

Mental Health Challenges Amongst Immigrant Entrepreneurs: A Silent Struggle

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ABSTRACT

Immigrant entrepreneurs face several stressors with the potential to negatively impact their mental health and business performance. Due to their critical role in the economy, immigrant entrepreneurs' mental health has to be promoted. Immigrant entrepreneurs create jobs, foster innovation and economic growth by contributing to gross domestic product (GDP). Examining mental health challenges experienced by immigrant entrepreneurs provides insights regarding sources of stressors. This helps in identifying coping strategies and solutions that can be proffered to address mental health challenges among immigrant entrepreneurs. The study follows a literature review approach involving collecting relevant data from existing studies. The review also shows that mental health challenges amongst immigrants are caused by various stressors, which include pre-migration trauma, social isolation, xenophobia, acculturation challenges, lack of resources, legal barriers, and economic challenges. To cope with these challenges, immigrant entrepreneurs adopt strategies that can be classified as individual, economic, cultural, and social strategies. These insights provide the basis for the expansion of mental health services in South Africa, both at the policy and practitioner levels, to cater for immigrant entrepreneurs' mental health needs. The research provides original perspectives on mental health challenges faced by immigrant entrepreneurs, highlighting key stressors and coping strategies that they adopt. This provides insights that can be leveraged to improve the plight of immigrant entrepreneurs as key actors in the host country's economy.

Keywords: Africa, Coping strategies, Stressors, Policy, Resilience, Entrepreneurship

INTRODUCTION

For various reasons, which include poverty, unemployment, search for better economic opportunities, and political instability, there has been increasing migration in the Sub-Saharan region (Li & Samimi, 2022). Whilst some migrate to other continents, South Africa, one of the biggest and most developed countries, has attracted many immigrants. Notably, South Africa has become an attractive destination for immigrant entrepreneurs looking for better opportunities. Immigrant entrepreneurs refer to individuals who migrate to another country and run or start their business ventures (Desiderio, 2014). Immigrant entrepreneurs are unique because they leverage networks, cultural insights, and skills to create or identify economic opportunities. They often encounter challenges such as being in unfamiliar markets, having limited resources, a lack of support from the host nation, and language and cultural barriers. Immigrant entrepreneurs play an important role in the local economy, especially in developing economies such as South Africa (Fuba & Moos, 2022). Contributions of immigrant entrepreneurs to the local economy include promoting resilience and innovation in the informal sector, job creation, skills transfer, and diversification of service and product offerings. Whilst some immigrant

entrepreneurs can find better opportunities in South Africa due to its favourable economic environment, they are exposed to various psychological stressors which negatively impact their mental wellbeing (Ngota et al., 2019).

Fatoki (2019) stresses that it is important for entrepreneurs to be in the best state of their minds to effectively execute and pursue their entrepreneurial endeavours to benefit the community and country at large. Mental health is, therefore, an important factor with the potential to influence one's overall health and mental well-being. Mental health has been proven to affect different aspects of life, including physical health, social relationships, and work productivity. Mental health and mental well-being are often used interchangeably as they refer to the same thing (World Health Organisation, 2022). This study uses the term mental health instead of mental well-being. Mental health is the state of sustaining inner balance, enabling individuals to manage emotions, harness their abilities and handle life challenges in a way that enables them to function to their full potential (Fernet et al., 2016). Furthermore, the World Health Organisation (2022, p.1) defines mental health as "a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community". Immigrant mental health challenges, therefore, refer to various difficulties or conditions that affect the emotional, social, and psychological well-being of migrants running their businesses. These difficulties can cause numerous mental-related disorders such as schizophrenia, anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and other situational issues like grief, trauma, and stress. The disorders usually manifest as disruptions in coping abilities, mood, thinking, and behaviour, thus negatively impacting one's daily life, relationships, and business performance (Stephan et al., 2023).

