

Positioning Diasporans as Change Agents in the SME Sector

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Within an entrepreneurial ecosystem, diasporans are transnational entrepreneurs that bring new ideas, beliefs, norms and behaviors acquired in their country of residence to engage differently in business activities in their home countries. The state of an institutional environment influences the extent of entrepreneurial opportunities and threats perceived about doing business in that country of origin. It is useful to understand the extent to which being involved in entrepreneurial activities in a country of origin is perceived as an asset or liability by transnational individuals, particularly as governments seek effective ways to support SMEs, especially when existing challenges are further compounded by crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the paper seeks to understand whether transnational entrepreneurs are likely to develop new ways of reframing these issues. The paper draws insights from the perspectives of diasporans about their resources and the country of origin's business environment for business investments. It concludes that relative to entrepreneurial ecosystem attributes and diasporans resources, diasporans do not approach the opportunities and threats of entrepreneurial activities differently.

Keywords: transnational entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial ecosystem, diaspora, expressive actions, instrumental actions

INTRODUCTION

The wide discussions about how the economic activities of diasporans can positively impact the country of origin encourage policy-makers' desire to create a favorable environment in the country of origin to attract diasporans.

Diasporans are viewed as agents of change because of institutional acculturation into environments that are often relatively different from those that exist in their countries of origin (Riddle & Brinkerhoff et al., 2011). As a result of institutional acculturation, diasporans may bring with them new knowledge, beliefs, norms and behaviors from their country of residence which could be of advantage to their country of origin. They could help in introducing new ways of doing things especially in instances where the country of origin is a developing country, and the country of residence is developed.

The government of countries of origin, countries of residence, and development agencies, such as the World Bank, and non-government organizations (NGOs) see diasporans as stakeholders in development. Consequently, many countries are 'seeking creative ways of promoting diaspora homeland entrepreneurship and investment' (Riddle & Brinkerhoff, 2011, p.671). Some governments of countries of origin have started programs to attract investments by diasporans (Faist, 2008).

An area of future research highlighted in the broader international entrepreneurship literature is whether because of their deftness and resourcefulness, international entrepreneurs are likely to develop new ways

of reframing the economic and social issues due to Covid-19 (Zahra, 2021). From the related transnational entrepreneurship literature, diasporans are believed to have unique resources and are well equipped to navigate multiple institutional environments (Terjesen & Elam, 2009). Diasporans are non-local actors within entrepreneurial ecosystems (Brown & Mason, 2017; Fuller-Love & Akiode, 2020) and are believed to possess an ‘immigrant effect’ in their activities which helps them approach the opportunities and threats of entrepreneurial activities differently (Elo, 2016). Diasporans’ financial investments are transferred to the country of origin through money transfers or remittances (Fuller-Love & Akiode, 2020). However, since Covid-19, remittances have declined as many immigrants working in developed economies have lost their jobs or were furloughed, reducing their incomes (Zahra, 2021).

We do not have enough insights into the extent to which these individuals are actually well equipped for making significant changes in risky entrepreneurial landscapes made worse by Covid-19. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to answer the question: Are diasporans as transnational entrepreneurs likely to develop new ways of reframing the opportunities and threats of entrepreneurial activities, in operating and shaping the country of origin landscape? In order to answer this question, the paper draws insights from the uniqueness of the resources of a group of diasporans which could be used to engage in entrepreneurial action, in relation to the attributes of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in their country of origin.

SMES AND DIASPORA INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURS

SMEs are vulnerable to business environment challenges. Additionally, the COVID-19 outbreak has hit SMEs with a great force (Eggers, 2020). SMEs tend to be more resource-constrained compared to larger enterprises which makes them more vulnerable to external shocks. Liability of smallness describes a size-based constraint which makes SMEs liable to difficulties in obtaining and securing critical resources such as access to financial and human capital (Beamish, 2008; Terjesen et al., 2010). The COVID-19 outbreak has also made SMEs more vulnerable to threats of viability. This age-based threat is described as liability of newness and it affects the growth and the ability of SMEs to gain credibility both domestically or internationally (Lasrado et al., 2016). Another business environment challenge that the pandemic highlights is the location and experience-based constraints of SMEs. The liabilities of foreignness and outsidership affect SMEs in terms of market access (Lu & Beamish, 2006; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009).

