certain goods or services. When this happens, it creates power relationships between the entrepreneurs and the changes within the environment and economic interests that leads to entrepreneurship opportunity formation.

As the pandemic started to spread around the world, it became a reality that existing entrepreneurship norms were now independent of the perception that was once held of entrepreneurship opportunity formation. The situation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic became the new reality regarding entrepreneurship opportunity formation ([Harima, 2022](#)). As found in several studies on opportunity formation, when the need for power and achievement are present, they will become an unconscious motive that pushes immigrant entrepreneurs to venture creating individuals ([Wasdani and Mathew, 2014](#)). An understanding from the discussion is that, during the pandemic, an entrepreneurial individual with knowledge of the environmental changes and a substantial demand for required products will feel a need for achievement. This unconscious need for achievement (aided by their understanding of the situation) becomes the motivation that drives their entrepreneurship opportunity formation during the pandemic. [McMullen and Shepherd \(2006\)](#) highlighted that entrepreneurs are considered as possessing an accurate view of “reality” as opposed to non-entrepreneurs. Thus, the ability of individual entrepreneurs to understand the reality faced by people at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (less stable economic growth, unobservable opportunities exist independent of individual perception) drove immigrant entrepreneurship opportunity formation.

For many years now, immigrant entrepreneurs have taken on the responsibility for meeting the ethnic needs of their fellow immigrants, supporting community development, and foresting unity. Notwithstanding an immigrant entrepreneur’s individual orientation and characteristics, research has also examined the effect of the external enablement of new venture creation. Such research has identified the influences of entrepreneurial action on the outcomes extended by external conditions such as improvement in technologies, transportation, and communication. However, the effect of environmental uncertainty or even global pandemics such as COVID-19 immigrant’s entrepreneurial activity have received less attention in academic literature. Findings from the study by [Maritz \*et al.\* \(2020\)](#) claimed that the most obvious mechanisms by which COVID-19 creates business opportunities are the creation, expansion, and substitution of demand. In conclusion, COVID has helped the immigrant’s entrepreneurs to an understanding that, embracing technology reduce the time spend traveling between host and home country, puts the immigrant entrepreneur in the position to understand that transnational entrepreneurial activity has gone beyond selling only home country cultural goods, something deemed unachievable before COVID-19.

## Conclusion

The impact of COVID-19 on economic buoyancy was considerable given the closure of hundreds of thousands of SMEs and millions of workers made redundant. Yet, there have

been clear demonstrations of the power behind the entrepreneurial mind-set, with entrepreneurs across the globe exhibiting resilience, determination and talent to see or seek opportunities during environmental uncertainty. The study set out to answer two questions and the findings suggests as per RQ1: That environmental destruction also creates opportunities for immigrant entrepreneurs. The Schumpeterian view on opportunity formation clearly supports the views of the dataset used for this study that uncertainty can also change immigrant entrepreneurial activity. The Schumpeterian view also aligns with scholars such as Burke and Van Stel (2011), Toutain *et al.* (2017) and Davidsson *et al.* (2020) who claimed that enablers aid the formation of an activity. COVID-19, as an external enabler, opened prospects for the formation of activity and goods to be sold to meet the demand resulting from the pandemic.

Regarding RQ2, the inability of consumers to travel between Ireland and Nigeria led to an expansion in the demand for artefact and cultural goods. This expansion in demand allowed entrepreneurs with personal contacts in Nigeria to get goods bought and sent through post to them in Ireland. Hence, the study argues that in spite of the destruction arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the inability of immigrants to travel between their COR and COO, the expansion in demand for immigrant goods led to the creation of market opportunity for immigrant entrepreneurs with a strong COO network and technological know-how to engage in entrepreneurship. Another dimension to this study was the question of “where does opportunity come from?” and the understanding from both the primary dataset and the literature reviewed is that opportunity is an endless process that could happen with environmental irregularity or in a stable economic growth. In the context of the present, the environmental irregularity allow the immigrant’s entrepreneurs to embrace technology and to understand that their activity is not purely dependent upon the travel between host and home country. The limitation to the present study is the inability to use more than 11 primary dataset for this study, so future research on this topic should ensure the use of more primary dataset to validate the literature review.

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