Entrepreneurship is, by nature, a demanding, challenging and mentally taxing endeavour that involves taking risks and working long hours, and there is a high likelihood of experiencing stress (Stephan et al., 2023). Due to all this, entrepreneurs in general are at risk of experiencing mental health challenges. Extant research shows that entrepreneurs are susceptible to experiencing mental health problems such as depression and anxiety than the general members of the population (Fatoki, 2019; Popoola et al., 2024). This is because, besides common challenges entrepreneurs face, some challenges are unique to immigrant entrepreneurs. However, there is a dearth of knowledge on how mental health issues impact immigrant entrepreneurs and how they deal with mental health-related challenges.

Research on the nexus between psychological well-being and entrepreneurship is rising (Fatoki, 2019; Pienaar, 2025). This signals an increase in concern and interest among academics and members of society at large regarding mental health issues. Entrepreneurs are often perceived to have fewer challenges and stress by society, resulting in their mental health issues being neglected. However, over the past ten years, there has been increasing attention on mental health in general. Due to a lack of awareness, mental health has received more attention in the developed world compared to emerging economies, particularly in the African continent (Pienaar, 2025). This study zooms in on immigrant mental health in the South African context to gain insights into a seemingly neglected phenomenon potentially affecting immigrant entrepreneurs. Essentially, this study addresses the problem of limited studies on how immigrant entrepreneurs deal with and cope with mental health challenges resulting from being entrepreneurs in a foreign economy (South Africa).

Exploring mental health challenges amongst immigrant entrepreneurs in South Africa is important because it sheds light on mental health challenges confronting an important section of the economy. The increasing interest in immigrant entrepreneurship mental health challenges is timely, as it coincides with increasing mental health awareness in emerging economies. A prospering entrepreneurial venture benefits various stakeholders; hence, immigrant mental health is an important phenomenon that should be explored (Beckers et al., 2019). Mental health challenges are not only a problem for the entrepreneur but also for the venture's performance and other interested parties' well-being (Bort et al., 2020).

Kuske et al. (2025) note that entrepreneurship can simultaneously be a source of intense stressors and rich well-being resources. This means that immigrant entrepreneurs can experience positive well-being and extensive stress, which may result in mental illness (Williamson et al., 2021). The possible existence of high well-being and ill-being among entrepreneurs of all backgrounds is highlighted in available literature (Dube & Ncube, 2024). This suggests that whilst immigrant entrepreneurs might have positive experiences, they also experience heightened feelings of anxiety, depression, and disappointment compared to the general immigrant population. Regardless of this reality, the mental health challenges that immigrant entrepreneurs may face are usually overlooked, as society perceives them as always having positive experiences. This paper reviews extant literature to establish available knowledge on mental health challenges experienced by immigrant entrepreneurs. The review explores mental health in South Africa, the challenges faced by immigrant entrepreneurs, and coping strategies. It concludes with policy and practitioner implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review delves into discussing the relevant theory that informs how cultural innovation influences the performance of immigrant entrepreneurs. The review further discusses empirical literature on immigrant entrepreneurship.

Theoretical Background

Most mental health challenges emanate from various stressors that people encounter or experience in their lives. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Stress and Coping theory provides a valuable lens for examining how individuals deal with psychological distress. The theory outlines that individuals view environmental demands beyond their coping resources (White & Gupta, 2022). Individuals consider the extent to which a situation threatens them and how they can use what they have at their disposal to cope with the situation. The stress and coping theory applies to this research because it explains how immigrant entrepreneurs experience stressors and deal with mental health challenges to sustain their businesses.

An overview of Mental Health in South Africa

Mental health in South Africa is shaped by a multidimensional interaction between cultural, historical, and socio-economic factors that fuels gaps in mental health services provision and a rise in incidences of mental disorders (Docrat et al., 2019). With an increasing population, estimated to be more than 60 million, including an immigrant population amounting to 2,5 million, South Africa faces a considerable challenge in addressing mental health issues, specifically considering the post-apartheid transition, limited resources, poverty, and persistent inequalities (Mdlala et al., 2025). Whilst this study focuses on mental health challenges faced by immigrant entrepreneurs, it is critical to provide an overview of the prevailing mental health situation because it helps put the current study into perspective, as well as identify gaps that the current study can fill. Mental health challenges in South Africa are entrenched in socio-economic and historical contexts. The apartheid regime, which was characterised by discrimination, forced displacements, socio-economic marginalisations and racism, left a lasting impact on the South African population's mental health (Kleintjes & Schneider, 2023).

