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Immigrants and micro business development in Uganda: A study of the Kananga parish, Kampala metropolitan area

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Abstract
This mixed-methods study examines the role of immigrant entrepreneurs in developing micro-businesses in Kansanga, a residential and commercial division of Kampala, Uganda. A survey of 102 immigrants engaged in small businesses (68% male; 32% female; mean age = 29.5 years) was complemented by in-depth interviews with 18 purposively selected respondents. Quantitative analysis explored business types, scale, revenues, and motivations, while qualitative analysis identified emergent themes from narratives. The study applied Opportunity Structure Theory and Self-Determination Theory, highlighting how Uganda's policy framework and individual motivations shape immigrant entrepreneurship. Results indicate that 63% of surveyed immigrants earned income through owner-operated micro-enterprises, mainly in retail trade (52%) and personal services (27%). Most ventures were informal microenterprises (≤4 employees, ≤10 million UGX revenue), consistent with national patterns where 90% of all Ugandan firms are microenterprises. Entrepreneurs expressed strong intrinsic motivation for autonomy and self-sufficiency, reflecting SDT's focus on autonomy and competence. Nonetheless, 56% cited lack of market opportunities as the main obstacle, followed by competition with locals (39%), discrimination (35%), and documentation challenges (29%). Qualitative findings underscored the role of co-ethnic networks, fairness perceptions, it reveals that immigrant entrepreneurs expressed strong needs for autonomy and competence and faced barriers like discrimination and limited capital. Uganda's relatively open policy granting refugees rights to work and start businesses creates an enabling environment, though barriers such as limited capital and social exclusion persist. Policy implications include simplifying business registration, expanding financial access, and promoting inclusivity. Limitations include the study's non-random sample and cross-sectional design. Overall, immigrant-led micro-businesses represent a vital yet overlooked sector of Kampala's economy with potential to improve urban livelihoods if better supported.

Keywords: Immigrant Entrepreneurs, Developing and Micro-Businesses

Introduction

Entrepreneurship among migrants has received growing attention as a driver of economic development and integration in host communities. Globally, immigrants often enter self-employment when formal jobs are scarce, creating small businesses that can benefit both their own livelihoods and local economies (Aldrich & Waldinger, 1990; Kloosterman & Rath, 2010). Uganda is no exception: the country hosts an estimated 1.5 million refugees and migrants (UNHCR, 2020), and its legal framework explicitly allows them to live and work freely. In principle, Uganda's Refugee Act (2006) grants refugees the right to start businesses and access jobs, and recent policy initiatives encourage entrepreneurship for migrants (International Organization for Migration, 2018). Yet despite this favorable opportunity structure, many challenges impede business development. Prior research in Uganda's refugee settlements and urban areas has noted that most refugee-run businesses start informally and face barriers in formalization, language, discrimination, and limited capital (Refugee Law Project, 2019). In short, even with an open policy environment, systemic and social constraints persist.

Uganda's economy is overwhelmingly supported by micro and small enterprises. According to a 2024 national entrepreneurship report, roughly 90% of all Ugandan firms are micro-enterprises (employing ≤4 people) with mean 2.1 employees (Uganda Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives, 2024). By official definition, a microenterprise in Uganda can have up to four employees and annual revenues up to ten million UGX (≈ US$2,700). These micro-businesses account for the majority of private-sector activity and are often operated by individuals with minimal capital. In Kampala, a recent mixed-migration survey found that 63% of migrant respondents earned income through small businesses (Mixed Migration Centre, 2021). These data suggest that immigrants readily become small-scale entrepreneurs in urban areas like Kampala. However, existing studies on refugee entrepreneurship in Uganda have tended to focus on large settlements or the rural sector; relatively little is known about the everyday business experiences of immigrants living in Kampala's diverse neighborhoods, such as Kansanga.

