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# Identity-work among Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs residing in Northern English regional contexts: A qualitative examination

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the identity-work practiced by Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs residing in the UK who are tasked with forming credible identities. The men's intersecting identities as 'Black', 'African', 'immigrants' create disadvantages for them in their roles as *entrepreneurs in diaspora* existing in regional English contexts where Whiteness is associated with entrepreneurial credibility, and Black African immigrant masculinity is problematised and discriminated against. Drawing on rich qualitative data, we show the men participating in *covering* and *accentuating* identity-work to align their self-presentations and the operational identities of their businesses with symbolic Whiteness, thereby heightening the chances of their businesses surviving by engaging with White customers and gaining a level of integration within local White entrepreneurial networks. We position the men's identity-work as a compensatory response to the structural-level disadvantages they encounter. We contextualise the men's identity-work in relation to Critical Race Theory and from a policy implication perspective.

## 1. Introduction

In the UK, Black African male immigrants are twice as likely to form a business compared to White, British-born citizens (Hart, Bonner, Levie, & Heery, 2017, p. 28 – 29), showing the proclivity for this demographic to engage in entrepreneurship. However, forming a business is just the start of an ongoing, multifaceted *entrepreneurial journey* (McMullen & Dimov, 2013) for Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs. To date, the way high levels of failure define businesses formed by Black African male immigrants has been focused on (Jones, 2017; Amankwah-Amoah, Adomako, & Berko, 2021; Nwankwo, 2005). Another, though less explored, part of the unfolding entrepreneurial journey experienced by Black African immigrants occurs at the level of identity. It is important for the identity-related aspects of Black African immigrant entrepreneurs to be explored for a fuller picture of their distinctive experiences of *doing* immigrant entrepreneurship to emerge.

Having formed a business in the UK, Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs should ensure their identities – i.e. their micro-level self-presentations – conform to culturally-constructed expectations which define what a credible entrepreneurial identity constitutes in their host nation (Radu-Lefebvre, Lefebvre, Crosina, & Hytti, 2021; Marlow & McAdam, 2015, p. 794). Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs must, therefore, recognise what a creditable entrepreneurial identity constitutes in the settings he encounters and then reflexively align his personal identity with this cultural ideal, through symbolic acts and behaviours.

Thus, there is a need for Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs to participate in identity-work, being 'the actions that people enact to build, revise, and maintain … identities' (Caza, Vough, & Puranik, 2018, p. 893). By participating in identity-work, Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs can – in theory - systematically build and maintain entrepreneurial identities that are seen as credible by others; thereby integrating into localised business networks, attracting customers and realising business growth in their host nation on the basis of their identities 'fitting' expectations.

However, epistemologically, there is a lack of qualitative work that explores the identity-work that Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs in the UK participate in, and the impact this identity-work has on the men's entrepreneurial ventures. We are not currently aware of any study that qualitatively explores how Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs in the UK respond to the challenges they face in their roles as entrepreneurs through specific forms of identity-work. At a time when

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calls exist for empirical insights into identity-work to emerge which compliment theoretically rooted analyses (Brown, 2022, p. 1223–1224), we fill this research gap through a qualitative examination of the identity-work of a cohort of 21 Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs who, after moving to the UK from Sub-Saharan Africa, have set up small businesses in regional contexts located in Northern England. We study the men's identity-work through qualitative methods, as this approach allows the nuances and complexities of the men's identity-work to be properly understood and contextualised.

We contribute to this special issue on *African entrepreneurship at an international level* specifically, by deepen understandings of the *need* for Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs *in diaspora* (Nyame-Asiamah, Amoako, Amankwah-Amoah, & Debrah, 2020) to participate in identity-work, as they attempt to establish businesses in an international context where they experience discrimination (Kroeger & Wright, 2021) and a 'liability of origin' (Amankwah-Amoah & Debrah, 2017) because of the way their intersecting identities as 'black', 'African', 'immigrant' men are treated and perceived in a culture where Whiteness is hegemonic and Black African immigrant masculinity is stigmatised. Further, we are motivated to show the extent to which the acquisition of symbolic Whiteness defines the men's identity-work. We theories the men's identity-work as a an agentic *response* to the structural level discrimination that the men encounter in regional contexts where Whiteness is especially normative and hegemonic.

Our article unfolds over four sections. First, we review literature to underpin the concepts of identity, identity-work, entrepreneurial identity and intersectionality, which are central to our analysis. Second, we present a methodology discussion, outlining our fieldwork, approach to analysing data and the *entwined positionality* (Bolade-Ogunfodun, Richmond Soga, & Laker, 2022) that our methodological process benefited from. Third, we present findings on the 'covering' and 'accentuating' identity-work strategies which the Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs we studied adopt in order to align their personal identities and the identities of their businesses with symbolic whiteness. Finally, we discuss our study in relation to Critical Race Theory, from a policy perspective, and suggest future trajectories through which our analysis can be developed.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Identity, identity-work and entrepreneurial identity

We use the term identity – one of the most contested terms in social science (see Brubaker & Cooper, 2000) – to refer to two aspects of a person's self-presentation. First, to refer to objective, 'foundational, deep, basic and abiding' traits, which position an individual within a categorical identity group (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000, p. 7) and which are *ascribed* to individuals by others (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022, p. 25). Being a Black African immigrant male is a foundational, abiding identity-trait. Second, incorporating a cultural-constructionist view, identity also refers to the evanescent, temporal, fluid elements of one's self-presentation, such clothing. These temporal signifiers of identity are loaded with cultural meaning, and can be put on and take off by an agent *in relation* to their abiding identity category. They are fundamental in 'how people 'announce and enact' who they are in social interactions' (Brown, 2022, p. 1210), and therefore fundamental in the management and construction of identity in particular empirical settings.

Identity is highly significant in shaping occupational experience (Ashcraft, 2013, p. 26). If an actor's identity is incongruent with others' expectations, a lack of occupational belonging, even penalisation, will be experienced (Giazitzoglu, 2022). In contrast, actors who successfully align their identities with others' expectations experience heightened belonging and success in their careered lived-experiences. Accordingly, actors will strategically participate in identity-work, being 'the actions that people enact to build, revise, and maintain … identities' (Caza et al., 2018, p. 893), in order to craft identities that fit with occupational expectations held by others. This applies to the identities of entrepreneurs.

