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An Exploratory Qualitative Design Toward a Contextualized Definition of Entrepreneurship Culture Among TVET Graduates: Evidence from Vhembe District, South Africa

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Abstract

Entrepreneurship culture (EC) is increasingly promoted within Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) to prepare graduates for self-employment. However, existing conceptualisations of EC are derived largely from urban, resource-rich contexts and fail to explain entrepreneurial realities in rural settings characterised by informality, resource scarcity, and vocational stigma. This study developed a contextually grounded conceptualisation of EC based on the lived experiences of TVET graduates in the rural Vhembe District of South Africa. Employing an exploratory qualitative design informed by interpretivist phenomenology, we recruited 18 TVET alumni across various trades using purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, with established entrepreneurial behavior models serving as sensitising concepts. Four interrelated attributes characterised the rural TVET entrepreneurship culture: livelihood pragmatism, delayed transition into self-employment, adaptive application of vocational skills, and relational navigation of community dynamics. Rather than opportunity-driven venture creation, entrepreneurship was experienced as an adaptive response to structural constraints. Graduates leveraged vocational skills to address local needs through low-overhead enterprises while navigating social jealousy and vocational stigma. The study defines rural TVET entrepreneurship culture as a culturally embedded system of shared meanings and identities that enables graduates to adapt skills to local realities while navigating structural challenges. This definition advances construct clarity, offering a foundation for future curriculum design, measurement tools, and policy in rural vocational education.

1 Introduction

Entrepreneurship culture (EC) is increasingly recognised as a driver of self-employment, economic participation, and sustainable development in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) contexts. This growing emphasis reflects an expanding role for TVET, which has traditionally prepared students for specific occupations and formal employment through vocational skills development. As formal employment opportunities contract and labour markets become increasingly characterised by informality (Audretsch & Thurik, 2001; ILO, 2022; WEF, 2023; OECD/European Commission, 2023), governments and international agencies have repositioned TVET as a catalyst for entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihoods. The significance of entrepreneurship culture is therefore amplified within vocational education, where graduates are increasingly expected to create employment rather than solely prepare for it.

This policy shift is particularly evident in South Africa. National policy frameworks position TVET as a key contributor to entrepreneurship, inclusive economic growth, and sustainable livelihoods in light of persistent challenges in graduate employment and labour-market transitions (DHET, 2013, 2021, 2023; National Planning Commission [NPC], 2012; UNESCO, 2022). However, research within TVET has largely focused on employability, skills development, and labour-market alignment, giving comparatively little attention to the cultural and social processes through which entrepreneurial engagement becomes meaningful and legitimate among vocational graduates (Oketch, 2007; McGrath & Powell, 2016). Consequently, although entrepreneurship culture has assumed growing policy importance, its conceptual foundations within TVET remain insufficiently developed.

Despite increasing scholarly interest, entrepreneurship culture remains conceptually ambiguous. Definitions vary across disciplines, levels of analysis, and research contexts, limiting cumulative theory development and construct operationalisation (Goertz, 2006; Suddaby, 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2016; Welter, 2011; Thai & Mai,

2023). As summarised in Table 1, existing conceptualisations span macro-level national cultures, meso-level organisational environments, and micro-level opportunity processes, while frequently overlapping with related constructs such as entrepreneurial mindset, entrepreneurial orientation, entrepreneurship education, and entrepreneurial ecosystems. Whereas entrepreneurial mindset refers primarily to individual cognitive dispositions and entrepreneurial orientation to a firm's strategic posture (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Kuratko, 2005), entrepreneurship culture concerns the shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices that shape entrepreneurship as desirable, legitimate, and feasible within a particular social context (Hayton et al., 2002; Thai & Mai, 2023). Entrepreneurial ecosystems emphasise networks, institutions, and resource configurations (Stam, 2015; Spigel, 2017), while entrepreneurship education focuses on pedagogical processes that develop entrepreneurial competencies (Fayolle & Gailly, 2008). In the present study, behavioural theories including the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Social Cognitive Theory, and the Entrepreneurial Event Model are treated as sensitising concepts rather than conceptual definitions of entrepreneurship culture.

Most empirical research has similarly privileged macro-level or institutionally advantaged contexts. For example, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) assesses entrepreneurship culture through national expert surveys and population-level measures of entrepreneurial attitudes, extent of entrepreneurship education in education systems, opportunity recognition, and intentions (Bosma et al., 2024), while much university-based research examines entrepreneurship within innovation ecosystems characterised by incubators, venture capital, and extensive institutional support. Although these perspectives have advanced understanding of entrepreneurship across national, organisational, and educational settings, they provide limited insight into how entrepreneurship culture develops among vocational graduates operating within resource-constrained local environments.

These contextual differences become particularly pronounced in rural settings. Rural entrepreneurship unfolds within environments characterised by weak infrastructure, limited access to finance, underemployment, and extensive informal economic activity, where these conditions simultaneously constrain and create entrepreneurial opportunities (Korsgaard et al., 2015; George et al., 2016; Pato & Teixeira, 2016; Müller & Korsgaard, 2018). Entrepreneurial activity is often embedded within family relationships, trust-based networks, and locally constituted opportunity structures rather than growth-oriented market ecosystems (Welter et al., 2017). Consequently, conceptualisations developed predominantly within urban, university, and institutionally advantaged settings may not adequately capture the entrepreneurial realities of rural TVET graduates. This mismatch is acutely felt in regions like the Vhembe District of South Africa, a deeply rural area characterized by high youth unemployment, infrastructural backlogs, and a highly informal local economy (Vhembe District Municipality, 2026; Mudzielwana & Maphosa, 2025; Makhado & Musyoki, 2025).