Kansanga Division is a densely populated part of Kampala that hosts universities, markets, and residential areas. It attracts migrants from within East Africa and beyond, some of whom establish small shops, eateries, salons, and kiosk trade. Local media have reported tensions, noting that foreign traders in areas like Kansanga often appear to operate informally while local vendors face strict enforcement. Academically, however, the role of Kansanga (and similar wards) in immigrant entrepreneurship remains under-studied. This gap motivates the study. Researchers ask: (1) What are the characteristics of micro-businesses operated by immigrants in Kansanga (sector, scale, revenue)? (2) What drives these individuals to start and maintain businesses (motivation, goals)? (3) What obstacles and opportunities do they encounter in Kampala's economic environment? (4) How do these findings align with theoretical perspectives on migrant entrepreneurship (Ryan & Deci, 2017)? To answer these questions, the research adopted a mixed-methods design, collecting quantitative survey data on business outcomes and qualitative interview data on personal narratives.

Background.

Uganda is widely recognized for having one of the most progressive refugee and migration policies in Africa. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023), Uganda hosts over 1.5 million refugees and other migrants, primarily from neighbouring countries such as South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, and Somalia. The Refugee Act of 2006 and the Refugee Regulations of 2010 grant refugees the right to work, move freely, and establish businesses, making Uganda an exceptional model of refugee self-reliance in sub-Saharan Africa (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2018). These favourable policies have encouraged many immigrants to settle not only in rural refugee settlements but also in urban canters such as Kampala, where they pursue trade, services, and other entrepreneurial activities as means of livelihood and integration.

Micro-businesses are the backbone of Uganda's economy, accounting for nearly 90% of all registered enterprises and employing a majority of the labour force (Uganda Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives [MTIC], 2024). These small-scale ventures such as retail kiosks, salons, tailoring shops, and food stalls require minimal capital but significantly contribute to employment creation, poverty reduction, and inclusive economic growth. Kansanga parish, located within Makindye division of Kampala, is particularly suitable for research on immigrant entrepreneurship because of its diverse and densely populated setting. The area hosts universities, markets, and residential zones that attract both Ugandans and foreign nationals, especially students and informal traders. This cosmopolitan character makes Kansanga an ideal microcosm for examining how immigrants engage in micro-business development, the challenges they face, and the opportunities for promoting urban economic inclusion (Mixed Migration Centre, 2021; Refugee Law Project, 2019).

Research questions

What are the motivations, characteristics, and challenges faced by immigrant entrepreneurs operating micro-businesses in Kansanga, Kampala?

How do opportunity structures and intrinsic motivations influence the sustainability and growth of immigrant-led micro-businesses in Uganda's urban economy?

Literature Review

The literature on immigrant entrepreneurship offers two relevant theoretical lenses. Opportunity Structure Theory posits that the context of the host country including market conditions and policies shapes migrants' success in business. Uganda's liberal refugee policies, for example, theoretically open up entrepreneurship possibilities. If the opportunity structure is supportive, migrants can contribute to productivity and diversify industries. Conversely, structural barriers (e.g., lack of capital, regulatory hurdles) can thwart immigrant business growth (Kloosterman & Rath, 2010; Waldinger et al., 1990).

In parallel, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) emphasizes psychological motivation: humans are driven by innate needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Entrepreneurship can fulfill these needs by granting independence and skill mastery (autonomy and competence) while also enabling social connections (relatedness) (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The research anticipated that immigrant entrepreneurs in

Kansanga will report autonomy-driven motives and satisfaction of competence needs alongside structural constraints. By applying these frameworks, the research integrated how both external structures and internal motivations influence business outcomes.