Eggers (2020) identified three critical areas that SMEs deal with in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic: finance, strategic orientation and strategy, and the institutional environment. The effect of the institutional environment on the entrepreneurial process includes shaping the abilities, motivations and actions of entrepreneurs (Plummer & Pe’er, 2010). Entrepreneurial ecosystem provides a holistic approach to addressing these critical areas. It explores the interdependencies between individual and institutional variables. It is concerned with resource mobilization by entrepreneurs for entrepreneurial action (Fuller-Love & Akiode, 2020).

Entrepreneurial ecosystems are a “combination of social, political and cultural elements within a region that support the development and growth of innovative start-ups and encourage nascent entrepreneurs and other actors to take the risks of starting, funding, and otherwise assisting high-risk ventures” (Spigel, 2017, p.50). Within entrepreneurial ecosystems, diasporans are perceived as change agents for institutional development and reforms in their countries of origin (Drori et al., 2009; Riddle & Brinkerhoff, 2011). They are perceived as market-relevant asset in their country of residence (Harima et al., 2016) who can also contribute to the host country’s economy (Peroni et al., 2016). This role also links the financial investments and business activities of diasporans to wider issues such as export trade and economic development (Boly et al., 2014; Terjesen et al., 2010).

Institutional entrepreneurship is an entrepreneurial ecosystem nuance of policymakers (Fuller-Love & Akiode, 2020, p.47). It represents the activities of actors who have an interest in encouraging particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones (Bruton et al., 2010, p. 428). Therefore, institutional entrepreneurship literature seeks to understand ‘the relationship between diasporans cognition, entrepreneurial action and institutional effects’ (Riddle & Brinkerhoff, 2011, p.679).

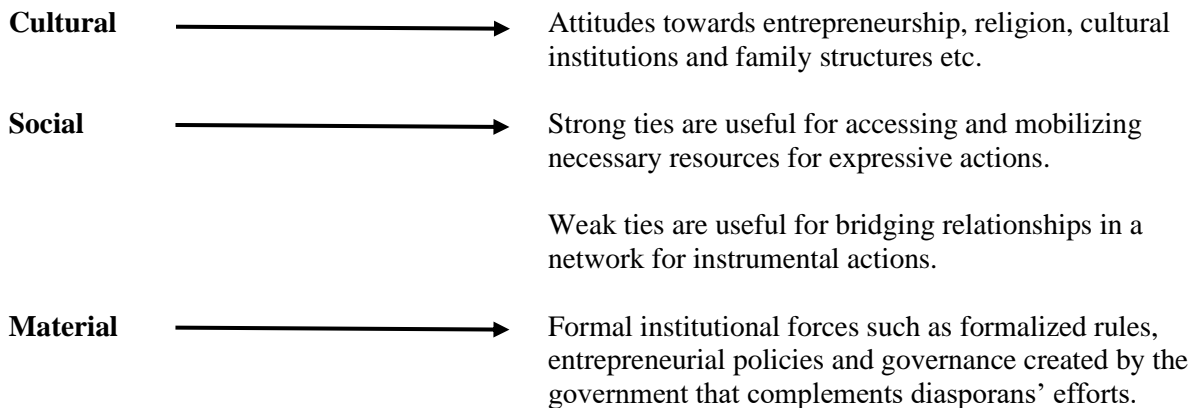
The institutional entrepreneurial activities of diasporans draw attention to institutional arrangements in the country of origin and how diasporans leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones (Riddle et al., 2010). In particular, this area seeks to understand how diasporans can effect change across geographic borders and the process by which this change might occur and/or what duration and ties in different context are necessary to effect the change (Riddle & Brinkerhoff, 2011). These factors contribute to discussions about how diasporans' activities influence policy-making in the country of origin (Harima et al., 2016).

Institutional acculturation describes how diasporans may bring with them new knowledge, beliefs, norms, and behaviors from their country of residence which could be of advantage to their country of origin. Even though not all institutional environments are conducive to socio-economic development or supportive of investment climates (Riddle & Brinkerhoff, 2011), it is believed that because of institutional acculturation diasporans can be motivated to transform institutional arrangements in the country of origin (Terjesen & Elam, 2009). The knowledge and relationships acquired by transnational entrepreneurs facilitate the development and transfer of resources and people across communities. The activities of transnational entrepreneurs can change the rules of the game, refine existing practices, introduce new ways of doing business and, ultimately, create new institutions in the countries of origin (Riddle & Brinkerhoff et al., 2011).

