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Social and occupational integration in migrant tourism entrepreneurship in Italy

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Abstract

This study investigates how social and occupational integration shape migrant entrepreneurship in Italy's accommodation and restaurant sector, where tourism is a key economic driver. Using an original panel dataset covering 102 provinces (2013–2022), the analysis examines both direct and interaction effects of integration dimensions, accounting for international tourism expenditure. Results show that both social and occupational integration foster migrant entrepreneurship, although their effects are not complementary. Social integration emerges as the stronger determinant, amplified by tourism demand, while occupational integration is weaker and less consistent. Subsample analyses reveal gender and territorial heterogeneities: female entrepreneurship is more strongly linked to social integration and responsive to tourism demand, whereas occupational integration is more relevant for men. In low-density provinces, occupational integration loses significance, social integration remains key, and the negative effect of tourism expenditure is offset by its interaction with social integration.

Keywords

migrant tourism entrepreneurship, social integration, occupational integration, tourist expenditure, gender differences, territorial heterogeneity

Introduction

Migration-related entrepreneurship has long been examined as a complex outcome of the interplay between multiple conditions. Within this perspective, the mixed embeddedness framework (Kloosterman and Rath, 2001) has become a central theoretical lens, emphasising that entrepreneurial opportunities for migrants are shaped by the interaction between individual resources, structural contexts, market conditions, institutional and regulatory environments, and the social

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networks in which migrants are embedded (Barberis and Solano, 2018). More specifically, mixed embeddedness situates migrant entrepreneurship within two fundamental and interrelated levels: migrants' embeddedness in social networks (the relational dimension) and their positioning within market and institutional structures (the structural dimension).

The concept of integration complements this perspective by focusing on the multidimensional processes through which migrants become incorporated into host societies (Ager and Strang, 2008; Esser, 2001), thereby conceptualising incorporation as involving multiple, interrelated dimensions rather than a single outcome. Integration emerges as a complex and interactive process shaped by the interplay between migrants and the social, economic, institutional, and cultural contexts of host communities. In this respect, migrant entrepreneurs are not merely passive recipients of structural conditions, but actively negotiate social recognition and respond to structural and socio-cultural forms of marginalization through agency and identity work within host societies (Suseno et al., 2026). Within this theoretical framework, social integration and labour-market (occupational) integration are consistently identified as core dimensions of migrants' incorporation, as they capture fundamental aspects of migrants' insertion into social relations and their positioning within economic and institutional structures (Ager and Strang, 2008; Esser, 2001). This focus is also theoretically consistent with the mixed embeddedness framework, as social and occupational integration correspond directly to the relational and structural levels through which migrant entrepreneurship is analysed.

Social integration refers to the processes through which migrants become embedded within the social and institutional fabric of host societies. It is a multidimensional concept encompassing legal, territorial, institutional, and relational dimensions of incorporation. Social integration emerges through processes of mutual recognition between immigrants and native populations (Laurentsyeva and Venturini, 2017). For migrants, it involves developing a sense of belonging to the host society through adaptation to local norms, values, and institutional settings. At the same time, integration also depends on the extent to which immigrants are recognized and accepted as legitimate members of the host community. The common idea is that higher levels of social integration may facilitate relational embeddedness within local social networks, expanding migrants' access to bridging social capital and fostering connections beyond co-ethnic networks with local customers, suppliers, and regulatory bodies (Light and Gold, 2000; Putnam, 2000). Moreover, higher levels of social integration may be associated with greater familiarity with local socio-cultural context and language practices, as well as greater public visibility, thereby reducing information and transaction costs and increasing the credibility of migrant entrepreneurs in mainstream markets.

Occupational integration, in turn, refers to migrants' positioning within the host country's labour market through employment opportunities, skills matching, and the acquisition of sector-specific experience. From the perspective of human capital theory (Chiswick, 1978), such positioning signals the local recognition and utilisation of migrants' skills and provides opportunities to acquire managerial competences and familiarity with institutional procedures. Prior employment in local firms, especially in customer-facing industries, not only builds technical and managerial capacity but also generates income and reputational capital that can facilitate the transition to self-employment (Baycan-Levent and Nijkamp, 2009).

The centrality of social and occupational integration is further reflected in internationally recognised measurement frameworks, such as the EU–OECD indicators of migrant integration, which place social inclusion and labour-market participation at the core of integration monitoring systems and related policy areas. Empirical research examining the relationship between migrant entrepreneurship and integration further supports the central role of social and economic integration in shaping entrepreneurial engagement and outcomes, by highlighting how social ties, social

capital, and labour-market positioning influence entrepreneurial opportunities and trajectories (Massidda et al., 2024). However, despite the growing empirical attention devoted to migrant integration, its operationalisation remains far from standardised, particularly regarding social integration. A common characteristic among quantitative researchers is their reliance on microdata. Scholars have employed various indicators to approximate the social integration of immigrants, including self-identification, preferences and beliefs (such as trust, social preferences and values), social participation and inclusion (such as language, permanent stay, and perceived discrimination), demographics (such as age of marriage and fertility), and civil and political participation (such as active citizenship and voting) (Laurentsyeva and Venturini, 2017). At the macro level, conversely, empirical research has been significantly constrained by the lack of consistent and longitudinal indicators of migrant integration, thereby limiting the scope for large-scale comparative analyses (Massidda et al., 2026). Occupational integration, instead, is more consistently measured, at both the micro and macro levels, through labour-market-related indicators such as employment status, occupational attainment, labour-force participation, and job stability.

In tourism and hospitality, integration is particularly significant because entrepreneurial activities are embedded in locally regulated and place-specific market contexts. In such settings, business performance depends not only on interactions with customers but also on familiarity with locally defined service standards, operational practices, and networks of suppliers and institutions (Shaw and Williams, 2004). While relatively low entry barriers may attract many migrant entrepreneurs, research on tourism and hospitality firms shows that sustained performance is closely linked to knowledge of locally specific operational practices and to the ability to engage with locally embedded economic and institutional contexts (Getz and Carlsen, 2000). In this scenario, social integration facilitates access to locally embedded networks and key market actors, whereas occupational integration reflects prior sector-specific experience and knowledge that support business upgrading, service quality improvement, and positioning in more competitive market segments. In this sense, social and occupational integration represent typical and structurally relevant determinants of migrant entrepreneurship in tourism and hospitality, given the sector's strong dependence on locally embedded markets, institutions, and service practices. Against this backdrop, a growing, albeit still limited, body of recent empirical research in tourism and hospitality highlights the role of social and occupational integration, alongside broader processes of embeddedness, social recognition, and interaction with host communities, in shaping migrant entrepreneurial trajectories across a variety of tourism settings, as reviewed in the following section (Fourie et al., 2026; Li et al., 2025).

However, despite this increasing interest, relatively few studies have systematically examined the role of integration processes in shaping the trajectories of migrant tourism entrepreneurship. In particular, there is a lack of quantitative, territory-based evidence on how social and occupational integration affects the entrepreneurial presence of migrants in the tourism sector, which is both highly exposed to international tourism demand and central to migrants' entrepreneurial strategies. This gap is evident across the broader field of entrepreneurship studies, but it becomes particularly acute in research on migrant entrepreneurship in the tourism sector.

This paper aims to address this gap by analyzing a provincial panel dataset for Italy covering the period 2013–2022. A distinctive feature of the study is the use of two original provincial-level composite indices developed by IDOS, which allow us to operationalise social and occupational integration in a longitudinal territorial framework. Given the challenges of precisely delineating tourism-related firms, the analysis focuses on the accommodation and restaurant sector, where the tourism component of demand is particularly pronounced. We investigate not only the direct effects of social and occupational integration on migrant firms, but also their interactive effects, thereby

exploring the complementarities between different dimensions of integration. Moreover, we investigate whether integration is influenced by international tourism demand, measured as per tourist expenditure. We also control for unemployment, per capita *GDP*, credit availability, and institutional quality.

To address panel heterogeneity, the analysis combines full-sample estimations with robustness checks on subsamples differentiated by gender and by population density. In the context of migrant tourism entrepreneurship, both gender and territorial characteristics are crucial dimensions of analysis. Gender shapes access to resources, networks, and business opportunities, while territorial factors condition market potential, service availability, and integration dynamics.

This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, it provides one of the few territory-based quantitative assessments of how different dimensions of integration shape migrant entrepreneurship in tourism, a field that has been largely examined from a qualitative or case study perspective. Second, by distinguishing between social and occupational integration and testing their joint effects, the analysis advances a more nuanced understanding of how multiple dimensions of embeddedness interact in influencing entrepreneurial outcomes. Third, the paper introduces international tourism demand as a conditioning factor, thereby linking local integration processes to global market dynamics. Finally, by disaggregating results by gender and territorial characteristics, the study uncovers important sources of heterogeneity, highlighting how opportunities and constraints vary across groups of entrepreneurs and regional contexts.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we review the relevant literature and develop the research hypotheses. We then provide background on foreign entrepreneurship, tourism, and integration in Italian provinces, followed by a description of the methodology and data. Next, we present the empirical results and discuss the main findings and their implications. Finally, we conclude the paper.

Literature review and research hypotheses

Research on migrant entrepreneurship has consistently underscored the importance of social and economic integration for both the establishment and sustainability of migrant firms. Yet, a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between integration and entrepreneurship remains elusive, owing to the complexity of the phenomenon and the scarcity of quantitative evidence in this field (Massidda et al., 2024). This gap is particularly salient in tourism-related sectors, where direct client interaction, reputation, and service quality are critical determinants of entrepreneurial performance (Pırnar and Altın, 2024). Although immigrant entrepreneurship in tourism is gaining increasing attention as a research domain, the literature remains limited, fragmented, and largely dominated by qualitative case studies (Pırnar and Altın, 2024). Against this background, this paper aims to provide empirical quantitative evidence on the decisive role of social and economic integration in shaping tourism entrepreneurship, thereby addressing a key gap in the literature.

Our first research hypothesis is:

H1: Higher levels of social integration positively influence the number of migrant firms in the tourism-related sectors.

