



Exploring New Chinese Migrant Businesses in Auckland, New Zealand: Challenges and Opportunities

Songming Yang¹ · Mingsheng Li¹ · Geoff Watson¹

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Abstract

This study examines how new Chinese migrant businesses navigate structural and operational constraints in a high-income, multicultural host-country context, with a particular focus on the role of digital embeddedness. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 29 Chinese migrant business owners conducted in Auckland, New Zealand, the study explores how entrepreneurs engage with digital platforms, online networks, and digital infrastructures to address constraints related to market access, regulatory complexity, and limited local networks. The findings show that digital embeddedness functions as a key adaptive mechanism that helps entrepreneurs develop visibility, mobilise resources, and extend beyond primarily co-ethnic markets to engage broader consumer segments, while also introducing platform-related vulnerabilities such as reputational exposure and dependence on algorithmic visibility. By conceptualising digital embeddedness as an extension of mixed embeddedness in digitally mediated market environments, this study contributes to the migrant entrepreneurship literature by clarifying how digital infrastructures reshape opportunity structures in high-income multicultural economies. The paper concludes with theoretically grounded implications and context-sensitive practical insights for supporting migrant entrepreneurship in increasingly digitalised host-country settings.

Keywords Chinese migrant businesses · Mixed embeddedness · Cultural adaptation · Ethnic networks · Digital transformation · Social capital

✉ Songming Yang
20003415@massey.ac.nz

Mingsheng Li
M.S.Li@massey.ac.nz

Geoff Watson
G.Watson@massey.ac.nz

¹ Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand

Introduction

In the era of globalisation, migrant groups are widely discussed as influencing the economic, cultural, and social dynamics of their host societies, although the nature and extent of these impacts remain subject to ongoing academic debate (Capoani et al., 2024; Karki & Moasun, 2023). According to the International Organization for Migration (2024), the global number of international migrants has reached 281 million, accounting for 3.6% of the world's population. Within this broader context, migrant entrepreneurship has been examined as a potentially important component of host-country economies, associated with business creation, employment generation, and forms of socio-economic participation. However, existing research also highlights that its contributions to economic growth and cultural integration are uneven and highly contingent on institutional, regulatory, and market conditions (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019).

Migrant entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in the global economy, with Chinese migrant businesses gaining academic attention for their ability to leverage community networks and transnational connections (Sinkovics & Reuber, 2021). Related studies have examined how social capital enables Chinese entrepreneurs to access financial and market resources, particularly in the early stages of business formation. Many of these businesses initially operate as family-run enterprises before expanding into various industries (Liu et al., 2023). For example, studies of Chinese migrant businesses in Australia document a gradual shift from low-margin, labour-intensive sectors (such as retail and hospitality) toward higher-value activities in areas including professional services, technology-enabled trade, and platform-based commerce, facilitated by innovation and the strategic use of digital technologies (Wang & Warn, 2019). Despite these contributions, Chinese migrant entrepreneurs continue to face persistent barriers such as cultural differences, language challenges, regulatory constraints, and limited access to mainstream markets (Capoani et al., 2024; Zhou, 2021). In this study, mainstream markets and networks refer to non-co-ethnic customer segments, industry intermediaries, and business institutions that are not primarily organised through Chinese-language or co-ethnic networks.

Challenges to Migrant Entrepreneurship in Auckland

New Zealand is a well-established immigrant-receiving country (Lyons et al., 2011). Auckland is the largest urban centre and economic hub in New Zealand, with 33% (1,656,486) of the total population (Statistics New Zealand, 2023). As reported in the 2023 census, Auckland's Asian population reached 518,178, comprising 31.3% of the city's total residents. Within this demographic, people of Chinese ethnicity represent the largest subgroup, making up 38.0% (196,908) of the Asian population in the region (Statistics New Zealand, 2023). Auckland's multicultural environment provides Chinese migrants with a wide range

of business opportunities, but, as some previous studies argue, also presents significant challenges, including language barriers, cultural differences, restricted access to local markets, and an over-reliance on ethnic networks (Meares et al., 2011; Spoonley & Meares, 2011; Xue et al., 2012).

This study focuses on new Chinese migrant businesses¹ in New Zealand, which refers to enterprises established by post-1986 new Chinese migrants.² The rapid growth of this population has created a sizeable Chinese consumer market, driving the expansion of Chinese-owned businesses across diverse industries (Spoonley & Meares, 2011). These businesses often serve not only co-ethnic clients but also wider New Zealand society, contributing significantly to the urban economy (Liu et al., 2022). In contrast to earlier Chinese migrants who primarily operated small, enclave-based businesses (Liu et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024), many new Chinese entrepreneurs pursue more innovative and transnational ventures. Their enterprises increasingly connect with both local market opportunities and global networks (Chen & McQueen, 2008; Spoonley & Meares, 2011).

Existing research on Chinese migrant businesses in New Zealand has provided valuable descriptive insights into entrepreneurial motivations, business sectors, and early-stage challenges (Liu et al., 2022), yet offers limited explanation of how entrepreneurs adapt to broader cultural and societal dynamics. This study extends that work by examining the structural and institutional context within which these businesses operate.

Auckland's emerging multicultural social structure has provided unique opportunities for migrant entrepreneurship, attracting a large number of Chinese migrants, but, as previous studies have noted, significant challenges remained (Xue et al., 2012). Although Auckland had a relatively supportive business environment, Chinese migrants still faced cultural differences and market access barriers in their entrepreneurial process (Ishizawa & Arunachalam, 2014). Language barriers, cultural adaptation issues, and challenges in interacting with mainstream society affected Chinese migrants in Auckland. Language barriers not only restricted their communication with local customers and business partners but also limited their in-depth understanding and adaptation to the local market (Xue et al., 2012). Furthermore, market entry thresholds and the complexity of policies and regulations meant that many Chinese migrant enterprises faced higher costs and risks when entering the local market, including compliance-related expenses (e.g. licensing, food safety, and employment regulations), greater reliance on professional intermediaries, and increased exposure to penalties or business disruption arising from regulatory misunderstandings (Spoonley & Meares, 2011). However, Chinese migrants gradually gained a foothold in the New Zealand market by utilising ethnic networks and transnational connections (Meares et al., 2011). Similar patterns have been observed in

¹ "New Chinese migrant businesses" in this research are defined as businesses officially registered in the New Zealand Companies Office (<https://companies-register.companiesoffice.govt.nz/>) and operated by new Chinese migrants who are originally from Mainland China after the introduction of the Immigration Act 1987.

