

MIXED EMBEDDEDNESS AND INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS: A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF ETHNIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP (2015–2025)

NGUYEN THANH THUY TRANG,
ZSUZSÁNNÁ REGINA REICHER

Budapest University of Economics and Business, Budapest, Hungary
trang.thanh.thuy.nguyen.28@unibge.hu, reicher.regina@uni-bge.hu

As global economies prioritize sustainable governance, rising institutional standards have created a "cost floor" that threatens the survival of ethnic SMEs, particularly within the rigid regulatory landscape of Europe. This study conducts a systematic bibliometric analysis of 492 articles (2015–2025) from the Web of Science to map how academic literature tracks these institutional constraints. The mapping identifies a significant geographical asymmetry, where a dominance of North American studies overlooks the specific structural pressures found in European welfare states. A primary objective is to investigate an identified "theoretical leapfrog" in the field, where research transitions from sociological enclave studies directly to psychological resilience while bypassing the actual mechanics of institutional transition. Finally, by justifying keywords like "Mixed Embeddedness" and "Institutional Constraints," the study identifies a critical gap in regulatory inclusivity and provides a data-driven roadmap for future research into ethnic business survival.

DOI
[https://doi.org/
10.18690/um.epf.7.2026.48](https://doi.org/10.18690/um.epf.7.2026.48)

ISBN
978-961-299-166-1

Keywords:
sustainable governance,
bibliometric analysis,
regulatory gentrification,
standardization gap,
mixed embeddedness



University of Maribor Press

1 Introduction

As global economies increasingly prioritize sustainable governance, the interplay between rising institutional standards and the survival of ethnic Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) has emerged as a critical site of institutional tension. While international frameworks, such as standardized labor codes and safety protocols like HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) are designed to ensure public welfare (Yapp & Fairman, 2006), their implementation often acts as a double-edged sword. For small ethnic firms, these regulations impose a regulatory cost floor that can unintentionally marginalize traditional, low-margin business models (Smallbone & Welter, 2001; Kloosterman, 2010). This raises an urgent question for both policymakers and researchers about whether modern formalization efforts are fostering economic inclusion or are they just displacing the businesses they meant to regulate (Obschonka et al., 2018). These standards often involve high entry and maintenance costs, disproportionately affecting vulnerable entrepreneurs. This makes it important to assess whether current academic research reflects these changing structural conditions.

Researching this phenomenon within the European context is essential due to the continent's unique and rigid institutional landscape. Unlike the more liberal market economies, where ethnic enclaves often operate with more flexibility, European entrepreneurs have to deal with much more rigid regulations and welfare state requirements. As European cities increasingly adopt "green" and "sustainable" urban policies, they have become a testing ground for whether high-standard governance can really be inclusive. Despite this, there is a perceived geographical asymmetry in existing literature, with a dominance of studies focused on North America and the UK. This geographical gap makes a mapping of the field necessary to see how many studies actually look at these specific European constraints.

The primary objective of this study is to address these gaps by conducting a systematic bibliometric analysis of 492 peer-reviewed articles from the Web of Science spanning 2015 to 2025. The goal is to map the field's intellectual structure and find the main thematic clusters. A central aim is to investigate a 'theoretical leapfrog' in the literature, referring to an imbalance in which sociological perspectives on ethnic enclaves and more recent psychological approaches to entrepreneurial resilience have developed more rapidly than meso-level institutional

analyses. This study intends to quantify the extent of this bypass to determine if the literature has neglected the mid-level regulatory processes that determine business survival. To achieve this, the search strategy utilizes specific keywords such as "Mixed Embeddedness," "Institutional Constraints," and "Regulatory Gentrification." These terms are justified as the necessary analytical pillars for capturing the link between an entrepreneur's social capital and the aggressive formalization required by modern governments.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it extends the Mixed Embeddedness framework by highlighting the underexplored role of regulatory standardization in shaping entrepreneurial trajectories. Second, it connects this dynamic to Institutional Void Theory by conceptualizing the 'standardization gap' as a lack of intermediary support structures. Third, it identifies a 'theoretical leapfrog' in the literature, pointing to an imbalance between sociological, psychological, and institutional perspectives.