Given the scarcity of direct quantitative evidence on the relationship between migrant integration and entrepreneurship in tourism, this hypothesis draws on a broader body of literature on migrant integration, social embeddedness, social capital, and migrant entrepreneurship. In particular, studies on social capital and migrant entrepreneurship suggest the idea that higher levels of

social integration may facilitate access to bridging networks, strengthen trust-based relations with local communities, and broaden entrepreneurial opportunities beyond co-ethnic markets (Light and Gold, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Ram et al., 2017). More broadly, research on immigrant entrepreneurship shows that participation in local associations, civic engagement, and interaction with native communities improve migrants' access to non-ethnic customers, business partners, and institutional support, thereby strengthening entrepreneurial embeddedness within host societies (Light and Gold, 2000; Ram et al., 2017). Recent research further emphasizes the central role of integration within host societies in shaping migrant entrepreneurial trajectories. In this perspective, migrant entrepreneurs are not merely constrained by structural barriers but actively develop forms of agency, social legitimacy, and recognition that enable them to overcome marginalisation and strengthen their integration within host societies (Suseno et al., 2026). In tourism-related sectors, where customer interaction, reputation, and service quality are essential, social integration has been found to improve entrepreneurial performance by widening the client base and reducing informational asymmetries (Altinay and Altinay, 2008), and to enhance the subjective well-being of migrant tourism entrepreneurs (Liang et al., 2023). At the same time, it has been found that entrepreneurial activity can help refugees embed themselves within the socio-economic fabric of host societies (Mostajer Haghighi and Lynch, 2012; Pechlaner et al., 2012; Shneikat and Alrawadieh, 2019). More recently, a study of migrant tourism entrepreneurs in rural China supports the view that entrepreneurial success depends not only on access to economic resources but also on migrants' ability to become socially embedded and accepted within destination communities. Here, integration is described as a dynamic process shaped by interaction with local communities, adaptation to destination-specific norms and practices, and the acquisition of legitimacy within local socio-economic systems (Li et al., 2025). Consistent with this view, studies of tourism immigrant entrepreneurship in rural Sweden show that migrants' embeddedness in local socio-economic systems contributes to destination development and business success (Mattsson and Cassel, 2020). Evidence from informal tourism-related activities in South Africa further highlights the importance of social networks, collective support mechanisms, and community-based forms of social capital in sustaining migrant entrepreneurial activities under challenging market conditions (Fourie et al., 2026). Taken together, this emerging body of research increasingly highlights the central role of social integration in shaping migrant entrepreneurship within tourism settings. However, despite growing interest in these issues, empirical evidence remains concentrated in specific contexts and qualitative case studies. Consequently, there is still limited evidence on the relationship between migrant integration and entrepreneurial activity in tourism-related sectors.

Our second research hypothesis is:

H2: Higher occupational integration positively influences the number of migrant firms in the tourism-related sectors.

Occupational integration strengthens human capital through recognized work experience, skills acquisition, and income generation (Baycan-Levent and Nijkamp, 2009). Migrants who gain stable employment, accumulate industry-specific experience, and achieve recognition of their qualifications are better equipped to mobilize human capital and financial resources for business creation (Kanas et al., 2009; Rüdel and Steinmann, 2024). Empirical studies indicate that prior employment in the host country increases the likelihood of transition to self-employment in hospitality and related industries (Baycan-Levent and Nijkamp, 2009). Research on refugee entrepreneurship in tourism and hospitality also highlights that integration into host societies and local markets shapes

the challenges and opportunities entrepreneurs face, including socio-cultural and market-related barriers (Alrawadieh et al., 2018).

Our third research hypothesis states:

H3: There is potential interaction between the two dimensions of integration.

Although no specific studies directly investigate this assumption, the broader literature suggests that the two dimensions may reinforce one another. Higher levels of social integration can facilitate access to occupational opportunities, while occupational integration can, in turn, strengthen social networks and community embeddedness. Yet, this interaction may not always be positive. Heavy reliance on ethnic or community-based networks, for example, can enhance social embeddedness but limit access to broader labor market opportunities.

Two additional hypotheses further extend the analysis by considering the demand side of tourism. From a demand-side perspective, the tourism literature suggests that tourist flows and expenditure create opportunities for entrepreneurship, especially in accommodation and food services, where consumption is directly tied to visitor presence (Williams and Shaw, 2011). Research on lifestyle and necessity migrant entrepreneurs in Southern Europe confirms that tourism demand acts as a pull factor for business creation (Bosworth and Farrell, 2011). This demand-side mechanism may be particularly relevant in the case of international tourism, since expenditure by foreign visitors represents an external inflow of resources into destination economies that can enhance local economic performance (Balaguer and Cantavella-Jordà, 2002), thereby creating more favourable market conditions for entrepreneurial activity in tourism-related sectors. Under this perspective, as suggested by studies of "mixed embeddedness," favorable market conditions resulting from high tourism expenditure could even reinforce the benefits of social and occupational integration by amplifying migrants' ability to seize entrepreneurial opportunities (Kloosterman, 2010; Pırnar and Altın, 2024). For example, socially integrated entrepreneurs are more likely to connect with tourism distribution channels, while occupationally integrated migrants can better adapt to service standards demanded by international tourists. This suggests that tourist expenditure may strengthen the positive effects of social and occupational integration on migrant entrepreneurship. Building on these insights, the present paper addresses the following research hypotheses:

H4: International tourism demand positively affects the development of migrant entrepreneurship in tourism-related sectors.

H5: International tourism demand interacts with social and occupational integration, amplifying their effects on migrant firms in tourism-related sectors.

While the hypotheses outlined above focus on the average relationship between integration and migrant entrepreneurship, existing research suggests that these mechanisms may vary across gender and territorial contexts. With regard to gender, a well-established literature documents a persistent gap in immigrant entrepreneurship, with female migrants exhibiting a systematically lower propensity to enter self-employment than their male counterparts. This gap has been linked to differences in access to resources, labour-market trajectories, family responsibilities, and institutional barriers (Sun and Fong, 2022). Beyond entry rates, gender is likely to shape how integration translates into entrepreneurial outcomes, as studies on immigrant entrepreneurship show that the effects of embeddedness in social, economic, and institutional environments differ by gender

(Brieger and Gielnik, 2021). Territorial context represents an additional source of heterogeneity. Research on immigrant entrepreneurship highlights that local opportunity structures differ across high- and low-density areas, shaping migrants' access to markets and resources (Baycan-Levent and Nijkamp, 2009; Kloosterman and Rath, 2001).

Both gender and territorial heterogeneity are particularly salient in the tourism and hospitality sector, where low entry barriers, strong reliance on informal networks, marked gender segmentation, and spatial context critically shape opportunity structures and modes of embeddedness. Recent studies on immigrant entrepreneurship in tourism show that gender and local spatial conditions influence both access to entrepreneurial opportunities and business strategies (Alrawadieh et al., 2018; Hallak et al., 2015; Li et al., 2025; Mattsson and Cassel, 2020). However, this evidence remains limited and does not allow for clear conclusions about the expected direction of integration effects across gender and territorial contexts.

Building on these considerations, the paper advances two final hypotheses:

H6: The relationship between migrant integration and entrepreneurship differs across gender.

H7: The relationship between migrant integration and entrepreneurship differs across territorial contexts.

The scenario of migrant entrepreneurship, integration, and tourism in Italian provinces

This section sets the contextual background for the empirical analysis proposed in this study, examining the evolution of immigrant tourism firms, the broader process of migrant integration, and the dynamics of international tourist expenditure. For this purpose, we focus in particular on Accommodation and Restaurant firms (*A&R*). This choice depends on two main reasons. First of all, it is well established that tourism-related firms are not easily delineated, as their activities rarely cater exclusively to tourists. In some industries, however, the tourism component is particularly significant. Among these, *A&R* stand out, where the tourism dimension is especially pronounced and often dominant. Second, after wholesale and retail trade, the *A&R* sector records the highest share of firms owned or managed by foreign-born entrepreneurs: about 8.4% of immigrant entrepreneurs have businesses in this sector.

Regarding migrant entrepreneurship and integration, the main source is the IDOS database, which provides data for the period 2013-2022. Data on international tourist expenditure are obtained from the Bank of Italy. The details on the definition and source of the variables considered in this section, together with the other variables used in the empirical analysis, are presented in Section 4.2.

Migrant entrepreneurship in tourism

In Italy, immigrant entrepreneurship has grown steadily, increasing by approximately 30% over just 10 years (2013–2022), and now involves a wide range of sectors within the production system. As shown in Figure 1, this trend is also evident in the *A&R* sector across many Italian provinces. The left-hand panel of Figure 1 displays the distribution of the variable across Italian provinces in 2022, classified into quartiles (Q1–Q4). Quartiles capture the relative position of provinces within the national distribution, with Q1 identifying provinces in the lowest 25% and Q4 those in the highest 25% of observed values. The right-hand panel reports the absolute change in the variable between

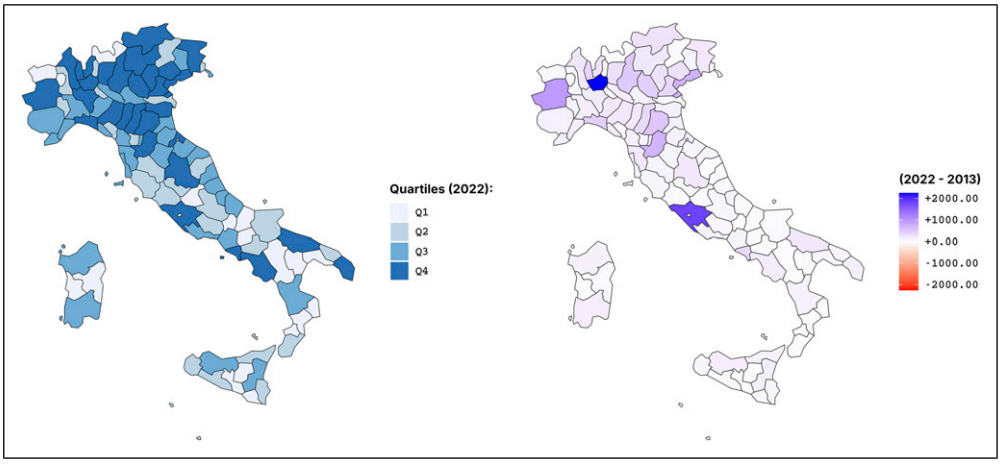

Figure 1. Immigrant firms in *A&R* at the provincial level (2013–2022). The left panel shows the provincial distribution of the number of immigrant firms in *A&R* in 2022, grouped into quartiles (Q1–Q4). The right panel displays absolute changes between 2013 and 2022, measured in the same units as the original variable.
Note. All values are computed at the provincial level using authors' elaborations on the original IDOS database.

2013 and 2022, computed as the difference between end-of-period and initial values for each province. Positive values indicate an increase over time, while negative values denote a decline.

Following the same logic as Figure 1, but adjusting for provincial size, Figure 2 displays the ratio of immigrant firms to the resident population. The provinces with the highest shares are predominantly concentrated in the central and northern areas of the country. At the same time, the figure confirms a broadly upward trend across nearly all Italian provinces, particularly in the North.

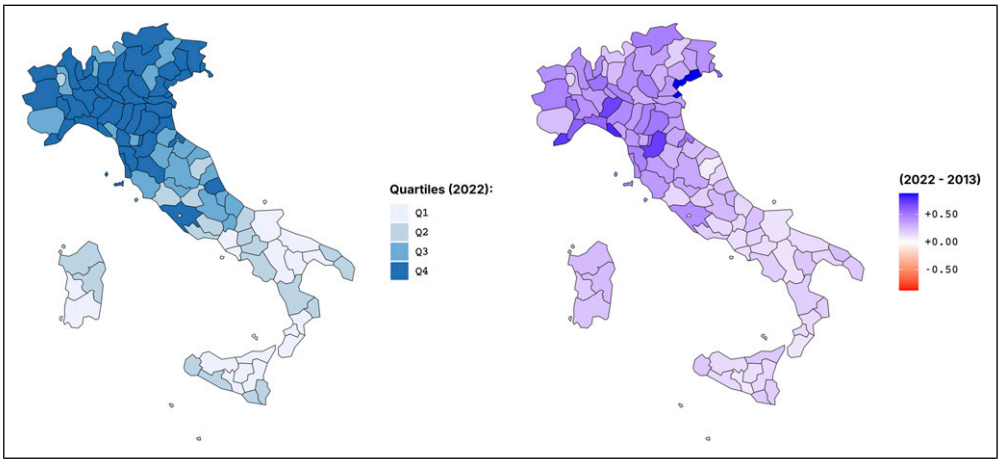

Figure 2. Ratio of immigrant firms in *A&R* over resident population (2013–2022). The left panel shows the provincial distribution of the ratio of immigrant firms in *A&R* over resident population in 2022, grouped into quartiles (Q1–Q4). The right panel displays absolute changes between 2013 and 2022, measured in the same units as the original variable.
Note. All values are computed at the provincial level using authors' elaborations on the original IDOS database.