² "New Chinese migrants" in the New Zealand context usually refer to Chinese who have migrated to New Zealand since the introduction of the Immigration Policy Review in 1986, which abolished the "traditional origin" preference for British migrants (Ip, 1995). New Chinese migrants are mostly from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China. These three groups plus Chinese from other countries (e.g. Malaysia and Indonesia) are categorised as new Chinese migrants (Liu, 2018).

other contexts. For instance, in the UK, ethnic minority entrepreneurs rely heavily on co-ethnic social capital to overcome initial entry barriers, but this reliance can limit diversification into mainstream markets (Haq et al., 2021). Similarly, in the Netherlands, migrant microbusinesses have demonstrated that while social capital within ethnic networks offers trust-based transactions and resource pooling, over-dependence on these networks can constrain innovation and scalability (Dabić et al., 2020).

While some studies have explored how Chinese migrants used social networks to address these challenges, relatively few studies have examined how they identify and capitalise on business opportunities (Meares et al., 2011). It has been argued that Chinese migrant companies need to both find a foothold in the local market and maintain transnational connections and networks. This need for mixed embeddedness makes it imperative for Chinese migrant businesses to maintain a high degree of flexibility and adaptability in the face of market changes (Spoonley & Meares, 2011). However, how such businesses operate effectively in a unique multicultural environment such as Auckland, while taking advantage of the business opportunities presented by globalisation, remains an under-researched area. In addition to these challenges, migrant entrepreneurs also experience what the literature describes as the liabilities of smallness and foreignness (Dabić et al., 2020; Haq et al., 2024). The liability of smallness refers to constraints such as limited financial, managerial, and technological resources that can inhibit competitiveness and scalability, while the liability of foreignness denotes the additional costs and disadvantages associated with operating in an unfamiliar institutional and cultural environment. In Auckland, these liabilities manifest in entrepreneurs' restricted access to mainstream networks, difficulties in navigating compliance systems, and the need to adapt to a smaller, geographically isolated market. Recognising these liabilities provides a sharper analytical lens for understanding the persistent structural and operational barriers Chinese migrant businesses face in this context.

Existing research on Chinese migrant businesses in New Zealand has provided valuable descriptive insights into entrepreneurial motivations, business sectors, and early-stage challenges, but offers limited explanation of how entrepreneurs adapt over time or sustain competitiveness in high-income, multicultural market environments (Cain & Spoonley, 2013; Meares et al., 2011; Xue et al., 2012).

More broadly, there is a lack of systematic theorisation of how migrant entrepreneurs develop digitally mediated strategies under conditions of structural constraint. While mixed embeddedness theory emphasises the interaction of institutional, structural, and social factors, it has largely conceptualised these dynamics as operating through predominantly offline markets and networks. Although recent studies acknowledge the growing role of digital platforms and virtual networks, these are often treated as supplementary mechanisms rather than as integral components of entrepreneurial opportunity structures.

Accordingly, it remains underexplored how digital platforms shape platform-mediated visibility and customer access, influence engagement beyond primarily co-ethnic markets, and structure adaptive responses under conditions of disruption in high-income multicultural contexts. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how digital embeddedness operates as an extension of mixed embeddedness among

Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in Auckland, offering empirically grounded insights into migrant entrepreneurship in digitally mediated, small-market economies.

This study aims to address the following research questions:

- RQ 1: What structural and operational constraints do new Chinese migrant entrepreneurs encounter in high-income multicultural host-country contexts?
- RQ 2: How do these entrepreneurs leverage digital embeddedness to navigate such constraints and develop adaptive entrepreneurial strategies?

Theoretical Frameworks

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework drawing on (1) mixed embeddedness, (2) social capital theory, and (3) scholarship on migrant entrepreneurship as a field of study. Together, these perspectives support analysis of how opportunity structures and entrepreneurial agency interact in migrant business formation and development, particularly under conditions of institutional complexity and market entry barriers. Importantly, the framework is used as a sensitising lens to guide interpretation rather than to predict empirical findings.

Migration Entrepreneurship Studies

Migrant entrepreneurship refers to the study of how migrants initiate, operate, and sustain businesses in host-country contexts (Portes et al., 2002). This body of work examines how migrants draw on cultural resources, co-ethnic networks, and transnational linkages while navigating institutional conditions and market structures that shape entrepreneurial opportunities (Vershina & Cruz, 2021). Recent scholarship increasingly recognises that digitalisation can reconfigure these opportunity structures (Ren & Liu, 2021), yet the digital dimension remains unevenly integrated into many established accounts of migrant entrepreneurship.

Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory, as introduced by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988), posits that resources derived from social networks, trust, and relationships significantly influence business success. For migrant entrepreneurs, social capital mitigates challenges like limited capital and cultural differences, particularly through co-ethnic networks that provide financial support, market information, and labour resources (Feng & Patulny, 2023). In the digital era, social capital extends beyond physical networks through platforms like Xiaohongshu (Rednote),³ which enable

³ “Xiaohongshu (Rednote)” is a popular mobile application in China currently. It is a social media platform which can be used for e-commerce. Usually, business owners can use it to promote their businesses or advocate their products or services. Users can also use it to share their feedback of using the products or services. The App can be used in China as well as other places around the world (Pemarathna, 2019).

entrepreneurs to build virtual connections, access broader markets, and innovate (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). Digital embeddedness may enhance social capital by creating hybrid networks that blend online and offline interactions, reducing isolation and fostering resilience. This perspective is useful for interpreting how migrant entrepreneurs may mobilise both offline and digitally mediated ties in host-country contexts.

The Mixed Embeddedness Theory

The mixed embeddedness theory, proposed by Kloosterman and Rath (2001), emphasises that migrant entrepreneurial activities are shaped by the interplay of social, cultural, and institutional factors in the host country, alongside individual resources and transnational networks. Rather than attributing entrepreneurial outcomes solely to ethnic resources or individual agency, the framework highlights how opportunity structures—such as regulatory regimes, labour markets, and sectoral conditions—interact with migrants' social embeddedness to shape business formation and development.