According to the South Africa Stress and Health study that was carried out in 2004, mental disorders, including mood disorders, substance abuse-linked disorders and anxiety disorders, are more prevalent in South Africa. Although this study was carried out two decades ago, it is still the most comprehensive study highlighting the prevalence of mental health at a national level. This shows a gap concerning insights into mental health challenges in South Africa (Pillay, 2019). The mental health situation in South Africa is exacerbated by socio-economic stressors such as (Statistics South Africa, 2024; World Bank, 2021). Whilst mental health research is gradually gaining attention from South African scholars, specific research focusing on immigrant entrepreneurs remains limited or scant.

From a legislative perspective, South Africa has implemented progressive laws that set the tone for addressing mental health issues. In particular, the Mental Health Care Act of 2002, which emphasises patient human rights, autonomy, and community-based care, is a significant step towards addressing mental health issues in the country (Pienaar, 2025). However, it is of concern that there seem to be challenges with the implementation of mental health policies, as can be seen in the Life Esidimeni tragedy (2016–2017), in which more than 140 mental patients died because of negligence, highlighting gaps between policy and practice (Mokgaola et al, 2022). The Life Esidimeni disaster exposes serious challenges with far-reaching impacts on the mental health situation, and these include poor oversight, underfunding and inadequate community-based services, which continue to affect mental health care service delivery negatively. Whilst this is a general view on the mental health care situation in the country, there is little or no comprehensive research that has been conducted on immigrant entrepreneurs' mental health challenges, thus presenting an opportunity to add knowledge perspectives on how immigrant entrepreneurs deal with mental health challenges under their unique circumstances in South Africa.

Besides social and economic factors, mental health challenges are worsened by cultural beliefs, which influence perceptions, and the nature of help sought (Ahad et al., 2023). Mokgaola et al (2022) state that mental health disorders in South Africa and Africa at large are often viewed through cultural beliefs in ancestral, spiritual and witchcraft, which prevent or delay access to effective biomedical care. Culturally entrenched stigma and stereotypes remain an obstacle to efforts meant to address mental health challenges at the community level, as people suffering from mental health disorders are labelled or rejected, especially in poor communities (Gyamfi et al., 2024). This can be seen in a recent study conducted in the Eastern Cape Province by Booysen et al. (2021), which established that patients cited supernatural causes and cultural rituals as reasons for mental health challenges, thus negatively impacting adherence to mental health care prescriptions and treatments. Given that most immigrants are from South Africa, it can be assumed that similar cultural beliefs impact them.

Further to this, there is a significant gap between people who can afford mental treatment and those who cannot. This gap is primarily driven by such factors as poverty, human resources constraints, financial constraints and other socio-economic factors which fuel disparities in accessing mental health care. Although the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends that mental health care services should be offered at the primary level (community-based healthcare services), in South Africa, mental health care services are concentrated at secondary and tertiary hospitals. According to Beckers et al. (2019), the WHO recommends that mental health services should be provided in a mix that includes informal, primary, and specialised care. However, the South African mental health care services are concentrated at the top, where hospital-based psychiatric care is prioritised (Docrat et al., 2019). In addition, the primary healthcare centres where most mental disorder patients first seek help are poorly resourced, with a shortage of psychotropic medication and a shortage of trained relevant healthcare workers. This is revealed in a study by Baker and Naidu (2021), who established that primary healthcare institutions lacked adequate mental health professionals, thus negatively impacting the provision of mental health care. Confirming these findings, the South African Society of Psychiatrists (2023) has warned about how mental healthcare is set to deteriorate if the number of trained psychologists in public institutions remains low. Access to these specialists is limited for immigrants who sometimes live in the country illegally (Babatunde et al., 2021).