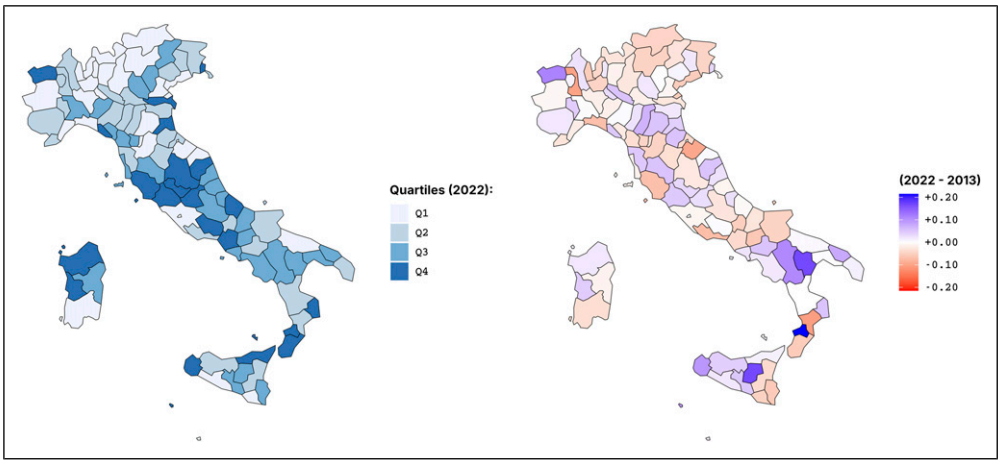

Figure 3. Share of female immigrant firms over total immigrant firms in *A&R* (2013–2022). The left panel shows the provincial distribution of the share of female immigrant firms in *A&R* in 2022, grouped into quartiles (Q1–Q4). The right panel displays absolute changes between 2013 and 2022, measured in the same units as the original variable. *Note.* All values are computed at the provincial level using authors' elaborations on the original IDOS database.

On average, approximately 37% of A&R immigrant firms are female (about 25% for the full sample of immigrant firms), but there are substantial differences across provinces. Similar to previous figures, Figure 3 shows that the share of female immigrant firms in *A&R* is higher in the central and southern regions of Italy. The figure also highlights the pronounced heterogeneity of dynamics over the observed period, with increases and decreases unevenly distributed across Italian provinces. Such variability points to the heightened vulnerability of female firms operating in the *A&R* sector.

When normalizing the number of female and male immigrant firms in *A&R* by the resident population, the overall pattern shown in Figure 2 is largely mirrored by both subgroups, which display a greater presence in the central-northern provinces and a broadly upward trend (Figure 4).

In summary, immigrant entrepreneurship in Italy's *A&R* sector is growing steadily, with the highest concentration in central and northern provinces. Female entrepreneurship represents around 37% of immigrant *A&R* businesses, with higher shares in central and southern regions. However, territorial differences and temporal fluctuations highlight their greater vulnerability. Overall, both male- and female firms follow the same geographic pattern and upward trend.

Migrant integration

As highlighted in Section 2, scholarly debate on migrant integration has predominantly focused on its social and economic dimensions, yet empirical evidence remains limited due to a lack of suitable data. Within the Italian context, this gap is partially mitigated by the use of two specific indicators constructed by IDOS: the *Social Integration Index* and the *Occupational Integration Index*.[1] Both indices are composite, proxy-based measures designed to capture key structural conditions of migrants' embeddedness at the provincial level.[2] The choice of these measures was constrained by the limited availability of data covering a time horizon adequate for an empirical analysis at the provincial level, such as ours.

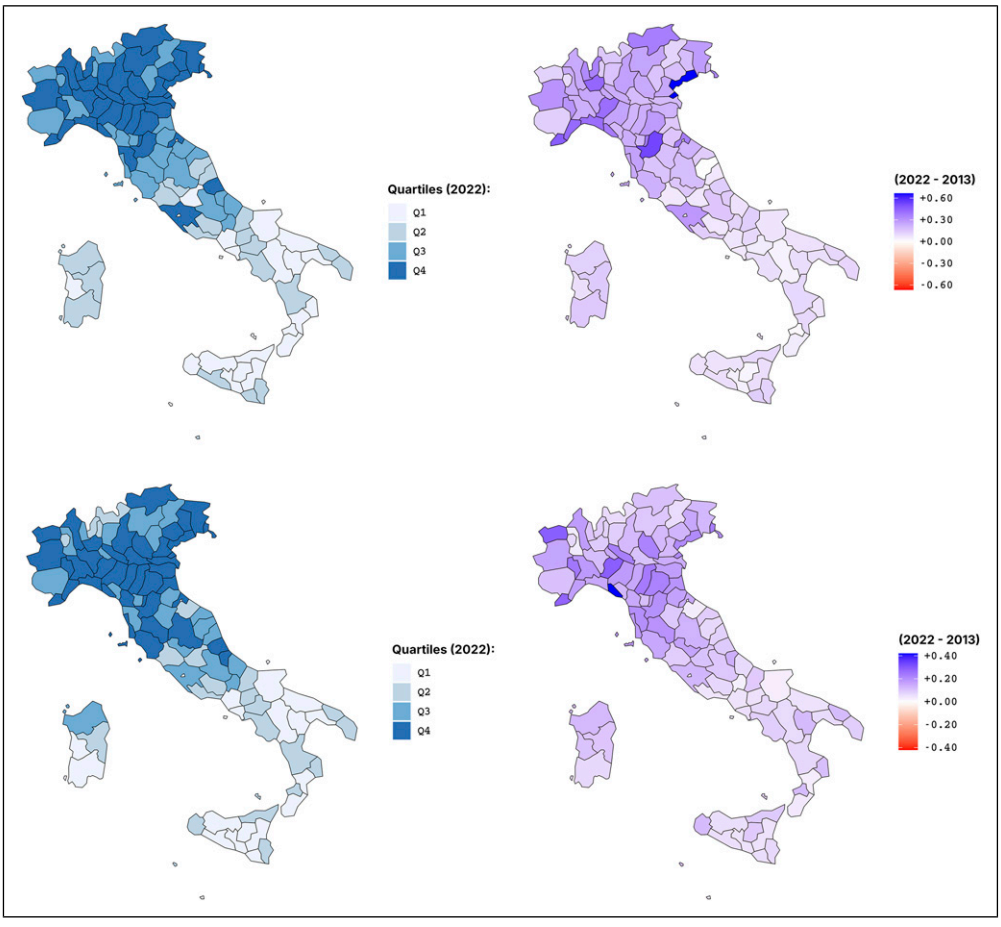

Figure 4. Ratio of immigrant firms in *A&R* over resident population by gender (2013–2022). Left panels show the provincial distribution of the ratio of immigrant firms in *A&R* over the resident population by gender in 2022, grouped into quartiles (Q1–Q4). The right panels display absolute changes from 2013 to 2022, measured in the same units as the original variable.
Note. All values are computed at the provincial level using authors' elaborations on the original IDOS database.

The *Social Integration Index* conceptualizes social integration as the attainment of specific legal statuses that attest to a stable and consolidated incorporation into the host society (IDOS, 2020). Precisely, the index considers the following four sub-indicators: *Naturalisation Indicator*; *Stable Residence Indicator*; *Settlement Indicator*; *High School Enrolment Indicator*. According to this interpretation, the index captures dimensions of legal stability and settlement that IDOS (2020) regards as facilitating migrants' embeddedness within the social and institutional fabric of host societies. This interpretation is consistent with broader international approaches to migrant integration, which emphasise how access to citizenship, stable residence rights, and long-term settlement may strengthen migrants' sense of belonging and attachment to the host society, thereby encouraging participation in social and institutional life (Laurentsyeva and Venturini, 2017). Although the index does not directly capture individual-level dimensions of integration, such as

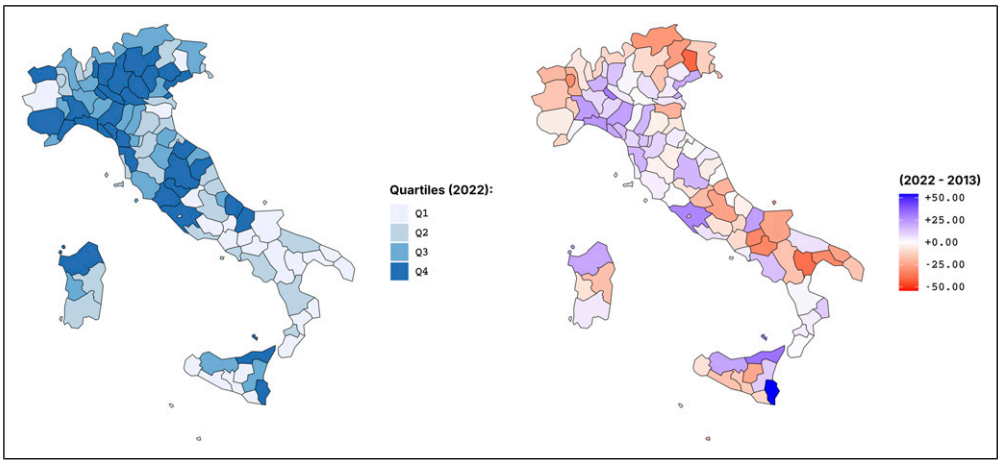

Figure 5. Social integration index. The left panel shows the provincial distribution of the *Social Integration Index* in 2022, grouped into quartiles (Q1–Q4). The right panel displays absolute changes between 2013 and 2022, measured in the same units as the original variable.
Note. All values are computed at the provincial level using authors' elaborations on the original IDOS database.

behaviours, values, or social preferences, which are typically observed through individual-level surveys, it provides a territorial measure of conditions commonly associated with migrants' incorporation into host societies. Therefore, the index should be interpreted as capturing the effects of institutionally mediated social embeddedness, rather than interpersonal networks per se.