If entrepreneurship culture is contextually constituted, its defining attributes cannot simply be transferred across educational and socioeconomic settings. Context-sensitive concept development therefore requires identifying the essential attributes and conceptual boundaries that distinguish entrepreneurship culture from related phenomena while specifying how these attributes manifest within the setting under investigation (Goertz, 2006; Sartori, 1970; Suddaby, 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2016). Rather than assuming that attributes derived largely from university and resource-rich environments are universally applicable, this study integrates existing scholarship with the lived experiences of rural TVET alumni in Vhembe to develop a contextually grounded conceptualisation of entrepreneurship culture.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question:

How can insights from the literature and the lived experiences of rural-based TVET alumni in South Africa be integrated to define a contextualised conceptual domain of entrepreneurship culture?

By developing a contextually grounded definition of entrepreneurship culture, this study advances construct clarity and reduces the risk of conceptual stretching, whereby concepts are applied beyond the boundaries of their defining attributes (Sartori, 1970; Goertz, 2006). The resulting definition provides a conceptual foundation for future measurement development, entrepreneurship education, and policy within rural TVET settings.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and informed by phenomenological principles to explore how rural-based TVET alumni understand and experience entrepreneurship culture (EC). Rather than testing an existing conceptualisation, the study sought to develop a contextually grounded conceptual definition of EC by integrating participants' lived experiences with established scholarship. In doing so, the study adopted a qualitative construct-development approach in which empirical meanings generated through participants' narratives formed the basis for identifying the defining attributes and conceptual boundaries of entrepreneurship culture, thereby informing subsequent measurement development (MacKenzie et al., 2011; Podsakoff et al., 2016).

2.2 Concept Development Framework

The primary methodological objective of this study was concept development rather than theory testing. Accordingly, the analytical process was guided by established principles of construct definition from social science methodology, management, and philosophy. Across these traditions, scholars argue that concept development requires identifying the essential attributes that distinguish a phenomenon from related constructs while specifying the conceptual boundaries within which those attributes remain valid (Sartori, 1970; Goertz, 2006; Suddaby, 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2016) as shown in Table 2 on next page.

Table 2. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Conceptual Definition and Construct Clarity

Author	Domain	Core Perspective
Goertz (2006)	Social Science Methodology	Concepts are defined by situating a phenomenon within a broader category and specifying the constitutive attributes that distinguish it from related phenomena, following the genus–differentia tradition.
Ayers (1981)	Epistemology	Concepts represent "nominal essences" made up of a specific combination of perceived attributes bound together by a label.
Sartori (1970)	Political Science	A concept's definition is its intension, the precise set of defining attributes that determines category membership and prevents conceptual stretching.
Suddaby (2010)	Management Theory	Construct clarity depends on capturing the essential and non-tautological characteristics of a phenomenon.
Podsakoff et al. (2016)	Methodology	To facilitate measurement, research constructs require clear conceptual definitions that specify their essential properties and distinguish them from related constructs.

Such conceptual clarity reduces the risk of conceptual stretching, whereby concepts are transferred across contexts despite changes in their defining properties (Sartori, 1970).

Rather than assuming that defining attributes derived largely from university or resource-rich entrepreneurial settings were universally applicable, this study integrated published scholarship with participants' lived experiences to identify the constitutive attributes of entrepreneurship culture within rural TVET contexts. Existing conceptualisations therefore served as analytical reference points rather than predetermined frameworks against which participants' experiences were evaluated. The resulting conceptual definition emerged through an iterative dialogue between empirical evidence and existing scholarship.

This framework informed the final stage of analysis, during which reflexively generated themes were synthesised into a formal conceptual definition by identifying those attributes that consistently distinguished entrepreneurship culture from related constructs within the rural TVET context.

2.3 Context and Participants

The study was conducted in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South Africa, where high unemployment, labour-market exclusion, and reliance on informal economic activities make self-employment an important

livelihood strategy for TVET graduates (Vhembe District Municipality, 2026; Mudzielwana & Maphosa, 2025; Makhado & Musyoki, 2025 ; Magadza & Mampane, 2024). The district's longstanding vocational tradition provided an appropriate setting for examining how entrepreneurial meanings are shaped by local histories, social relationships, and practical forms of knowledge (Korsgaard et al., 2015; Müller & Korsgaard, 2018; Welter et al., 2017; Vhembe TVET College ,2023)

Participants had completed either a National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED) (N4–N6) or a National Certificate Vocational (NCV) qualification at a public TVET college in the Vhembe District, possessed at least one year of labour-market experience, and resided within the rural Vhembe ecosystem. Graduates from informal or non-formal training programs were excluded. Purposive sampling, guided by a maximum variation strategy, was used to recruit graduates representing diverse ages, genders, vocational specialisations, employment status, years since graduation, and levels of entrepreneurial engagement. Initial participants were identified through community networks and trade associations, after which snowball sampling was used to access additional dispersed graduates who met the inclusion criteria. Data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently, with recruitment ceased once sufficient information power was achieved to address the study objective (Malterud et al., 2016).

2.4 Data Collection

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), and the Entrepreneurial Event Model (Shapero & Sokol, 1982) were employed as sensitising concepts rather than conceptual definitions of entrepreneurship culture (Blumer, 1954; Charmaz, 2014). These perspectives informed the development of the interview guide and supported interpretation without prescribing analytical categories.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between August 2025 and March 2026, comprising 10 face-to-face meetings (lasting 30 to 60 minutes) and 8 WhatsApp voice calls (lasting 15 to 25 minutes). The shorter duration of the WhatsApp interviews reflected the participants' preference for highly focused, concise exchanges to mitigate network instability and mobile data/battery constraints common in rural areas. Despite these differences in length, the WhatsApp interviews yielded highly concentrated, rich conceptual data comparable in thematic depth to the face-to-face sessions (Novick, 2008; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). To minimise potential mode effects, all interviews were conducted by the author using the same semi-structured interview guide, question sequence, and comparable probing techniques (Morse et al., 2002; Turner, 2010). The interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, anonymised through pseudonyms, and securely stored.