'Entrepreneurial activities and behaviours must align sufficiently with societal and sector norms and stakeholder expectations … the relationship between entrepreneurial activity and entrepreneurial identity is found to be mutually reinforcing' (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022, p. 26). Hence, participating in identity-work to project an identity that others (e.g. customers, suppliers and employees) see as credible is a significant part of *doing* contemporary entrepreneurship. When entrepreneurs project an identity that adheres to societal expectations, they substantially bolster their chances of experiencing business growth and reduce the prospect of business failure (Boyd, Harrison, & McInerny, 2021; Down & Giazitzoglu, 2014; Swail & Marlow, 2018; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Radu-Lefebvre, Loue, & Redien-Collot, 2019). This is illustrated in Giazitzoglu and Down (2017) ethnographic study which shows white male entrepreneurs participating in identity-work rooted in wearing certain clothing, driving Germanic cars and expressing Conservative political opinions. The men perform this identity-work to symbolically align their personal identities with definitions of what a 'valid entrepreneurial identity' constitutes in a semi-rural locale. Male entrepreneurs who fail to perform identity-work suitably are eschewed from local networks and opportunities.

When an entrepreneurial actor possesses abiding identity traits that do not 'fit' a-priori, structurally supplied definitions of entrepreneurial identity, *compensatory* identity-work must be participated in. Feminist scholars have produced particularly rich empirical insights into compensatory identity-work practiced by entrepreneurs. This Feminist scholarship derives from the ontological premise that masculinity is an abiding identity category that commands hegemony and normativity in the spaces where enterprise occurs (Ogbor, 2000; Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004). To employ Ashcraft (2013, p. 6) metaphor of *the glass slipper*, men 'fit' in the places where entrepreneurship occurs because wider, culturally constructed narratives position entrepreneurship and masculinity as synonymous, while simultaneously positioning female entrepreneurs as 'less significant' (Ahl, 2006, p. 595).

In response female entrepreneurs participate in identity-work designed 'to bridge that gulf between devalued feminised identities and the masculinised prototypical entrepreneur' (Swail & Marlow, 2018, p. 257), and 'negotiate the dissonance between their ascribed femininity and the masculinity inherent within entrepreneurship' (Marlow & McAdam, 2015, p. 794). Analysis has identified female entrepreneurs participating in identity-work that aligns their discourses (Wee & Brooks, 2012) and dramaturgical interactions with those stereotypically associated with male entrepreneurs (Stead, 2017; Bruni et al., 2004). By engaging in this identity-work, female entrepreneurs go some way in finding occupational fit in their roles as entrepreneurs, in the heavily masculinised spaces where entrepreneurship is *done* (Marlow & McAdam, 2015, p. 806), thereby compensating for the discrimination and sense of 'otherness' their gendered identities construct.

The need to patriciate in compensatory identity-work has also been highlighted in relation to gay male entrepreneurs. Rumens and Ozturk (2019) suggest that to 'fit' in entrepreneurial contexts, it is necessary to project not *just* masculinity but, more specifically, heterosexual masculinity. Rumens and Ozturk describe gay male entrepreneurs participating in identity-work that aligns them with heterosexual masculinity and which disguises their gay masculine identities. This allows gay male entrepreneurs to compensate for the lack of fit their sexuality may construct in enterprising contexts where heterosexual masculinity is normative and hegemonic.

In the same way that female entrepreneurs and gay male entrepreneurs must participate in distinctive, compensatory identity-work, it is reasonable to assume that Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs residing in the UK participate in unique identity-work, as they attempt to obtain an identity 'fit'. 'Having a particular social identity means being at one with a certain group, being like others in the group' (Stets &

Burke, 2000, p. 226). Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs may participate in specific forms of identity-work to 'be like' actors associated with entrepreneurship in the UK. Yet, as we saw, Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs are understudied from an identity-work perspective.

### 2.2. Intersectionality

Intersectionality has emerged as a significant concept in the study of identity-work. Intersectionality investigates how aspects of identity aggregate together, preventing components of identity being seen as disparate, autonomous and isolated. Scholarship looking at entrepreneur's identity-work has benefited from adopting an intersectional perspective to illustrate, first, how multiple aspects of an entrepreneur's identity combine together in social structures to disempower them and, second, how entrepreneurs participate in forms of compensatory identity-work to counter their disempowerment and find identity 'fit'. Indeed, 'when combined with identity-work, intersectionality offers scope to analyse in greater depth the multiplicity and dynamism of interactions with social structures thus offering a better understanding of how individuals respond and relate to external structures of power' (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022, p. 28).

For example, Essers and Benschop (2007) investigate female immigrant entrepreneurs of Moroccan and Turkish origin living in the Netherlands; and Adeeko and Treanor (2022) consider female refugee entrepreneurs in the UK. Both studies, taking an intersectional approach, show the women's identities as 'women', 'immigrants' and 'refugees' – and 'women immigrant refugees' – intersect to create inequality and marginalisation in their lives. In response, the women participate in distinctive forms of compensatory identity-work to align their identities to images of Western femininity that are conventional in Dutch and British Society. This identity-work ameliorates some of the marginalisation the women experience, creates a degree of 'fit', and allows the women to access entrepreneurial opportunities otherwise closed to them.

Despite intersectionality providing a highly relevant lens to study immigrant entrepreneurs' identity-work through, the approach has not been used to study identity-work practiced by male entrepreneurs to the same degree used to study female entrepreneurs. Indeed, 'critiques of intersectionality are premised on the assumption that the failure to give all intersectional subjects their day in the sun is a fundamental shortcoming of the field, a critique frequently delivered through the "what about white men?" question' (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 798). Certainly, the ways in which masculinity intersects with 'Black', 'African', 'immigrant' identity to create identity-challenges and prompt compensatory identity-work deserves analysis. Intersectionality is especially useful in showing how social structures can position some components of an agent's identity as powerful, and other components less powerful, even problematic and a basis for discrimination (Cho et al., 2013,p. 797). In this context, the men we study may gain power through their masculine identities given the association between masculinity and entrepreneurship (Giazitzoglu & Down, 2017), but other aspects of the men's identities intersect to negate this power and cause stigma, problems and discrimination, creating a need for compensatory identity-work as they attempt to create 'fit'.

### 2.3. Black African immigrant masculine identity in the UK context

In turn, the particular structural challenges Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs face and perform agentic, compensatory identity-work in relation to need to be highlighted. Gold (2016, p. 1712) states:

> 'Research on black entrepreneurship continues to reveal race-based disadvantages, including low levels of earnings, lack of wealth, poor education … and difficulty in getting a loan … blacks are commonly assigned lower credit ratings than Whites who earn much less'.