2 Methodology

2.1 Data Collection

Data were retrieved from the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection, chosen for its peer-reviewed journals and its widespread use in bibliometric research. To ensure a comprehensive overview of the institutional environment, a broad search string was utilized to capture the intersection of migrant business and regulatory constraints: ("*ethnic entrepreneur*" OR "migrant entrepreneur*" OR "immigrant entrepreneur*" OR "immigrant business" OR "minority business" OR "ethnic business") AND ("mixed embeddedness" OR "social capital" OR "institution*" OR "regulation" OR "policy" OR "gentrification" OR "compliance" OR "standard*" OR "informal economy")*. The search was limited to documents published between 2015 and 2025, filtered for English language and restricted to articles, review articles, and early access papers to ensure peer-reviewed quality. This process yielded a final dataset of 492 documents.

2.2 Bibliometric Analysis & Data Processing

Co-occurrence analysis was conducted using VOSviewer (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). To ensure theoretical clarity, a three-step cleaning protocol was applied to the initial 1,916 unique keywords. First, semantic standardization utilized a custom

thesaurus developed by the authors based on iterative review of keyword variants and domain-specific terminology. This process aimed to consolidate synonymous terms (e.g., ‘immigrant entrepreneur’ and ‘migrant entrepreneur’) while preserving conceptual distinctions where relevant. In some cases, broader umbrella terms were used (e.g., grouping ‘racism’ and ‘inequality’ under ‘discrimination’) to enhance network density. While necessary for network density, we acknowledge that this categorization risks oversimplifying the distinct institutional origins of these barriers. Second, exclusion criteria removed generic search terms such as “immigrant entrepreneurship” and “Business”; and geographical identifiers were also removed to mitigate centrality bias and emphasize universal variables. Finally, a minimum occurrence threshold of 5 was applied to balance network interpretability and inclusiveness, a commonly used approach in bibliometric studies. Following these exclusions, 35 keywords were retained for the final network analysis. The resulting map revealed four distinct theoretical clusters (Institutional, Socio-Spatial, Agency, and Resources), derived through association strength normalization.

3 Findings

3.1 Publication Trends

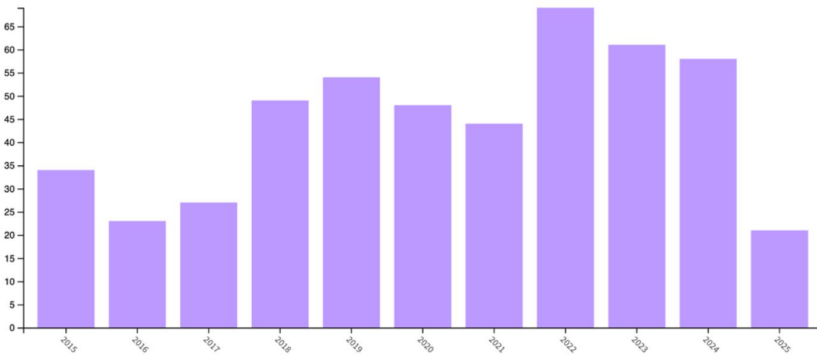


Figure 1: Number of articles by year (2015–2025)

Source: own.