Existing evidence from Uganda underlines the dual nature of immigrant entrepreneurship. The mixed-migration survey in Kampala found that over half of migrants (53%) ran small businesses, but also that 56% cited lack of opportunities as the main barrier to employment or business, followed by competition (39%) and discrimination (35%) (Mixed Migration Centre, 2021). Likewise, a desk review of refugee entrepreneurship noted that while the policy environment is favorable (refugees have freedom of movement and work rights), refugees often remain in informal microenterprises and struggle to formalize them. Common obstacles include language barriers, limited networks, and scarce finance (Refugee Law Project, 2019). Our study builds on this literature by targeting a specific urban locale and combining survey metrics with first-person accounts. Such a mixed-methods approach has been recommended in social science research to capture both breadth and depth of complex phenomena (Wishkoski et al., 2022). In summary, research is expected to find that many Kansanga immigrants run micro-scale enterprises (in line with national MSME patterns), motivated by economic necessity and autonomy, yet constrained by structural factors described in the literature.

Materials and Methods

The research employed a cross-sectional mixed-methods design.

Study Design

The researchers used a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and given equal priority. The survey (n=102) provided standardized measures of business characteristics and respondent perceptions, while semi-structured interviews (n=18) explored experiences in depth. This design allows triangulation of findings: survey trends quantify scope and patterns, whereas interviews offer context and nuance (as recommended by [5†L83-L92]).

The study employed purposive and convenience sampling to identify immigrant micro entrepreneurs operating in Kananga parish. respondents were selected from major trading areas markets. The sample of 102 survey participants was chosen based on accessibility and willingness to participate while 18 interviews were purposively selected to ensure diversity in gender, country of origin and business sector

Data Collection

Survey data were collected in-person between August to September 2025. Trained bilingual research assistants administered a structured questionnaire in English or Swahili, covering: demographics, type and size of business, years operating, monthly revenue ranges, motivations for starting the business, perceived challenges, and assessments of business success. Several items used Likert scales (e.g. agreement with motivation statements) and multi-select questions on obstacles. The survey also asked questions linked to SDT constructs (e.g. "My business makes me feel independent" to probe autonomy).

Concurrently, the researchers conducted individual interviews with 18 volunteers drawn from the survey sample (diverse by country of origin, gender, and business sector). Interviews (30–45 minutes each) were conducted in English or with translators, following a semi-structured guide. Key topics included personal migration history, reasons for entrepreneurship, experiences in the Ugandan market, relationships with customers and officials, and future aspirations. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and translated/transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis.

Quantitative data were entered into SPSS 27. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means) summarized sample characteristics and business indicators. The research also examined bivariate relationships (chi-square tests, t-tests) to explore, for example, whether length of stay predicted business profitability (though inferential tests are limited by sample size). Figures were created to illustrate major trends (e.g. distribution of business types).

Qualitative interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding. Two authors independently coded transcripts in NVivo 12, using both deductive codes derived from theory (e.g. autonomy, competence, opportunity, barrier) and inductive codes emerging from the data. Through an iterative process, the team developed a codebook and identified core themes (e.g. Necessity vs. Opportunity Motivation, Institutional Challenges, Social Integration). Discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved to consensus. Illustrative quotes were selected to exemplify each theme.

Throughout analysis, researchers maintained the theoretical lens of opportunity structures and basic psychological needs to interpret findings. For instance, references to market barriers were linked to opportunity structure theory, while mentions of personal drive or satisfaction were considered in light of SDT.

Results

Quantitative Findings

Respondent and business profiles. The sample included immigrants who had lived in Uganda on average 5.8 years (SD=3.2). Education levels varied: 28% had university or tertiary training, 46% completed secondary school, 18% had primary education, and 8% no formal schooling. Most respondents (72%) held legal status (refugee, asylum, or work permit).

Regarding business types, retail trade was most common: 52% of entrepreneurs sold goods (clothing, electronics, groceries) from stalls or small shops. The next largest category was personal services (e.g. hair salons, tailors) at 27%, followed by hospitality/food (11%) and transportation (auto-rickshaws, boda-boda taxis; 7%). Only 3% of businesses were in construction or professional services. This sector distribution mirrors national MSME patterns, where wholesale/retail trade dominates.