Empirically, mixed embeddedness has been widely applied to explain why migrant entrepreneurs tend to cluster in particular sectors, how they adapt to regulatory constraints, and why patterns of business growth vary across national and urban contexts. Studies drawing on this framework have shown, for example, how restrictive labour market conditions and regulatory barriers channel migrant entrepreneurs into self-employment or niche markets, while access to co-ethnic networks provides initial support but may also constrain diversification and scalability (Kloosterman, 2010; Waldinger et al., 1990). Subsequent applications have extended the framework to comparative contexts, demonstrating how differences in institutional environments across countries shape distinct entrepreneurial trajectories among migrant groups (Dabić et al., 2020).

More recent work has also applied mixed embeddedness to analyse how migrant entrepreneurs navigate structural barriers through simultaneous engagement with local and transnational contexts, including cross-border networks, supply chains, and markets (Drori et al., 2009). These applications establish mixed embeddedness as a foundational framework for understanding migrant entrepreneurship as a context-dependent process shaped by both structural conditions and socially embedded resources, providing a theoretical basis for examining how new dimensions—such as digital infrastructures—may further reconfigure opportunity structures in contemporary settings.

Extending Mixed Embeddedness Through Digital Embeddedness

This study conceptualises digital embeddedness as the extent to which migrant entrepreneurs become embedded in digital infrastructures, platforms, and digitally mediated networks in ways that shape access to customers, information, and resources. Digital embeddedness is not simply the use of technology; it captures how entrepreneurs engage with platform affordances, visibility regimes, and

digitally mediated trust-building practises that increasingly structure market participation. Building on mixed embeddedness, we treat digital embeddedness as an extension of opportunity structures in contemporary economies, where digital infrastructures may enable market entry and resource mobilisation while also creating new constraints and vulnerabilities (e.g. reputational exposure, platform dependence, and algorithmic visibility). This conceptualisation allows analysis of how digitally mediated environments intersect with institutional conditions and social relations in shaping migrant entrepreneurial adaptation.

Recent scholarship has called for renewed theoretical attention to how migration intersects with changing entrepreneurial contexts, institutional conditions, and language regimes in host societies. In particular, comprehensive reviews highlight that migrant entrepreneurs' participation and legitimacy are shaped not only by market structures but also by linguistic environments and minority–majority language relations (Kolesnik & Dvoutely, 2025; Orrensalo et al., 2025). Emerging work on dual embeddedness further suggests that migrants' simultaneous engagement with home- and host-country cultural contexts can generate opportunity advantages through forms of bicultural capital while also introducing boundary conditions linked to institutional and market constraints (Samami & Schøtt, 2025). Together, these perspectives underscore the need to situate migrant entrepreneurship within dynamically evolving opportunity structures that increasingly incorporate digitally mediated and linguistically differentiated environments.

Method

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design. Qualitative approaches are particularly suited to exploring complex and context-dependent entrepreneurial processes (Yamamura & Lassalle, 2022). In-depth qualitative inquiry allows researchers to examine how migrant entrepreneurs interpret constraints, mobilise resources, and adapt their practises within specific institutional and socio-cultural settings. Through this approach, the study aims to generate empirically grounded insights into the business dynamics of new Chinese migrant enterprises in Auckland and to contribute to ongoing debates in migrant entrepreneurship research.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to explore participants' entrepreneurial experiences within a flexible yet guided framework (Wang & Warn, 2018). This format allowed participants to elaborate on challenges, coping strategies, and business development processes while enabling the researcher to probe emerging themes in real time. Given the relational and networked nature of migrant entrepreneurship, semi-structured interviews were particularly suited to capturing nuanced accounts of resource mobilisation, adaptation, and interaction with institutional environments (Wang & Warn, 2019). The interview setting also facilitated the development

of rapport and open dialogue, supporting in-depth reflection on participants' lived experiences (Xu et al., 2019).

Participants

To ensure data diversity, purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques were used. This strategy helped the researcher to locate respondents who met the criteria and recommend other potential participants through existing respondents. Selection criteria for respondents included being an adult new Chinese migrant business owner (over 18 years old) who had immigrated to New Zealand from China after the introduction of the Immigration Act 1987, and whose businesses were officially registered with the New Zealand Companies Office. Most participating firms were small businesses (fewer than 20 full-time employees), consistent with the broader structure of the New Zealand economy where approximately 97% of registered enterprises fall within this category (New Zealand Small Business Council, 2025). While official definitions are adopted, this qualitative study prioritises interpretive depth rather than statistically representative comparison across firm size or revenue levels.

Table 1 provides demographic and migration-related context to situate participants' entrepreneurial trajectories. The table is not intended for comparative hypothesis testing; rather, it supports interpretation of how institutional familiarity, social positioning, and migration pathways may shape experiences of market entry and digitally mediated business practises.

Interview

Interviews were conducted with 29 eligible new Chinese migrant business owners, originally from mainland China, whose businesses cover various industries in Auckland, spanning low-skilled service industries (e.g. retail, wholesale, restaurants, and cleaning) and high-skilled professional services (e.g. financial, consulting, technology). Their companies were mainly located in the North Shore and Central area of Auckland. Interviews were recorded with the written consent of the interviewee, and the researcher also took notes during the interview. Respondents were allocated pseudonyms during the coding process to ensure confidentiality. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Selected quotations were translated into English for reporting.