2.5 Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were imported into ATLAS.ti 26 and analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach (Byrne, 2021). Coding proceeded inductively and recursively, while the sensitising concepts informed interpretive dialogue during theme development without constraining the analysis. The resulting themes were subsequently examined alongside the concept-development framework outlined in Section 2.2 to identify the defining attributes and conceptual boundaries of entrepreneurship culture. Through semantic mapping and iterative comparison with existing scholarship,

themes were synthesised into a contextually grounded conceptual definition. Only themes embedded within the rural structural context that consistently shaped entrepreneurial meanings and actions were retained as constitutive attributes of the construct (Saldaña, 2021).

Insert Table 3 here which presents illustrative examples of the analytical process.

Coding and theme development were recursive and continuously refined through repeated engagement with the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). Discussions with supervisors provided valuable peer debriefing that challenged early interpretations and strengthened analytical rigor. In line with the epistemological assumptions of Reflexive Thematic Analysis, member checking was not undertaken, as the findings are understood as interpretive co-constructions rather than objective accounts requiring participant verification (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

2.6 Researcher Reflexivity and Quality Considerations

Recognising that meaning is co-constructed, the author maintained reflexive awareness throughout the study (Finlay, 2002; Berger, 2015). Professional experience in TVET and rural development initially sensitised the author to view entrepreneurship culture positively as a pathway to self-employment. Reflexive memo writing, an audit trail, supervisory discussions, and close engagement with participants' accounts enabled the continual examination of these assumptions as themes developed. Methodological coherence, transparent analytical procedures, reflexive engagement, and rich contextual descriptions support the trustworthiness of this study (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

2.7 Data Availability

Interview transcripts are not publicly available because participants may be identifiable within small rural communities. The interview guide, coding framework, and selected anonymised analytical materials are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

3 Findings

3.1 Overview of Themes

The analysis of interviews with 18 rural-based TVET alumni generated six interconnected themes describing entrepreneurship culture within the rural Vhembe context **(Insert Supplementary Table 4 here).** These themes concerned pathways to self-employment, comparisons with formal employment, recognition of rural opportunities, institutional preparation, vocational stigma, and community dynamics.

3.2 Participant Demographic Profile

The sample comprised 18 TVET alumni representing diverse vocational disciplines, employment statuses, entrepreneurial experiences, ages, and years since graduation **(Insert Supplementary Table 5 here).** This variation provides a broad experiential basis for examining how entrepreneurship culture is understood across post-college trajectories.

3.3.1 Theme 1: Pathways Leading to Self-Employment and Entrepreneurial Aspirations

Participants described entrepreneurial entry as delayed and nonlinear, frequently occurring after prolonged unemployment, casual work, or employment unrelated to their vocational training. Many ultimately established enterprises outside their original fields of study, suggesting that entrepreneurship was experienced primarily as an adaptive livelihood strategy rather than a planned career trajectory. In this context, the data reveal that entrepreneurial engagement was seldom driven by opportunity recognition alone but emerged from the need to navigate constrained labour-market transitions.

RP01 recalled abandoning a long-held aspiration of becoming a firefighter after repeated failure to secure formal employment:

"I nursed this desire until I finished my course at college. Unfortunately, after graduation, I was unable to secure formal employment. I ended doing odd jobs as Driver and part-time Mechanic..."

This transition demonstrates how entrepreneurial pathways are frequently forged through cumulative, reactive adaptations to systemic labor-market exclusion rather than deliberate, proactive career planning. Rather than maintaining static career ambitions, graduates actively reconstruct their professional identities and aspirations as they navigate the reality of disrupted vocational expectations.

Similarly, RP03 explained that the unexpected death of a benefactor forced her to reconsider her livelihood options:

"After graduation, I got employed as a sales representative for organic food products. Unfortunately, my benefactor passed on and had to look elsewhere for opportunities..."

Read within the structural realities of the rural Vhembe District, this sudden shift underscores how vulnerable vocational graduates are to the loss of formal safety nets. With minimal institutional or financial cushions, self-employment ceases to be an aspirational career choice and instead becomes a necessary, reactionary livelihood tactic triggered by sudden changes in personal and economic circumstances. Although labour-market exclusion featured prominently, participants also described pathways shaped by family socialisation. RP05 reflected:

"Our family is involved in Truck Business. My Father initiated and encouraged me to do truck mechanics. 'Rather let's do services and keep our monies inside,' he would say."

This quote highlights those entrepreneurial aspirations were not solely responses to economic hardship but were also cultivated through intergenerational exposure to enterprise. Family businesses functioned as sites where entrepreneurial values, practical knowledge, and vocational identities were transmitted, thereby normalising self-employment as a legitimate livelihood pathway. When immediate economic survival became the overriding concern, participants prioritised ventures capable of generating reliable daily income. RP15 explained:

" The part-time work I was involved in didn't give me enough income. I then thought of something that people need every day. You know, people eat every day..."

This reveals a stark livelihood pragmatism where the choice of enterprise is dictated not by high-growth aspirations or market innovation, but by the immediate, predictable safety of daily survivalist consumer demand. Taken together, these accounts reveal that entrepreneurship culture within the rural TVET context was characterised by adaptive responses to labour-market constraints, while remaining shaped by family influence and practical considerations of economic survival.

3.3.2 Theme 2: Perceptions and Comparisons Between Self-Employment and Formal Employment Career Paths

Participants consistently evaluated entrepreneurship in relation to formal employment, which remained their preferred career pathway because of its perceived stability, social prestige, and financial security. In this context, the data reveal that entrepreneurship was seldom viewed as a first-choice career but rather as a pragmatic alternative when formal employment proved unattainable. RP16 reflected on how repeated unsuccessful attempts to obtain employment eventually redirected his career trajectory:

"Though I trained as an Electrical engineer, I could not get formal employment... I then had to resort to being an Uber driver... It then dawned on me that I needed to be self-employed even in an area unrelated to my qualifications."

