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Bridging the Gap Transnationally—Coupling Migrants' Informal and Formal Business Activities Through Hybrid Business Models

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ABSTRACT

Multifocal practices allow transnational migrant entrepreneurs (TMEs) to access extended opportunity structures in diverse entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs). National and regional regulations, customer relations, market demands, networks, and country-specific entrepreneurial statuses facilitate the strategic coupling of informal and formal business structures toward hybrid business models. However, "how" TMEs innovate and develop approaches to build from informal, formal business models in parallel across national borders remains largely underexplored. Our multiple case study presents three Polish–German TMEs who operate on a multifocal basis in different ecosystems. The longitude study of these entrepreneurs illustrates how transnational migrant businesses can change the owners' power dynamics, habitus, and feelings of belonging while counteracting social exclusion and self-discrimination. Our study contributes to the theoretical debate by illuminating the pathway between informality and formality facilitated by migrant entrepreneurs' transnational business models and their multifocal practices, possibly turning into transnational embeddedness in two or more ecosystems.

1 | Introduction

Transnational migrant entrepreneur (TME) refers to transnational entrepreneurial activity initiated by migrants (Portes, Haller, and Guarnizo 2002). Transnational entrepreneurship typically takes place between the home and host country of the migrant entrepreneur (Portes, Haller, and Guarnizo 2002). As David et al. (2022) and Solano (2016) discussed, TMEs are self-employed migrants who use their migration experience for cross-border business activities in different contexts and settings. Hence, migrant entrepreneurs' "multifocality" is understood as their involvement, but not necessarily embeddedness, in multiple places and groups, potentially broadening their opportunity structures (Solano, Schutjens, and Rath 2022). Transnationalism is identified as an element of entrepreneurship, while the link between transnationalism and migrant entrepreneurship became a prominent topic (Elo and Dana 2023; Harima and Baron 2020; Brzozowski, Cucculelli, and Surdej 2017; Drori, Honig, and Grinsberg 2013; Guarnizo 2003). In several cases, transnationalism indicates a path forward and a way of bridging the gap for business actions across countries (Elo and Minto-Coy 2019). Characterized by multifocal practices including different countries and different groups, TMEs "may consider place features as well as group behaviours and attitudes" (Solano, Schutjens, and Rath 2022, 3) formed to entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs)

(Spigel 2020; Schaefer and Henn 2018) to detect opportunities for new business formation or further business development (Elo et al. 2018; Harima and Baron 2020). Transnational business opportunity developments involve highly performative, entrepreneurial action, networking abilities, and often long-term planning by these transnational migrant business drivers (David and Terstriep 2019; Schmiz 2011; Casson et al. 2008). However, extant findings on TMEs rarely address the interrelation of transnational informal and formal business (Gillespie and McBride 2013). Also, the multifocal approach to (mixed) embeddedness in which these hybrid business models evolve is seldom acknowledged (Solano, Schutjens, and Rath 2022; Dubosson-Torbay, Osterwalder, and Pigneur 2002). Here, the (mixed) embeddedness approach offers important insights. It describes the opportunity structures and the interaction between personal and group resources that influence migrants' entrepreneurial behavior and activities (Solano, Schutjens, and Rath 2022; Kloosterman and Rath 2018; Kloosterman, van der Leun, and Rath 1999).

Utilizing all forms of capital, we assume migrants' maximum exploitation of opportunity structures through multifocal embeddedness in two or more EEs to start their businesses and leave behind challenges and barriers they face in their host country. Sensing and seizing opportunities beyond established organizational structures and markets to them also may mean experimenting in "gray zones."

Hence, and in response to the recent call for more longitudinal studies to understand how the trajectories of entrepreneurs and their businesses evolve over space and time (Riaño, Mittmasser, and Sandoz 2022), we ask:

1. How does transnationalism bridge the gap between informal and formal business structures?
2. How do TMEs' multifocal practices allow for experimentation with and influence the establishment of hybrid business models and their embeddedness in multiple EEs?