Businesses were overwhelmingly small-scale: 81% employed no other workers (owner-operated), 17% employed 1–2 local assistants, and 2% had 3–4 employees. All enterprises met the Ugandan microenterprise criteria (≤4 employees). Reported monthly revenues were modest: 65% earned under 500,000 UGX (~$135) per month, 30% earned 500,000–2,000,000 UGX, and only 5% reported higher income. Average startup capital was low (median ≈200,000 UGX). Consistent with prior observations, immigrant businesses tended to stay informal, with only 12% of respondents having formal business registration.

A majority of respondents (63%) indicated that their businesses were their primary or sole source of income. Fig. 1 (below) shows the distribution of business purposes and perceived necessity: 58% said they entered business due to lack of other job opportunities (necessity entrepreneurship), whereas 42% cited recognizing a market opportunity or a personal skill as motivation.

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Length of stay (years)	102	0.5	15	5.8	3.2
Monthly revenue (UGX)	102	50,000	3,000,000	450,000	380,000
Startup capital (UGX)	102	50,000	2,000,000	230,000	210,000

Table 1: Education Level Frequency Distribution

Education Level	Frequency
University/Tertiary	29
Secondary	47
Primary	18
No schooling	8

Table 2: Business Type Frequency Distribution

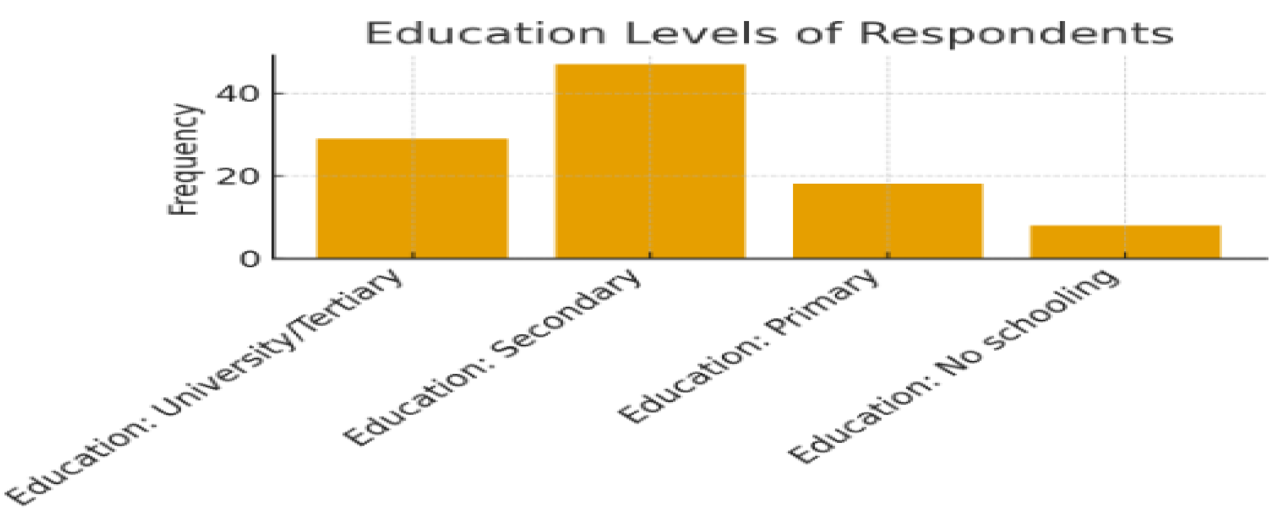
Business Type	Frequency
Retail trade	53
Personal services	28
Hospitality/Food	11
Transport	7
Construction/Professional	3