This trajectory highlights that entering self-employment is often a slow, sometimes painful process of occupational compromise rather than an immediate, enthusiastic choice. It illustrates the profound identity shift required of graduates as they reconcile their highly specialized, formal training with the stark realities of an under-resourced local economy. Participants further explained that delayed entrepreneurial entry was frequently linked to inadequate start-up resources rather than an absence of entrepreneurial interest. RP17 recalled:

"After the death of my bosses due to COVID, I looked for alternative formal employment. Self-employment seemed impossible as I did not have any meaningful savings for a venture. It was only after my mother suggested that perhaps I should think of making scones and cakes. I did and it's paying."

This experience highlights a common regional pattern where self-employment is only seriously contemplated after formal paths are entirely exhausted. Rather than being triggered by a sudden flash of "opportunity recognition," the decision to start a business matures slowly, shaped by family intervention, immediate economic distress, and accumulated domestic skills.

Taken together, these narratives reveal that entrepreneurship was experienced as an adaptive livelihood strategy, characterised by delayed transitions into self-employment following constrained labour-market opportunities.

3.3.3 Theme 3: Opportunities for New Ventures in Rural Areas

Participants acknowledged the structural constraints associated with rural communities, yet simultaneously identified entrepreneurial opportunities arising from unmet local needs, limited competition, and comparatively

low operating costs. In this context, the data reveal that opportunity recognition was grounded primarily in responding to everyday community needs rather than identifying high-growth or technologically innovative ventures.

RP01 explained:

"There are many services that people require in rural areas but there are no service providers around. These are opportunities for which one hardly needs to compete. I can do my work and retire to my home without worrying about rentals."

This conceptualization positions rural entrepreneurship as a practical response to localized service deficits rather than an aggressive pursuit of market share. Ironically, the very infrastructure and service gaps that characterize rural resource constraints are recast by graduates as protective niches that offer low-overhead business opportunities. Similarly, RP16 reflected:

"People think only of farming in rural areas, but there is value in value addition. Moreover, I need not live beyond my means through trying to impress peers."

This perspective reframes the rural setting by showing that lower local living costs and minimal operational overheads can cushion early-stage enterprises. Instead of viewing rurality exclusively through a lens of deficit, graduates recognize specific environmental dynamics that can support modest, resilient, and socially grounded business growth. RP06 further observed:

"Unlike in urban areas, competition is relatively low in rural areas. One can easily establish a niche through the provision of products and services largely unavailable in rural areas."

This illustrates graduates' ability to spot low hanging fruit in rural areas for sustainable livelihoods. Not all participants, however, expressed similar confidence. RP11 admitted:

"I am not very confident about the opportunities available. There may be many people in rural areas that need various services and products but with increasing poverty levels, can they afford to pay for them? "

This contrasting perspective is important because it illustrates that opportunity recognition varied across individuals, reminding us that entrepreneurship culture represents shared tendencies rather than universal experiences. Viewed collectively, these accounts reveal that participants conceptualised entrepreneurship primarily as adapting vocational skills to underserved, low-overhead rural markets rather than pursuing innovation-driven growth opportunities.

3.3.4 Theme 4: Institutional Preparation versus Market Realities

Participants frequently described a disconnect between institutional training and the practical realities of establishing and sustaining a business. From this perspective, the data reveal that vocational education was perceived as providing uneven preparation for entrepreneurial practice.

RP06 reflected:

"It didn't! Though I was trained as an electrical engineer, we hardly had practical exposure, and I feel incompetent to even perform wiring for a residential property. I am more comfortable doing Fashion designing."

This highlights a critical distinction: graduates do not necessarily dismiss the intrinsic value of vocational education, but they strongly question its pedagogical capacity to foster autonomous, real-world practice. Consequently, the practical confidence required for entrepreneurship is frequently salvaged or constructed entirely outside the college walls. Similarly, RP03 observed:

"In my enterprise, there is hardly anything that I can relate with my time at TVET."

This account reinforces the perception that entrepreneurial competence frequently developed through workplace experience, family enterprises, experimentation, or self-directed learning rather than through formal vocational curricula. Some participants contrasted contemporary TVET with earlier vocational traditions. RP16 remarked:

"The current TVET tends to be more conceptual than practical. Long back TVET was glowingly referred to as 'finya zwanda' or roll up your sleeves for work, because of its practical focus."

Drawing on this local historical memory reveals a perceived curricular regression. By contrasting modern, highly conceptualized assessments with the hands-on legacy of *finya zwanda*, alumni articulate a sense that contemporary vocational education has become disconnected from the tactile, practical confidence essential for self-reliance. However, not all accounts were critical. RP14 reflected:

"The Business course I did had aspects of entrepreneurship, and the mandatory practical training empowered me through valuable experiential knowledge."

This contrasting account highlights variation in participants' educational experiences and suggests that institutional preparation may depend on programme characteristics and individual learning opportunities. Taken together, these narratives indicate that entrepreneurship culture developed through interaction between institutional learning, workplace experience, family influence, and practical experimentation rather than through formal education alone.

3.3.5 Theme 5: Societal Stigma and the Cultural Marginalisation of TVET

Participants consistently described entrepreneurship as unfolding within a broader social environment in which vocational education lacked legitimacy. In this context, the data reveal that entrepreneurship was shaped not only by economic conditions but also by socially constructed perceptions of vocational education. RP09 remarked:

"TVET is looked down upon. We are considered people who have not learned enough. TVET students can't go far in life, they say "

This experience reveals that vocational stigma is not merely a collection of isolated social slights, but a highly organized, socially shared hierarchy of credibility. These deep-seated cultural biases directly undermine

graduates' self-efficacy and complicate their professional entry by casting them as academically second-rate. Similarly, RP10 reflected:

"We are considered failures that could not make it to University."