Kroeger and Wright (2021) show Black-owned business are significantly less likely to be open 4 years after forming than White-owned businesses, leading to the assertion that entrepreneurship is analogous to a game that 'White and Black entrepreneurs do not have the same odds of winning' (Kroeger & Wright, 2021, p. 194). Amankwah-Amoah et al. (2021) also illustrate that levels of business failure are disproportionately high among businesses formed by Black African immigrants. A report published by the *British Business Bank* (titled *Alone together, entrepreneurship and diversity in the UK*) states 'after starting a business, Black business owners have median turnover of just £25,000, compared to £35,000 for White business owners' (p. 12); 'Only half of Black entrepreneurs meet their non-financial aims, compared to nearly 70% of White entrepreneurs' (p. 5); 'Asian and Other Ethnic Minority entrepreneurs have better outcomes than Black entrepreneurs' (p. 5). A report published by the *Federation of Small Business* (titled *Unlocking Opportunity: The value of ethnic minority firms to UK economic activity and enterprise*) identifies a lack of access to external finance as a fundamental barrier Black African immigrant entrepreneurs face in the UK, which other demographics – especially White British-born male entrepreneurs - do not contend with to the same degree. Fraser (2009) shows that out of all immigrant entrepreneur groups, Black Africans are the most likely to be refused a business loan compared to White entrepreneurs.

These entrepreneur specific challenges are part of broader cultural challenges Black African male immigrants face in the UK, and must create 'identity fit' in relation to. As pointed out by Pasura and Christou (2018, p. 527), portrayals of Black African men in the UK depict:

> 'a hypersexualized African masculinity … linked to the AIDS pandemic … a stereotypical image of them as dangerous and unwelcome strangers in western cities, mirroring colonial discourses, alarms, and moral panics about Africans spreading incurable diseases to colonial cities … African masculinities are … captured through an orientalizing gaze as immutable, violent, patriarchal, and oppressive'.

Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs in the UK are disadvantaged by what Amankwah-Amoah and Debrah (2017) conceptualise as a *liability of origin*: deeply rooted, structural level narratives stigmatise several intersecting aspects of Black African immigrant male identity, rendering their success in constructing a credible entrepreneurs masculinity challenging.

Given these conditions, it is perhaps inevitable that Scholars in Immigration Studies have shown that Black African immigrant men lose their 'breadwinner status' as a result of them moving to and residing in the UK, where they are often excluded from waged employment opportunities (Kloosterman & Rath, 2003). Significantly Black African immigrant females avoid this labour exclusion within their immigration experience due to their employability in service roles (Pasura & Christou, 2018). In this context, entrepreneurship is highly important to Black African immigrant males residing in the UK as it offers them a chance – perhaps the only viable chance - to retain a breadwinner status within their immigration experience and accumulate pecuniary capital. Our focus on the identity-work of Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs is salient, therefore, not just because their identity-work is understudied, but also because successful entrepreneurial identity-work is particularly important to this demographic: the men have a special need to explore identity-work and successfully perform identity-work in order to retain the breadwinner status to central to African masculinity, within an immigration experience where the construction of a legitimate entrepreneurial identity is crucial yet so difficult because of the structural level barriers and discrimination discussed above.

### 2.4. Black identity matters in work and organisational settings

While there is a dearth of insights revealing how Black African male immigrant *entrepreneurs* experience identity and identity-work, a wider collection of work takes a minoritarian perspective to show Black people contending with identity in organisational settings. Insights include analysis of African American students at medical school (Roberts, Settles, & Jellison, 2008), African American business executives (Bell & Nkomo, 2001) and female managers (Davidson, 1997). The common theme in this work is that Black people are devalued on account of their abiding Black identities in organisational contexts where White identity is seen as normative, hegemonic and 'ideal' (Acker, 2006).

Fernando, Reveley, and Learmonth (2020) study is of particular epistemological relevance to our examination. From an auto-ethnographic perspective, Fernando et al describe a Black immigrant academic participating in identity-work to manage the tensions his identity constructs in the predominantly White, middleclass culture of an elite British University. Building on Goffman's conceptual toolbox, the identity-work observed is linked to *covering* and *accenting*: identity-work is observed that means the immigrant academic's black identity becomes 'covered' (though it can't be fully hidden), and replaced by the academic exaggerating ('accenting') aspects of White identity. This allows the academic's identity to 'fit' more in academia's cultural context.

As our empirics show, entrepreneurship in the UK provides a structure akin to the settings discussed above. Black identity is seen as unusual, even problematic, while Whiteness is conceptualises as normative, 'ideal' and hegemonic in the spaces where entrepreneurship occurs within the regional contexts we study. This means Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs feel compelled to replicate (accentuate) symbolic whiteness as an identity-resource, and hide (cover) their blackness, via specific forms of compensatory identity-work.

## 3. Methodology

Our examination into identity-work is centred on 21 Black men who were born and raised in Sub-Saharan Africa and who migrated to the UK as economic migrants (not displaced refugees), where they formed and run small businesses. The men studied are first-generation immigrants. The men consented to take part in qualitative interviews about their experiences of being entrepreneurs in the UK, and also consented for the second author to observe them in various social spaces where they interact as entrepreneurs. No harm came to or will come to the men we studied because of their participation in our study, which adhered to ethical guidelines. We attributed the men we researched with pseudonyms. The men we studied were happy for quotes to be used in this paper and for general details about them and their businesses to be published, but did not want transcriptions of their interviews to be shared. Table 1 gives more information about the men we researched.

The men's businesses are located in urban geographies based in the North-East and North-West regions of England, where Whiteness is the predominant demographic category. As UK Census data shows, Black African immigrants make up only 1.8% of the British population, and an even smaller percentage in the Northern English regions we studied. At a time when calls exist for analysis to show how particular structural contexts determine forms of agentic entrepreneurial behaviour within them (Welter & Baker, 2021), our study illustrates how regional contexts in Northern England create particular structural conditions linked to symbolic Whiteness, that Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs must respond to via identity-work. By focusing on these regional contexts, we study the sort of 'not obviously entrepreneurial' locales that have been somewhat neglected in studies of entrepreneurship, but which scholars have been urged to turn their attention to, in order to bolster the diversity of places studied (Welter, Baker, Audretsch, & Gartner, 2017).