We argue that entrepreneurial aspirations, the EU Single Market, and the free movement of people, goods, and capital have accelerated new opportunities for hybrid business models by migrant entrepreneurs acting in transnational and multifocal ways. Underlying the economic adjustment approach (Portes, Haller, and Guarnizo 2002) is the assumption that migrant entrepreneurs operating across borders acquire their socioeconomic status as entrepreneurs by combining formal and informal entrepreneurial activities. A status that they would likely have been refused otherwise. The article refers to methods and interlinkages that TMEs integrate into their daily business activities to unveil the informality of migrant entrepreneurship (David and Terstriep 2019). To overcome the barriers of labor market integration (David, Evans, and Terstriep 2019; David and Coenen 2017) and social habitus growth (Bourdieu 1992; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) as two possible incentives, TMEs may establish unconventional (hybrid) business models, which are often partly or time-wise informal. The entrepreneurs and their business models are characterized by multifocal acting in diverse EEs in different countries with different groups of people. They are shaped by the specific regional regulations, customers, and market demand underlying country-specific understandings.

This study presents three cases of Polish–German TMEs to exemplify how transnationally evolving migrant businesses can change their personal and entrepreneurial status quo. Utilizing reverse engineering (Komatsu Cipriani et al. 2020) involving the application of tools and processes traditionally used to generate new business, the business models behind the cases and their evolution over time have been uncovered employing a business model canvas (Dubosson-Torbay, Osterwalder, and Pigneur 2002; Osterwalder and Pigneur 2010). Both analytical tools were applied to reveal the entrepreneurs' business activities and shed light on their motives and the transition from informality or nascent business to formality and growth. Incentives for and barriers to the endeavors and changes over time are explicated. The study gives particular attention to the multifocality in TMEs' behavior to experiment with and establish hybrid business models and, by so doing, represents a further contribution to the phenomenon of TME and literature.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. We begin by reviewing ongoing theoretical debates in the field of TMEs based on transnationalism and the multifocality approach. Hereafter, the transformed power relations of TMEs are discussed, and questions of status, habitus and social mobility are studied. We review the literature on the embeddedness of TMEs in EEs and the concept of hybrid business models. After introducing the methodology, we present three case studies of TMEs and their business models. The findings and conclusion discuss the facilitation of transition processes from informal to formal entrepreneurship, including the role played by multifocality in transnational (mixed) embeddedness. We end with some implications for policy and practice.

2 | Theoretical Considerations

2.1 | Transnational and Multifocal Perspectives on TMEs

In Europe, in the past decades, the term migrant entrepreneurship (Ram, Jones, and Villares-Varela 2017; Rath and Schutjens 2016) expanded the focus from ethnic entrepreneurship to newcomer entrepreneurship driven by refugees' business formation and to cross-border international business (Baklanov et al. 2014; David and Coenen 2017). In the earlier literature, immigrant entrepreneurship marked the nexus of entrepreneurial activities and migrants in the first generation. Today, migrant entrepreneurship is often understood as an umbrella for different migrant groups and migrant generations, diverse ethnicities, varieties of motives for migration, unequal qualification levels, and resources in specific spatial and social settings (David et al. 2022; Sandoz et al. 2022). With the addition of the element of transnationalism in migrant entrepreneurship, this research stream became even more complex but more inclusive to the understanding and research of the phenomenon. Transnationalism refers to economic, social, and political transnational elements influencing migrant entrepreneurship (Vertovec 2004, 2009).

In the economic context, transnationalism was presented by Portes (2001) and Guarnizo (2003), who detailed how transnational entrepreneurs activate their cross-border networks for entrepreneurship. Zapata-Barrero and Rezaei (2020) follow these studies and describe transnational entrepreneurship as an emerging social global pattern in migration studies. Similarly, Patel and Conklin (2009, 1045) point out that "[t]ransnational entrepreneurship is becoming an increasingly important global phenomenon with enormous impact on economic, social, and political structures worldwide." While Casson et al. (2008) explain this phenomenon by the fact that migrant entrepreneurs are more mobile per se, Godley (2008) argues that their willingness to move needs to be stressed and not taken for granted.