This account becomes more meaningful when understood within the broader hierarchy of educational status, where university qualifications were regarded as more socially legitimate than vocational pathways. Participants further explained that these perceptions affected customers' confidence in their professional competence. RP06 observed:

"Society is very sceptical about TVET graduates' ability to provide acceptable services or products."

This quote highlights how educational stigma extended beyond symbolic status to influence perceived business legitimacy and market opportunities. Female graduates described an additional layer of disadvantage. RP07 explained:

"TVET is despised, and those who enrol in it are despised... more so if one is a woman."

This points to a double burden of marginalization where systemic educational stigma intersects with rigid local gender roles. For women attempting to leverage technical trades for self-employment, entering the market requires continuously confronting both the perceived inferiority of their TVET background and cultural skepticism regarding their technical capability.

3.3.6 Theme 6: Communal Support and the "Ndicou mfumisa" Dynamic

Participants portrayed rural communities as simultaneously enabling and constraining entrepreneurship through close interpersonal relationships. In this context, the data reveal that community ties created opportunities for market access while also generating relational tensions associated with visible entrepreneurial success. RP01 explained:

"People are jealous of each other to the point that they think 'Ndicou mfumisa', meaning I am enriching him if I support his venture."

This local Vha-Venda expression highlights how economic transactions are deeply bound to complex relational dynamics in rural communities. Rather than evaluating local businesses solely on service quality, community members may view supporting a peer’s venture as a zero-sum social game, where transactional patronage is seen as actively elevating an equal above the established community hierarchy. Entrepreneurial success was interpreted through existing community relationships rather than purely economic considerations. RP16 elaborated:

"We are very jealous about people who succeed; we do not support each other..."

This account extends the interpretation by suggesting that participants understood community support as influenced by broader patterns of cooperation, competition, and collective economic behaviour. Similarly, RP13 remarked:

"There is a perception that if you support somebody in the community, you make them rich and they become better than you."

RP08 recounted how his family dissuaded him from advertising his Bussiness on social media saying:

“They will bewitch you “

Importantly, participants also proposed alternative explanations. RP12 observed:

"There is a lack of customer care among small businesses hence the perceived lack of support "

RP15 similarly argued:

"Society supports what you can offer, not who you are."

These contrasting accounts are significant because they caution against interpreting weak community support solely as a consequence of jealousy. Instead, they suggest that entrepreneurial competence, customer service, and business performance also shaped community patronage.

RP14 offered a balanced perspective by describing both supportive and unsupportive community experiences.

Yes and no. There are people in society who are pretentious. They buy your product and deliberately delay payment. Would you say that’s supporting your efforts? How do they expect me to restock? However, others genuinely support this. I think you saw a woman who came when you bought all my scones, but I had to ask you to give some back to sell to her, as she is my regular customer. That is support!

Taken together, these narratives reveal that entrepreneurship culture within the rural TVET context was deeply relational. Community networks simultaneously facilitated entrepreneurial activity through local market access while constraining business development through complex social expectations, interpersonal obligations, and perceptions surrounding success. This relational character emerged as a defining feature of entrepreneurship culture rather than a peripheral contextual influence.

4 Discussion

This discussion integrates established scholarship with participants' experiences to refine the conceptual boundaries of entrepreneurship culture. Rather than treating deductive concepts and inductive findings as competing explanations, the discussion places them in a dialogue to identify where existing conceptualisations are confirmed, qualified, and extended.

4.1 Integrative Synthesis of Entrepreneurship Culture

Table 6 synthesises the findings across the macro, meso, and micro levels of the analysis. At the macro level, entrepreneurship culture emerged within conditions of labour-market exclusion, weak institutional support, and limited formal employment opportunities. At the meso level, entrepreneurial meaning is negotiated through family relationships, vocational stigma, and community norms. At the micro level, entrepreneurial action reflects adaptive opportunity recognition, resilience, and locally situated agency.

Table 6: Multi-Level Integrated Synthesis Matrix of Rural TVET Entrepreneurship Culture

Analytical Level	Deductively Derived Entrepreneurship Culture Concept	Inductively Derived Contextual Attribute	Conceptual Contribution to Entrepreneurship Culture
Macro	Structural autonomy and formal opportunity structures	Structural constraint, survival-oriented agency, weak institutional support	Entrepreneurship culture is structurally embedded rather than context-free.
Meso	Entrepreneurial networks and social capital	Family embeddedness, vocational stigma, relational accountability	Entrepreneurship culture operates through socially negotiated legitimacy and relational norms.
Micro	Opportunity recognition and entrepreneurial agency	Incremental adaptation, resilience, locally embedded opportunity recognition	Entrepreneurial action is adaptive and contextually negotiated rather than universally growth-oriented.

Taken together, the six themes identified in the Findings reveal that entrepreneurship culture is not a context-free disposition but a socially embedded system of meanings through which entrepreneurship is interpreted and enacted. The multi-level synthesis presented in Table 6 demonstrates how these meanings emerge through interactions between structural conditions, social relationships, and individual agency rather than from any single level of analysis.

4.2 Entrepreneurship Culture as Structurally Embedded Agency

The findings indicate that entrepreneurship culture within the rural TVET context is fundamentally shaped by structurally embedded agency. Participants consistently interpreted entrepreneurship as an adaptive response to constrained labour markets rather than as the pursuit of innovation or growth. While this finding aligns with studies linking labour-market exclusion to entrepreneurial activity (ILO, 2022; Palmer, 2007; WEF, 2023), it further suggests that structural conditions shape not only entrepreneurial behaviour but also the meanings attached to entrepreneurship itself. In the rural TVET context, entrepreneurship is understood as a culturally legitimate livelihood strategy under conditions of economic uncertainty.