Data Collection Process

All interviews were conducted between October 2023 and April 2024, to ensure the collection of the latest feedback from entrepreneurs in the specific context of the post-COVID-19 pandemic. The inclusion of the pandemic period was analytically relevant, as systemic shocks were expected to intensify the dynamics under

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of participants (Source: Authors' compilation based on interview data)

Category	Values	Frequency	Percentage
Age	26–30	3	10.3%
	31–35	6	20.7%
	36–40	8	27.6%
	41–45	8	27.6%
	46–50	3	10.3%
	51–55	1	3.4%
	Totals	29	100.0%
Years in New Zealand	Recently arrived migrants (0–10 years)	9	31.0%
	Mid-term migrants (11–20 years)	9	31.0%
	Long-term migrants (21 + years)	11	37.9%
	Totals	29	100.0%
Gender	Male	19	65.5%
	Female	10	34.5%
	Totals	29	100.0%
Immigration pathway	Skilled	26	89.7%
	Business	3	10.3%
	Totals	29	100.0%
Academic qualification	Master's degree	9	31.0%
	Bachelor's degree	15	51.7%
	Diploma	3	10.3%
	High school	2	6.9%
	Totals	29	100.0%
Nature of company	Sole proprietorship company	19	65.5%
	Joint-stock company	10	34.5%
	Totals	29	100.0%
Industry sector	E. Construction	3	10.3%
	F. Wholesale trade	1	3.4%
	G. Retail trade	4	13.8%
	H. Accommodation & food services	5	17.2%
	I. Transport, postal, & warehousing	2	6.9%
	L. Rental, hiring, & real estate services	1	3.4%
	M. Professional, scientific, & technical services	3	10.3%
	N. Administrative & support services	2	6.9%
	P. Education & training	3	10.3%
	Q. Health care & social assistance	1	3.4%
	R. Arts & recreation services	1	3.4%
	S. Other services	3	10.3%
	Totals	29	100.0%

investigation. They covered the following topics: migration experience and entrepreneurial motivation; company information; challenges and coping strategies in the early stages of entrepreneurship; business development and expansion paths; and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the business. Interviews were transcribed verbatim shortly after each session to preserve contextual detail and minimise recall bias.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 min, following the established question framework and allowing the interviewees to freely express their views to explore potential themes and viewpoints. During the interview, the researcher avoided asking leading questions to ensure the responses reflected participants' perspectives. Interviews were initially analysed in Mandarin to preserve linguistic nuance, with selected quotations later translated into English for reporting.

Although the research questions informed the interview design, the interview guide did not explicitly use the term "digital embeddedness". Instead, interviews included open-ended prompts about marketing practises, customer engagement, online channels, and changes in business operations over time. This approach was intended to avoid imposing analytical terminology on participants and to allow digitally mediated practises to emerge from participants' accounts, which were subsequently interpreted through the lens of digital embeddedness during analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis adopted a theoretically informed abductive strategy, enabling iterative movement between empirical material and sensitising theoretical concepts (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This approach facilitated ongoing dialogue between data and theory, allowing conceptual refinement without presupposing theoretical outcomes while maintaining strong empirical grounding.

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Transcripts were first read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively to remain grounded in participants' narratives and to avoid imposing predefined categories. NVivo software supported the systematic organisation and retrieval of coded material. Through iterative comparison across interviews, codes were progressively refined into higher-order categories and overarching themes. Concepts from the literature on mixed embeddedness, social capital, migrant entrepreneurship, and digitalisation functioned as sensitising concepts to guide abstraction rather than as predetermined analytical frames.

To enhance analytical rigour and trustworthiness, the study followed established qualitative criteria of credibility and transparency (Nowell et al., 2017). This included maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, conducting cross-case comparisons across industries and demographic backgrounds, and engaging in regular peer debriefing with supervisors to review emerging interpretations. A summary of the coding structure is presented in Table 2.

All interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim in Mandarin. The researcher, a native Mandarin speaker, carried out the interviews and transcription

without the use of an interpreter, thereby minimising translation distortion. Data were initially analysed in Chinese, and selected quotations were subsequently translated into English. Translations were checked against original transcripts to ensure conceptual equivalence rather than literal correspondence, and interpretive ambiguities were discussed with supervisors to preserve participants' intended meanings.

Findings

Challenges and Constraints Shaping Digital Embeddedness

Participants described multiple constraints that shaped their entrepreneurial activities in Auckland. Some challenges, such as high operating costs or staffing difficulties, reflect broader small-business conditions in competitive urban markets. However, participants indicated that these constraints became particularly consequential in the early stages of settlement due to limited local networks, regulatory unfamiliarity, and the need to establish credibility beyond co-ethnic customer bases. Importantly, these conditions did not simply coexist with digital practises; they shaped the necessity and form of digital embeddedness, influencing how entrepreneurs engaged with platforms and digitally mediated market infrastructures.

Structural and Regulatory Constraints in a High-Income Context

Language proficiency was a fundamental challenge for many entrepreneurs, especially in accessing key information, negotiating with local stakeholders, and building relationships with non-Chinese business owners. Almost all respondents emphasised the role of language as both a social and economic barrier. Wei illustrated the language and cultural differences challenge: "The language barriers make it difficult for us to enter the mainstream market. Even if my English improves, I still struggle with understanding cultural nuances, like jokes". Similarly, Dong elaborated on how limited language proficiency created gaps in accessing unfiltered information: "If you have limited language skills, the information you get is second-hand. Direct access to unfiltered information is essential, and language is a barrier to achieving that". These accounts indicate how limited language proficiency constrains entrepreneurs' capacity to navigate regulatory systems, access industry information, and engage with mainstream business networks.

Managing the New Zealand regulatory framework poses another significant obstacle, especially for entrepreneurs unfamiliar with local compliance systems. Interviewees indicated that these challenges occupied much of their time and resources, which reduced their focus on business expansion and innovation. Michael noted the increasing complexity of managing compliance: "Dealing with the paperwork has become more time-consuming. I can't just delegate it to someone else because I'm ultimately responsible if something goes wrong, which creates anxiety". Bruce, who used to run a restaurant, shared the difficulty

Table 2 Overview of the coding process and theme development (Source: Authors' coding, derived from analysis of interview data)