The analysis of publication volume over the last decade reveals a non-linear growth trajectory, reflecting the field’s responsiveness to global structural shocks. The data indicates three distinct phases of academic interest. Firstly, between 2015 and 2019,

the field experienced moderate, organic growth, rising from 34 publications in 2015 to 54 in 2019. This period corresponds to the consolidation of "Mixed Embeddedness" as a dominant theoretical framework, where research focused on the stable integration of immigrant businesses into host economies. A notable contraction occurred in 2021, where output dropped to 44 publications. This decline likely reflects the immediate operational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which temporarily stalled fieldwork and empirical data collection. Following the dip, the field experienced its most significant surge, peaking at 68 publications in 2022 and maintaining high levels through 2023 (61) and 2024 (58). This sharp increase correlates with the emergence of "Resilience" and "Covid-19" as key terms in the yellow cluster (see Figure 3). It suggests a theoretical pivot that scholars moved rapidly to study how ethnic entrepreneurs survived institutional voids during the crisis. This trend indicates that the research focus often jumps straight from culturalist explanations to crisis-oriented coping, largely leapfrogging the steady-state mechanics of institutional standardization. The recorded volume for 2025 (21) is notably lower. However, this figure is a procedural artifact rather than a thematic shift. Because the data collection occurred in early 2026, the 2025 results remain incomplete due to the standard indexing latency of the Web of Science Core Collection.

3.2 Geographic Asymmetry



Figure 2: Number of articles by year (2015–2025).

Source: own.

The analysis of scientific articles by country (Figure 2) reveals a pronounced geographical asymmetry in the literature. The field is overwhelmingly dominated by stable, developed Western economies, with the USA and England collectively accounting for a significant portion of the total output. This is followed by other major countries such as Australia (35) and Canada (37). This focus implies that "Mixed Embeddedness" and other fundamental ideas of ethnic entrepreneurship are highly adapted to the institutional circumstances of developed, liberal market countries. Western Europe also maintains a strong presence, led by Germany (39), Sweden (32), and the Netherlands (27). These nations represent "coordinated market economies" with robust, stable welfare states. The high output from the Netherlands is particularly notable given its size, reflecting the Dutch origins of the Mixed Embeddedness approach (Kloosterman et al.). In stark contrast, representation from Post-Socialist Transition Economies is marginal. Poland (23 documents) is the only Central European nation to appear as a significant node. This gap is particularly critical when considering the Adriatic and Balkan regions (including Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia), which are notably absent from the bibliometric clusters. While China (40) represents a major non-Western contributor, its unique state-capitalist context differs significantly from the unstable, democratizing institutional settings of Central and Eastern Europe. This geographical skew provides a structural explanation for the "Standardization Gap." Since the vast majority of research originates from countries with mature regulatory frameworks (USA, UK, Germany), existing theories presuppose a baseline of institutional stability. Consequently, the specific challenges of standardizing businesses in volatile, post-socialist environments, where institutions are often "voids" rather than "frameworks"—remain undertheorized because the primary data sources (Western nations) do not exhibit these conditions.

3.3 Intellectual Structure: Cluster Analysis and Network Topology

The Institutional Cluster (Red) functions as the research field's structural backbone, connecting the institutional environment and specific sectors to outcome variables like performance and innovation. A critical pattern within this topology is the peripheral positioning of "informality," which links directly to institutional and transition nodes but lacks any mediating ties to "compliance" or "formalization" This visual gap highlights the 'standardization gap' and is consistent with institutional void theory, suggesting that the absence of intermediary structures

interact with social barriers and blocked mobility (Light, 1972) to force entrepreneurs deeper into segregated communities for survival (Vertovec, 2007).

The Psychological Cluster (Blue) reveals a significant blind spot where scholars study the intent to start a business in isolation from the bureaucratic hurdles that govern it (Abebe, 2023; Smallbone & Welter, 2001). Additionally, the placement of refugee entrepreneurship alongside barriers suggests this group is frequently viewed through a lens of crisis adaptation rather than as competitive business owners focused on performance (Obschonka et al., 2018). This aligns with recent observations that refugee entrepreneurial intent is often studied as a response to adverse structural constraints and the 'pains' of forced migration (Abebe, 2023).