The discussion on transnationalism began in the early 1990s (e.g., Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Glick Schiller 1992) and highlighted transmigration, which Pries (2001a, 2001b) refers to as an ideal type of international migratory movement. He argues that changing between places in different national societies is not a one-off phenomenon but a recurring feature of transmigration (Pries 2001a). This can involve engaging in multiple consecutive or simultaneous entrepreneurial activities and locations (Elo et al. 2018). Pries (2001a, 2001b) introduces distinct spatial reference systems to advance the concept of transnational social spaces (TSS). These include individuals, networks, and organizations that cross-national borders. Different locations, regions, and countries build a net of TSS that Pries (2001b, 2007) introduces as "pluri-local," also in line with "multifocal" transnational entrepreneurship found by Solano (2016). Other scholars address the opportunity structures of entrepreneurs within more than one institutional setting (e.g., Drori, Honig, and Wright 2009; Portes, Haller, and Guarnizo 2002).

On one side, the concept of transnationalism brings a spatial dimension to entrepreneurship, focusing on economic globalization (Robinson 1998), and embraces entrepreneurial activities. Still, globalization and transnationalism are not identical (Tedeschi, Vorobeva, and Jauhiainen 2020). Unlike transnationalism, globalization points to the interlinkage between countries and entire continents, while transnationalism refers to people's cross-border movement and activities (Tedeschi, Vorobeva, and Jauhiainen 2020). In this context, the concepts of transnationalism and translocality often are confused. Translocality is part of the transnational movement with strong credit to the primacy of place. Thus, translocality has the potential to strengthen local-to-local connections and place-to-place relationships. Translocal approaches explain complex phenomena of social–spatial arrangements, including international migration, knowledge transfer, and local development processes (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013). However, in the concept of transnational entrepreneurship and its variants, acting internationally, across borders, is central. The views have mostly been limited to the country of residence (CoR) and the country of origin (CoO), but approaches expanding transnationalism emerged (Solano 2016; Bagwell 2015; Vertovec 2004). There is increasing interest in and empirical evidence for, including multiple places and relations in the analysis of transnational entrepreneurship.

Studies shed light on the relevance of this phenomenon at different levels to grasp the evolution of transnationalism in entrepreneurship from all perspectives. For instance, grounded in the mixed embeddedness concept (Kloosterman, van der Leun, and Rath 1999) as an additional resource of capital forms (Bourdieu 1986), scholars argue that TMEs impact regional innovation systems through, for example, higher competitiveness (Kloosterman and Rath 2018; David 2015; Schmiz 2011). Solano et al. (2022, 7) introduce the concept of multifocality of migrant entrepreneurs and argue that "[...] migrant entrepreneurs take into account, and have business connections, with multiple places and multiple groups when it comes to pursuing business opportunities." In so doing, the authors go beyond the focus of duality and embeddedness referring to the CoR and CoO but "[...] shed light on entrepreneurial opportunities created by other places (e.g., third countries) or groups" (Solano, Schutjens, and Rath 2022, 17). Transnational migrants are linked to diverse transnational diaspora and family networks that further underline their multifocal activities (Elo, Täube, and Servais 2022; Mustafa and Chen 2010).

TMEs instead "[c]onduct venture activities across different institutional settings. [...] creating the potential to produce greater economic rents than those generated by operating in a single environment and enabling TMEs to exploit comparative advantages beyond those possible by free-market agreements alone" (Patel and Conklin 2009, 1045–1046). Being characterized by multifocality, TMEs act in diverse settings with diverse persons across countries and levels (Glick Schiller 2015). That is, habitus is enacted by hybridizing the multifocality of business logic via the adoption, development, extension, and transition of formal and informal business strategies.

Operating in multifocal ways, TSS, such as diverse EE, bring several advantages for entrepreneurship. In line with Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital, newer publications on social, financial, human, or cultural capital describe transnational activities, networks, and places as a source of additional assets for migrant entrepreneurs (Bilecen and Lubbers 2021; David, Schaefer, and Terstriep 2021; Sommer 2020; Phuong and Harima 2019; Solano 2016; Omrane 2015; Schmiz 2011). TMEs may access several layers of resources through their transnational diaspora networks and global diasporas (Elo, Täube, and Servais 2022).