The inadequacies of mental health services are attributed to a lack of sufficient funds to finance mental health treatment. According to Docrat et al. (2019), South Africa allocates only 5% of the health budget to mental health. Whilst the National Health Insurance scheme aims to enhance access to mental health services, the designed mental health package is still inadequate due to a lack of a clear funding framework for community-based mental health care (Shisana et al., 2024). Drawing on all the above, it can be asserted that mental health services in South Africa face numerous challenges, which include limited resources, a lack of professionals, and insufficient funding. Regardless of several progressive and deliberate policies, there is still a wide gap in mental health treatment, particularly for low-income earners and immigrants (Meyer et al., 2019). Improving mental health care in South Africa requires investments in human resources, adequate funding, and effective policy implementation.

Mental Health Challenges Faced by Immigrant Entrepreneurs in South Africa

As one of the biggest economies in Africa, South Africa has attracted many immigrants, mainly from English-speaking African countries and Asia countries such as Lebanon, Pakistan and India (Fubah & Moos, 2022). With limited formal job opportunities and lacking documentation, some immigrants employed themselves through entrepreneurship (Asoba & Mefi, 2020; Sabary & Ključnikov, 2023). Whilst immigrant entrepreneurs play a critical role in economic growth, innovation, and job creation, they face the threat of mental health challenges. Immigrants face unique mental health challenges emanating from migrant related stressors such as systematic barriers, economic challenges, cultural shocks and xenophobia. Since the dawn of democracy, South Africa has experienced an increase in immigrants from all over Africa, with those from Cameroon, DRC, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Somalia who dominantly engaged in small businesses such as restaurants, hair salons, and retail shops (Tengeh & Nkem, 2017).

In addition to the above, migration itself is considered a significant stressor, encompassing perilous journeys, pre-migration trauma and post immigration difficulties, which include social exclusion and acculturation (Anisman et al., 2024). For immigrants engaged in entrepreneurship in South Africa, these stressors are compounded by the pressures of operating a business in an often hostile and competitive environment (Asoba & Mefi, 2020). Immigrants' mental health, especially immigrant entrepreneurs, is understudied despite evidence suggesting that they experience high rates of post-traumatic stress disorders, depression, and anxiety due to challenges such as business failure, exclusion, and economic strain (Agyekum et al., 2025). The interplay between entrepreneurship, migration, and mental health presents unique challenges that require attention from all concerned stakeholders, such as researchers, policymakers, entrepreneurs, and mental health professionals.

METHODOLOGY

A narrative review approach was adopted for this study. Utilising this approach involved synthesising existing literature related to mental health and immigrant entrepreneurs. This allowed for subjective selection of relevant sources to tell a story about how immigrant entrepreneurs experience stressors and strategies they utilise to cope with mental health challenges emanating from entrepreneurs in a foreign economy (Sukhera, 2022). Literature sources considered for this study were obtained from databases such as Research Gate, Google Scholar, Wiley Online, Science Direct and Sage. Research reports, publications, theses, and dissertations were also considered. Furthermore, the study included published literature on immigrant entrepreneurs and focused on mental health issues such as burnout, depression, anxiety, stress, wellbeing, stressors and coping strategies.

Articles considered for this study were supposed to be published between 2015 and 2025, regardless of whether they were quantitative or qualitative studies. Articles that were published more than 10 years ago were excluded from this study. Opinion-based sources such as magazines, blogs, non-scholarly commentaries and articles on immigrants in general were excluded from the study. The narrative analysis technique was used to analyse the literature. The first step in the process was selecting relevant literature, then familiarising with the literature before extracting relevant literature to address the research questions (Sukhera, 2022). Lastly, the research identified themes from the extracted literature, which were then subsequently interpreted. Although secondary data addressed the research problem for this study, it should be noted that the findings for this study should be treated with caution. This is because secondary data has some limitations, which include a lack of primary insights to address the current research problem, data might be outdated and the data on key contexts that are important for a specific study (Singh, 2022).

DISCUSSION OF LITERATURE

Stressors Affecting Immigrant Entrepreneurs' Mental Health

Immigrant entrepreneurs face a unique set of stressors that affect their mental health compared to the general immigrant population. These stressors include xenophobia, economic challenges, social isolation, bureaucratic and legal barriers and pre-migration stressors.