The findings further indicate that entrepreneurship culture is not produced exclusively through formal entrepreneurship education. Rather, entrepreneurial capabilities emerged through continual interaction between institutional learning, family businesses, workplaces, and community experience. This suggests that entrepreneurship culture is socially accumulated across multiple learning environments rather than transmitted through educational programmes alone. Although this may partly reflect historical cohorts who completed their studies before entrepreneurship development initiatives became more systematically integrated within South African TVET colleges (Akoobhai & Bambo, 2023; Nchu et al., 2023), the findings indicate that entrepreneurship

culture develops through interactions between institutional, family, and community environments rather than through formal education alone.

4.3 Entrepreneurship Culture as Socially Negotiated Legitimacy

Building on the structural conditions discussed above, findings demonstrate that entrepreneurship is embedded in systems of social legitimacy. Family members often encouraged entrepreneurial activity, whereas the persistent stigma surrounding TVET qualifications shaped participants' perceptions of their entrepreneurial credibility. This pattern is consistent with stigma theory (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and entrepreneurial identity scholarship (Down & Warren, 2008; Mmbaga et al., 2020), all of which emphasise that entrepreneurial identities are constructed through shared social meanings rather than individual characteristics alone.

The locally embedded *ndicou mfumisa* phenomenon extends this understanding by illustrating how entrepreneurial legitimacy is negotiated within the expectations of reciprocity, equality, and community cohesion. Viewed alongside Foster's (1965) *Image of Limited Good*, participants' accounts suggest that visible entrepreneurial success may be interpreted as disrupting social equilibrium within resource-constrained communities, thereby discouraging overt displays of economic advancement. Foster's framework is employed here as an analytical analogue rather than a direct cultural explanation. The findings are also consistent with Granovetter's (1985) concept of embeddedness, highlighting that those entrepreneurial decisions were shaped by social legitimacy, reciprocal obligations, and community expectations, as much as by market opportunities.

Building on the structural conditions discussed above, the findings demonstrate that rural entrepreneurship is deeply embedded in systems of social legitimacy. Family networks often function as crucial incubators of entrepreneurial intent, whereas the persistent societal stigma surrounding TVET qualifications actively undermines participants' external credibility. This dual reality highlights a complex identity negotiation. Viewed through stigma theory (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001), the TVET label operates as a socially discrediting mark that limits market legitimacy. Concurrently, graduates must navigate this devaluation internally; as suggested by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and contemporary identity scholarship (Down & Warren, 2008), their entrepreneurial entry represents a creative restructuring of self-concept, translating a marginalized educational identity into a resilient, self-employed persona. For female TVET graduates and consistent with intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), vocational stigma and gender combine to produce distinctive challenges that extend beyond identity alone. These intersecting identities became socially discrediting attributes that constrain female entrepreneurial legitimacy within male-dominated technical occupations.

4.4 Entrepreneurship Culture as Contextually Embedded Meaning

These structural conditions are translated into entrepreneurial action through socially negotiated legitimacy as participants interpreted entrepreneurship through a historically situated understanding of vocational education, including references to the earlier *Finya zwanda* ethos that emphasised practical competence. These accounts reinforce the perspective that entrepreneurship is socially and spatially embedded (Welter et al., 2017; Müller &

Korsgaard, 2018), while illustrating how entrepreneurial meanings evolve through the interaction of institutional histories, labour-market conditions, and community experience.

Taken together, the preceding discussion demonstrates that the six themes identified in this study are not independent characteristics but mutually reinforcing expressions of entrepreneurship culture within rural TVET settings. Livelihood pragmatism, delayed entrepreneurial transition, adaptive opportunity recognition, socially negotiated legitimacy, vocational identity, and relational community dynamics collectively describe how entrepreneurship is understood, valued, and enacted. Entrepreneurship culture therefore emerges not as a fixed behavioural disposition but as a culturally embedded system of meanings through which entrepreneurial action is continually negotiated within particular structural and institutional contexts.

Conclusion and Construct Definition

This study examined how rural-based TVET alumni from the Vhembe District of South Africa conceptualised entrepreneurship culture through their lived experiences. Integrating these experiences with existing scholarship shows that entrepreneurship culture extends beyond entrepreneurial attitudes or behavioural predispositions. Instead, they are expressed through shared meanings, social identities, legitimacy judgments, and adaptive practices, shaped by the structural and institutional conditions within which entrepreneurship occurs. Drawing on these insights, this study proposes the following context-specific definition:

A rural-based TVET entrepreneurship culture is a culturally embedded system of shared meanings, norms, identities, and legitimacy judgments through which vocationally trained actors navigate structural resource constraints, limited formal employment opportunities, and vocational stigma by adapting their capabilities to exploit unmet local needs and sustain livelihoods through low-overhead relationally negotiated forms of enterprise.

This definition is contextually bounded to rural TVET alumni experiences rather than intended as a universal characterisation of entrepreneurship culture. Nevertheless, it contributes to greater construct clarity by demonstrating that entrepreneurship culture retains conceptual coherence, whereas its defining attributes are reconfigured by the social, institutional, and economic conditions in which entrepreneurship is enacted.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to entrepreneurship research in three ways. First, it advances construct clarity by distinguishing entrepreneurship culture from related concepts, such as entrepreneurial mindset, entrepreneurial orientation, entrepreneurship education, and entrepreneurial ecosystems, while identifying its defining attributes within a rural vocational context. Second, it demonstrates that entrepreneurship culture is best understood as a culturally embedded system of shared meanings, whose defining attributes are contextually configured rather than universally fixed. Existing concepts such as entrepreneurial agency, opportunity recognition, and social embeddedness therefore remain relevant but acquire different meanings under conditions of labour-market exclusion, vocational stigma, and rurality. Third, this study provides an empirically grounded conceptual foundation from which context-sensitive measures of entrepreneurship culture can be developed and evaluated in similar educational and geographical settings.