**Table 1**
Information about the Black African immigrant male Entrepreneurs researched.

| Pseudonyms | Age | Nature of business | Business location | Year of migration to UK | Country of origin |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adama | 38 | IT & software services | Newcastle | 1992 | Nigeria |
| Chimdi | 51 | Food manufacturing | Darlington | 1994 | Nigeria |
| Bello | 36 | Financial services | Manchester | 2001 | Nigeria |
| Ali | 43 | Catering & hospitality | Newcastle | 1997 | Kenya |
| Kofi | 39 | Recruitment services | Sunderland | 1996 | Ghana |
| Chanda | 35 | Cleaning & facility management | Newcastle | 2005 | Zambia |
| Madiba | 43 | Barbing salon | Sunderland | 2000 | South Africa |
| Kenyatta | 38 | IT services | Leeds | 1999 | Kenya |
| Chikansa | 42 | Education and media | Lancaster | 1990 | Zimbabwe |
| Sunday | 38 | Barbing salon | Greater Manchester | 2007 | Cameroon |
| Kuffor | 27 | IT recycling | Greater Manchester | 2006 | Ghana |
| Hadebe | 26 | Software services | Newcastle | 2015 | Zimbabwe |
| Malema | 42 | Property & Facility management | Bolton | 1997 | South Africa |
| Kiki | 49 | Food supply and production | Bolton | 1993 | Nigeria |
| Chamisa | 39 | Photography & event management | Leeds | 2001 | Zambia |
| Junior | 53 | Restaurant | Preston | 2006 | Uganda |
| Tutu | 47 | Financial services | Leeds | 2001 | South Africa |
| Femi | 40 | Computer design & installation | Manchester | 1983 | Nigeria |
| Ayew | 44 | Food production | Newcastle | 2000 | Ghana |
| Prince | 48 | Barbing salon | Preston | 2009 | Zimbabwe |
| Julius | 41 | Recruitment services | Leeds | 1996 | Zimbabwe |

### 3.1. Reflexivity and research

All observations and interviews were conducted by the second author: a Black male born and raised in Nigeria who migrated to the North-East region of England to study a PhD project investigating the experiences of Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs. As with Amankwah-Amoah and Debrah's research process (2017, p. 217), the second author used personal connections to acquire a pool of Black people to research. Initially, the second author asked to observe and interview two Black African male Immigrant entrepreneurs who he met when attending an Evangelical Church which attracts many local Black African residents. He asked these entrepreneurs to introduce him to other Black African Immigrant male entrepreneurs in their networks. In this way, a 'snowballing' approach to sampling occurred, with relevant individuals being introduced to the research process and consenting to participate. Utilising personal links and allowing a sample emerge through snowballing was conducive to accessing a close-knit, marginal demographic, who many in the academy may find elusive to cement relationships with.

In mind of the need to reflexively consider the presence of a researcher on the people and phenomenon being studied when conducting qualitative research (Langley & Klag, 2019; Giazitzoglu, 2018), it should be noted that the researcher shared aspects of abiding identity

with the men studied (he is a 'Black', 'African', 'immigrant' 'man'). Pasura and Christou (2018,p. 528), when outlining their qualitative research into Black African male immigrants living in London, point out how research conducted by a Black African scholar 'allowed respondents to share the experiences of vulnerability, which they may not have shared with a White researcher—a sentiment that was clearly echoed by some of the participants'. Likewise, our research process benefited because the second author had shared experiences with those he researched. Interviewees mentioned they 'felt at home' during interviews and used African vernaculars to communicate their experiences. During observations, the researcher was granted access to spaces, events and insights which may have been hidden from White academics (see also Fernando et al., 2020, p. 771). Shared identity and shared experiences between researcher and researched in the field thus bolstered access, the quality and candour of empirics captured and, therefore, the quality of findings that iteratively and inductively emerged from empirics.

The notion of *Entwined Positionality*, discussed by Bolade-Ogunfodun et al. (2022), is significant to our research process. Entwined Positionality recognises that a researcher's personhood and formative context (i.e. background and upbringing) plays a central role in them not *just* accessing research sites and gatekeepers in the field but also in the sensemaking processes through which captured data is interpreted. The fact that data was elicited and, crucially, analysed by – to borrow from Bolade-Ogunfodun et al. (2022, p. 16) – 'a researcher of non-Western origin, the 'other', deploying a cultural frame of reference' meant a distinct positionality existed when data was being read to inform iterative findings. This cultural frame of reference provided a viewpoint that was particularly sensitive to the identity-rooted disadvantages experienced by Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs operating in regional contexts because of their abiding identities, and also the compensatory identity-work practiced by the men in response to these disadvantages. The second author's entwined positionality provided 'a nuanced way of interpreting observations and experiences to enrich understanding' (Bolade-Ogunfodun et al., 2022,p. 20).

### 3.2. Research process and data analysis

> 'Qualitative researchers believe that valuable knowledge is derived from proximity with the phenomena studied. Only by becoming, at least to some degree, involved in the situations studied, by listening to those who live with them every day, and by seeing, touching, and feeling them for ourselves can we come to understand them deeply enough to be able to make sense of their experience' (Langley & Klag, 2019, p. 516).

To obtain proximity to the lived experiences of Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs and hear how the men articulate their identity challenges and related identity-work, Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs were researched through two methods: participant observations and semi-structured qualitative interviews.

Participant observations occurred between 2019 and 2020, at events including African business networking meetings in the cities of Manchester and Newcastle Upon Tyne; workspaces; business incubator centres (e.g. Tus Park) and an awards ceremony that promotes and celebrates UK businesses founded by Black Africans. Observations also occurred in the men's business premises and in shops, cafes, restaurants and churches. Observations occurred when the men interacted with other Black actors, as well as in situations where the men interacted with White actors, including customers and other entrepreneurs. In total, 48 h were spent observing 21 men. Observations were recorded in a research diary.

In addition, each of the 21 males we researched participated in two rounds of semi-structured qualitative interviews. Interviews occurred on a one–one basis and happened in an array of places, including the men's businesses and in university offices. Round one interviews took place between 2018 and 2019. Round one interviews discussed the men's experiences of being Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs residing in the UK. Some of the open-ended questions used to generate conversations in round one interviews are reproduced in Table 2.

Round two interviews occurred in 2020. In round two interviews, the men's identity-work was discussed in detail, and often in relation to examples of identity-work which were observed during participant observations. The focus on discussing identity-work in round two interviews was because, at this point, identity-work had been identified as qualitatively salient by the authors: all of the men we studied had participated in visible identity-work during observations, and had discussed the need to manage their identities in round one interviews. Identity-work was therefore a specific aspect of the men's experiences which iteratively emerged as being empirically relevant during fieldwork, and which we wanted to investigate in more detail as the research process evolved. The *sort* of identity that the men felt compelled to manufacture in their roles as entrepreneurs, *why* they felt compelled to manufacture this identity, *how*, through identity-work, the men reproduce entrepreneurial identity and the impact the men's identity-work has upon their business venturing became empirically clearer in second round interviews.