Figure 5 presents the standardized index values (scaled from 1 to 100) in 2022 (left-hand panel) and their variation over the period considered (2013–2022) (right-hand panel). The results show that higher scores are largely concentrated in the central and northern provinces, where the index

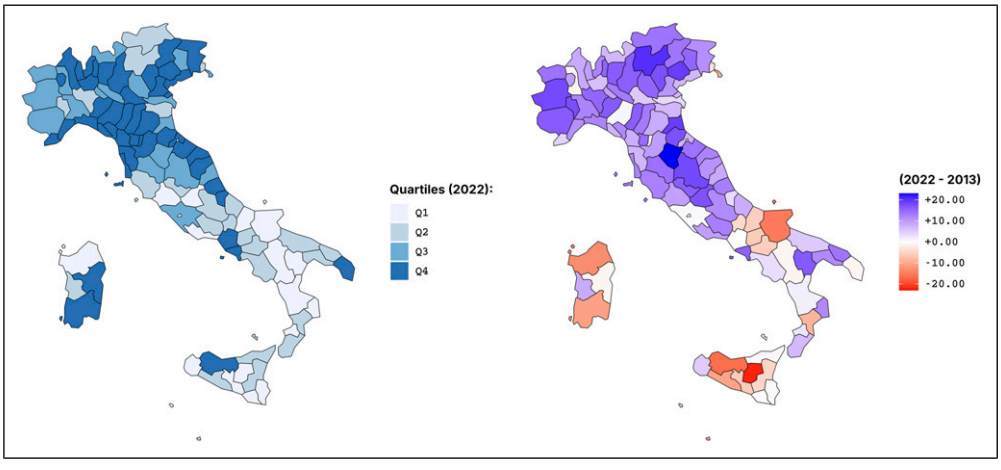

Figure 6. Occupational integration index. The left panel shows the provincial distribution of the *Occupational Integration Index* in 2022, grouped into quartiles (Q1–Q4). The right panel displays absolute changes between 2013 and 2022, measured in the same units as the original variable.
Note. All values are computed at the provincial level using authors' elaborations on the original IDOS database.

shows an upward trend from 2013 to 2022. It is also evident that over the period considered, a non-negligible number of provinces experienced a decline in the index, particularly in the North-East and North-West, as well as in the South.

The *Occupational Integration Index* measures the degree and quality of immigrants' participation in the local labour market, and it is composed of the following four sub-indicators: *Labour Market Participation Indicator*; *Employment Intensity Indicator*; *Non-EU Labour Market Participation Indicator*; *Entrepreneurship Indicator* (IDOS, 2020). Again, what holds the four sub-indicators together is the IDOS's assumption that together they provide a summary of migrants' integration into the labor market. Figure 6 presents the standardized index values (scaled from 1 to 100) in 2022 (left-hand panel) and their variation over 2013–2022 (right-hand panel). The results show that higher scores are largely concentrated in the central and northern provinces. They also indicate significant improvements across the provincial landscape, particularly in the central and northern regions, as well as in certain southern provinces. By contrast, a tendency toward deterioration is evident in the Islands.

Summarizing, the *Social Integration Index* is highest in central and northern provinces, with overall improvements between 2013 and 2022, though some areas in the North-East, North-West, and South show declines. The *Occupational Integration Index* follows a similar pattern, with a clear and widespread improvement across the entire Centre-North and signs of major deterioration in the Islands.

International tourist expenditure

As discussed above, from an economic perspective, international tourism is widely recognized as a key driver of growth, as it represents an exogenous source of demand and an inflow of external resources comparable to service exports (Balaguer and Cantavella-Jordà, 2002). Accordingly, a large body of literature emphasizes international tourism expenditure as the most appropriate measure to capture the growth-enhancing effects of tourism activity. This general insight is

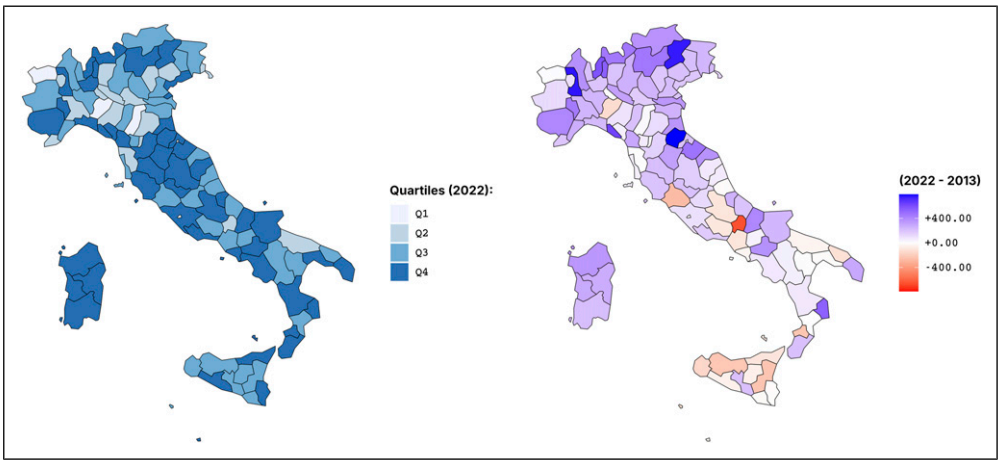

Figure 7. International per-tourist expenditure (2013–2022). The left panel shows the provincial distribution of the international per-tourist expenditure in 2022, grouped into quartiles (Q1–Q4). The right panel displays absolute changes between 2013 and 2022, measured in the same units as the original variable.
Note. All values are computed at the provincial level using authors' elaborations on the original Bank of Italy data.

particularly relevant in the Italian context, where international tourism plays a crucial role in the national economy.[3]

As it is well known, tourism activities play a crucial role in Italy's economy, accounting for more than 10% of GDP and 13% of total employment. Within this framework, incoming international tourism accounts for over half of total demand, underscoring its pivotal role in sustaining and expanding the national tourism market. According to data from the Bank of Italy, in 2022 international tourist expenditure was estimated at approximately €42 billion, corresponding to about 49.8 million international trips. This implies an average per-tourist expenditure of roughly €850. This average value, nevertheless, corresponds to a markedly heterogeneous distribution across provinces.

The left-hand panel of Figure 7 shows that, in 2022, higher per-tourist expenditure levels are observed across several provinces in central Italy, in Sardinia, and in parts of Southern Italy, as well as in a limited number of provinces in the North. Overall, this distribution suggests the absence of a clear territorial pattern. La Spezia, Forlì-Cesena, Arezzo, Belluno, and Salerno exhibit the highest values, while the lowest levels are recorded in Piacenza, followed by Modena, Aosta, and Trieste. The right-hand panel of Figure 7 indicates that changes in per-tourist expenditure over the period 2013–2022 are mainly concentrated in central and northern provinces and in Sardinia. The largest variations are observed in La Spezia, Forlì-Cesena, Arezzo, Belluno, and Salerno.

Methodology

The research strategy

This study seeks to provide quantitative empirical evidence on the role of social and occupational integration in shaping immigrant entrepreneurship in Italy's tourism sector, while also examining the potential moderating effect of international tourist expenditure. To this end, we specify an empirical model where the dependent variable is the ratio of immigrant firms in the *A&R* sector in province i and year t to the average annual population ($A\&R_firms_{it}$). The main explanatory variables are the *Social Integration Index* (soc_{it}), the *Occupational Integration Index* (occ_{it}), and international per-tourist expenditure (exp_{it}). In line with our research hypotheses, we expect all three variables to foster migrant entrepreneurship (H1, H2, and H4). The empirical model also incorporates three interaction terms ($soc_{it}{*}exp_{it}$; $occ_{it}{*}exp_{it}$; $occ_{it}{*}soc_{it}$), reflecting the expectation that these covariates interact and thus shape their overall marginal effects on the dependent variable (H3, H5). Moreover, we expect these mechanisms to differ by gender (H6) and territory (H7).

Besides the main explanatory variables, the model includes several control variables identified in the literature: per capita GDP (gdp_{it}) as a proxy for local economic prosperity, expected to affect migrant firms positively; the unemployment rate (unr_{it}), whose impact is theoretically ambiguous: while higher unemployment may discourage opportunity-driven entrepreneurship, it can also stimulate necessity-driven self-employment; the share of credit over GDP ($credit_{it}$), capturing access to financial resources and expected to have a positive effect; the share of exports over GDP (tr_{it}), reflecting economic openness and competitiveness, also expected to be positive; and the crime rate used as a proxy for institutional quality (iq_{it}), with potentially negative effects.

The estimating equation for our baseline model is specified as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} A\&R_firms_{it} = {} & \beta_0 + \beta_1 soc_{it} + \beta_2 occ_{it} + \beta_3 exp_{it} + \beta_4 (soc_{it} * exp_{it}) + \beta_5 (occ_{it} * exp_{it}) \\ & + \beta_6 (occ_{it} * soc_{it}) + \beta_7 gdp_{it} + \beta_8 unr_{it} + \beta_9 credit_{it} + \beta_{10} tr_{it} + \beta_{11} iq_{it} + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it} \end{aligned}$$

where the term δ_t denotes year fixed effects, which control for time-specific effects influencing all provinces in a given year.

As for the estimation technique, to account for heteroskedasticity and correlated errors in panel data, we estimate the models using Feasible Generalized Least Squares (FGLS), which yields efficient and unbiased coefficients where OLS would be inefficient. Independent variables are grand-mean centered to mitigate multicollinearity, particularly when interaction terms are present. In addition, mean-centering facilitates interpretation, as estimated coefficients can be read as marginal effects evaluated at the average values of the remaining covariates. Accordingly, in models including interaction terms, main-effect coefficients should be interpreted as conditional marginal effects evaluated at the average levels of the interacting variables, whereas interaction terms capture deviations from these average effects.

The analysis proceeds in three main steps. We begin with the estimation of the baseline model as reported in the previous equation for the full sample of the immigrant firms in the *A&R* sector ($A\&R_firms_{it}$). Then, after splitting the sample into female ($A\&R_f_firms_{it}$) and male firms ($A\&R_m_firms_{it}$), we re-estimate the equation to examine the role of gender in the relationship between integration and immigrant entrepreneurship in the tourism sector. For this analysis, the empirical model includes a gender-specific unemployment rate, unr_{it}^{g}, to substitute the generic unemployment rate (unr_{it}) among the explanatory variables. Finally, to account for the role of territorial heterogeneity, the analysis distinguishes between provinces with population density above and below the threshold of 106.3 inhabitants per square kilometer. This threshold is derived from the ISTAT (2022) definition of "internal areas," which is originally formulated at the municipal level. Although the classification is not directly applicable to provinces, adopting this criterion provides a meaningful proxy that allows us to differentiate between more urbanized and peripheral contexts. This approach enables exploration of how integration and migrant entrepreneurship unfold in structurally different territorial settings.

Variables description and data sources

The empirical analysis spans the period 2013–2022 and covers 102 Italian provinces, corresponding to the NUTS-3 classification according to the EU standard. This number differs from the current total of 107 provinces because, during the period under consideration, several administrative changes to Italy's provincial boundaries occurred. Since it was not possible to retrieve consistent information for all variables of interest across the newly established provinces, they were reassigned to their original territorial units to ensure temporal and spatial comparability of the data.

The dataset draws on multiple sources. Regarding migrant entrepreneurship and integration, as anticipated in Section 3, the primary source is the IDOS database, which provides comprehensive information for this period. This database was specifically developed by the IDOS Study Center within the framework of the GRInS – Growing Resilient, Inclusive and Sustainable project, funded under Mission 4 of Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR). It comprises two distinct components.