First-cycle codes	Categories	Themes
Limited English proficiency, difficulty understanding cultural nuances, reliance on second-hand information	Language and communication barriers	Challenges and constraints shaping digital embeddedness
Unfamiliarity with NZ compliance systems, complexity of paperwork, differences in sector-specific regulations	Regulatory and institutional challenges	Challenges and constraints shaping digital embeddedness
High tax rates, rising fuel and resource costs, small market size, intense local competition	Market and cost constraints	Challenges and constraints shaping digital embeddedness
Small customer base within ethnic market, limited scalability	Market scale limitations	Challenges and constraints shaping digital embeddedness
High staff turnover after PR, short-term employment, high training costs	Workforce instability	Challenges and constraints shaping digital embeddedness
Difficulty finding skilled or committed staff, staff poaching clients	Workforce management challenges	Challenges and constraints shaping digital embeddedness
Supplier discrimination, exclusion from product launches, stricter supply conditions	Systemic discrimination and exclusion	Challenges and constraints shaping digital embeddedness
Cyberbullying on social media, false reviews, online harassment	Reputational risks from digital platforms	Challenges and constraints shaping digital embeddedness
Business closures during lockdowns, supply chain disruptions, loss of customers	Lockdowns and border closures	Challenges and constraints shaping digital embeddedness
Reduced consumer spending, shift to online shopping	Post-pandemic economic downturn	Challenges and constraints shaping digital embeddedness
Rapid shift to online platforms, digital marketing adoption, remote consultations	Digital adaptation during pandemic	Challenges and constraints shaping digital embeddedness
Use of Xiaohongshu platforms for precise marketing, customer targeting	Digital transformation strategies	Digital embeddedness as an adaptive mechanism
Diversifying product range, entering new markets	Product diversification	Digital embeddedness as an adaptive mechanism
Providing personalised services, building community relationships, using customer data for service improvement	Enhanced customer experience	Digital embeddedness as an adaptive mechanism
Leveraging government subsidies, co-ethnic community support, sharing resources	Leveraging support networks	Digital embeddedness as an adaptive mechanism
Renting offices to formalise business image, data-driven strategic planning	Professionalisation of operations	Digital embeddedness as an adaptive mechanism

This table illustrates the progression from first-cycle inductive codes to higher-order categories and final themes through an iterative analytical process. Initial coding was conducted inductively based on participants' narratives, while concepts drawn from the literature on mixed embeddedness, social capital, migrant entrepreneurship, and digitalisation were used as sensitising concepts during later stages of interpretation and abstraction. This process reflects a theoretically informed abductive approach to qualitative analysis

Contextual note: While initial coding distinguished between structural, operational, social, and pandemic-related challenges, these categories are analytically consolidated in the findings into two overarching themes: (1) challenges and constraints shaping digital embeddedness and (2) digital embeddedness as an adaptive mechanism. This consolidation reflects an analytical reorganisation at the interpretation stage rather than a change to the underlying coding, and ensures consistency between Table 2, the findings narrative, and the conceptual framework (Fig. 1)

of adapting to specific local policies: “Allergy regulations here are completely different from China. Missing these details could have serious legal implications for my restaurant”.

In the New Zealand context, food businesses are subject to strict food safety and allergen management requirements, including obligations to identify, manage, and clearly communicate the presence of common allergens (such as nuts, dairy, or gluten) to consumers. These requirements place legal responsibility on business owners for compliance and accurate disclosure, increasing regulatory complexity for migrant entrepreneurs unfamiliar with local food safety regimes (Ministry for Primary Industries, 2023). These accounts highlight how regulatory systems, while necessary for governance, can pose significant challenges for migrant entrepreneurs with limited institutional familiarity.

Operational Constraints, Market Visibility, and Network Limitations

High operational costs, including taxes and rising resource costs, were identified as significant constraints on business sustainability. Ken explained: “Taxes here are extremely high, leaving little room for profitability, especially in a competitive market like Auckland”. Kun, as a tourism operator, noted that rising post-pandemic fuel costs had exacerbated financial pressures: “The cost of fuel and other resources has risen dramatically compared to before the pandemic, making it very difficult to maintain profitability”. These financial pressures exacerbate the difficulties faced by entrepreneurs already operating in niche markets.

The small scale of the Auckland market further restricts growth opportunities, especially for businesses targeting specific ethnic or niche markets. Miao and Mike, both of whom operated logistics businesses in Auckland, held similar views: “The market and customer base in New Zealand are so small and competitive. It’s difficult to scale up a business and find ways to expand, no matter what industry you operate in here”. Kaiwen, whose business primarily served the Chinese community, stated: “The market here is too small. Due to my business mainly targets the Chinese community, our growth opportunities are even more limited, making it difficult to grow beyond a certain point”. This observation highlights how market constraints and high levels of competition confined businesses to operations with limited scalability.

Some entrepreneurs described experiences of perceived discrimination and exclusion in their business interactions. This discrimination often presented as unequal resource access, exclusion from key industry opportunities, and unfavourable supplier terms. Kent emphasised the discriminatory practises by local suppliers:

Some local companies do not invite us to new product launches, feeling like we are excluded from the inner circle. And suppliers impose stricter conditions on us than on other ethnic groups. For example, they sometimes bundle products or set additional requirements for Chinese entrepreneurs.

These accounts suggest perceived unequal treatment that may affect entrepreneurs’ access to business opportunities and resources. Nike shared his perspective on

the broader social context: “Hidden racial discrimination still exists in New Zealand. It may not be prevalent, but it affects our treatment in professional environments”.

This exclusion from key networks and opportunities restricted resource access, which limited the ability of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs to establish networks and compete on equal terms in the Auckland business ecosystem. This suggests perceived exclusion and unequal access to certain business networks, which may constrain opportunities for resource mobilisation and mainstream market participation. Given the qualitative scope of this study, we report these experiences as perceived barriers within business networks rather than as definitive evidence of systemic patterns across the wider economy.

Recruiting and retaining a stable workforce proved to be a persistent challenge for many Chinese migrant businesses in Auckland. Participants frequently mentioned high training costs, short-term staff commitments, and employee turnover as significant barriers. Hank elaborated on the financial and operational pressures that come with high staff turnover:

It takes about two years to train a skilled employee, but many leave as soon as they get permanent residency (PR). This creates a continuous cycle of recruitment and retraining, which is costly and frustrating, and a heavy operational and financial burden on the company.