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and observations of identity-work recorded in the research diary were typed up. Each author read transcriptions and diary entries independently. After reading data independently, both authors met several times to discuss meaningful themes pertaining to the men's identity-work that existed in data (phase one analysis). As discussed, the second author's entwined positionality and associated cultural frame of references were very helpful in this regard.

Two primary themes were iteratively identified in data during phase one analysis. First, the men's identities as 'Black', 'African', 'immigrants' intersect in ways which result in them feeling excluded and disadvantaged in the contexts where they interact as entrepreneurs. Second, the men routinely participate in particular forms of identity-work, linked to acquiring symbolic Whiteness, in order to challenge and counter the exclusion and disadvantage their abiding identities create. Fig. 1 visualises what data told us, inductively, about the identity experiences and related identity-work of Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs after phase one analysis.

Upon studying data that reveals the men's identity-work in more detail (phase two analysis), it was observed that the men's identity-work occurs at two levels. First, the men participate in identity-work that *makes their business appear White at an operational level*. Second, the men participate in identity-work that *aligns their personal identities with those associated with White professional men, at a self-presentational level*. In order to 'move' these observations into more systematic findings, data was coded using N-Vivo software (phase three analysis). Data that revealed how operational level identity-work is lived and articulated was grouped in the code 'making a business appear White'. Data that

**Table 2**
Examples of open-ended stage 1 interview questions.

| |
|---|
| How does your ethnicity influence your entrepreneurial activities? |
| What is your experience of doing business in the north of England as a black man? |
| Do you think your identity affect your credibility as an entrepreneur? How and why? |
| How do white and black male entrepreneurs differ and why are these differences important? |
| Do any problems arise from being both a 'black man' and 'immigrant' and a 'small business owner? |
| Tell me about being a black entrepreneur in this society? |
| Do you see yourself to be different from white entrepreneurs? |
| What are some of the things you do to attract customers and enhance your entrepreneurial prospects? |
| How would you define yourself as an entrepreneur? |
| What advantages exist in being a white entrepreneur that you might not have? |
| Does your identity create specific advantages or barriers in your business? How and why? |

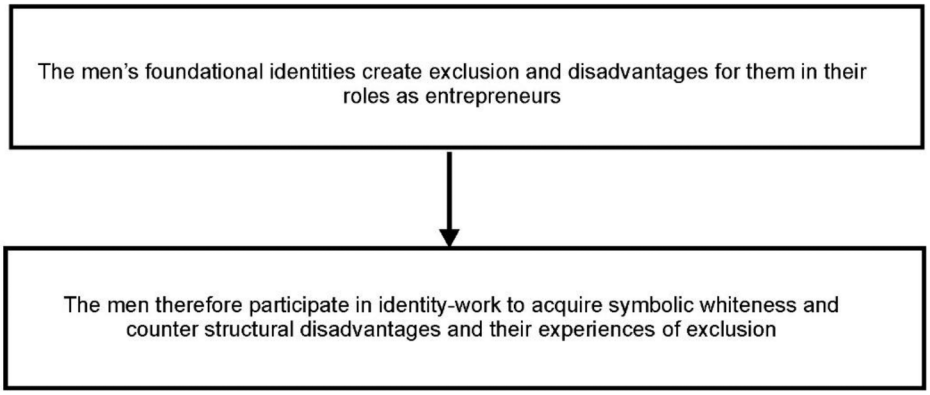


**Fig. 1.** A visualisation of what data tells us about the identity experiences and identity-work of Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs.

reveals how identity-work at the self-presentational level is lived and articulated was grouped in the code 'looking like a White corporate man'.

After coding data, we analysed data again (phase four analysis), to further understand the men's identity-work. Phase four analysis showed that the men's identity-work is dualistic in its motivation. To employ Goffman's lexicon, the men's identity-work can be motivated to 'cover' (i.e. motivated to disguise Black African Immigrant identity) and simultaneously motivated to 'accentuate' (i.e. motivated to exaggerates symbolic whiteness). Fig. 2 visualises the coding strategies we ordered data in relation to during phase three analysis. Fig. 3 is a Venn diagram that illustrates the dualistic motivation and nature of the men's identity-work, as revealed in phase four analysis. Fig. 4 is a visualisation of our data structure.

Data analysis shows that by acquiring symbolic Whiteness via identity-work, the men do three things that are advantageous to them in their roles as entrepreneurs. First, they heighten the chances of the businesses they form surviving, thus challenging the proclivity to encounter business failure that is common to this demographic. Second, they improve their integration within local entrepreneurial networks which is important in terms of future opportunity creation. Third, they can attract and engage White customers.

Having analysed data systematically in the four ways discussed above, we could present iterative findings on the identity-work practiced by Black African immigrant entrepreneurs residing in British regional contexts, which are rooted in the men's first-person voices and lived-experiences.

## 4. Findings

Code 1: Making a business appear White (through covering and accentuating identity-work)

Data stored in this code shows businesses formed by Black African immigrant males are perceived to 'lack quality' and 'not be as good as White owned businesses' within the regional contexts studied. Ali rhetorically asked: 'is it a surprise that in a place full of White people, White businesses rule supreme and our (Black) businesses are looked down on?' Reaffirming the liability of origin thesis, Ali commented that 'Black men are either associated with crime and music or expected to be footballers but not entrepreneurs'. Chimdi stated:

> 'It's society mentality and anything Black is not good, White symbolises trust, whether it is real or not. As a Black man, the society expect you to be doing drugs or be in prison, not in business. Because you are Black, they just believe there is only so much to expect from you… When it comes to wealth or business, White people don't trust Black people or their businesses'.