Xenophobia

Immigrants, especially those of African origin, are exposed to xenophobic and Afro-phobic attacks in South Africa. These hostilities are noteworthy stressors because they sometimes translate to violence resulting in loss of property, destruction of businesses, loss of life and injuries (Ngota et al., 2019). Notable incidences of xenophobic-driven violence occurred in 2008 and 2015, resulting in several entrepreneurs losing their businesses and lives, whilst others were displaced (Adetiba, 2022). Survivors of these attacks are vulnerable to stress, depression and anxiety whenever threatening statements are made against immigrants. Furthermore, Chekenya (2024) notes that xenophobic attacks are primarily targeted at African migrants who are usually derogatively referred to as “makwerekwere”, thus creating a strong sense of fear and insecurity among migrant entrepreneurs. Xenophobic attacks and statements leave some immigrant entrepreneurs psychologically traumatised and stranded, thereby affecting their mental well-being. According to Malatji and Makgamatha (2024), the persistent threats of eviction and deportation against immigrant entrepreneurs result in anxiety and PTSD, thus negatively affecting their business growth and mental resilience. Instances of Xenophobia are not unique to the South African context alone but also exist in other contexts. Kefala and Lan (2022) found that young entrepreneurs from the West experienced hostilities and xenophobic treatment in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Sönmez (2025) show that immigrant entrepreneurs in the UK were exposed to racism, showing that hostile treatment in that context is based on race, compared to South Africa, where hostilities are mainly against immigrants of African origin.

Economic Challenges

Although most immigrant entrepreneurs migrate hoping to improve their economic prospects, on settling, they often face economic and financial challenges such as a lack of access to credit, capital, and financial institutions (Muchineripi et al., 2019). As a result, some immigrant entrepreneurs rely on personal savings, family borrowings and informal sources such as stokvels and loan sharks, who have unorthodox ways of enforcing repayments when a client defaults, to fund their ventures. Furthermore, Fatoki (2020) outlines that immigrants are primarily unable to secure stock and premises on terms due to a lack of credit history, thus further straining their financial resources. Similar experiences are also highlighted in a study conducted in Europe by Duan, Kotey and Sandhu (2023). Such economic challenges confronting immigrant entrepreneurs are a significant source of stress, which contributes to mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, and emotional instability. Entrepreneurs struggle to grow their businesses and meet basic needs (Pradana et al., 2023).

Cultural Challenges

Immigrant entrepreneurs often find themselves socially isolated due to several unique acculturation obstacles in their host communities (Fubah & Moos, 2022). These challenges include cultural differences, language barriers, and beliefs that impede the smooth integration of immigrants into the South African community (Urban et al., 2022). In some regions where communication is dominantly in local languages, immigrant entrepreneurs face communication barriers that affect social networking and business operations (Ngoro et al., 2018). Networking is important in building social capital, which has been proven to enhance entrepreneurial resilience.

Due to cultural differences, immigrant entrepreneurs are often excluded from the host nation's local platforms and networks. This impedes their acculturation process and limits their access to social support and opportunities, thus compounding social isolation (Barker, 2021). Such isolation from local networks and communities has been found to increase the risk of loneliness, stress, and depression, especially among women who also face other gender-based challenges. This exclusion of immigrant entrepreneurs is also highlighted by Scheu and Kuckertz (2023), who cited cultural barriers as impediments to cultural integration in developed countries.

Legal and Bureaucratic Barriers

To operate legally and credibly, businesses must meet all the expected requirements in line with the country's laws and regulations (Sodunke et al., 2025). This includes obtaining relevant registrations, permits and licenses. Due to the complex bureaucratic legal process unique to immigrants, obtaining these permits and licenses is often tricky. As a result, some of the immigrant entrepreneurs end up operating illegally, exposing their business to closure, fines or deportation, and arrests and deportation of owners (Solano, 2023). The stress and worries associated with navigating the legal barriers, together with fear of authorities, actively contribute to mental health challenges such as hypervigilance and anxiety (de Alpuim-Gonçalves et al., 2025). Illegal immigrants, who are, in most cases, undocumented, are more vulnerable to mental health issues because they have limited access to health services, which include mental health care (Akokuwebe et al., 2023).