Similarly, Kent, a hair salon owner, described the operational disruptions caused by high turnover: “I spend several years training someone, but they left after they got PR. Finding a suitable replacement staff has extra cost and is time-consuming”. This situation reflects the unintended consequences of immigration policies, which aimed to attract skilled migrants but unintentionally affected the labour base of migrant businesses. In addition to turnover related to PR, some participants also encountered challenges with employees who left shortly after being hired. Jenny’s traditional Chinese medicine clinic faced this issue: “I recently hired two people, but they left after two days. It’s so frustrating and disrupts our operations”. These illustrate the problems caused by workforce instability, which hinders the long-term planning and development of migrant businesses.

In addition to recruitment and retention, managing employee behaviour and performance brings additional challenges. Entrepreneurs often struggle to find staff who are both skilled and committed to long-term employment. Hank, owner of a hair and beauty salon, observed: “It’s hard to manage employees here. Some people are not fully committed to their jobs and it’s hard to find people who want to stay for long-term”. Furthermore, some participants emphasised the negative impact of staff separation on customer relationships and business continuity. Paul explained: “When employees leave, they sometimes take customers with them, which has a significant negative impact on our business”. These management challenges have increased operational pressures and limited Chinese migrant businesses’ ability to focus on growth and strategic planning.

Several participants noted difficulties in addressing negative online experiences, particularly due to limited platform-level mechanisms for dispute resolution or complaint management. These experiences indicate the dual role of social media

platforms in enabling market expansion, while also introducing new operational and reputational challenges for migrant businesses.

Across these constraints, participants frequently described turning to digital platforms not merely as tools, but as market infrastructures through which visibility, information, and customer relationships could be cultivated. In this sense, barriers to market entry and mainstream integration helped structure the pathways through which entrepreneurs sought digital embeddedness, including platform-based promotion, digitally mediated trust-building, and online network expansion.

Systemic Shocks and Amplified Vulnerabilities

Systemic disruptions, including the COVID-19 pandemic, amplified existing vulnerabilities among businesses with limited offline customer bases and constrained access to mainstream distribution channels. Participants described how digitally mediated channels became more salient during this period, enabling rapid adjustments in communication, marketing, and customer retention. Rather than treating shocks as separate phenomena, the findings suggest that they intensified the importance of digital embeddedness as a condition for adaptation while also increasing exposure to platform volatility and reputational risk.

The strict lockdown measures and border closures during the pandemic significantly disrupted international tourism and global supply chain industries that rely on physical customer traffic. Entrepreneurs in industries such as hospitality, tourism, and retail were most severely affected. Kent, who operated a tourism business, described the serious impact: “My business was completely shut down for three years due to the border closures. To survive, I had to turn to the construction industry to support my employees and their families”. Similarly, Pen shared: “My business couldn’t operate from 2020 to 2023 because of the border restrictions. During that time, I had to temporarily close the company and look for other jobs to survive”.

For the hospitality industry, the reduction in passenger flow during the lockdown period led to temporary business closures. Andi, who runs two convenience stores in the Auckland central business district (CBD), explained: “With the lockdowns, the CBD was empty. There were no customers, and I had no choice but to temporarily close my store”. The interruption of the supply chain has further exacerbated the situation. Miao, who operates a logistics business, noted: “The border closure has led to frequent delivery delays, sometimes lasting up to two months. My customers are getting frustrated, and it was difficult to manage their expectations”. Lockdowns and border closures have affected Chinese migrant businesses, which are vulnerable to systemic disruptions in global and local markets.

Even after the lifting of pandemic restrictions, economic recovery has been slow. Entrepreneurs faced reduced purchasing power and shifting consumer behaviour, which extended the challenges of rebuilding their businesses. Hank, the hair salon owner, described the decline in discretionary spending: “Customers have reduced spending on non-essential services. It’s taking much longer for us to regain pre-pandemic revenue levels”. Entrepreneurs in the retail industry noted changes in consumer behaviour, such as the increased preference for online shopping. Miao remarked: “Before the pandemic, most New Zealanders preferred shopping in

physical stores. Now, many have become accustomed to online shopping, the change in consumer behaviour has led to a change in the retail landscape". This economic downturn has brought difficulties in rebuilding consumer confidence and adapting to new market conditions.

Digital Embeddedness as an Adaptive Mechanism

The findings indicate that digital embeddedness serves as a key adaptive mechanism linking constraints to entrepreneurial outcomes. Participants' accounts suggest that engagement with digital platforms, online networks, and digitally mediated market infrastructures supported three interrelated processes: (1) building visibility and accessing customers, (2) extending beyond co-ethnic markets and engaging broader consumer segments, and (3) enhancing adaptive capacity under changing conditions. The following subsections trace these processes using participants' narratives.

Platform-Based Visibility and Customer Targeting

Ting described how Xiaohongshu enabled targeted customer engagement: "The platform helps us target our audience effectively, about 90% of our customers come from Xiaohongshu". Kaiwen emphasised the help of social media platform marketing for his businesses:

Xiaohongshu has precise positioning function, which could help us effectively find target customer groups and deliver marketing information to them. Although our company has only been established for a short while, 90% of our customers were converted through this platform.

Together, these accounts indicate that platform-mediated visibility and targeting supported customer access and market reach within constrained offline networks and competitive local conditions. These practises illustrate how platform-based visibility functioned as a compensatory practise in contexts where offline customer access and network reach were constrained.

Extending Beyond Co-Ethnic Markets and Engaging Broader Consumer Segments

Eric explained how Xiaohongshu transformed his business operations model:

Nowadays, both tourists and residents in Auckland are frequently using Xiaohongshu. We use Xiaohongshu to attract younger customers by sharing posts about Jellycat toys, which are popular among 20- to 30-year-olds, and this is a customer group we previously lacked. Now our shop should have the most varieties of Jellycat toys in Auckland. Xiaohongshu's ability to accurately target customers has changed our sales model, with a conversion rate of 10%–20%.

In the training sector, entrepreneurs are also shifting to online teaching models during the pandemic. Paul noted: "We moved our classes online within days of the

lockdown being announced. Although it was challenging, it minimised losses and allowed us to continue serving students”. These narratives suggest that digital platforms enabled entrepreneurs to extend beyond primarily co-ethnic customer bases and engage broader consumer segments while remaining embedded in niche market logics.