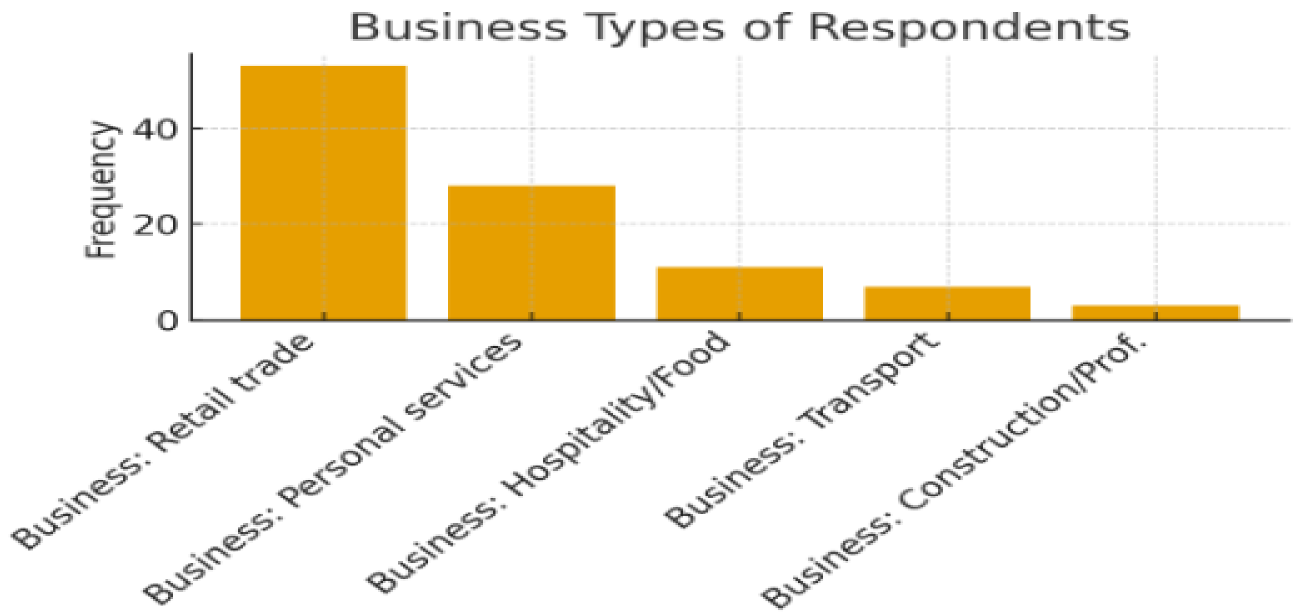
Table 3: Revenue Frequency Distribution

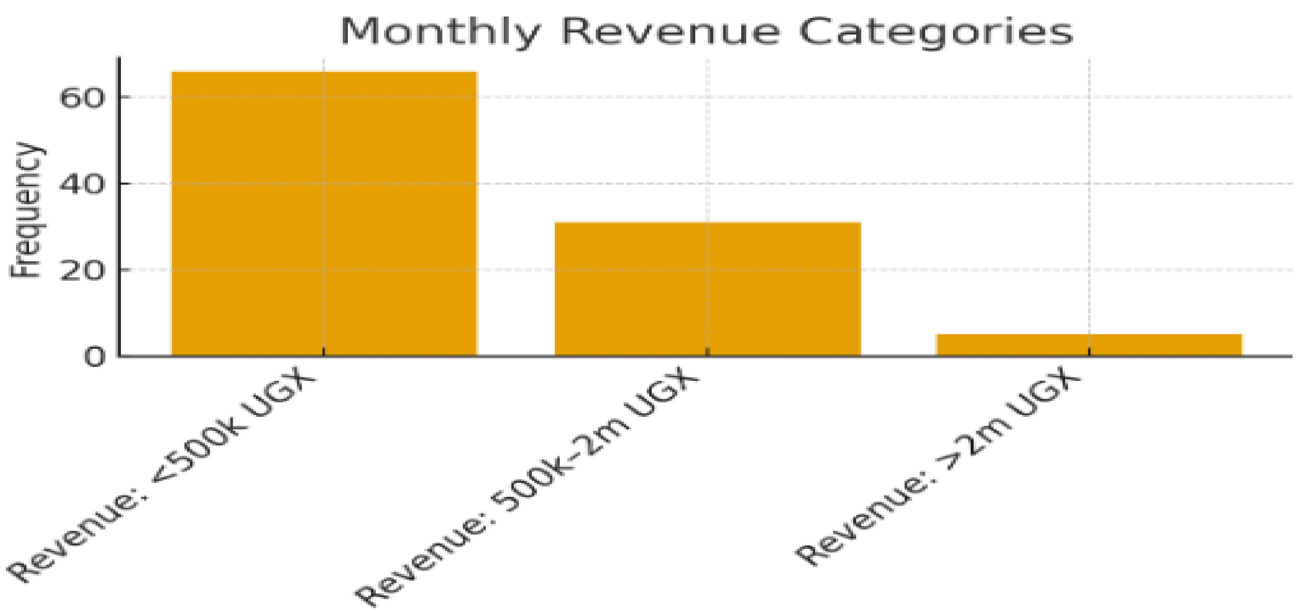
Revenue Range (UGX)	Frequency
<500k	66
500k–2m	31
>2m	5