ATTRIBUTES OF AN ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM

The attributes of an entrepreneurial ecosystem are the cultural, social and material attributes whose interactions and coordination predominantly contribute to the success of an ecosystem (Isenberg, 2010; Spigel, 2017).

FIGURE 1
ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM ATTRIBUTES



These attributes shown in Figure 1 contribute to entrepreneurial ecosystem success because their interaction and coordination help to align both the resource allocation systems within an economy (institutional variables) and the individual-level opportunity pursuit (Fuller-Love & Akiode, 2020).

CULTURAL ATTRIBUTES

These attributes are the underlying beliefs and outlooks about entrepreneurship within a region. Cultural attributes also describe the informal institutional forces such as values and norms. Language, awareness of the culture of the country of origin and knowledge of the business environment are some of the facilitating mechanisms of the diaspora (Lampert, 2012; Boly et al., 2014). However, access to resources may vary by culture and context (Foster & Maas, 2014). Diasporans are believed to possess attitudes

towards entrepreneurship, religion, cultural institutions and family structures (Elo, 2016). This accounts for differences in motivation, attitude, or risk propensity and also distinguishes willingness to bear uncertainty (Mcmullen & Shepherd, 2006). Therefore, cultural attributes shape the mindset of actors and provide supportive culture and attitude towards entrepreneurship.

SOCIAL ATTRIBUTES

In the entrepreneurship process, social attributes are sources of social capital. Sources of social capital are the resources owned or acquired through the formal and informal social networks within a region. Social attributes provide complementary resources through networks of entrepreneurs, role model, mentors, investment capital from family and friends, and a skilled workforce (Spigel, 2017). Strong ties are useful for accessing and mobilizing necessary resources for expressive actions but may not be sufficient for instrumental actions which requires weak ties (Lin & Ensel, 1989).

Expressive actions are based on least-effort principle, maintained, or preserved in close networks, for example, when a diasporan or close friends make use of resources they currently possess. Instrumental actions require more effort. They are those activities which are searched for and obtained by bridging relationships in a network (Lin, 2001).

The presence and interaction between social elements contribute to the success of the ecosystem by creating a network of advice, mentoring and moral support (Cohen, 2006; Mars et al., 2012). In terms of diasporans and the country of origin, Safran (1991) points out that the relationship between diasporans and the country of origin is reflected not so much in instrumental as in expressive behavior.

MATERIAL ATTRIBUTES

These attributes refer to the tangible support for entrepreneurship within a region. That is, the combination of formal institutional forces such as formalized rules, e.g., entrepreneurial policies and governance (Bruton et al., 2010; Scott, 2014). Formal institutions are the structures (regulatory and governance) which are directly designed and operated by the government. Therefore, material attributes describe the institutional environment created by the government that complements diasporans' efforts. However, where formal institutional trust is weak, alternative institutional forms of trust such as personal trust are predominant. An institutional environment that is weak or unstable and the regulatory environment that is inefficiently operated, would result in the failure of the formal institutions. Ultimately, this could hinder the development of productive entrepreneurship. Material attributes also refer to well-regulated markets and formal support organizations or institutions that train entrepreneurs and generate knowledge spillovers, e.g., universities and higher education.

THE CONTEXT

The Nigerian diaspora and the entrepreneurial ecosystem provide a context to draw insights about positioning diasporans as change agents in the SME sector. The Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) and National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) carried out a collaborative survey in 2013. The national survey identified six major constraints faced by SMEs in Nigeria. The areas of constraints identified were: access to finance, weak infrastructure, inconsistency of government policies, access to market, multiple-taxation and obsolete technology.

Diasporans are linked to the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem through two main areas namely, market access (diaspora export program) and access to finance (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014; Fate Foundation, 2016). The seven key components of the Nigerian entrepreneurial ecosystem are: policy and regulation, access to finance, capacity building, access to markets, access to resources, business support and research and development ecosystem (Fate Foundation, 2016). It is hoped that the SME sector will benefit from the vast network of Nigerians around the world to support international market access (Iwuchukwu, 2014).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Institutions comprise of three pillars (Scott, 2014), namely the regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive which are believed to be important in understanding entrepreneurship in emerging economies (Bruton et al., 2010). These forces, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life (Scott, 2014, p.56). The conceptual framework presented in this paper (Table 1), drawing from the institutional theory, depicts how the institutional forces influence the type of entrepreneurial actions diasporans are willing to take.