Resilience, Learning, and Emerging Platform-Related Vulnerabilities

By contrast, Baoluo described a different experience, which is the risks of digital harassment: “We faced cyberbullying on Xiaohongshu. The false reviews and malicious comments heavily damaged our reputation and mental health. It took us a year to recover from the impact”. Similarly, Jackson, a restaurant owner, emphasised the damaging effects of malicious false reviews on social media: “Some comments were obviously fake, but it’s influenced potential customers. Even though this didn’t cause us to go out of business, it reduced customer traffic and revenue”.

Several participants reported negative online experiences such as false reviews, reputational attacks, or hostile comments. While these incidents were described as harmful to business confidence and customer trust, the interview data do not allow definitive attribution of such behaviours to racialised motives. We therefore report these accounts as platform-related vulnerabilities that may affect small, consumer-facing businesses, highlighting how digital embeddedness can create new risks alongside opportunities.

In addition, the transition to digital teaching faces challenges in the education industry. As the pandemic restricted people’s mobility, Die transferred her school’s physical classes to online teaching, with unforeseen consequences:

The biggest problem for online teaching was copyright and piracy. Some users recorded and shared our courses without permission, while others shared their accounts with unpaid users. This caused us to lose a large portion of our revenue.

In the healthcare industry, adopting innovative methods of social media can help maintain operations during the pandemic. Zhenni, who runs a traditional Chinese medicine clinic, shared her success with digital innovation: “We have launched a remote consultation and herbal medicine delivery service during the pandemic. This allowed us to continue serving patients while complying with social distancing measures”.

Overall, participants’ accounts indicate that digitally mediated adaptation involved ongoing learning and experimentation, but also new dependencies and vulnerabilities shaped by platform governance and reputational exposure.

Additional Adaptive Practises Beyond Digital Platforms

Beyond platform-based strategies, some participants also described complementary adaptive practises that supported business continuity and adjustment. These

practises, including product diversification, reliance on support networks, and increasing professionalisation, were not inherently digital, but often intersected with entrepreneurs' broader learning processes and responses to uncertainty. They are therefore reported as complementary and contextual forms of adaptation, rather than as constitutive elements of digital embeddedness.

Product Diversification To reduce risks and adapt to changing market demands, many Chinese migrant businesses in Auckland adopted product diversification as a strategy to reduce dependence on a single revenue stream and to serve a wider range of customer needs. Eric runs an e-commerce business and noted the necessity of diversifying product offerings in a dynamic market:

Relying on the single product or channel is too risky. We have diversified our offerings to stay competitive in a rapidly changing market. For example, with the increasing direct connection between New Zealand brands and Chinese shopping websites, traditional purchasing models are decreasing, which forces us to explore and expand new product categories.

Product diversification proved to be a key strategy for maintaining competitiveness in a fluctuating business environment, which helps entrepreneurs to reduce risks and adapt to market changes.

Enhanced Customer Experience Improving customer experience became a core strategy for building trust, fostering customer loyalty, and sustaining growth in Auckland's competitive market. Kevin described his community-orientated approach:

Our business is building relationships, not just transactions. For example, on rainy days, we provide umbrellas to customers and interact with children by giving them small gifts. These interactions create a warm community feeling that fosters long-term customer loyalty.

Hank mentioned the role of data analysis in improving customer satisfaction: "We analyse customer data to track their preferences and adjust our services accordingly. This approach allows us to anticipate their needs and ensure their satisfaction". By focusing on personalised services and innovative practises, these entrepreneurs strengthened customer relationships and enhanced their market influence.

Leveraging Support Networks Support networks, including government subsidies and co-ethnic communities, played a critical role in helping businesses cope with crises and sustain operations. Yong expressed gratitude for New Zealand government wage subsidies during the pandemic: "The government wage subsidy program was essential for maintaining our business during lockdowns. Without it, we wouldn't have been able to retain our employees". Many entrepreneurs also relied on informal co-ethnic networks for guidance, partnerships, and access to resources. Bruce noted: "The Chinese community network was invaluable during my early

years of entrepreneurship. My friends shared industry knowledge helped me understand the local business landscape and provided critical support, which saved my time and effort”. By leveraging formal and informal networks, these entrepreneurs can overcome financial difficulties and obtain access to necessary resources during challenging periods.

Professionalisation Faced with increasing competition and higher customer expectations, many entrepreneurs are professionalising their business processes to improve operational efficiency and scalability. This included formalising operations, adopting data-driven strategies, and building long-term strategic plans. Wei shared his efforts to professionalise operations: “Although my industry doesn’t require an office, I rented one to present a more professional image and organise my operations more systematically”. Kevin emphasised the importance of market observation and adaptation: “We closely monitor market trends and analyse customer demand to adjust our strategies proactively. This has been key to our success”. These efforts to professionalise their operations reflect the long-term vision and adaptability of Chinese migrant businesses in Auckland. By formalising processes and adopting data-driven strategies, they have improved their competitiveness in the host market. These accounts reflect efforts to enhance organisational legitimacy and operational stability, rather than platform-based strategies, and are therefore reported as complementary forms of adaptation. Figure 1 summarises the qualitatively inferred relationships between constraints, digitally mediated practises, and adaptive outcomes identified across the findings.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how new Chinese migrant entrepreneurs navigate structural and operational constraints in a high-income, multicultural host-country context, with particular attention to the role of digital embeddedness. Interpreting the findings in dialogue with scholarship on mixed embeddedness (Kloosterman, 2010; Kloosterman & Rath, 2001), migrant entrepreneurship (Dabić et al., 2020; Portes et al., 2002), and digitalisation (Ren & Liu, 2021; Yamamura & Lassalle, 2022), the discussion highlights how structural conditions, institutional environments, and digitally mediated practises interact to shape entrepreneurial trajectories among new Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in Auckland.