Table 4: Motivation Frequency Distribution

Motivation Type	Frequency
Necessity	59
Opportunity	43







Challenges and supports. Survey participants were asked to select the main obstacles to successful entrepreneurship. The top-cited challenges were: lack of market opportunities (56%), competition with locals (39%), discrimination/bias (35%), and lack of proper documents (29%). These align closely with the Kampala migrant survey findings (56% lack opportunities; 39% competition; 35% discrimination). Fewer respondents noted issues like high costs of licenses (18%) or lack of information (22%). Notably, only 14% reported lack of motivation or skills as a barrier.

Regarding support networks, 62% of respondents relied on co-ethnic contacts (friends/family from the same country) for initial capital or advice. Approximately 27% reported help from non-governmental or church groups. These findings suggest entrepreneurs depend heavily on personal social capital rather than formal institutions.

Qualitative Themes

Analysis of interview transcripts revealed several key themes:

Motivation: Autonomy and Resilience. Many immigrants described entrepreneurial work as a route to self-sufficiency. A Congolese shopkeeper explained, "I started this kiosk because no job was offered to me; if I don't work for myself, I feed no one." This reflects autonomy needs (SDT) and a resilience borne of necessity. Several respondents explicitly contrasted business ownership with previous unemployment, feeling "free" and "proud" of running a shop. Even among those citing "opportunity" motives, a common thread was the desire for control over one's future. Thus, consistent with SDT, autonomy and competence were salient: entrepreneurs valued developing business skills and making independent decisions. One Somali tailor noted, "When I see customers satisfied, I feel capable and independent. This business builds my confidence."

Structural Barriers and Opportunity Gaps. Interviewees elaborated on the survey's list of barriers. The most frequent complaint was the difficult business environment. Although officially allowed to work, many faced an opaque regulatory process. A Ugandan-Eritrean food vendor lamented, "They say refugees can start businesses, but when I tried to register, the process was confusing and costly." This confirms the literature: Uganda's progressive policies exist on paper, but practical hurdles remain. The absence of clear guidance on permits and licensing was widely cited.

Market saturation and competition also emerged as a theme. Several entrepreneurs noted that many immigrants cluster in similar trades (e.g. khat selling, small electronics), driving down profits. A Congolese fruit seller said locals became resentful of competition: "When a foreigner puts up a market stall, Ugandan traders feel cheated by the rules." Discrimination subtler than outright refusal was also mentioned: "Sometimes customers hesitate to buy from someone they think is not a local." These experiences illustrate how perceived unequal enforcement of regulations can create an uneven opportunity structure, even when formal rules are liberal.

Coping Strategies and Networks. Immigrants reported relying on community networks to mitigate barriers. Common strategies included informal group loans, shared transport of goods from markets, and advice from fellow countrymen who had navigated Kampala's markets before. One theme was the importance of trust-based partnerships: e.g. a Pakistani restaurant owner described forming a rotating savings group with two other expatriate businessmen to manage cash flow. These social bonds eased some challenges of formal finance. Such network use is a well-documented feature of immigrant entrepreneurship (Aldrich & Waldinger, 1990).