The first captures the evolution of migrant entrepreneurship, operationalised in this study through the InfoCamere classification of "foreign firms". The data collected in the Italian Business Register constitute the primary statistical source for describing and analysing immigrant entrepreneurship in Italy. This administrative archive gathers all information contained in the records of the Chambers of Commerce managed through the InfoCamere system and identifies individuals involved in business activities according to their place of birth (Italy or abroad). The InfoCamere

classification identifies "foreign firms" according to the degree of participation of foreign-born individuals in the enterprise, as reflected in their involvement in its ownership and governance structure. As a general criterion, firms are classified as "foreign" when foreign-born individuals hold a predominant position in the ownership and/or governance structure according to the thresholds established by the InfoCamere methodology (InfoCamere, n.d.; IDOS, 2024: 37). The degree of foreign participation is assessed according to criteria that vary by legal form. For corporations, the classification combines capital participation and governance positions; for partnerships and cooperatives, it is based on the proportion of partners or members; and for sole proprietorships, it depends on the birthplace of the owner. Firms are further classified according to the degree of foreign entrepreneurial participation (majority, strong, or exclusive). For the sake of clarity, we report here only the thresholds for majority foreign participation, as this represents the baseline classification criterion: for corporations, the sum of the percentage of equity shares held by foreign-born individuals and the percentage of governance positions must exceed 100%; for partnerships and cooperatives, foreign-born individuals must hold more than 50% of partners or members; for sole proprietorships, the owner must be foreign-born; and for other legal forms, foreign-born individuals must account for more than 50% of governance positions. The dataset also provides sectoral and gender disaggregation.[4]

The second component comprises a set of indicators to measure migrant integration. These indicators originate from a long-standing research program on immigrant integration initiated in the early 2000s by IDOS in collaboration with CNEL (*Consiglio Nazionale dell'Economia e del Lavoro*). These indicators underwent several methodological revisions across editions, limiting their suitability for intertemporal analysis.[5] To address this issue, IDOS reconstructed a harmonized provincial-level time series for 2013–2022, building on the 2020 framework while introducing targeted adjustments to ensure internal consistency and empirical comparability over time. As anticipated in Section 3.2, each of the two integration indices, namely Social and Occupational, is constructed as the sum of four sub-indicators, each derived from a corresponding indicator variable. These variables are selected based on their theoretical correlation with the phenomenon under investigation. The primary sources of these variables are ISTAT (Italian National Institute of Statistics), the Italian Ministry of Education, INPS (Italian National Social Security Institute), InfoCamere, and the Guglielmo Tagliacarne Institute. The methodology requires that all indicator variables be transformed onto a common measurement scale, thereby freeing them from their original units of measurement, before they are aggregated into a composite index. Specifically, for each indicator variable, the values observed across territorial units are rescaled onto a percentile score ranging from 1 to 100, with the leading territory assigned a score of 100, the lowest-ranked territory a score of 1, and all remaining territories receiving an intermediate score proportional to their relative distance from the original values.[6] Applying the same criterion, the composite indicator resulting from aggregating the four components is subsequently transformed to a 1–100 scale.

The availability of IDOS data from 2013 to 2022 constrains the whole analysis to this time frame. The detailed definitions of these variables, along with their corresponding data sources, are presented in Table 1. Table 1 also provides details on the other variables included in the empirical analysis.

Table 1. List of variables and sources.

Dependent variable and covariates	Label in the empirical model	Source
Migrant entrepreneurship in A&R: Ratio of accommodation and restaurant firms classified as "foreign firms" according to the InfoCamere methodology to the average annual resident population	$A\&R_firms_{it}$	IDOS Research Centre, based on data from Infocamere and Fondazione G. Tagliacarne
Social integration index: The sum of naturalisation indicator, stable residence indicator, settlement indicator, and high school enrolment indicator.	soc_{it}	IDOS Research Centre
Occupational integration index: The sum of labour market participation indicator, employment intensity indicator, Non-EU labour market participation indicator, and entrepreneurship indicator	occ_{it}	IDOS Research Centre
Per-tourist expenditure: Ratio of tourism expenditure over the number of trips	exp_{it}	Bank of Italy
Per capita GDP: Ratio of GDP over population	gdp_{it}	EUROSTAT
Unemployment rate	unr_{it}	ISTAT
Credit indicator: Ratio of credit over GDP	$credit_{it}$	Bank of Italy
Export indicator: Ratio of exports over GDP	tr_{it}	ISTAT
Institutional quality indicator: Number of crimes per 100,000 inhabitants	iq_{it}	ISTAT
Auxiliary variables underpinning the construction of the integration indicators		**Source**
Naturalisation indicator: Average number of citizenship acquisitions per 1000 foreign residents.		IDOS Research Centre, based on data from ISTAT.
Stable residence indicator: Percentage of long-term Non-EU residence permits relative to total Non-EU valid residence permits		IDOS Research Centre, based on data from ISTAT.
Settlement indicator: Percentage of residence permits issued for family reasons relative to total short-term residence permits		IDOS Research Centre, based on data from ISTAT.
High school enrolment indicator: Percentage of foreign students in high schools (*licei*) relative to total foreign students enrolled in upper secondary education		IDOS Research Centre, based on data from the ministry of education.
Labour market participation indicator: Percentage of foreign employed out of total foreign resident population.		IDOS research centre, based on data from INPS and ISTAT.
Employment intensity indicator: Average annual number of employed foreign workers relative to the total number of foreign-born workers who experienced employment at least once during the year.		IDOS Research Centre, based on data from INPS.
Non-EU labour market participation indicator: Percentage of non-EU nationals out of total foreign-born employed population during the year.		IDOS Research Centre, based on data from INPS.
Entrepreneurship indicator: Percentage of foreign entrepreneurs (owners) out of adult foreign resident population.		IDOS Research Centre, based on data from ISTAT, Infocamere, and Fondazione G. Tagliacarne.

Table 2. Results for *A&R* migrant firms in the full sample.

	Dependent variable
	A&R_firms Full sample
Main independents	
c_soc_{it}	0.00087***
	(0.00012)
c_occ_{it}	0.00172***
	(0.00022)
c_exp_{it}	0.00001*
	(0.00000)
c.c_soc#c.c_exp	0.00000***
	(0.00000)
c.c_occ#c.c_exp	−0.00000
	(0.00000)
c.c_occ#c.c_soc	−0.00001
	(0.00001)
Controls	
c_gdp_{it}	0.00003***
	(0.00000)
c_unr_{it}	−0.00245***
	(0.00053)
c_credit_{it}	0.00037***
	(0.00007)
c_tr_{it}	0.00000***
	(0.00000)
c_iq_{it}	0.00001*
	(0.00000)
Constant	0.59338***
	(0.00602)
Observations	918
Number of units	102
Wald χ^2 (19) = 10253.31	
Prob > χ^2 = 0.000	

Note. The dependent variable refers to *A&R* migrant firms in the full sample. Estimates are obtained using a Feasible Generalized Least Squares (FGLS) estimator for panel data. Independent variables are grand-mean centered. All specifications include year fixed effects. Observations are at the provincial level over the period 2013–2022. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. ***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, and *$p < 0.10$ denote statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively. The Wald χ^2 test indicates strong joint significance of the estimated coefficients.

Results

Results at full sample level

As described in the methodology section, the analysis starts by estimating the baseline model using the full sample. The corresponding results are reported in Table 2.

As shown, both dimensions of integration are positively and significantly associated with the number of migrant firms in the *A&R* sector. Social integration (soc_{it}) shows a positive coefficient,

highlighting the role of relational embeddedness in fostering entrepreneurship. Occupational integration (occ_{it}) also has a positive, highly significant effect, confirming that stable labour-market participation and human capital accumulation facilitate the transition to entrepreneurial activities. Since the independent variables are mean-centered, the estimates can be interpreted as the marginal effect of an increase in integration relative to its sample average, evaluated at the average levels of the other covariates. These findings provide clear support for both H1 and H2.

To assess the quantitative relevance of the estimated associations, we complement statistical significance with effect sizes based on interquartile-range (P75–P25) changes in the integration indicators. This measure captures typical and data-driven cross-provincial variation and quantifies the effect of closing the gap between provinces at the lower and upper quartiles of the integration distributions. For the *Social Integration Index* (soc_{it}), the interquartile-range increase amounts to 23.46 points. Given the estimated coefficient reported in Table 2 (0.00087), this change corresponds to an increase of 0.0204 foreign firms per 1000 residents. To illustrate this magnitude in absolute terms while remaining consistent with the P25–P75 interpretation, we report the implied effect for a large province located around the lower quartile of the soc_{it} distribution, such as Caserta, with a resident population of approximately 0.91 million in 2022. In this case, the interquartile-range increase translates into about 19 additional foreign firms, roughly 5.9% of the province's existing stock observed in 2022 (323). For occupational integration (occ_{it}), the estimated coefficient (0.00172) combined with an interquartile-range increase of 20.65 points implies an increase of 0.0355 foreign firms per 1000 residents. We illustrate this effect using a similarly large province located around the lower quartile of the occ_{it} distribution, such as Catania, with a resident population of approximately 1.08 million. In this case, the implied change corresponds to about 38 additional foreign firms, or approximately 12.3% of the stock observed in 2022 (310).

Concerning the interaction between social and occupational integration, the estimated coefficient is negative but not significant, suggesting that the two forms of integration operate largely independently rather than exerting complementary effects. Therefore, H3 receives no confirmation at this stage of the empirical analysis.

Regarding the role of international tourism demand (c_exp_{it}), the estimates reveal a small, yet positive, coefficient with low statistical significance, indicating a positive, albeit weak, contribution of tourism expenditure to the development of migrant firms in the tourism sector (H4). The interaction between social integration and tourism demand is positive and significant, lending support to H5 and showing that market opportunities amplify the benefits of social embeddedness. By contrast, the interaction between occupational integration and tourism demand is not significant, implying that increasing tourism expenditure does not necessarily translate into stronger responsiveness of tourism firms to labour market experience.

The interpretation of the interaction effects in Table 2 is complemented by graphical inspection of marginal effects, which provides a more precise assessment of the magnitude and direction of the estimated interactions. As shown in Figure 8, the effect of social integration on migrant tourism firms (Figure 8, panel a) increases with higher levels of international tourism expenditure, whereas the effect of occupational integration displays a slightly declining trend (Figure 8, panel b). In addition, the marginal effect of occupational integration decreases as social integration rises (Figure 8, panel c), suggesting that the two dimensions are not strictly complementary.

Taken together, these findings confirm the central role of integration in shaping migrant tourism entrepreneurship, while also highlighting the asymmetric ways in which social and occupational dimensions interact with market conditions.