Practical Implications

Although derived from a single rural district, the findings offer several practical insights into TVET policy and entrepreneurship education. The prominence of delayed entrepreneurial entry highlights the need to strengthen curriculum components concerned with entrepreneurial preparedness, informal resource mobilisation, and venture initiation. Participants' accounts of vocational stigma, community scepticism, and relational constraints further suggest that entrepreneurship education should extend beyond conventional business planning to include strategies for building entrepreneurial legitimacy, strengthening local networks, and navigating community dynamics. A holistic approach that incorporates or engages communities and other stakeholders outside the education system, could be ideal to nurturing Entrepreneurship culture in TVET contexts. Finally, the importance of localised service deficits and low-overhead enterprises indicates that entrepreneurship programs in rural TVET contexts should place greater emphasis on opportunity recognition within underserved local markets rather than relying predominantly on high-growth or technology-oriented venture models.

Limitations and Future Research

These findings should be interpreted within the context of this study. This study focused on alumni from public TVET institutions in the rural Vhembe District and employed purposive and snowball sampling. Consequently, the findings are not intended to represent private, urban, or better-resourced vocational contexts. Moreover, the exploratory qualitative design and Reflexive Thematic Analysis generated contextually grounded interpretations rather than universally applicable dimensions or causal explanations. Although analytical rigor has been strengthened through reflexive memo writing, audit trails, and peer debriefing, alternative interpretations remain possible.

Future research should extend this work by developing systematic measurements. The conceptual attributes identified in this study provide an empirical foundation for item generation, expert content validation, pilot testing, exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, and subsequent assessment of validity across diverse TVET populations. Comparative studies involving different institutional, regional, and national contexts would further determine which attributes remain stable across settings and which vary according to local structural and cultural conditions. Such work contributes to the progressive refinement of entrepreneurship culture as a contextually sensitive yet conceptually coherent construct.

Declarations

Ethics and AI Statements

Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board of the author's home university. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained through strict anonymisation. Paperpal was utilized for language editing and editorial refinement

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Tables

Table 1: Selected Conceptualizations of Entrepreneurship Culture Across Levels of Analysis

Author(s)	Conceptualization of Entrepreneurial Culture	Level of Analysis	Research Context	Key Attributes Emphasized
Hofstede (2001)	Entrepreneurship culture is reflected in shared societal values and norms that shape attitudes towards entrepreneurial behaviour.	Macro	Cross-national Cross-cultural	Risk tolerance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance.
Hayton, George & Zahra (2002)	National culture comprises shared values and beliefs that influence entrepreneurial behaviour, including innovation, autonomy, and risk-taking.	Macro	Cross-national Comparative	Innovation orientation, institutional risk acceptance, autonomy.

Table 1 (continued) Selected Conceptualizations of Entrepreneurship Culture Across Levels of Analysis

Author(s)	Conceptualization of Entrepreneurial Culture	Level of Analysis	Research Context	Key Attributes Emphasized
Obschonka et al. (2013)	Regional entrepreneurship culture emerges from shared psychological characteristics, historical legacies, and local values that support entrepreneurial activity	Macro	Regional Economics / Geography	Localised entrepreneurial personality traits, psychological clustering.
George et al. (2016)	Entrepreneurship culture is shaped by informal institutions, social norms, and community networks that influence entrepreneurial behaviour.	Macro	Emerging Economies / Sub-Saharan Africa	Community norms, indigenous networks, collective resource sharing.

Table 1 (continued) Selected Conceptualizations of Entrepreneurship Culture Across Levels of Analysis

Author(s)	Conceptualization of Entrepreneurial Culture	Level of Analysis	Research Context	Key Attributes Emphasized
Schein (2010)	Entrepreneurship culture reflects shared organisational assumptions and values that guide entrepreneurial behaviour within organisations.	Meso	Organizational Theory	Deep-seated organizational assumptions, core values, operational norms.
Covin & Lumpkin (2011)	Entrepreneurial orientation conceptualises entrepreneurial behaviour through organisational strategic practices, rather than through shared cultural meanings.	Meso	Corporate Strategy / Firm Level	Firm-level proactiveness, strategic autonomy, competitive aggressiveness.

Table 1 (continued) Selected Conceptualizations of Entrepreneurship Culture Across Levels of Analysis

Author(s)	Conceptualization of Entrepreneurial Culture	Level of Analysis	Research Context	Key Attributes Emphasized
UNESCO-UNEVOC (2018)	Entrepreneurship education frameworks foster school environments that encourage venture creation.	Meso	Spain Vocational Education (TVET)	Controlled entrepreneurial mindsets and simulated institutional venture creation.
Shane & Venkataraman (2000)	Opportunity-based entrepreneurship conceptualises entrepreneurship through opportunity recognition and exploitation rather than shared cultural systems.	Micro	Individual Opportunity Theory	Cognitive discovery, individual evaluation, opportunity exploitation.