These comments show the juxtaposition between the men's abiding identities as Black African immigrant men and culturally supplied expectations about who can participate in entrepreneurship with credibility; with the latter category being rooted in white masculinity (Ogbor, 2000; Giazitzoglu & Down, 2017). Quantitative analysis (e.g. The *British Bank's* Report *Alone together, entrepreneurship and diversity in the UK*) reveals the statistical proclivity for businesses formed by Black African male immigrants in the UK to underperform and fail. On the basis of our empirical data, we suggest this underperformance is due in part to negative judgements Black African owned businesses receive from

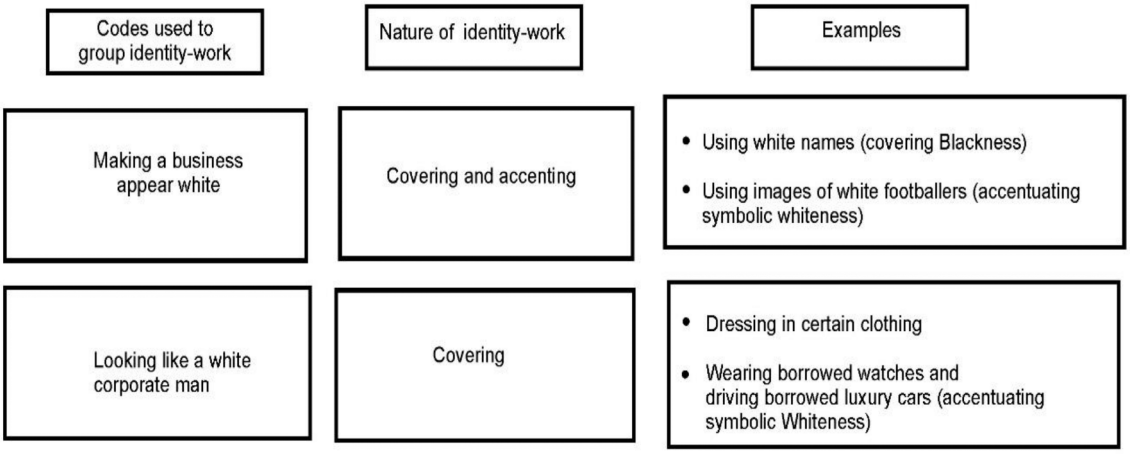


**Fig. 2.** The Codes we used to move themes into systematic findings.

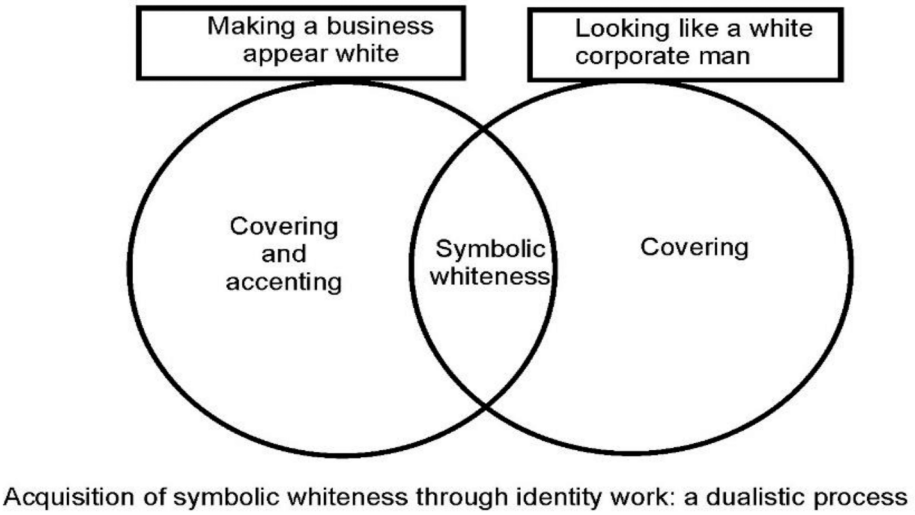


**Fig. 3.** The acquisition of whiteness through identity-work as dualistically motivated.

| Quotes | Codes | Aggregate codes |
|---|---|---|
| The face of my business has to be a white woman. The ethnicity projected should be what people want to see. It is business, it has nothing to do with ethnicity… If I can solve a problem and bring someone who can convince them to accept my solution, I will project that face to them (*Malema*) | Projecting whiteness in business to overcome identity barrier | Making a business appear white |
| I once hired an English guy to work with me, I used his name for business communication, all they see is his name. He was the one responding to emails, so seeing his names, nobody will find out the owner is black (*Kofi*) | Using whiteness as a frontstage identity | |
| When I send emails out to potential business partners who don't know me. I send emails like they are receiving it from a white girl, I used different aliases, like Laura Asher, Hellen Davies, Sarah Miller… (*Adama*) | Using a white culturally acceptable names in business communications | |
| A black man has to go into those business meetings a lot more aesthetically pleasing and dress like a corporate executive (*Bello*) | Self-presentation as a white corporate executive | Looking like a white corporate man |
| Whether it is something that we have done or through the media, we're not being portrayed properly… that means I will spend more money on my appearance and certain clothes or dressing in certain ways to signal to other people to proof my acceptability (*Femi*) | Compensating for identity by dressing in a certain way | |
| Because young black males in the UK are not in the positive light… they are rather perceived as musicians or footballers, not as entrepreneurs. To succeed… you need to somehow align yourself with white people (*Hadebe*) | Presenting the black identity as entrepreneurial through alignment with white people | |

**Fig. 4.** Data structure.

White customers. These negative judgements are especially problematic to black businesses operating in the overwhelmingly White regional contexts we studied, where Whites make up over 90% of the population (GOV.UK, 2011), and where White customers are the only real viable market to rely on for growth.

Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs participate in compensatory identity-work practices that 'cover' the black foundational identities of their businesses, ensuring *their businesses appear white* at an operational and reputational level. This reduces the discrimination and associated lack of growth that the men's businesses will otherwise experience. An example of operational-level, covering identity-work is using 'stereotypical English names rather than Black African names' in e-mail correspondence and on letters when communicating with White clients. Accordingly, Black African immigrant males

will 'make up a White sounding name' and use this name, thereby hiding their authentic identity and giving the impression to White actors that they are 'dealing with a White … not a Black African immigrant'. Other examples identity-work include employing 'White folks not Black people' when recruiting public-facing employees (e.g. receptionists) that white customers will see, insisting that 'White faces not Black faces' are used in marketing and communication materials like brochures and websites that are public facing, and 'leveraging on' (i.e. naming) White contacts 'when submitting grant applications'. To local customers and funders who may stigmatise businesses formed by Black African immigrants, the use of White names, faces and images are said to provide a level 'familiarity' and 'reassurance'.