As for the control variables, most behave as expected. Higher GDP per capita (c_gdp_{it}), credit availability (c_credit_{it}), trade openness (c_tr_{it}), and lower unemployment (c_unr_{it}) are all

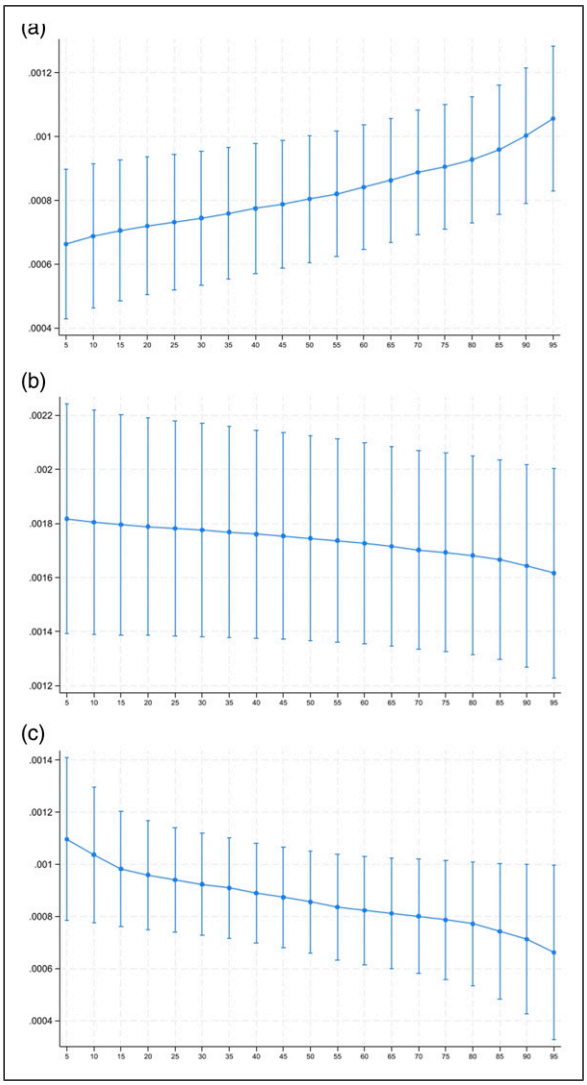

Figure 8. Marginal effects. (a) Average marginal effect of soc_{it} on $A\&R_firms_{it}$ for increasing exp_{it}, (b) Average marginal effect of occ_{it} on $A\&R_firms_{it}$ for increasing exp_{it}, (c) Average marginal effect of soc_{it} on $A\&R_firms_{it}$ for increasing occ_{it}.

significantly associated with a larger presence of migrant firms. These results are consistent with the existing literature on entrepreneurship, which emphasizes the role of favorable economic environments in fostering business creation. In particular, the findings for GDP per capita and unemployment provide meaningful insights into the underlying nature of migrant entrepreneurship in tourism-related sectors. The positive association with local economic prosperity, coupled with the negative link to unemployment, suggests that such entrepreneurship is largely opportunity-driven rather than necessity-driven. Consistent with the push–pull framework, higher levels of economic development act as a pull factor, while lower unemployment reduces push factors, indicating that

Table 3. Results for *A&R* migrant firms by gender.

	Dependent variable	
	A&R_f_firms Females	*A&R_m_firms* Males
Main independents		
c_soc_{it}	0.00059***	0.00030***
	(0.00007)	*(0.00008)*
c_occ_{it}	0.00035***	0.00085***
	(0.00012)	*(0.00015)*
c_exp_{it}	0.00001***	−0.00000
	(0.00000)	*(0.00000)*
c.c_soc#c.c_exp	0.00000***	0.00000
	(0.00000)	*(0.00000)*
c.c_occ#c.c_exp	−0.00000	−0.00000
	(0.00000)	*(0.00000)*
c.c_occ#c.c_soc	−0.00001***	0.00000
	(0.00000)	*(0.00000)*
Controls		
c_gdp_{it}	0.00001***	0.00002***
	(0.00000)	*(0.00000)*
$c_unr_f_{it}$	−0.00131***	-
	(0.00020)	
$c_unr_m_{it}$	-	−0.00133***
		(0.00034)
c_credit_{it}	0.00017***	0.00011***
	(0.00003)	*(0.00004)*
c_tr_{it}	0.00000**	−0.00000
	(0.00000)	*(0.00000)*
c_iq_{it}	0.00001*	0.00000
	(0.00000)	*(0.00000)*
Constant	0.23353***	0.34839***
Observations	918	918
Number of units	102	102
	Wald χ^2 (19) = 3340.77 Prob > χ^2 = 0.000	Wald χ^2 (19) = 5680.37 Prob > χ^2 = 0.000

Note. The dependent variable refers to *A&R* migrant firms reported separately by gender. Estimates are obtained using a Feasible Generalized Least Squares (FGLS) estimator for panel data. Independent variables are grand-mean centered. All specifications include year fixed effects. Observations are at the provincial level over the period 2013–2022. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. ***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, and *$p < 0.10$ denote statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively. The Wald χ^2 test indicates strong joint significance of the estimated coefficients.

migrants are more likely to engage in entrepreneurship as a strategic response to favorable market conditions rather than as a fallback in the absence of wage employment.

By contrast, the variable iq_{it} exhibits an unexpected sign which warrants further investigation: a higher crime rate appears to stimulate migrant entrepreneurship in the tourism sector. A possible explanation could be that migrant entrepreneurship concentrates in urban areas where higher crime rates coexist with greater market opportunities. However, the results reported in Table 2 do not

allow us to draw such a conclusion. Further insights may be gained from the population density estimations presented in Section 5.3.

Results by gender

The gender-disaggregated estimations reported in Table 3 reveal both commonalities and important differences. For both male and female firms, social and occupational integration exert a positive and highly significant effect, confirming H1 and H2 across gender lines. However, the magnitudes differ: social integration shows a higher estimated coefficient for female firms (0.00059) than for male firms (0.00030), whereas occupational integration shows a higher estimated coefficient for male firms (0.00085) than for female firms (0.00035). This pattern suggests that female entrepreneurs may rely more on relational embeddedness, while men benefit more from labour-market experience.

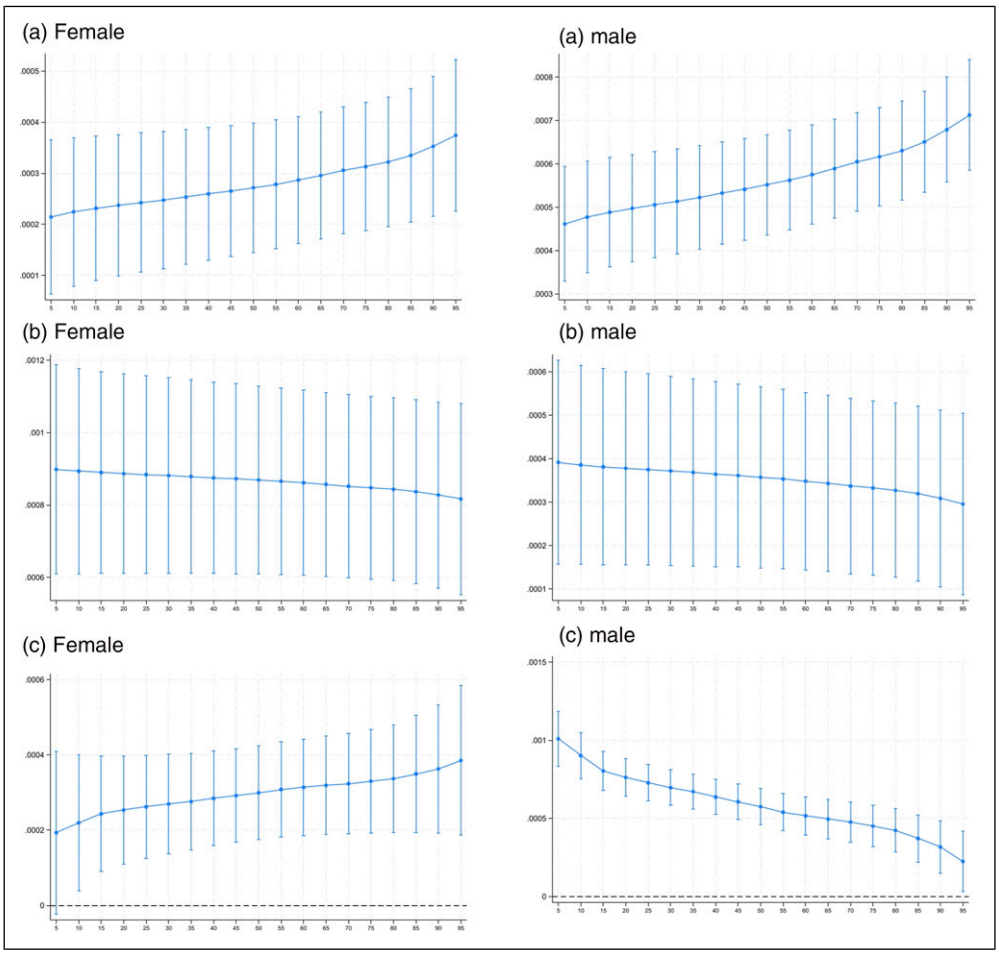

Figure 9. Marginal effects by gender. (a) Average marginal effect of soc_{it} on $A\&R_firms_{it}$ for increasing exp_{it}, (b) Average marginal effect of occ_{it} on $A\&R_firms_{it}$ for increasing exp_{it}, (c) Average marginal effect of soc_{it} on $A\&R_firms_{it}$ for increasing occ_{it}.

Tourism demand further accentuates this asymmetry, as international tourism expenditure (c_exp_{it}) is positive and significant only for female firms, thereby confirming H4. Moreover, for this group, the interaction between social integration and tourism expenditure is also strongly significant, supporting H5. Conversely, no significant interaction between occupational integration and tourism expenditure is observed for female firms. Therefore, female entrepreneurial activity in tourism seems sensitive to fluctuations in international demand and benefits from the interplay between social integration and market opportunities. In contrast, neither the direct nor the indirect effects of tourism demand are significant for male firms.

As for the interaction between social and occupational integration, this is negative and significant only for women, suggesting potential trade-offs rather than complementarities in their case (H3). For men, the interaction effects remain non-significant, pointing to largely independent contributions of the two dimensions.

Turning to the graphical analysis of marginal effects, Figure 9 confirms this scenario. At the margin, the effect of social integration on migrant female firms tends to increase with higher levels of international tourism expenditure (Figure 9, panel a), while it decreases as occupational integration rises (Figure 9, panel c).

Control variables align with expectations: GDP per capita (c_gdp_{it}) and credit availability (c_credit_{it}) exert positive and significant effects for both genders, while unemployment (c_unr_{it}) has the expected negative association (significant in both specifications). Trade openness (c_tr_{it}) is significant only for women, while c_iq_{it} has a weak positive effect in the female sample only.

Taken together, these results highlight a gendered differentiation in the integration–entrepreneurship nexus, giving support to H6. Female entrepreneurship in tourism appears more closely linked to social integration and more responsive to international tourism demand, while male entrepreneurship benefits more from occupational integration and is less sensitive to tourism flows. The negative and significant interaction between social and occupational integration in the female subsample indicates that the two dimensions do not operate as complements in fostering women's entrepreneurship in tourism. Rather, they appear to function as partial substitutes: when occupational integration is already high, the marginal contribution of social integration to firm creation diminishes, and vice versa.