TABLE 1
HOW INSTITUTIONAL FORCES AFFECT ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIONS

Theory Element	Regulative	Normative	Cultural-cognitive
Logic	Instrumentality	Appropriateness	Orthodoxy
Entrepreneurial actions	Instrumental and expressive actions	Instrumental and expressive actions	Expressive actions

Starting with a premise that diasporans possess or can access resources through their networks to effect change, the expectations of change from these actors can only be driven through mutual interactions of the institutional forces within an entrepreneurial ecosystem. Where the regulative forces are strong, it is expected that the stable environment will encourage taking action as a means to an end. Therefore, even though diasporans possess both weak and strong ties, the probability of instrumental actions through weak ties are higher. When the regulatory environment is weak, the normative and cultural-cognitive forces will be more prevalent. In terms of normative forces, the probability of expressive actions through strong ties are higher because such action require lesser efforts and where instrumental actions through weak ties are supported, they are guided by interactions rooted in professional, social or organization expectations (Bruton et al., 2010). Cultural-cognitive forces support expressive actions. Such actions rely solely on strong ties and are justified on the basis of generally accepted subjective rules and meanings. Drawing from this framework, the paper seeks to understand the extent to which diasporans approach entrepreneurial actions in a risky and challenging context differently.

METHODOLOGY

Insights for this paper were drawn from literature as well as from a survey of Nigeria diasporans. The combined online and offline survey was carried out over a period of 6 months. The former targeted members of diaspora groups on Facebook and professionals on LinkedIn, while the latter was a pen and paper survey carried out at a diaspora conference. In addition to the traditional pen and paper survey carried out at a diaspora event, the internet is appropriate for studying migrant networks and for understanding the concepts of diaspora and transnational entrepreneurship (Kissau & Hunger 2010). A total of 208 diasporans were selected through purposive sampling as was used in other diaspora studies (e.g. Tabor & Milfont, 2013; Ferguson et al., 2016; Elo, 2016). The method is useful in identifying diaspora population from a wider migrant population. The data was then analyzed using descriptive statistics. The breakdown of education and occupation of respondents is shown in Table 2.

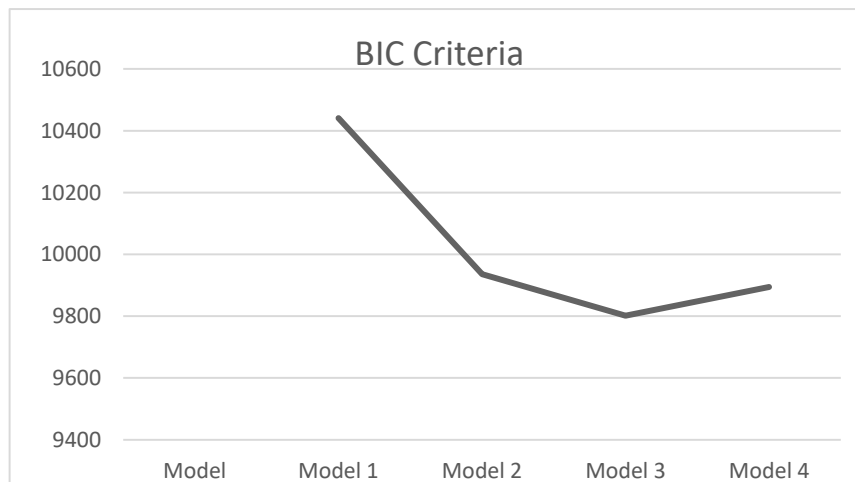
TABLE 2
EDUCATION AND OCCUPATION OF DIASPORANS

	Professionals & managers	Sales and other services	Technicians and associated occupations	Students and others	Academics & other teaching	Entrepreneurs & small business owners
Number of respondents	46	38	15	43	28	38
PhD	7%	3%	0%	16%	53%	13%
Masters	52%	44%	66%	54%	39%	32%
Bachelors	33%	42%	27%	26%	4%	40%
Diploma	4%	8%	0%	2%	0%	5%
Other Certification	4%	3%	7%	2%	4%	10%