Table 3: Illustrative examples of the Reflexive Thematic Analysis process

Research Probe / Question	Participant Quote (Verbatim)	Initial Interpretive Coding	Developing Pattern of Meaning	Final Theme	Interpretive Insight
1. What brought you here into self-employment?	"Besides, the way my parents provided for us proved that there is life in entrepreneurship"	Family socialisation into entrepreneurship	Pathways into self-employment	Theme #1: Pathways Leading to Self-Employment and Entrepreneurial Aspirations	Leveraging family influence and networks
2. Do you see opportunities for new ventures in rural areas?	"There are many services that people require in rural areas but there are no providers"	Lack of service providers in rural areas	Opportunities for new ventures in rural areas	Theme #3: Opportunities for New Ventures in Rural Areas	Ability to locate and target unserved consumer niches

Table 3 (continued) Illustrative examples of the Reflexive Thematic Analysis process

Research Probe / Question	Participant Quote (Verbatim)	Initial Interpretive Coding	Developing Pattern of Meaning	Final Theme	Interpretive Insight
3. What caused you to delay starting your business after graduating?	"However, as I did not have enough money to buy necessary equipment, I delayed my venture creation"	Financial constraints	Reasons for delaying business start-up after graduation	Theme #2: Perceptions and Comparisons Between Self-Employment and Formal Employment Career Paths	Resource Mobilization & Capital Management
4. How did your TVET prepare you for your career?	"Moreover, my TVET did not really train me in anything to do with Business"	Lack of career preparation from TVET	TVET preparation for career development	Theme #4: Institutional Preparation versus Market Realities	Recognizing deficiencies to pursue hands-on learning

Table 3 (continued) Illustrative examples of the Reflexive Thematic Analysis process

Research Probe / Question	Participant Quote (Verbatim)	Code	Sub-theme	Theme	Participant Meaning
5. What are the traits/characteristics required for success in business or self-employment?	"Moreso for TVET students as they are generally associated with failure... you have to be strong."	Resilience	Traits required for success in business and self-employment	Theme #5: Societal Stigma and the Cultural Marginalization of TVET	Psychological resilience & perseverance

Table 4: Summary of Emergent Qualitative Themes and Visual Map

Theme	Main Pattern Observed	Illustrative Participants
Pathways to self-employment	Delayed entrepreneurial entry following periods of unemployment and informal work.	RP01, RP03, RP16, RP05
Formal employment comparisons	Preference for formal employment based on perceived social desirability and stability.	RP01, RP14, RP16
Rural opportunities	Identification of venture options derived from unmet local service deficits.	RP01, RP16

Table 4 (continued) Summary of Emergent Qualitative Themes and Visual Map

Theme	Main Pattern Observed	Illustrative Participants
TVET preparation	Assessment of the training curriculum as weakly aligned with rural operational realities.	RP02, RP10, RP15
Social stigma	Community association of TVET enrolment with academic underperformance.	RP06, RP09, RP10, RP07, RP18
Community dynamics	Experiences of local jealousy and social tension following visible business traction.	RP01, RP14, RP15, RP16, RP12, RP13

Table 5: Participant Demographic Profile and Stated Descriptive Context

Research Participant (RP) ID	Age	Gender	Course	Years Post-Graduation	Employment Status	Stated Descriptive Context / Main Pattern Reported
RP01	40	M	Mechanical Engineering	20	Self-employed mechanic	Emphasise practical self-reliance and low-cost operations and address local service gaps.
RP02	35	F	Electrical Engineering	12	Self-employed fashion designer	Described shifting to an alternate field due to limited formal hiring and a need for daily income.
RP03	28	F	Chemical Engineering	9	Self-employed fashion designer	reported entering the necessary self-employment outside her field of study due to a loss of financial support.
RP04	52	M	Carpentry	24	Self-employed carpenter	Focus on long-term local trade operations, reputation building, and local technical work.

Table 5 (continued) Participant Demographic Profile and Stated Descriptive Context

Research Participant (RP) ID	Age	Gender	Course	Years Post-Graduation	Employment Status	Stated Descriptive Context / Main Pattern Reported
RP05	32	M	Mechanical Engineering	10	Self-employed	Stated a preference for operational autonomy and independent income generation over job-seeking.
RP06	19	M	Carpentry	1	Unemployed	They reported a delayed transition to self-employment due to a lack of start-up capital.
RP07	30	F	Electrical Engineering	3	Self-employed	Highlighted personal navigation of gender dynamics within male-dominated technical trade.
RP08	29	M	Electrical Engineering	8	Self-employed	They expressed a deliberate choice to operate independently rather than pursue standard corporate roles.

Table 5(continued) Participant Demographic Profile and Stated Descriptive Context

Research Participant (RP) ID	Age	Gender	Course	Years Post-Graduation	Employment Status	Stated Descriptive Context / Main Pattern Reported
RP09	25	M	Electrical Engineering	3	Formally employed	Maintain that salaried work provides superior personal security and community prestige.
RP10	32	M	Business Administration	10	Formally employed	Specific operational training deficits and gaps in systemic institutional preparation were identified.
RP11	26	F	Office Administration	3	Unemployed	Described local labour market exclusion and looking at self-employment strictly as a coping option.
RP12	25	M	Business Administration	3	Formally employed	Stated an intention to build a formal enterprise but cited initial funding shortages as a barrier.

Table 5 (continued) Participant Demographic Profile and Stated Descriptive Context

Research Participant (RP) ID	Age	Gender	Course	Years Post-Graduation	Employment Status	Stated Descriptive Context / Main Pattern Reported
RP13	**32**	**F**	**Electrical Engineering**	**6**	**Self-employed**	**Reported operating a technical business despite low local support and limited resource ecosystems.**
RP14	**32**	**F**	**Business Administration**	**10**	**Self-employed**	**Described a strategy of flexible adaptation to local demand shifts and informal consumer needs.**
RP15	26	M	Electrical Engineering	5	Self-employed	They reported moving to self-employment as an alternative survival method after failing to find a formal job.
RP16	**32**	**M**	**Marketing**	**10**	**Self-employed agro-processor**	**Focuses on identifying localised market niches and launching a rural agricultural processing unit.**

Table 5 (continued) Participant Demographic Profile and Stated Descriptive Context

Research Participant (RP) ID	Age	Gender	Course	Years Post-Graduation	Employment Status	Stated Descriptive Context / Main Pattern Reported
RP17	26	M	Electrical Engineering	6	Self-employed chef	reported a complete shift away from his engineering certificate toward flexible livelihood options.
RP18	26	F	Electrical Engineering	1	Formally employed	Reported entry requirements as society barometer in valuating TVET and University education usefulness.