The men's voices bring the principles of their identity-work to life. *Hadebe* suggests:

> 'When you see a name like Musa Abdoullahi, you're like shit! Musa Abdoullahi is seeking the same business opportunity as Philip Smith. The officials will attend to Philip first and then read Musa's application later because he is not from here……. that is why I don't use my African name in business communication'

*Adama* described his covering identity-work thus:

> 'When I send emails out to potential business partners who don't know me I send emails like they are receiving it from a White girl, I used different aliases, like Laura Asher, Hellen Davies, Sarah Miller. So, if I email you for business, the first email you will get is from Sarah. Why? Because it's different, sexy and fashionable. It is better than a traditional African male name. If you receive an email from Sarah Miller, there is no barrier and no negative emotions associated with Black names'.

*Julius* also disguised the Black foundations of his business, by covering it with the identity of White femininity:

> 'Basically, my personal identity makes people less receptive to me. So when I started my business, I knew it was going to be difficult. The first day I started out I went to twelve shops, and I got rejected in all the twelve. So the next time I went out…I got a White girl to go out with me … she acted as the business owner and we got many customers. It's a situation where I have to hide my identity and front with a White woman to make my business work'.

Data grouped in this code also includes cases where businesses formed by Black African immigrants are unable to *appear* white, through covering identity-work. This happens in situations when the Black African immigrant entrepreneur must directly engage with White customers and is therefore unable to 'use' symbols of whiteness (e.g. White names and employees) to cover identity. In these cases, accentuating identity-work occurs, to ensure the Black African immigrant male's business is 'as appealing as it can be' to white customers; with the business' 'ability to cater to white customers' exaggerated.

The case of *Sunday*, a barber who displays pictures of prominent White Premier League footballers in his shop to attract White customers is the most lucid example of this sort of accentuating identity-work we captured. Sunday claims:

> 'When I started this business here, a lot of them guys (White people) never come … but (over time) I was cutting hair for … White footballers… I started putting pictures of (White footballers) I cut in the shops and the more White haircut pictures I put in the shop, the more they (Whites) see the pictures, the more they (White customers) started coming here for business. I used the pictures and my nice cuts to change their attitude'.

By participating in identity-work that accentuates how open a Black owned business is to White customers, businesses formed by Black African immigrant entrepreneur utilise the resource of symbolic Whiteness to appear more inclusive and welcoming of white customers.

Code 2: 'looking like a White corporate man' (through accentuating identity-work)

Data grouped in this code shows, further, that the men's foundational identities as 'Black', 'African', 'immigrant' men do not fit culturally constructed expectations that define entrepreneurial credibility. This sentiment is made clear in the following, albeit uncomfortable, anecdote:

> 'I remember going to a Christmas (business) dinner … back at (names City) … the doorman refused to allow me in… he never thought I could be a business man just because of the colour of my skin'.

When reflecting on what constitutes the 'ideal' identity for an entrepreneur existing in the regional contexts studied, the men articulated not *just* White masculinity but a certain configuration or 'class' of 'respectable', 'corporate', 'executive' White masculinity. Sunday suggests:

> 'It's not enough to look White … there are lots of whites, lots of different white styles, like you get the Chavs (derogatory term for White working class man) and stuff, they are not more respectable than us Blacks. You don't want to look like a scruffy White, like a poor White. You want to look like a respectable White … the sort of White I speak of is a class of White'.

Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs suggested it was important that they reproduced the visuals of respectable White masculinity as doing so means they 'appear like the right sort of Black businessman for Whites to work with', and is conducive to them gaining access to and a level of respect from White entrepreneurs who make up local entrepreneurial networks. As put 'dressing in the ways they (Whites) like … it's a respect thing, they see you've made the effort and the barriers become not as big'.

To conform to culturally constructed expectations about what constitutes entrepreneurial masculinity as a visual accomplishment, Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs engage in symbolic identity-work focused on their self-presentations. Specifically, they buy and wear distinct clothing – especially 'jackets, shirts and smart shoes' - to 'dress like them White executives' and 'mimic the corporate office style'. Three men routinely borrow luxury cars (including *Lamborghinis, Aston Martins* and *Ferraris*) and expensive watches from affluent African Premier League Footballers in their social networks. The men will drive these cars and wear these watches to business dinners and networking events, where they will interact with White entrepreneurs. The men enjoy the 'mystification' that some White actors display when they see Black entrepreneurs with such commodities. The men do not admit to White actors that these resources are borrowed. During observations, Junior was seen using his smartphone to take photographs of himself with a famous Black African footballer he is friends with. He later showed these photographs to White entrepreneurs he interacted with at a business networking event. By so doing, Junior emphasised his intimacy with a world (Premier League Football) that is admired by but inaccessible to many White male entrepreneurs who make up local business networks.

Clothing, watches, cars and photographs thereby function as symbolic resources that Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs use in identity-work processes that visually align the self-presentational aspects of their identities with a form of respectable White masculinity. The men feel more 'confident', 'welcome', 'at home' and 'likely to get respect and opportunities' when engaging with White actors because of their symbolic identity-work.

However, we do not want to overstate the extent to which this symbolic identity-work integrates Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs into local networks: while the men feel they bolster their chances of 'getting their foot in the door' by 'looking right and driving the fast cars' – as put 'I no longer get turned away by the bouncers now because I know how to dress' - there will always be a level 'otherness' attributed to Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs by some

White actors. Identity-work reduces rather than alleviates the structural-level discrimination they encounter.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis has examined the identity-work of a cohort of Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs who are tasked with forming and maintaining entrepreneurial identities that are seen as credible in the regional contexts they are embedded, as part of their ongoing journeys as entrepreneurs *in diaspora*. At a time when calls exist for empirical analysis to occur which shows how particular structural contexts determine forms of agentic entrepreneurial behaviour within them (Welter & Baker, 2021), we have shown how regional contexts in Northern England create structural conditions linked to the attribution of discrimination for Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs because of the way aspects of their abiding identities intersect. To compensate for this structural level disadvantage, and to give their businesses the best chances of growing and avoiding failure, we have shown Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs participating in distinctive agentic identity-work, that features both covering and accentuating elements.

### 5.1. Theoretical contributions

While being primarily an empirical paper, responding to calls for qualitative insights into identity-work to emerge (Brown, 2022), our analysis contributes *theoretically* to Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT 'seeks to critique and transform the relationship between race, racism and power … by offering an analytical lens to critically explore how racism is produced and enacted' (Jaylan, Anker, Taheri, & Tinsley, 2023). CRT suggests racism occurs when ethnic minorities are negatively judged in ways that devalue their moral and intellectual qualities on account of their racial identities (Puzzo, 1964). The fact that the men we studied experience discrimination within their lived-experiences because of their abiding identities is perhaps unsurprising to those who see UK culture as necessary racist against Black citizens. Concurrently, the novel contribution we make is in positioning the identity-work of Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs as *a compensatory response* to the structural racism they encounter: by disguising their identities (covering) or aligning their identities with Whiteness (accentuating) via identity-work, the men go some way in reducing the devaluation others attribute to them and their businesses; engaging with Whiteness as a resource used within their ongoing business venturing. From a CRT perspective this is significant, as it shows the agency those discriminated against display in an attempt to gain the legitimacy that White, hegemonic actors may take for granted.