LATENT CLASS MODELING AND CORRESPONDENCE ANALYSIS

A list of 16 items representing entrepreneurial activities are adapted from a Resource Generator (RG) Questionnaire. They are classified as financing, general business actions and export-related activities. The respondents were asked to indicate whether they or someone they knew would be able to provide the listed entrepreneurial activities for a hypothetical ‘entrepreneur from Nigeria.’ For the survey data, latent variables were measured from the observed variables that had five possible outcomes (kj) 1=diasporan, 2= family, 3=close friend, 4= friend of a friend and 5= none. The questions explored the nature of relationships through which diasporans can engage in entrepreneurial activities. Each respondent *i* (where $i=1..n$) gives a *k*th response to a *j*th variable, such that Y_{ijk} represents the observed values of manifest variable *A* (Linzer & Lewis, 2011). The command for the model parameter estimate was specified as: `poLCA cbind (dv1, dv2, dv3...) ~1`, where `dv#` = variables names in the data frame.

FIGURE 2
MODEL FITTING



For the latent class allocations, the best fitting was the model with the lowest BIC (Figure 2). The model consists of three classes shown in Table 3. Finally, correspondence analysis (CA) was carried out to create maps that show the relationships between and within the data.

TABLE 3
LATENT CLASS ALLOCATIONS

Class	Nature of relationship	Entrepreneurial action	Population share
Class 1	Strong ties – diasporans themselves or close ties	Probability higher for expressive actions	30%
Class 2	Limited or no ties	Probability higher for expressive actions	35%
Class 3	Diverse networks	Probability higher for expressive actions than instrumental actions	35%

POSITIONING DIASPORANS IN THE SME SECTOR

Diasporans are believed to possess an ‘immigrant effect’ in their activities which helps them approach the opportunities and threats of entrepreneurial activities differently (Elo, 2016). They are seen as business enablers who possess useful resources such as ethnic culture, social networks, values, attitudes towards entrepreneurship and economic behavior, religion, cultural institutions and family structures. Therefore, considering the aforementioned entrepreneurial ecosystem attributes, positioning diasporans means gaining insights from them (actors) about entrepreneurial actions, based on the nature of resources they possess, their interactions and their cognitive mindset (Brown & Mason, 2017), in relation to entrepreneurial ecosystem attributes.

Least-Effort Entrepreneurial Actions in Relation to Social Attributes

The data reveals three classes of diasporans: those who own resources themselves or through close friends (close ties or networks), those who can access resources held by others (diverse ties or networks) and those who can do neither (no ties or network). Among these classes of diasporans, the probability of accessing expressive entrepreneurial activities is higher than instrumental entrepreneurial activities for the whole population of respondents. The three entrepreneurial activities that were significant across the three classes of diasporans (even among diasporans with diverse networks) are: knowledge about financial matters, information about business opportunities and providing business advice. The underlying corresponding relationships based on the approximate distance of one point to another are shown in the Appendix.

Knowledge About Financial Matters

Appendix I shows that by occupation, diasporans that are small business owners and entrepreneurs and those who are professionals and managers show expressive actions rather than instrumental actions. The probability of providing financial information (a least-effort action) by diasporans themselves or their close networks is high.

Information About Business Opportunities

In Appendix II the probability of providing information through strong ties is also high and indicates least-effort interactions.