The final cluster connects strategy with social and human capital within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, representing the resources mobilized during crises. The proximity of the 'strategy' node to 'social capital' and 'crisis' rather than stable market variables indicates that migrant business strategy is largely reactive. In unstable environments, entrepreneurs often bypass formal institutions in favor of network theory, utilizing family and community ties to maintain continuity (Kloosterman, 2010; Abebe, 2023). Consequently, for these firms, 'strategy' is defined by the mobilization of social networks to weather regulatory storms rather than long-term growth.

3.4 Evolutionary Trends and Research Gaps

While the cluster analysis reveals the static structure of the field, the overlay and density visualizations expose the dynamic trajectory of research, highlighting a critical pivot in theoretical focus. Figure 4 serves as a "heat map" of academic attention, revealing a field that is structurally unbalanced. The map displays intense "hotspots" of bright yellow and green around "Social Capital", "Performance", and "Mixed Embeddedness", confirming that the role of social networks and embeddedness is a mature, saturated area of inquiry. In stark contrast, the concepts of "Informality", "Transition", and "Labor Market" appear in darker, low-density peripheral zones.

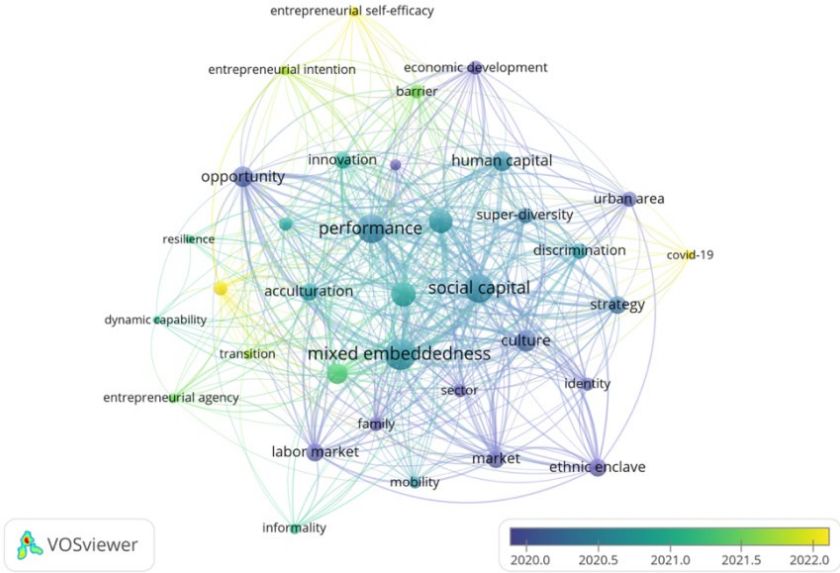


Figure 4: Overlay Visualization

Source: own.

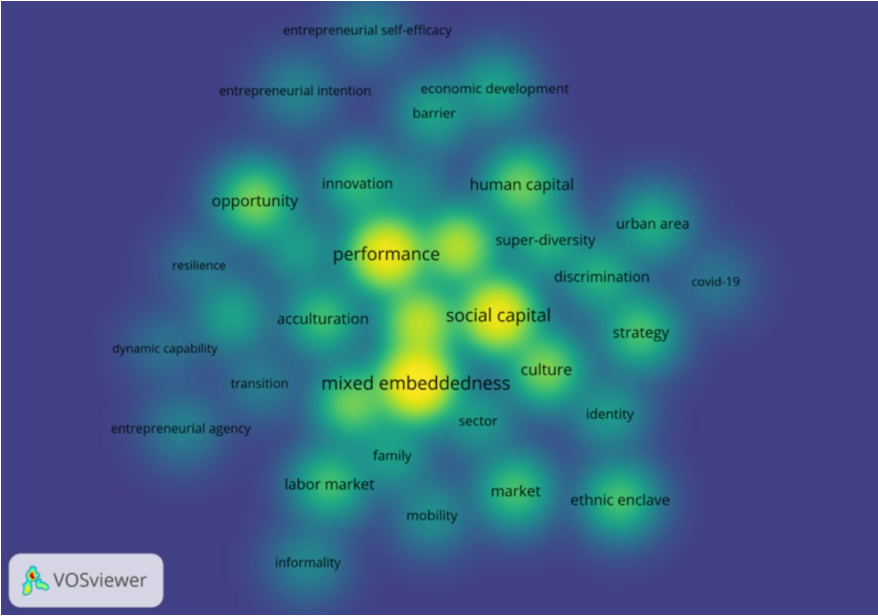


Figure 5: Density Visualization

Source: own.