Pre-Migration Stressors

Significant population immigrant entrepreneurs, especially those from African countries, experience traumatic events such as economic collapse, poverty, natural disasters, war and political persecution in their own countries before they migrate (Osayi & Opara, 2023). Migration-related stressors coupled with these traumatic experiences exacerbate mental disorders such as PTSD and mental health-related challenges (Cohodes et al., 2021; Walsh & Cooney, 2023). The post-migration stressors faced by immigrants can trigger mental disorders, thereby creating an intricate trail of trauma that is not treated due to a shortage of adequate mental health services (Shisana et al., 2024). As such, Hinz et al. (2023) highlighted the need for psychological interventions to help immigrant entrepreneurs adjust so that their prospects for success in the Swiss context can be enhanced.

Access to Mental Healthcare Services

As the South African population continues to increase, there has been no corresponding increase in the health care budget and human resources to provide health care services. According to Docrat et al. (2019), the mental health services in South Africa are underfunded and have 0,89 psychiatrists per 100,000 people, which is low compared to 10 psychiatrists per 100,000 people in developed countries. This shortage of mental health professionals compromises immigrant entrepreneurs' access to mental health (Willeke et al., 2021). Besides the shortage of healthcare workers, immigrants, especially those operating in the informal sector, encounter numerous barriers that include language barriers and a lack of medical aid, which in turn limit their access to mental health services and treatment (Mago, 2023). Immigrant entrepreneurs' access to mental health care is usually not designed to meet the linguistic and cultural needs of immigrant entrepreneurs, thus restricting their effectiveness and limiting their accessibility to migrants (Pandey et al., 2022). As the sentiment to put natural citizens first ahead of immigrants has become more prominent across the world, immigrants' mental health needs are often neglected, thereby increasing the chances of mental health issues among migrants (Mugo, 2022).

Stigma and Discrimination

In many African communities, people who suffer from mental health issues are seen as paying for their sins or being punished for doing something. As a result, mental health patients are stigmatised and discriminated against by society, resulting in them not getting enough support to seek medical help. Malki (2022) states that in some instances, immigrant entrepreneurs do need to seek mental health care due to fear of discrimination, stigmatisation, and lack of awareness. Due to deep-rooted cultural beliefs, misconceptions and stereotypes, some Africans seek help from spiritual healers, causing delays in accessing evidence-based mental health services (Edem-Enang, 2021). All this worsens immigrant entrepreneurs' mental health challenges. Whilst stigma and discrimination in African contexts is mainly due to nationality, Sönmez (2025) show that discrimination in the UK is largely due to racism. This indicates that whilst stigma and discrimination are experienced by entrepreneurs from various parts of the world, antecedents to discrimination differ from region to region.

Coping Strategies

Regardless of the adverse situations that immigrant entrepreneurs go through, they demonstrate significant resilience, which enables them to navigate mental health challenges (Ovharhe & Chukwuemeka, 2023). This is achieved by employing various coping strategies to sustain their ventures and to reduce the impact of mental

health challenges on the well-being of their businesses (Baldacchino & Sasseti, 2025). Understanding and examining the coping strategies of immigrant entrepreneurs is important because it helps develop context-specific interventions to support economic contributions and mental health at large. Coping strategies that immigrant entrepreneurs can employ to mitigate mental health challenges can be classified as individual, cultural, economic, and social coping strategies (Yendaw et al., 2023).

Individual Coping Strategies

Individual coping strategies can be classified into emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies (Edwards et al., 2022). Emotion-focused coping strategies are used to manage one's emotional well-being. Garcini et al. (2021) state that to mitigate emotional distress, entrepreneurs may use strategies such as self-reflection, mindfulness activities and prayer. Religious beliefs and practices are pervasive among Africans and play an important role in helping them cope with adversities (Edem-Enang, 2021). This is so because religion is a source of emotional regulation and hope in times of despair. Studies (Nanji, 2022; Bogan et al., 2022) show that Muslims and Christians usually cite their faith as a defence against mental health disorders. Additionally, immigrant entrepreneurs adopt problem-focused coping strategies. Problem-focused coping strategies refer to those strategies that are targeted at addressing a specific problem. Kieseppä et al. (2021) state that immigrant entrepreneurs diversify their operations and plan proactively to minimise the chances of financial loss. For instance, Tengeh and Nkem (2020) found that Somali entrepreneurs operating in Cape Town own numerous businesses, which allow them to spread business risk, thereby minimising the psychological effects of economic volatility. Furthermore, some of the immigrant entrepreneurs learn new skills to diversify their sources of income; however, in Western countries, stringent visa regulations and enforcements limits the extent to which they can explore other sources of income (David & Terstriep, 2025). Available literature has pointed out that some immigrant entrepreneurs learn new skills such as digital marketing and local languages to minimise acculturation distress and improve their venture's competitiveness (Tsai, 2021; Walsh & Cooney, 2023).