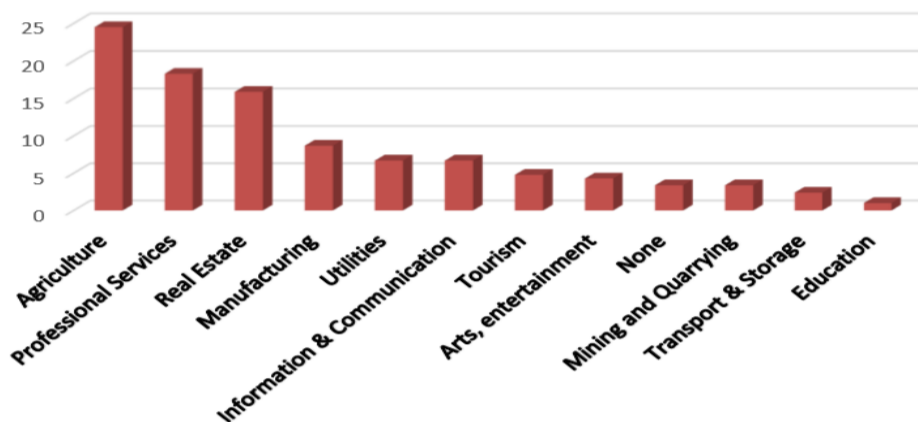
Providing Business Advice

As shown in Appendix III, the probability of small business owners and entrepreneurs and those who are professionals and managers giving business advice is high. While the probability is high for least-effort actions, the probability of selecting none (no ties or network) is high for gaining access to finance and this is an action which may require bridging network relationships (an instrumental action).

Diasporans Investment Preferences in Relation to Cultural and Material Attribute

These were diasporans' responses to business investments in the country of origin in relation to the entrepreneurial outlook and the institutional forces that shape entrepreneurship. The top three preferred sectors for investment as shown in Figure 3 are agriculture (25 percent), professional services (18 percent) and real estate (16 percent).

FIGURE 3
THE MOST PREFERRED SECTORS FOR ENTREPRENEURIAL INVESTMENT



As shown in Appendix IV, diasporans (57 percent) indicated that they prefer to start their own businesses. This response was significant to diasporans aged between 35-49 years and who are permanent residents in their host country. Appendix V shows that, the top two constraints that discourage making business investments by the diasporans are corruption and business environment uncertainties. Many diasporans strongly agree and agree that corruption and business environment uncertainties make business investments risky in the country of origin.

Ecosystem Attributes and Diasporans Resources

The findings show that diasporans do not approach the opportunities and threats of entrepreneurial activities differently in conditions of uncertainty or risk. Where institutional constraints affect business investments in the country of origin, diasporans would invest in tried and tested areas. For example, the Nigerian diasporans who are mostly entrepreneurs and professionals and managers and aged between 35-49 years, would rather invest in agriculture.

There is also no indication of diasporans ability or willingness to change the rules of the game. Rather, where material attributes are constrained, diasporans would not actively engage in entrepreneurial actions and would base their judgment on affordable loss. For example, the significant expressive actions – knowledge about financial matters, information about business opportunities and providing business advice information are sourced based on accessibility through least-effort. That is, entrepreneurs and professionals already possess such resources or they can easily access them and involve less financial cost.

Even though a class of diasporans with diverse networks exists, the number of diasporans within the class that would bridge these networks to provide resources for SMEs in the country of origin is not significant. Therefore, having diverse networks in diaspora does not necessarily mean that a diasporan is capable or willing to provide resources that support instrumental action in a country of origin. More diasporans would prefer to start their own businesses. This indicates a home-bound start-up potential. That is, a willingness to take advantage of market opportunities in the country of origin. However, there is no indication that diasporans perceive themselves as capable of changing the way things are in the SME sector.

Rather, it suggests that they would either stay away or embrace ways to protect their investments such as managing their own business themselves.

Also, with the constraints identified many would not consider relocating to start a business in the country of origin. Until when institutionalized corruption in Nigeria is dealt with, it may cause apprehension among potential diaspora investors and may discourage investments in entrepreneurship if such conditions back home do not change.

CONCLUSION

This paper gained insights from diasporans in relation to the resources they can leverage and to the attributes of an entrepreneurial ecosystem. From the findings, when there are constraints and instability due to weak regulatory forces, doing business in the country of origin is perceived as being risky. Therefore, diasporans do not approach the opportunities and threats of entrepreneurial activities in such circumstances differently. Rather, they take the least-effort, low-cost expressive actions that depend on resources diasporans themselves possess or which can be accessed through their strong ties. This was also evident by the higher probability of expressive actions even among the class of diasporans who could access resources from both weak and strong ties. Therefore, diasporans as transnational entrepreneurs are not likely to develop new ways of approaching the opportunities and threats of entrepreneurial activities in operating and shaping the country-of-origin landscape. They are more likely to proceed with caution using methods supported by the available stable forces.