Despite these advantages, one can observe that, in practice, transnationalism allows potential migrant entrepreneurs to use informal practices to prepare the ground for entrepreneurship of formal status (Sandoz 2021; David and Terstriep 2019; Bisignano and El-Anis 2019). Within the informal business structures of migrants, decision-making is often driven by employment, labor market regulations (David and Coenen 2017; Ram, Edwards, and Jones 2007; Williams 2004, 2006) or the legal status assigned to the migrant and permission to start a business (Elo, Täube, and Servais 2022). Other hazards to entrepreneurship may include a lack of financial or human assets and problems with qualification recognition (David, Evans, and Terstriep 2019). Scholars also argue that, in general, migrants without legal status are more likely to pursue strategies in the informal economy (Barrett et al. 2002; Bisignano and El-Anis 2019). In addition, we suggest that transnationalism can benefit migrants who want to avoid uncertainty or try things out without lasting consequences. Multifocality allows budding entrepreneurs to start informally before turning their attempts

into formal ventures by trying out hybrid business models (Williams and Martinez 2014). Bisignano and El-Anis (2019) explore how informal migrants' social and economic embeddedness follows a continuous redefinition and transition of social ties and market structures. These processes are reflected in revaluating and renegotiating their goals, expectations, attitudes, and opportunities. Ram et al. (2007, 320) term informal migrant entrepreneurship the "[r]emunerated production of goods and services perfectly legal in themselves but hidden from the state for tax and welfare purposes." For this study, we take a processual view of "informal" and understand the term as the preformation phase in the shadow of the market. Informality can be a temporary or an add-on feature, but it can also be strategic for entrepreneurship under unattractive conditions (Elo and Emmanuel 2022).

2.2 | Self-Employment and Entrepreneurship as a Status Change

Since self-employment is known to be an accelerator for social mobility and integration (David, Evans, and Terstriep 2019), it follows that the status of being an entrepreneur or what we refer to as the businessperson can change owners' power dynamics, habitus and "feeling of belonging" while counteracting social exclusion and self-discrimination. Based on Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (Bourdieu 1977), Drori, Honig, and Grinsberg (2013) and De Clercq and Voronov (2009, 395) picture entrepreneurship as "[a] profound socially embedded process connected to entrepreneurs' positions in structures of power relations." David and Steinberg (2021) identify united sociocultural attitudes in the habitus concept, where habitus is understood as social imprints on an individual level arising in patterns of thoughts and actions that determine the possibilities and limitations of a person. Accordingly, acquiring status as a (transnational) entrepreneur changes migrants' positions in societies (De Clercq and Voronov 2009) by permitting them to access different types and variations of capital (Bourdieu 1986). Just as entrepreneurship is an essential component and measuring instrument of economies, the status of being an entrepreneur harbors the potential of power and access to better opportunity structures on the individual level (David, Evans, and Terstriep 2019). Accordingly, social mobility prompts many migrants to set up a business (Leicht et al. 2017) and thus achieve higher status in terms of social integration and proper income (David and Coenen 2017). Consequently, migrant entrepreneurs increasingly rely on education as social capital, especially when starting a business or becoming self-employed (Metzger 2016).

Beyond the possible informality of TMEs' business, the hybrid organizing of business models by TMEs is theoretically interesting (Davies and Doherty 2018). The term "hybrid" refers to a business model that creates or unites tensions (Pache and Santos 2013), often simultaneously. Vatanasakdakul et al. (2004, 54), for instance, introduce hybrid business models (Kleverbeck et al. 2017) using the example of online and offline business strategies. Taking up these examples, Komatsu Cipriani et al. (2020) describe the adaption of profit-driven strategies into mission-driven business strategies and vice versa. They assume that mission-driven strategies can embody different forms and suggest "[...] non-profit or for-profit, public or private, governmental or non-governmental, charitable or faith-based organizations" as possible forms in the context of social innovations (Komatsu Cipriani et al. 2020, 542).