This distribution reinforces the ‘standardization gap,’ indicating that the mechanisms of formalization remain underexplored—an omission that is consistent with Institutional Theory, which emphasizes the role of institutional structures in shaping market participation. Despite the importance of regulatory frameworks in transition economies, the bibliometric data suggest a limited concentration of research on how firms transition from informal to formal states. Consequently, existing scholarship remains heavily focused on social network perspectives, while the mechanics of regulatory standardization are comparatively underdeveloped.

The overlay visualization further clarifies this gap by color-coding keywords based on their average publication year, revealing a clear chronological shift in the research agenda. Traditional terms such as “Ethnic Enclave”, “Acculturation”, “Labor Market”, and “Identity” appear in dark blue, indicating that the field’s foundation was built on sociological and culturalist explanations. These studies focused on who the entrepreneurs are and where they are segregated. However, the most recent research, marked by bright yellow nodes, is defined by a distinct pivot toward internal capabilities and crisis response. Terms like “Covid-19,” “Resilience,” and “Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy” now dominate the current discourse. The middle step is missing. This pattern reflects a ‘theoretical leapfrog,’ where sociological perspectives on ethnic enclaves and more recent psychological approaches to entrepreneurial resilience have developed more rapidly than meso-level institutional analyses. This gap suggests that the role of regulatory structures, which is central to Institutional Theory, remains under-integrated in the study of ethnic entrepreneurship. The nodes for ‘Institutional Environment’ and ‘Strategy’ remain in the middle (green), suggesting they are not the cutting-edge topics driving the current conversation. This confirms that the field is reacting to global shocks by prioritizing individual survival traits over structural reforms required for long-term growth. The research focus has effectively ‘jumped’ from sociological explanations of ‘Culture’ to psychological ‘Crisis Coping,’ bypassing the essential middle step of Standardization (see Figure 4). This theoretical ‘leapfrogging’ aligns with critiques of the ‘Resilience Paradigm,’ which often places the burden of survival on the entrepreneur while ignoring the exclusionary nature of governance frameworks (Abebe, 2023; Smallbone & Welter, 2001).

4 Discussion

Bibliometric mapping reveals a significant geographical asymmetry, with the USA and UK dominating research output. This creates a deep-seated theoretical bias, as our foundational models are calibrated to stable, liberal markets rather than the volatile reality of post-socialist transitions. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a central European school of entrepreneurship research to explicitly address the regulatory instability unique to transition economies.

Our analysis provides empirical weight for the "Standardization Gap". Findings align with the concept of 'institutional voids' (Khanna & Palepu, 2010), where the state's shift toward market regulation lacks the necessary intermediaries or support structures for small players to transition successfully (Smallbone & Welter, 2001; Mair & Marti, 2009). In this context, the 'standardization gap' reflects not merely regulatory pressure, but the absence of support mechanisms enabling compliance. Network topology confirms that current literature treats informality as a permanent trap rather than a transitional phase toward formalization. As barriers rise without corresponding aid, entrepreneurs are forced into low-return informal activities, navigating a state of "transitional informality" rather than leveraging institutions for growth.

The positioning of the "Labor Market" node alongside "Discrimination" and "Identity" provides the theoretical basis for "Regulatory Gentrification". This suggests that the mainstream labor market often functions as a site of social exclusion rather than opportunity, resonating with Vertovec's (2007) concept of "super-diversity". When regulations tighten to standardize the economy, they raise the threshold for formal participation, inadvertently pushing vulnerable entrepreneurs deeper into the enclave. This suggests that gentrification involves rising regulatory standards that systematically displace informal business formats.