In terms of entrepreneurial ecosystem attributes – there should be supportive policies to create an environment that can improve diaspora engagement in the country of origin. Then, diasporans might be encouraged to put in more effort such as those that would require searching and bridging network relationships to engage in instrumental actions. In addition, it would help to change their outlook about entrepreneurship in the country of origin. This way, the three attributes would interact well and contribute to a stable and successful entrepreneurial ecosystem.

On the basis of the findings of this paper, diasporans can be positioned as complementary agents of support for SMEs to overcome challenges and recovery from the effects of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, such supports are not from the position of agents of change that will significantly turn things around to contribute to productive entrepreneurship. That is, they are not well-positioned as alternatives to formal institutions – structures that are meant to support access to instrumental actions for SMEs such as access to finance mobilization and access to markets. They are themselves limited by the absence of the needed regulatory forces.

Therefore, policymakers should be realistic and not expect colossal changes through diasporans. Positioning of diasporans and other entrepreneurial ecosystem actors is important when devising policies that would engage ecosystem transnational actors. It would give policymakers an idea of the type of changes to expect in the SME sector from a targeted groups of actors.

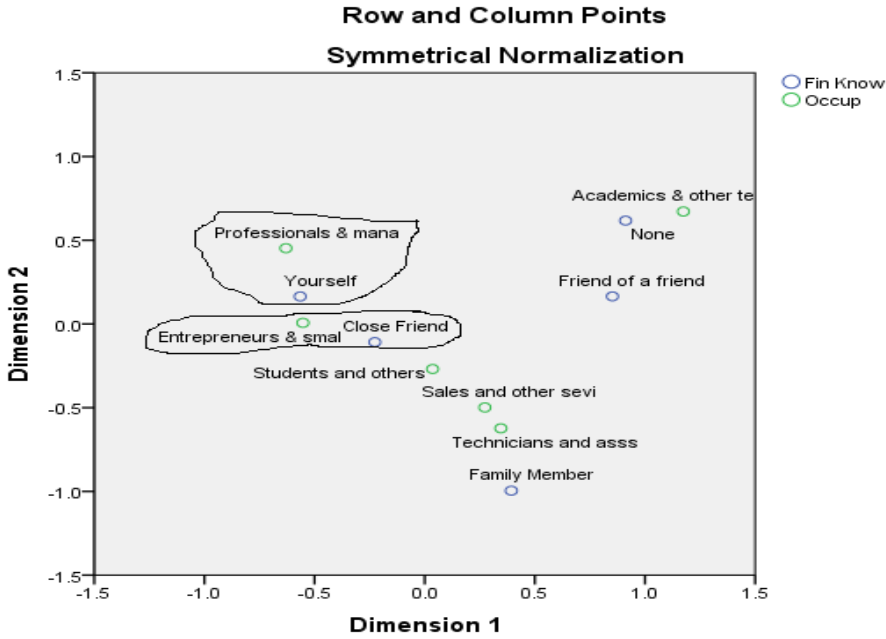
On a wider note, a key contribution of this paper is that it highlights the importance of positioning entrepreneurial ecosystem elements relative to ecosystem attributes. Particularly for developing effective ways to support SMEs especially in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic when environmental jolts increase the complexities of the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