TMEs often undergo a series of transformations to adapt their business models and strategies to their given situations and needs. In so doing, traditional business modeling is opened to a new combination of opportunity structures accessible through multifocal embeddedness in multiple EEs. These are shaped by national and regional regulations, customer relations, market demands, and country-specific understandings of the status of an entrepreneur or businessperson (Spigel and Bathelt 2019). Migrant entrepreneurs thus strategically couple informal with formal in hybrid business structures, highlighting TMEs' bricolage abilities and improvisation rather than strategic planning, abilities which allow them "[t]o deal with the scarcity of resources, recombining them in creative ways to cope with difficulties and unexpected drifts" (Komatsu Cipriani et al. 2020, 561). Elo and Silva (2022, 444) introduce the concept of "diasporic agility," which refers to a particularly agile interplay for new markets with ambidextrous roles among channel partners and multilevel actors in business markets.

2.3 | EEs as Places of Multifocal Practices

The literature argues that there is a correlation between entrepreneurship and economic performance and that this is embedded in EEs (Content et al. 2020). An EE can be understood as "[a] set of independent actors and factors coordinated in such a way that they enable productive entrepreneurship" (Stam and van de Ven 2021, 811). Spigel (2015, 49), referring to scholars such as Acs, Autio, and Szerb (2014) or Feldman, Francis, and Bercovitz (2005), suggests an EE is "a [...] tool for creating resilient economies based on entrepreneurial innovation" and draws a picture of EEs including "[...] localized cultural outlooks, social networks, investment capital, universities, and active economic policies that create environments supportive of innovation-based ventures." For Malecki (2011), EEs are local and regional networks of entrepreneurs such as Silicon Valley. Roundy (2017, 1253) identifies and isolates the critical components of EEs and, in line with the previously named authors, presents EEs as "consisting of [...] large pools of investment capital, support organizations such as venture incubators and accelerators, labour forces with sufficient human capital, and cultures that encourage risk-taking, innovation, and are accepting of failure." By defining EEs as an umbrella concept producing benefits and resources, David, Schaefer, and Terstriep (2021), based on Spigel and Harrison (2018), describe how a cohesive, typically regional community of entrepreneurs and their supporters help new high-growth ventures to form, survive and expand.

Summarizing these understandings, the concept of EEs emphasizes that the framework in which foundations of new firms and entrepreneurial activities are embedded influences entrepreneurial activities, structures, opportunities, resources, and business models. Drawing on Saxenian (2007), David, Schaefer, and Terstriep (2021) contend that migrant entrepreneurs have access to multiple EEs, which may serve as settings for their multifocal activities, potentially resulting in a more profound embeddedness. This way, migrant entrepreneurs can engage in

co-creation and co-production processes in multiple local economies (Krüger and David 2020). The characteristics of local EEs influence the operations of TMEs, which include the utilization of hybrid business models combining formal and informal structures.

Continuing with thoughts on the mixed embeddedness approach first introduced by Kloosterman, van der Leun, and Rath (1998, 1999), we further assume that local opportunity structures are linked to or embedded and implemented in broader nationally institutionalized regulatory and sociocultural contexts. These, again, influence transnational multifocal processes. This interlinkage of diverse power dynamics in ecosystems, habitus, and milieus may provide a creative space for the "new" and a resource that differs in capital forms (Bourdieu 1986) and business models from the mainstream. By power dynamics, we refer to the balance or disbalance between individuals and groups and how authority is distributed, affecting personal and business behavior. Power dynamics can impact who feels comfortable contributing in a group setting and who does not.