Perceptions of Belonging and Identity. Interestingly, many expressed a sense of belonging through their businesses. Although facing moments of exclusion, entrepreneurs felt that serving customers and contributing to the local economy gave them an identity beyond that of "outsider." One commented, "My customers treat me as one of them once I prove my products are good." This suggests that the relatedness need (SDT) is partially met through daily business interactions, helping immigrants integrate into Kampala's social fabric.

In summary, according to self-determination theory, individuals are motivated by needs for autonomy and competence , this was evident in our findings where most immigrants emphasized independence and self sufficiency as their reasons for starting businesses.

The research shows that entrepreneurs in kansanga depend primarily on co-ethnic networks and informed groups rather than institutional assistance like NGOS, as stated in the refugee law project 2029, in addition, this research shows that individual motivation and resilience play equally vital roles for development and success compared to Klosterman and rath 2010 that shows structural opportunity is he main determinant of the entrepreneurial success.

Discussion

Our mixed-methods findings shed light on how immigrants contribute to micro-business development in Kampala's Kansanga Division. Quantitatively, the high incidence of micro-enterprises among our respondents (81% owner-operated, 90% qualifying as micro-businesses) is consistent with national trends. The dominance of retail trade and personal services also mirrors

Uganda's MSME economy. These data confirm that immigrants fill common market niches (e.g. small retail kiosks, food stalls) and thus integrate into existing business ecosystems.

Theoretically, Opportunity Structure Theory helps explain our results. Uganda's institutional framework provides an enabling potential for immigrant entrepreneurship, as reflected in our finding that many respondents recognized the right to start businesses. However, the mere existence of supportive policies did not eliminate obstacles. As Kloosterman et al. (2010) note, enabling policies must translate into actual market opportunities. In practice, our participants reported the paucity of clear opportunities and felt squeezed by competition and subtle discrimination. These perceptions align with prior evidence that regulatory gaps and social friction can limit immigrant economic participation. Thus, our results refine the opportunity structure argument by highlighting that favorable policies at the macro level may be undermined by local implementation issues in urban settings.

From the SDT perspective, the predominance of autonomy-related motivation emerged strongly. Many entrepreneurs explicitly valued the independence and self-reliance that business ownership afforded them. This finding dovetails with SDT's proposition that satisfying the autonomy and competence needs drives engagement and wellbeing. Several interviewees expressed pride in their skill development and resourcefulness. Moreover, the theme of belonging and customer relationships suggests a degree of need fulfillment on relatedness, even if social acceptance was imperfect. In short, immigrant entrepreneurs in Kansanga appear motivated by intrinsic drivers (making their own way) and not solely by extrinsic survival imperatives, although economic necessity was often the catalyst.

Our study has several practical implications. First, recognizing the importance of opportunity structures, policymakers should reduce the practical obstacles that immigrants identify. Simplifying business registration and educating both migrants and officials about rights could help. For example, a Policy Guide on Entrepreneurship for Migrants and Refugees recommends targeted outreach so that refugees understand licensing processes. In Kansanga, local authorities could collaborate with NGOs to hold information sessions. Second, given finance emerged as a barrier, microcredit and savings groups should be made more accessible to newcomers. Programs like Numida's digital lending show promise. Third, efforts to foster positive intercultural relations – such as joint enterprise workshops for local and immigrant traders – could alleviate the sense of competition and discrimination cited by participants.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is its small, non-random sample focused on one Kampala division. While Kansanga is illustrative of a mixed urban community, our findings may not generalize to other districts or to rural refugee settlements.

The cross-sectional design captures a snapshot in time; longitudinal research could examine how immigrant businesses evolve. Additionally, self-reported data may be biased by social desirability (e.g. underreporting illegal activities).