Social Coping Strategies

Immigrant entrepreneurs depend on diaspora and ethnic networks for practical and emotional support (Mago, 2023). They build social capital amongst fellow countrymen and develop a platform for interaction and collaboration, both physically and online. Malki (2022) outlines that immigrant entrepreneurs join informal financial groups such as rotating savings groups and stokvels, which have the potential to provide them with economic relief as well as a sense of belonging, thus minimising the challenge of social isolation. Immigrant entrepreneurs also provide peer support and mentorship to fellow immigrants, thus fostering entrepreneurial resilience through sharing information on coping strategies and knowledge in general. This can be seen in that Zimbabwean entrepreneurs operating in Gauteng have informal platforms to discuss business opportunities, challenges, and coping strategies, allowing for the development of an environment conducive to mutual support (Mbeye et al., 2021). Similarly, Arshad and Berndt (2023) established that the family networks among Chinese immigrants in the United States of America facilitate crowdfunding, which enables the entrepreneurs to reduce the occurrence of stress resulting from limited access to financial resources for venture development.

Cultural Coping Strategies

Another strategy that is employed by immigrant entrepreneurs in South Africa to deal with mental health challenges is consulting traditional healers. Nanji (2022) states that entrepreneurs do cultural rituals and consult traditional healers to address mental disorders. This is more prevalent when bio-medical mental health services are deemed culturally incongruent or inaccessible to immigrants. Some nationalities perform spiritual cleansing ceremonies as a way of addressing mental health challenges (Raghaven et al., 2023). In addition, Mago (2023) asserts that maintaining and preserving cultural identity through traditions, food, and language is an effective method of improving mental health and resilience. This is also supported by Yetkin and Tunçalp (2023), who established the importance of culture in coping with stressors faced by immigrants in foreign countries.

Economic Coping Strategies

Immigrant entrepreneurs also adopt economic strategies to minimise mental health challenges emanating from business problems. Sodunke et al. (2025) state that immigrant entrepreneurs adhere to prudent business practices such as bartering services, reducing overhead costs and diversification to mitigate challenges associated with financial strain. Besides diversifying operations, Malki (2022) states that immigrant entrepreneurs also adopt innovative and diversified business models, which include e-commerce and exporting to other markets, thereby generating other sources of income and minimising financial anxiety triggered by market volatility.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AMONG IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The mental health challenges confronting immigrant entrepreneurs in South Africa emanate from a combination of factors, which include limited access to mental health services, pre-migration trauma, economic challenges, xenophobia, discrimination, stigma, and acculturation stressors. These challenges are worsened by cultural misalignment and a lack of targeted research to inform effective interventions. Regardless of these challenges, which pose mental health risks to immigrant entrepreneurs, they have strategies for remaining resilient and coping with adverse situations. These coping strategies are individual, economic, social, and cultural. Drawing on the insights above, this study makes policy and practical recommendations for improving immigrant entrepreneurs' mental well-being.

Policy Recommendations

Insights from the literature provide opportunities for policy recommendations and practical implications in enhancing mental health services for immigrant entrepreneurs. The study recommends that there is a need to expand the current policy framework for mental health. In particular, the National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan 2023–2030 (Department of Health, 2023) should be expanded to accommodate and address the mental health needs of immigrants, taking into consideration their vulnerability to stressors such as xenophobia, legal barriers, cultural shocks, and lack of access to resources. Furthermore, there is also a need to introduce a culturally sensitive mental health package in public institutions to improve the effectiveness of mental health services for immigrants. These include providing language interpreters (Mago, 2023). The government should also develop policies to promote the inclusion of immigrant entrepreneurs in the economy.