In 2000 Ogbor theorised that Western culture supplies an idealised entrepreneurial identity rooted in white, heterosexual masculinity, that entrepreneurial actors are judged against. Extant work into entrepreneur's identity-work shows that entrepreneurs in contemporary society who do not fit the hegemonic identity ideal set out by Ogbor must compensate, via identity-work. Thus, female entrepreneurs' identity-work is focused on acquiring *masculine identity* (e.g. Bruni et al., 2004) while gay male entrepreneurs' identity-work is focused on acquiring *heterosexual masculine identity* (Rumens & Ozturk, 2019). Our empirics show Black African immigrant entrepreneurs engaging in identity-work to develop symbolic Whiteness. Our empirics thus add to extant qualitative analysis, affirming the validity of Ogbor's theory over twenty years later.

In the lives of the men we studied, their identities 'as men' do not overcome the barriers their identities as 'Black', 'immigrant', 'African' entrepreneurs create. The privilege and power that masculinity ordinarily creates in entrepreneurial settings (Ogbor, 2000; Giazitzoglu & Down, 2017) dissipates when that masculinity intersects with Black, immigrant, African identity and the 'liability of origin' (Amankwah-Amoah & Debrah, 2017) these identity categories create in British society. Our empirics thus position identity-work as a diversity and inclusion issue, showing identity-work being practiced by a minority, as they seek to find a level of equality and meritocracy in their host nation and overcome the specific disadvantages their backgrounds and foundational identities create. Our empirics also show how intersectionality is useful as a theoretical lens in understanding how disadvantage can be experienced by an identity group because certain aspects of their identity ('Black', 'African', 'immigrant') are stigmatised even when other aspects of their identity are ordinarily privileged ('men').

### 5.2. Policy implications

To date, the importance of identity and identity-work to immigrant entrepreneurs in general and Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs in particular has not been appreciated in policy design and implementation. Indeed in the *Unlocking the Potential of ethnic Minority Businesses* Report, in which barriers to successful ethnic minority businesses in the UK are discussed extensively, not a single reference is made to 'identity'. An implication of our study lies in the identification of identity as a key though neglected issue that UK policy makers working with ethnic minority business owners must take into account. Policies that aim to help ethnic entrepreneurs overcome barriers they face recognise mentoring as crucial (*Unlocking the Potential of Ethnic Minority Businesses report*, p.37). Another implication of our research is in ensuring future mentoring policies take into account the importance of identity and identity-work. When Black African immigrant male entrepreneurs are mentored in the future, it is vital that those mentoring emphasise the importance of crafting qualitative identities that are seen as credible in the UK, if they are to reduce the chances of their businesses failing by attracting White customers and integrating into local business networks.

A major problem faced by policy makers involved in implementing ethnic minority business (EMB) is 'the quality of data about EMBs that is available in the UK, which has been a long-standing issue of concern' (*Unlocking the Potential of Ethnic Minority Businesses* Report, p. 5). Indeed 'data that does exist is often insufficiently granular to explore all the nuances that infuse the issue of ethnic minority entrepreneurship' (*Unlocking the Potential of Ethnic Minority Businesses* Report, p. 60). Through our utilisation of qualitative methods we generated the sort of 'granular' empirical data required to truly explore the experiences of a specific cohort of immigrant entrepreneurs and make recommendations to policy-makers on the basis of data. A further implication of our study is methodological. We have highlighted the advantages of exploring ethnic minority business from a qualitative perspective to reveal nuances and complexity otherwise hidden and too complex for statistical approaches to fully recognise and specify iterative, data-led recommendations in relation to.

### 5.3. Future research

In conclusion, we make three further points to outline how others can expand our contribution. Our work focuses on entrepreneurs based in Northern English regions. Northern England provides a particularly White urban geography. Indeed, the North-East region of England, where most of the men we researched live, is the least ethnically diverse region in the UK, with Whites making up 93.6% of the population (GOV. UK, 2011). The urban geographies we study contrast with ethnically diverse spaces, like the British Midlands (Jones, Ram, Edwards, Kiselinchev, & Muchenje, 2014); Leeds, Bradford, Leicester and most obviously London (Carter, Mwaura, Ram, Trehan, & Jones, 2015). Our focus on regional contexts thus responds to calls requesting that scholars diversify the cultural geographies that they study Black, African immigrant entrepreneurship within (Nwankwo, 2005). This is a strength. However, the Whiteness of the spaces studied could also be seen as a weakness, in that it might contribute, as a structural factor, to the extent of the identity-work we observed; meaning our findings can't be

generalised to other Black, African, immigrant entrepreneurs residing in other, more ethnically diverse and less White UK contexts, where the interplay of structure and agency might play out differently. In mind of this, we encourage others to research the identity-work of Black African male immigrants rooted in more heterogenous structural contexts to the regional spaces we studied. This will allow spatial-cultural comparisons to emerge, comparing our empirics with those captured in more diverse structural contexts.

The men we researched are first-generation immigrants. Is the type of identity-work we recorded specific to first generation Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs? Might the identity-work of second-generation Black African immigrant entrepreneurs be different? Comparing our empirics with those collected from second-generation Black, African male immigrant entrepreneurs provides a further, future research trajectory, that can help us further understand the dynamics explored in this paper at an intergenerational level. Nyame-Asiamah et al. (2020) show that African immigrant diaspora who practice entrepreneurship in the UK often return to their home African nation, where they utilise knowledge, skills and wealth gained in the UK to start new business journeys. Upon returning to Africa, these entrepreneurs will typically seek to engage with social networks made of kin, family members and friends. When Black African male immigrant entrepreneurs leave the international context of the UK and return to the national context of Africa to embark on entrepreneurship, what happens to their identities and what forms of identity-work do they practice? Do they retain a need and desire to produce symbolic Whiteness? Studying identity-work among Black African male entrepreneurs after they leave the UK and return to their home nation provides a further line of longitudinal research we encourage others to follow.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Andreas Giazitzoglu:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Tayo Korede:** Visualization, Investigation, Formal analysis, Methodology.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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