Results by population density

When shifting to a territorial perspective, as shown in Table 4, the picture becomes more nuanced and the results differ substantially across areas. In high-density provinces, both c_soc_{it} and c_occ_{it} exert a positive and significant effect, in line with the expectation that migrants can more easily leverage human and social capital in larger markets and more developed infrastructure. By contrast, in low-density provinces, only c_soc_{it} remains significant, while c_occ_{it} loses explanatory power. This asymmetry points to the limits of labour market experience in peripheral contexts, where opportunities are scarcer, and the translation of occupational skills into entrepreneurial initiatives may be constrained by structural barriers.

We also observe that tourism expenditure (c_exp_{it}) remains statistically significant only in low-density areas but with a negative sign, an outcome markedly different from that reported in Table 2 for the full sample. Moreover, results show that the interactions between tourism expenditure, c_exp_{it}, and both c_soc_{it} and c_occ_{it} are significant only in low-density provinces. By contrast, the interaction between c_soc_{it} and c_occ_{it} is significant in both types of areas and confirms the negative sign of the estimated coefficients.

Table 4. Results for *A&R* migrant firms by population density.

	Dependent variable	
	A&R_firms High-density	*A&R_firms* Low-density
Main independents		
c_soc_{it}	0.00062***	0.00051**
	(0.00015)	*(0.00025)*
c_occ_{it}	0.00165***	−0.00018
	(0.00031)	*(0.00032)*
c_exp_{it}	0.00000	−0.00003***
	(0.00000)	*(0.00001)*
c.c_soc#c.c_exp	0.00000	0.00000***
	(0.00000)	*(0.00000)*
c.c_occ#c.c_exp	0.00000	−0.00000***
	(0.00000)	*(0.00000)*
c.c_occ#c.c_soc	−0.00001*	−0.00003***
	(0.00001)	*(0.00001)*
Controls		
c_gdp_{it}	0.00003***	0.00002***
	(0.00000)	*(0.00000)*
c_unr_{it}	−0.00285***	−0.00140
	(0.00070)	*(0.00089)*
c_credit_{it}	0.00011	0.00059***
	(0.00008)	*(0.00012)*
c_tr_{it}	0.00000**	−0.00000
	(0.00000)	*(0.00000)*
c_iq_{it}	−0.00000	−0.00000
	(0.00000)	*(0.00001)*
Constant	0.61687***	0.54533***
	(0.00788)	*(0.01057)*
Observations	699	218
Territorial units	76	26
	Wald χ^2 (19) = 8455.34	Wald χ^2 (19) = 2049.71
	Prob > χ^2 = 0.000	Prob > χ^2 = 0.000

Note. The dependent variable refers to *A&R* migrant firms reported separately by population density. Estimates are obtained using a Feasible Generalized Least Squares (FGLS) estimator for panel data. Independent variables are grand-mean centered. All specifications include year fixed effects. Observations are at the provincial level over the period 2013–2022. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. ***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, and *$p < 0.10$ denote statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively. The Wald χ^2 test indicates strong joint significance of the estimated coefficients.

Going to the interaction effects in more detail, the graphical analysis of marginal effects in Figure 10 shows that the positive effect of c_soc_{it} increases with higher levels of tourism expenditure in both subsamples, with a more pronounced effect in low-density provinces (Figure 10, panel a). Concerning the interaction between tourism expenditure and c_occ_{it}, significant effects are found only in low-density areas and at high levels of expenditure (Figure 10, panel b). Finally, as for the interaction between c_soc_{it}, and c_occ_{it}, the results confirm that the two integration pathways

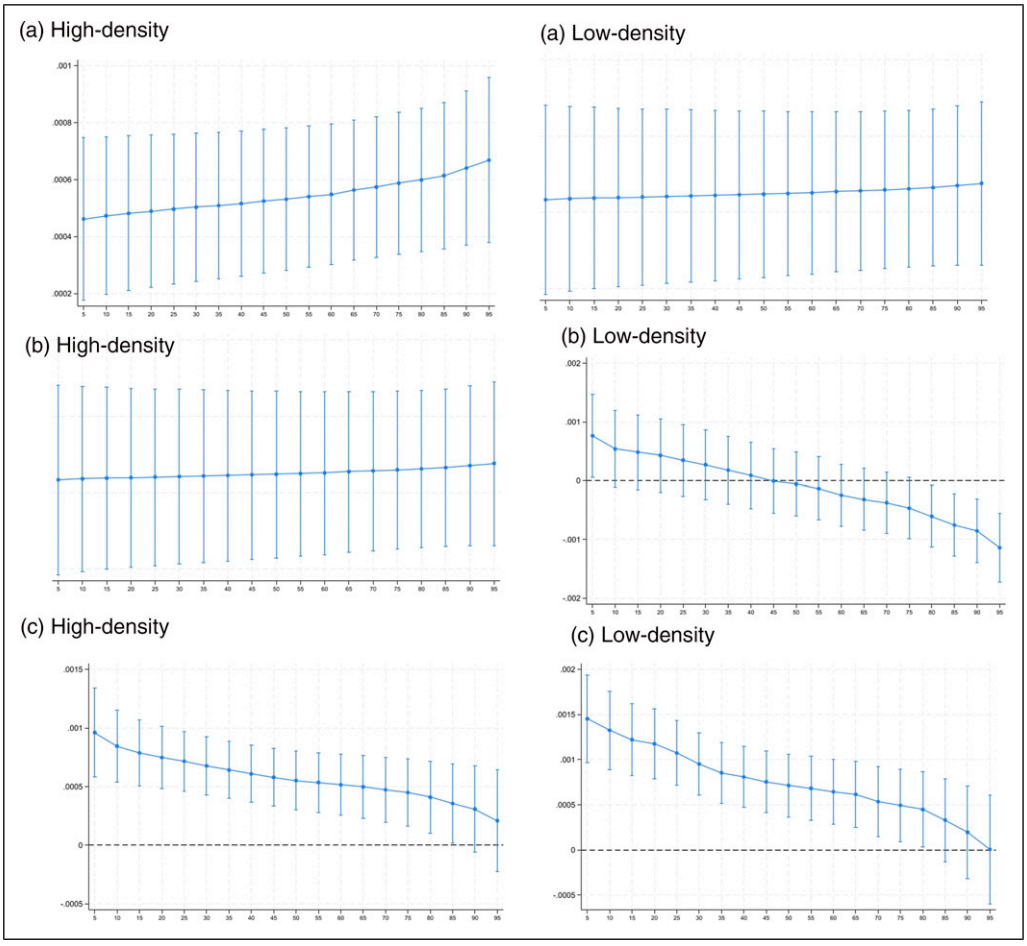

Figure 10. Marginal effects by population density. (a) Average marginal effect of soc_{it} on $A\&R_firms_{it}$ for increasing exp_{it}, (b) Average marginal effect of occ_{it} on $A\&R_firms_{it}$ for increasing exp_{it}, (c) Average marginal effect of soc_{it} on $A\&R_firms_{it}$ for increasing occ_{it}.

are not complementary; rather, the effect of one tends to be mitigated by that of the other (Figure 10, panel c).

The negative and significant effect of tourism expenditure in low-density provinces is particularly noteworthy. Rather than expanding opportunities for migrant entrepreneurs, higher expenditure may reflect a concentration of demand in niche destinations or seasonal markets dominated by established actors, thereby intensifying competition and limiting migrants' access. However, the positive interaction between tourism expenditure and social integration indicates that embeddedness in local networks allows migrants to turn rising demand into viable entrepreneurial strategies, offsetting the otherwise negative impact of tourism flows.

Finally, the consistently negative interaction between social and occupational integration across both areas highlights a lack of complementarity between the two dimensions. For migrant entrepreneurs, especially in low-density provinces, this may signal trade-offs in mobilising different

forms of capital: strong occupational embedding may reduce the relative importance of social networks, and vice versa.

Differences among the control variables also emerge across areas. In particular, per capita GDP (c_gdp_{it}) continues to exert a positive effect in both subsamples, while the unemployment rate (c_unr_{it}) is significant only in high-density areas, with a negative sign. Credit availability (c_credit_{it}) is positive and significant only in low-density areas, trade (c_tr_{it}) is positive and significant only in high-density areas, and, finally, the c_iq_{it} loses significance in both subsamples. As a consequence, no additional evidence is available to help the interpretation of the positive effect reported in the previous sections.

Taken together, these territorial estimations suggest that the integration–entrepreneurship nexus is strongly conditioned by local contexts, giving support to H7.

Discussion

The empirical results reveal a differentiated relationship between integration processes, tourism demand, and migrant entrepreneurship in Italy's accommodation and restaurant sector. Full-sample estimations show that both social and occupational integration significantly foster migrant entrepreneurship, although they do not operate as complementary dimensions. Tourism demand exerts a relatively limited direct effect, but it strengthens the entrepreneurial relevance of social integration. Marginal effects further indicate that the contribution of social integration becomes stronger as tourism expenditure increases, whereas the effect of occupational integration weakens as social integration rises.

These findings provide support for the idea that migrant entrepreneurship is shaped by multiple forms of embeddedness, as suggested by the mixed embeddedness framework (Kloosterman and Rath, 2001). At the same time, the results indicate that different forms of integration do not necessarily generate cumulative advantages. While both social and occupational integration positively contribute to entrepreneurial activity, their effects appear to operate through distinct rather than cumulative mechanisms, suggesting that migrants may rely on alternative pathways to access entrepreneurial opportunities. This evidence partly departs from the expectation that stronger integration across multiple domains automatically translates into greater entrepreneurial success.

Important heterogeneities emerge across gender and territorial contexts.

Gender-disaggregated estimations confirm the positive role of both integration dimensions, although with different intensities: social integration appears more relevant for female entrepreneurship, while occupational integration is stronger among male entrepreneurs. The stronger role of social integration among female entrepreneurs suggests that relational embeddedness may be especially important in overcoming barriers related to access to resources, visibility, and market opportunities. In tourism-related activities, where customer interaction and reputation are central, social embeddedness may therefore constitute a particularly valuable entrepreneurial asset. Gender differences also emerge in relation to other dimensions. Female firms also display greater responsiveness to tourism demand, both directly and through its interaction with social integration. By contrast, these effects are not observed for male entrepreneurship. Moreover, the interaction between social and occupational integration becomes negative and statistically significant only for females, suggesting the existence of trade-offs rather than complementarity between the two dimensions. This pattern may reflect structural barriers and gendered dynamics in the labour market, whereby female entrepreneurs face greater constraints in combining different forms of capital. For instance, strong occupational embedding might reduce the necessity or feasibility of leveraging broader social networks, while high reliance on social ties may compensate for limited

recognition of human capital in the labour market. More generally, the observed gender differences are consistent with previous studies highlighting the differentiated ways in which females and males access entrepreneurial resources and opportunities (Brieger and Gielnik, 2021; Sun and Fong, 2022).