Furthermore, policies such as the National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, can be revisited to add items that protect immigrants' businesses from xenophobic-related discrimination and violence. This can be achieved by running campaigns to highlight the positive role on entrepreneurs in the country. In addition, to minimise the impact of shortages in health institutions, the government of South Africa should increase mental health budget allocation from less than 5% to a maximum of 10% as recommended by the WHO. This will enable the expansion of mental health services in primary health care centres, especially in locations where immigrant populations are high.

The government should also intervene in the informal economy to support initiatives that improve immigrant entrepreneurs' access to financial resources. This includes strengthening and formalising stokvels and savings groups that are a reliable source of income for immigrants. The unavailability of empirical data on immigrant entrepreneurs impedes evidence and data-driven policy development. There is a need for a targeted study that builds on the South African Stress and Health (SASH) study, which was carried out in 2009 (Herman et al., 2009). This is important because it would ensure the development of context-specific solutions that apply to the South African situation.

Practical Recommendations

To circumvent the impact of limited mental health care services at primary institutions, medical practitioners should be equipped with cultural competence skills to cater for the diverse needs of immigrants. In addition, there is a need to promote community-based mental health interventions that encourage providing psychosocial support in easily accessible places such as community centres and markets. In light of the shortage of psychiatrists, there is a need to train lay counsellors whose responsibilities are providing basic mental health services, as the WHO recommended in the Mental Health Gap Action Programme (MHGAP) (Beckers et al., 2019). This is important in closing the mental health services and treatment gap at primary health care centres, especially in immigrant-dominated places. To further close the treatment gap among immigrants, practitioners should consider delivering mental health through telehealth service platforms to cater for immigrants who might be scared to seek health in formal health care centres for fear of deportation.

Practitioners should also carry out outreach programs aimed at reducing stigma and discrimination against immigrants to encourage help-seeking among immigrants affected by mental health disorders. Noting that religion and culture play an important role in helping immigrants cope with mental health issues, it is important to collaborate with them so that they can refer mental health patients for biomedical treatment, so that they can be treated in time (Nanji, 2022). For immigrants who have gone through traumatic experiences, there should be trauma-informed approaches to address mental health risks resulting from such experiences as acute poverty, war

and political instability. Business and entrepreneurship development agencies should also intervene with programs at supporting immigrant entrepreneurs to minimise challenges they face include financial support and cultural integration.

Conclusion

The paper provided insights into mental health care in South Africa. Although there have been efforts to improve mental health care through policy provisions, there is still room for improvement and expansion to accommodate the unique mental health needs of immigrant entrepreneurs. The review revealed mental health amongst immigrants is caused by various stressors, which include pre-migration trauma, social isolation, xenophobia, acculturation challenges, lack of resources, legal barriers and economic challenges (Ngota et al., 2019; Fatoki, 2019). Whilst immigrants face numerous challenges which affect their mental wellbeing, they employ diverse coping strategies to ensure resilience and sustainability for their businesses. These coping strategies are classified as individual, social, cultural and economic strategies (Stephan et al., 2023). Evidence from the review provides opportunities to expand existing mental health policy frameworks to accommodate the specific health needs of immigrant entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the review recommends action that makes mental health care more accessible to immigrant entrepreneurs at the local level, which include introducing tele-health for mental health services, collaborating with spiritual leaders, and training lay counsellors to provide basic mental health care at the local level.

Recommendation for Further Research

The current research followed a literature review approach, which used existing data to address research questions. Using secondary data to address current research questions does not effectively address them. Accordingly, empirical research would help close the existing gap through primary data that reflects immigrant entrepreneurs lived experiences in their struggle with mental health. Furthermore, the study focused on immigrant entrepreneurs in general. However, due to gender differences, female and male immigrant entrepreneurs may experience mental health challenges differently. Future research should explore women immigrant entrepreneurs' experiences with mental health challenges. Although some challenges may be context-specific, it is important to consider conducting separate studies in rural and urban settings.

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