The qualitative themes, while illuminating, are based on a limited number of interviews; further ethnographic work could deepen understanding. Finally, our theoretical framing – OST and SDT – influenced our code structure, which might have guided interpretation. Future studies might test these perspectives quantitatively or explore alternative frameworks (e.g. mixed embeddedness theory).

Conclusion

This exploratory study of immigrant entrepreneurs in Kansanga Division demonstrates that migrants play a significant role in Uganda's microenterprise sector. The research found out that the majority of surveyed immigrants sustain micro-businesses that generate livelihoods, driven by a mix of necessity and personal ambition. Their experiences exemplify how a relatively open legal environment (Uganda's opportunity structure) creates possibilities, yet also underscore persistent gaps: entrepreneurs routinely confront financial limits, informational barriers, and social friction. From a theoretical viewpoint, our findings reconcile structure and motivation: government policies and market conditions set the stage, but individual agency (embodying SDT's autonomy and competence needs) propels the entrepreneurial initiative.

For policy and practice, the results suggest that supporting immigrant-led micro-businesses could be a "win-win" for Kampala's urban economy. By addressing registration, credit access, and integration challenges, stakeholders can help convert the entrepreneurial potential of immigrants into robust economic contributions. In doing so, Uganda would be building on its reputation as a progressive host country and tapping an underutilized source of innovation and labor.

Overall, our mixed-methods evidence fills a research gap by focusing on urban immigrant entrepreneurship in Uganda. It lays the groundwork for further comparative studies across divisions and countries. As urban migration accelerates, understanding the dynamics highlighted here will be crucial for crafting inclusive growth strategies.

Recommendations

Immigrant entrepreneurs in Kansanga often face confusion and delays when attempting to register or license their businesses, despite Uganda's progressive legal framework. Local authorities should simplify these procedures by providing clear, step-by-step guidelines in multiple languages commonly spoken by migrants. Additionally, organizing regular information sessions or workshops can educate immigrant business owners about their rights, registration requirements, and compliance procedures. Simplified processes will encourage formalization, enhance access to business services, and reduce barriers that limit growth and sustainability.

Limited access to capital was identified as a major constraint for immigrant micro-businesses. Policymakers, financial institutions, and NGOs should expand microcredit and digital lending platforms tailored to the needs of immigrant entrepreneurs. Encouraging the formation of informal savings groups or cooperative funds among migrant communities can also provide a reliable source of startup and operational capital. These interventions will enable entrepreneurs to expand their businesses, invest in better infrastructure or inventory, and improve profitability, ultimately contributing to local economic development.

Many immigrant entrepreneurs in Kansanga rely on intrinsic motivation and resourcefulness but often lack formal business skills or knowledge of local market practices. Training programs focused on financial literacy, marketing, customer service, and small business management can enhance their competencies. Modules on navigating local regulations, taxation, and the process of formalizing informal enterprises will equip entrepreneurs to operate more effectively and sustainably. Such programs can be offered through community centers, NGOs, or partnership initiatives with local universities, promoting both economic success and social integration.

Competition with local traders and subtle discrimination were common challenges for immigrant entrepreneurs. Initiatives that foster interaction and collaboration between local and migrant business owners can reduce tensions and create mutually beneficial networks. Joint enterprise projects, mentorship programs, and intercultural networking events can encourage knowledge exchange, shared market access, and stronger community cohesion. By building trust and social capital, these efforts help immigrants establish a sense of belonging while also contributing positively to the broader urban economy.

Policymakers at national and municipal levels should develop and implement policies specifically designed to support immigrant-led micro-businesses. Incentives could include easier access to public markets, tax relief for newly registered businesses, or grants for innovative micro-enterprises. NGOs and international organizations can advocate for these policies while also providing technical guidance to help migrants leverage Uganda's legal and institutional frameworks. Targeted support ensures that the entrepreneurial potential of immigrants is fully utilized, promoting inclusive growth and social stability.

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