Consistent with prior research, the findings demonstrate that migrant entrepreneurs continue to face multiple structural and operational constraints, including language-related barriers, regulatory unfamiliarity, workforce instability, limited market scale, and perceived exclusion from certain business networks. Interpreted through the lenses of mixed embeddedness and the liabilities of smallness and foreignness (Dabić et al., 2020; Haq et al., 2024), these constraints help explain why resource frictions and institutional challenges persist even in relatively stable and supportive high-income business environments. Importantly, these barriers did not operate in isolation. Instead, they interacted with limited local network access and competitive market conditions, shaping entrepreneurs’ reliance

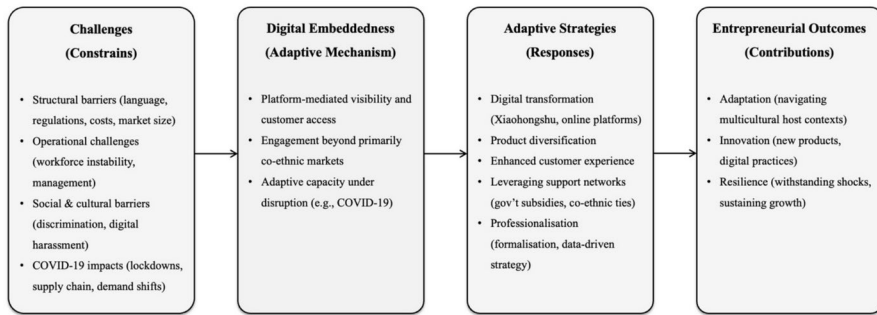


Fig. 1 Conceptual framework synthesising qualitatively inferred relationships based on empirical research findings (Source: Authors' construction based on interview analysis; the framework represents an interpretive synthesis rather than a causal model)

on co-ethnic ties and, increasingly, on digitally mediated practises as adaptive responses. Workforce instability linked to residency transitions constrained offline organisational capacity, which in turn intensified reliance on platform-mediated customer acquisition and retention.

Extending debates within mixed embeddedness scholarship, the findings illustrate how opportunity structures in digitally mediated economies are not confined to regulatory regimes and sectoral conditions but are increasingly shaped by platform infrastructures and algorithmically structured visibility regimes (Ren & Liu, 2021; Yamamura & Lassalle, 2022). Digital embeddedness emerged as a key adaptive mechanism through which entrepreneurs navigated constrained offline networks and limited mainstream market access. Platform-based practises supported customer visibility, facilitated targeted engagement, and enabled entrepreneurs to extend beyond narrowly defined co-ethnic markets while remaining embedded within niche market logics. In this sense, digital embeddedness did not replace existing forms of social and economic embeddedness but reconfigured how these connections were mobilised across online and offline spaces.

The findings further suggest that digital embeddedness may amplify forms of dual embeddedness or bicultural capital (Samsami & Schøtt, 2025) by enabling entrepreneurs to operate simultaneously across Chinese-language digital platforms and broader host-country consumer environments. Thus, digital infrastructures expand the repertoire of resource mobilisation strategies available to migrant entrepreneurs, reshaping opportunity structures in ways that extend beyond traditional accounts of ethnic networks and institutional constraints.

At the same time, the study complicates predominantly opportunity-oriented accounts of digitalisation in migrant entrepreneurship. While some literature emphasises the enabling potential of digital platforms for resource mobilisation and market access (Ren & Liu, 2021), the present findings highlight the ambivalent character of platform dependence. Participants reported reputational vulnerabilities, exposure to negative online interactions, and heightened dependence on platform governance structures. These dynamics underscore that digital embeddedness introduces new forms of uncertainty and risk alongside opportunity, reinforcing recent calls to

conceptualise digital infrastructures as both enabling and constraining components of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Yamamura & Lassalle, 2022).

Systemic shocks, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, further intensified these dynamics. Rather than treating shocks as analytically separate phenomena, as observed in parts of the migrant entrepreneurship literature (Drori et al., 2009), the findings indicate that such disruptions amplified pre-existing structural constraints while simultaneously increasing the salience of digital embeddedness. Lockdowns, border closures, and shifts in consumer behaviour heightened reliance on online platforms for communication, service delivery, and customer retention. Thus, digital practises became central to business continuity under conditions of uncertainty, while also accelerating exposure to platform volatility and competitive digital environments.

These findings contribute to ongoing debates on migrant entrepreneurship by demonstrating how digital embeddedness functions as an extension of mixed embeddedness in high-income, multicultural contexts. Rather than positioning digitalisation as a uniformly enabling force, the study shows how digitally mediated practises interact with institutional conditions, labour dynamics, and market scale constraints. In doing so, it refines existing accounts of mixed embeddedness by foregrounding the contingent and ambivalent role of digital infrastructures in shaping entrepreneurial adaptation.

While the study is grounded in the Auckland context, its insights are relevant to broader discussions of migrant entrepreneurship in digitally mediated economies. The findings suggest that institutional support environments may need to recognise both the opportunities and vulnerabilities associated with platform-based engagement. While the study offers context-sensitive insights that may inform policy discussions, it does not prescribe specific policy measures. Further research would be required to evaluate how regulatory, labour, and digital governance frameworks interact to shape migrant entrepreneurial outcomes across different national and urban contexts.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses on Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in a single metropolitan setting, which may limit transferability to other migrant groups or institutional environments. Second, while the sample captures sectoral diversity, the qualitative design prioritises depth over statistical generalisability and does not systematically compare firm size, revenue levels, or performance trajectories across cases. Consequently, variation in digital embeddedness across different levels of business success and industry-specific conditions cannot be systematically assessed within the scope of this study. Third, the analysis reflects entrepreneurs' reported experiences and perceptions; while these accounts illuminate lived realities within specific business contexts, they do not establish broader structural patterns across the wider economy.

Future research could adopt comparative or longitudinal designs to examine how digital embeddedness evolves over time and across regulatory, cultural, and technological environments. In particular, comparative studies across different migrant groups or institutional regimes may clarify how digital infrastructures intersect with language environments, minority–majority relations, and market scale conditions in shaping entrepreneurial opportunity structures. Such work would further refine theoretical understanding of migrant entrepreneurship in increasingly digitalised and platform-mediated economies.

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Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate This project was approved under Massey University Human Ethics Committee's Low Risk Ethics Notification process (Low Risk Notification Number: 4000026983). All ethical procedures were followed as approved by Massey University's Low Risk Ethics Notification process. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and given the right to withdraw at any time without consequences. All participants signed a written consent form before taking part in the interview process.

Consent for Publication Consent for publication was obtained from all participants. They were informed that pseudonymised quotes from their interviews may be used in the publication and agreed to this in writing.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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