This shift reflects the previously identified 'theoretical leapfrog,' where sociological and psychological perspectives have advanced more rapidly than institutional-level analyses. Consequently, the role of regulatory structures remains insufficiently integrated into the literature, limiting our understanding of how formalization processes shape entrepreneurial trajectories. A strong focus on individual 'resilience' scholarship inadvertently sanitizes structural unfairness. This "Resilience Paradigm"

places the survival burden entirely on the entrepreneur, ignoring the exclusionary nature of high-cost compliance frameworks in transition economies where formal support is scarce.

Finally, sustainable governance currently prioritizes the 'E' (Environmental) and 'G' (Governance) at the expense of the "S" (Social). Our analysis suggests that the standardization gap effectively acts as a barrier to social sustainability by displacing ethnic micro-enterprises that provide vital community cohesion and informal safety nets. To achieve true social sustainability, governance must shift from a punitive auditor to a partner in Institutional Inclusivity. We argue that success should not be measured by compliance rates, but by the state's ability to formalize SMEs without triggering their extinction. In this light, providing administrative and financial support for micro-SME compliance becomes a key metric for socially sustainable management.

5 Conclusion

This study utilized a bibliometric analysis of 492 articles to identify the theoretical roots of the "Standardization Gap" and its role in driving "Regulatory Gentrification". The observed shift toward resilience-focused research reflects a broader tendency within Institutional Theory to underemphasize structural constraints in favor of agent-level explanations. This risks placing the burden of adaptation on entrepreneurs while overlooking the exclusionary effects of regulatory systems.

For policymakers and practitioners, these results highlight a critical paradox in sustainable governance: regulations designed for public safety inadvertently act as mechanisms of social exclusion by imposing industrial capital requirements that only those with significant private or community wealth can meet. To resolve this, this study argues that sustainable governance cannot be achieved through standardization alone; it requires the establishment of Institutional Inclusivity. In an inclusive governance framework, the state functions not merely as a punitive auditor but as a developmental partner that provides micro-SMEs with the financial and administrative support necessary to meet modern standards. By shifting the focus from individual resilience to structural institutional support, the management field can ensure that the formalization of the market does not lead to the extinction of

authentic ethnic micro-enterprises, thereby preserving the social and economic diversity of the urban landscape.

References

- Abebe, S. A. (2023). *Refugee entrepreneurship: Towards a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon*. Lund University.
- Khanna, T., & Palepu, K. G. (2010). *Winning in emerging markets: A road map for strategy and execution*. Harvard Business Press.
- Kloosterman, R. C. (2010). Matching opportunities: The tripartite structure of ethnic entrepreneurship. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36(1), 25–45.
- Light, I. (1972). *Ethnic enterprise in America: Business and welfare among Chinese, Japanese, and Blacks*. University of California Press
- Mair, J., & Marti, I. (2009). Entrepreneurship in and around institutional voids: A case study from Bangladesh. *Journal of business venturing*, 24(5), 419-435.
- Obschonka, M., & Hahn, E. (2018). Personal agency in newly arrived refugees: The role of personality, entrepreneurial cognitions and intentions, and career adaptability. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 105, 173-184.
- Smallbone, D., & Welter, F. (2001). The role of government in SME development in transition economies. *International Small Business Journal*, 19(4), 63–77
- Vertovec, S. (2007). Super-diversity and its implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(6), 1024–1054.
- Welter, F., & Smallbone, D. (2011). Institutional perspectives on entrepreneurial behavior in challenging environments. *Journal of small business management*, 49(1), 107-125.
- Yapp, C., & Fairman, R. (2006). Factors affecting food safety compliance within small and medium-sized enterprises: implications for regulatory and enforcement strategies. *Food control*, 17(1), 42- 51.