Territorial estimations also point to marked differences between high- and low-density provinces. In more urbanized areas, both social and occupational integration contribute positively to migrant entrepreneurship, whereas social integration remains significant only in low-density provinces. This result suggests that in peripheral and tourism-dependent areas, entrepreneurial opportunities may depend more heavily on access to local networks, trust-based relationships, and informal channels of information. Under such conditions, social integration appears to facilitate the conversion of tourism demand into viable entrepreneurial opportunities, whereas occupational experience alone may be insufficient to overcome local structural constraints. The analysis also reveals further differences between the two territorial contexts. International tourism expenditure becomes significant only in peripheral areas, where it displays a negative sign. However, this effect is partially offset by its positive interaction with social integration, which strengthens migrant firms' responsiveness to tourism demand. Interaction terms further confirm that social and occupational integration tend to function as substitutes rather than complementary mechanisms, especially in peripheral contexts. Broadly speaking, these findings are consistent with recent tourism entrepreneurship research emphasising the importance of local embeddedness and community acceptance in shaping migrant entrepreneurial trajectories (Li et al., 2025; Mattsson and Cassel, 2020).

Overall, the entrepreneurial relevance of integration varies across dimensions and contexts. Social integration appears particularly important because it facilitates access to locally embedded networks, trust-based interactions, and forms of social recognition that are especially valuable in tourism-related markets. Conversely, occupational integration seems to depend more strongly on the structure and depth of local labour markets. More generally, the results suggest that tourism demand alone does not automatically generate entrepreneurial opportunities for migrants. Instead, its effects depend on migrants' ability to mobilise social resources and gain legitimacy within local communities.

Conclusions

Main empirical findings

This study investigates the extent to which social and occupational integration, and their interplay, shape migrant entrepreneurship in Italy's Accommodation and Restaurant sector, where tourism is a key driver of economic activity. Particular attention is devoted to the role of international tourism expenditure and its interaction with the two integration dimensions. The empirical analysis draws on an original panel dataset covering 102 Italian provinces over the period 2013–2022. The analysis is performed on both the full sample and selected sub-samples to assess how gender and territorial differences influence the empirical results.

The main findings can be summarized as follows. Both social and occupational integration foster migrant entrepreneurship, although their effects vary across genders and territorial contexts and do not appear to be complementary. Interaction effects, when statistically significant, are consistently negative, suggesting that the two dimensions of integration may operate through partially alternative rather than cumulative mechanisms.

International tourism demand also plays a relevant but heterogeneous role, interacting primarily with social integration and displaying differentiated effects across genders and territorial areas. More specifically, at higher levels of international tourist expenditure, social integration emerges as a comparatively stronger determinant of migrant entrepreneurship among females and in low-density provinces, whereas occupational integration appears more strongly associated with male entrepreneurship and high-density areas.

Theoretical implications and contributions

The findings of this study make several contributions to the theoretical debate on migrant entrepreneurship by advancing a more differentiated, context-sensitive interpretation of the mixed embeddedness framework. While mixed embeddedness has traditionally emphasized the joint and mutually reinforcing role of social and structural embeddedness, the empirical evidence presented here suggests that different dimensions of integration do not necessarily operate in a cumulative or complementary manner.

First, the results highlight that social and occupational integration represent distinct and, in some contexts, partially substitutable pathways to migrant entrepreneurship. Rather than reinforcing each other, these two dimensions may generate trade-offs, whereby the marginal contribution of one form of embeddedness diminishes as the other strengthens. This finding challenges implicit assumptions in the literature that higher levels of integration across multiple domains uniformly enhance entrepreneurial outcomes. Instead, it points to a more selective process through which migrants mobilize different forms of embeddedness in response to opportunity structures and constraints.

Second, the study demonstrates that the entrepreneurial returns of integration are highly context dependent. In particular, the findings indicate that different forms of embeddedness do not generate uniform effects across gender and territorial contexts. Social integration emerges as a comparatively robust and transferable form of embeddedness, consistently fostering migrant entrepreneurship across different settings, particularly among females and in low-population-density provinces when tourist expenditure rises. Occupational integration, by contrast, appears more context-dependent, exerting stronger effects in urbanized areas and among male entrepreneurs, but losing relevance in peripheral contexts. These patterns suggest that embeddedness should be conceptualized not as a uniform condition but as a contextually mediated mechanism, whose entrepreneurial returns vary systematically across social groups and spatial environments.

Third, the results contribute to the literature by reinterpreting the role of tourism within the mixed embeddedness framework. Rather than functioning merely as a favourable background condition or a sector characterized by low entry barriers, tourism demand appears to act as a contextual mechanism that shapes the extent to which integration translates into entrepreneurial opportunities. In particular, tourism expenditure seems to enhance the entrepreneurial relevance of social integration, while failing to compensate for weaker forms of occupational embeddedness. This indicates that access to local networks, trust-based relationships, and relational visibility become especially crucial in tourism-driven markets, where competition, seasonality, and place-specific norms constrain the conversion of labour-market experience into entrepreneurial success.

Taken together, these contributions suggest that integration should be understood as a multidimensional and context-dependent process whose entrepreneurial effects are neither uniform nor cumulative. By showing that different forms of integration operate through distinct mechanisms and generate differentiated entrepreneurial returns across contexts, this study refines existing

interpretations of mixed embeddedness and advances a more nuanced theoretical understanding of migrant entrepreneurship in tourism-related sectors.

Policy implications

Empirical results and theoretical implications can provide a valuable basis for designing targeted policies to foster migrant entrepreneurship in Italy. In the Italian context, the strong role of social integration underscores the importance of initiatives that go beyond labour-market insertion and actively promote bridging networks, intercultural competences, and connections with local institutions and consumer markets. Such efforts are particularly relevant in low-population-density provinces, where structural barriers limit the translation of occupational skills into entrepreneurial opportunities. Supporting social embeddedness in these territories can help mitigate the otherwise negative effects of tourism demand and strengthen the sustainability of migrant firms. At the same time, the differentiated patterns between males and females point to the need for gender-sensitive measures. Female entrepreneurs in tourism appear especially responsive to tourism demand when supported by social integration, suggesting that targeted programs, such as training in market access, visibility, and professional networking, may unlock their full potential. Conversely, the stronger role of occupational integration for males indicates that recognition of skills, pathways from wage employment to self-employment, and access to sector-specific training remain crucial.

Targeted policies fostering migrant entrepreneurship in Italy closely align with the objectives of the EU's entrepreneurship and integration strategies, which underscore the dual contribution of migrant business activity to economic dynamism and social cohesion. The European Pillar of Social Rights (2017) and the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021–2027) both highlight the importance of integrating labour market measures with broader forms of social participation and access to essential services. Our findings indicate that tourism can act as a strategic sector where these goals intersect, enabling migrants to convert integration processes into entrepreneurial initiatives while enhancing the competitiveness and diversification of local economies. Strengthening synergies between national programmes and EU-level instruments, such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), could further enhance the effectiveness of these interventions, positioning tourism entrepreneurship not only as a vehicle for fostering migrant business creation but also as a strategic lever for regional development.

Limitations and avenues for future research

Despite its original contributions, this study presents some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, social and occupational integration are captured through aggregate indicators, which cannot fully reflect the individual-level nature of integration processes. Future research could complement this approach by drawing on individual-level or mixed data sources to gain a more fine-grained understanding of how integration trajectories translate into entrepreneurial outcomes. Second, the focus on the Accommodation and Restaurant sector, while justified by its strong connection to tourism, excludes other forms of migrant entrepreneurship that may be shaped by different opportunity structures. Extending the analysis to additional tourism-related sectors would help assess the broader applicability of the mechanisms identified in this study. Third, although a sound theoretical framework and panel estimation methods strengthen the validity of the inference, potential endogeneity concerns remain, as entrepreneurial activity and integration processes may be mutually reinforcing. Future studies could further explore these dynamics. Finally, the results are

specific to the Italian context and the period 2013–2022, which may limit their generalizability to other settings and time frames. Comparative analyses across different institutional and geographical settings, as well as studies covering different phases of the tourism cycle, would help to assess the external validity of the results.

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Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies with human or animal participants. There are no human participants in this article and informed consent is not required.

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Data Availability Statement

This paper provides a clear and comprehensive citation of all the data used in the research.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. For technical details on the construction of these indices, see sub-section “Variables description and data sources”.
2. This indirect measurement strategy is consistent with broader practices in comparative and policy-oriented research. For instance, following the Zaragoza Declaration, the European Union monitors migrant integration through multiple dimensions (education, employment, social inclusion, and active citizenship), each operationalised via sets of proxy indicators rather than direct measures of integration (Eurostat, 2020). IDOS’s approach aligns with this multidimensional and proxy-based framework, adapting it to the provincial scale and data availability in the Italian context.
3. In addition to the economic considerations discussed in the main text, international tourist expenditure is used because it represents the only measure of tourism expenditure that is consistently available at the provincial level within the Italian statistical system. Data on domestic tourism expenditure are collected through household surveys and do not allow for robust or comparable estimates at this level of territorial disaggregation (Bank of Italy and Istat, 2020). However, to assess the robustness of the empirical results with respect to the domestic component of tourism demand, we estimate an additional specification of the baseline model using a proxy based on the average

length of stay of resident tourists. This measure is particularly relevant in tourism studies because the length of stay is closely associated with the overall economic impact of tourism and, more specifically, with the consumption of accommodation and food services. Further details and results are provided in Appendix A.

4. The InfoCamere classification of "foreign firms" adopted in this study differs from the notion of foreign-controlled enterprises used in Inward Foreign Affiliates Statistics (Inward FATS), one of the main international statistical frameworks for identifying enterprises under foreign control. While both may rely on enterprises recorded in national business registers, they capture different dimensions of foreign participation in economic activity. The InfoCamere approach classifies firms according to the participation of foreign-born individuals (natural persons) in the enterprise. By contrast, Inward FATS statistics classify enterprises according to whether they are ultimately controlled by an institutional entity resident abroad, such as a foreign company, holding company, or multinational corporate group, regardless of the characteristics of the natural persons participating in the enterprise. Consequently, Italian affiliates of multinational enterprises or international chains, such as McDonald's or Hilton, may be included in Inward FATS statistics while being excluded from the category of "foreign firms" adopted by InfoCamere (and therefore from the category of firms used as a proxy for immigrant entrepreneurship in this study) unless the participation of foreign-born individuals satisfies the criteria established by the InfoCamere classification.
5. Over time, the original regional Index of Territorial Integration evolved into a provincial-level Composite Index of Immigrant Integration, later redefined in 2009 as the Integration Potential Index, composed of Social and Occupational Integration sub-indices. In 2020, IDOS reconstructed the indicators in partnership with the National Institute for Health, Migration, and Poverty (NIHMP), producing updated estimates for 2016 (IDOS, 2020).
6. The IDOS Research Centre is responsible for auditing the reliability of these calculations. The methodology has been previously applied by IDOS in similar analyses and builds on a methodological framework developed in earlier studies on variable transformation and the construction of composite indicators, to which Mario Badaloni, former Full Professor of Statistics at Sapienza University of Rome, contributed. This methodological framework is presented in IDOS (2020: 10), in the section entitled "*La metodologia statistica adottata e la costruzione degli indici sintetici*". The underlying data used to compute the indicators are drawn from official administrative and statistical sources, namely the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), the Italian National Social Security Institute (INPS), and the Italian Ministry of the Interior, Infocamere, and Istituto Tagliacarne, all of which are accredited institutions responsible for the collection and validation of these data.

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