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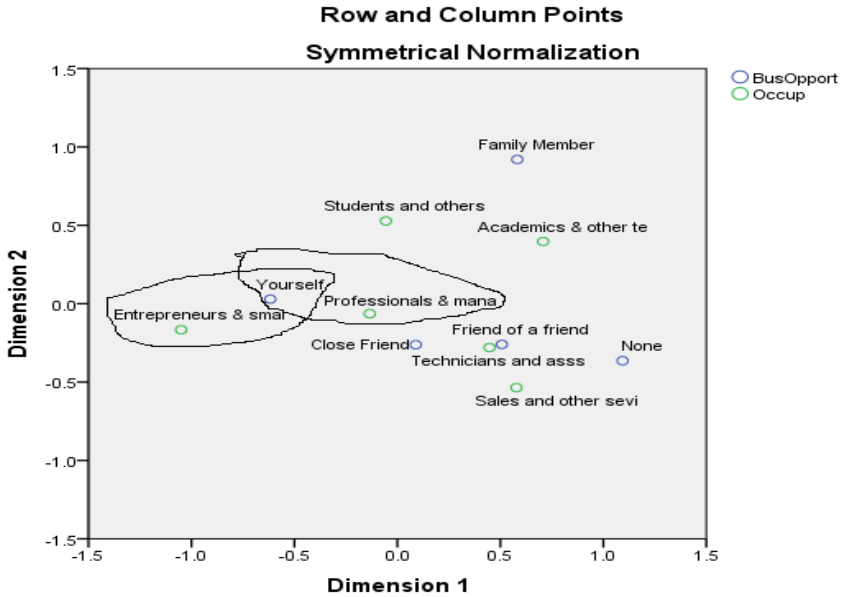
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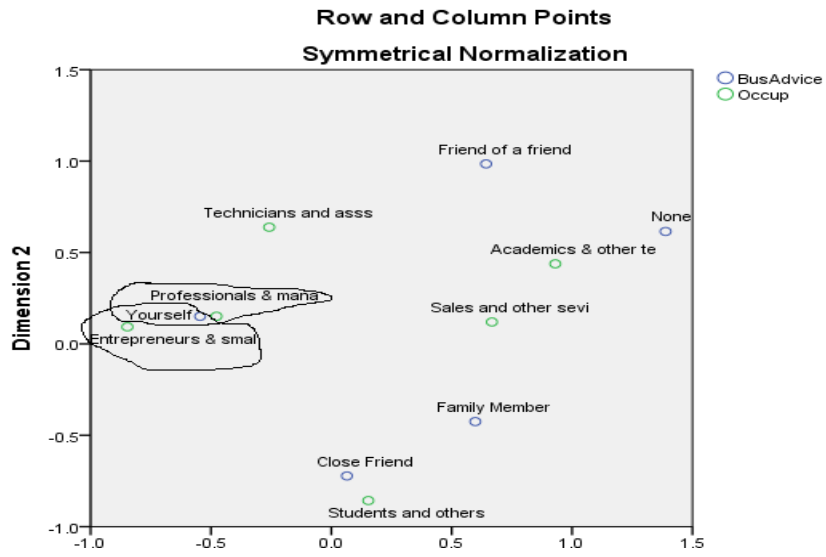
APPENDIX 1: PROVIDE FINANCIAL KNOWLEDGE



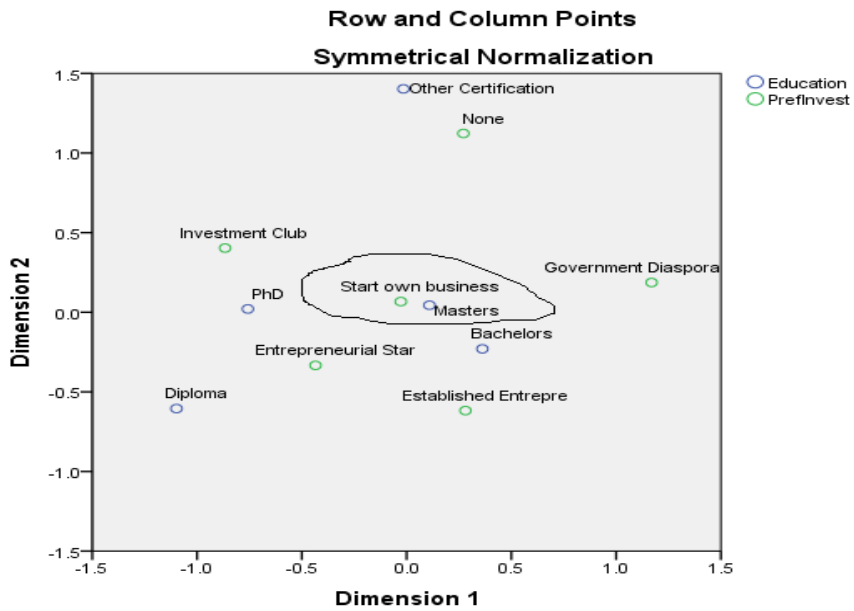
APPENDIX 2: GIVE INFORMATION ABOUT BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES



APPENDIX 3: GIVE BUSINESS ADVICE



APPENDIX 4: DIASPORANS WHO WANT TO START OWN BUSINESS



APPENDIX 5: CONSTRAINTS THAT DISCOURAGE BUSINESS INVESTMENT