The embeddedness concept considers TME as a reciprocally constitutive interaction between the individual, the local, and further outer social contexts. In this respect, a close connection to the work of Granovetter (1985, 2005) and Polanyi (1957) becomes apparent. Both scholars theorize that no forms of economic activity or actors' behaviors occur in a sociocultural and institutional vacuum but are embedded in concrete systems of social relations (Granovetter 1985, 487), which Malecki (2011) refers to as EEs. More precisely, Granovetter (1985) argues that economic transactions must necessarily be embedded in social ties of trust, mutual obligation, personal sentiment, and face-to-face communication rather than in formal, contractual, and official bureaucratic procedures. Following this, Oinas presented the framework of spatial embeddedness in 1997. He argues that economic activities are embedded in social relations and cannot be understood as disassociated from the social environment (David and Schaefer 2022). Acting multifocally in various transnational and sociocultural settings allows entrepreneurs to access additional resources, including specific knowledge, experiences, and cultures, for business stabilization and development (David, Schaefer, and Terstriep 2021). Migrant entrepreneurs' multifocal practices in diverse settings can become a "gray zone" or an "informal" business structure in the preformation phase in the shadow of the market. This multilayered transnational space allows TMEs to try things out and establish a formal business after passing through a time characterized by uncertainty and fear of failure.

3 | Methodological Approach

3.1 | Research Design and Methodology

Our research approach builds on a qualitative multiple case study with an explorative strategy (Marschan-Piekkari and Welch 2011). A qualitative case study as a method is well suited to address novel and real-life phenomena that are complex and multilayered. Hence, it applies to exploring and understanding transnationalism and entrepreneurship. The case study method also allows for "casing" over time, which is useful when analyzing transnational informal business activities during the preformation phase in the shadow of the market and including formal business development. It may address the concepts of multifocality that represent further layers to understanding TMEs activities. The business model analysis is employed to explore and deepen the research on the informal–formal opportunity nuances evolving within transnational entrepreneurial activities (Dubosson-Torbay, Osterwalder, and Pigneur 2002). The literature on hybrid business models, especially the canvas (Osterwalder and Pigneur 2010), together with the embeddedness in the EEs, fosters the analysis of migrant entrepreneurs and their use of different (hybrid) business structures, coupling informal and formal with transnational activities to start a business in a "safety zone." The business model approach of Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010) allows for the simple presentation of the rationale of how an organization produces, delivers, and captures venture/value. The business model canvas includes nine analytic blocks, starting with customer segments and continuing with the value proposition, channels, customer relationships, revenue streams, essential resources, key activities, key partnerships, and cost structure, which makes horizontal case comparison visible and more straightforward to reflect. The canvas instrument may simultaneously illustrate hybrid business models capturing informal and formal activities.

The cases have been selected to represent a particular transnational setting of Polish–German TMEs' multifocal practices in diverse ecosystems and to represent either similar business and industry contexts of automotive service and parts business or similar pathways into formal entrepreneurship. The case selection is purposeful, enabling the analysis of the evolving business models. This sampling draws on selecting information-rich cases whose analysis illuminated the study's leading questions (Patton 2002). The business models, distinguished by degrees of hybridity and multifocal activities of the business makers, bridge the gap between informal and formal business structures and allow TMEs to establish businesses in a "gray zone" or to jumpstart formal business learning from others in that zone. The analysis follows the path, that is, becoming formal without exposure to the threat of failing.

As the method of data collection for the case data and analysis, we have used narrative interviews (Erlach and Müller 2020). Narrative interviews are a part of qualitative social research Schütze (1976, 1983) and further developed into an innovative, phenomenon-driven method integrating additional elements from several qualitative approaches in a methods fusion. Narrative interviews differ from interviews that are traditionally conducted in the social sciences. Rather than following the usual question-and-answer scheme, they create an open space for storytelling (Erlach and Müller 2020). Hence, the essence of narrative interviews is to attain the interviewer's or narrator's story about his or her experiences rather than the sum of answers to questions formulated by the researcher (Hermanns 1992). Often, narrative interviews center around specific topics or issues in the interviewee's biography. Narrative interviews are also distinguished from other forms by offering a person the chance to own storytelling and use their ways of speech and descriptions through style, communication, and subjective perspective (Hermanns 1992) The narrative approach is well suited for understanding industries and networks within

industrial ecosystems (Makkonen, Aarikka-Stenroos, and Olkkonen 2012). The role of the interviewers during narrative interviews is distinct from regular interviews. They focus less on uncovering facts but on motivating the interviewees to share their personal experiences and stories (Hermanns 1992). The narrative obtained through the narrative interview is a recorded set of related events that make up a story: a beginning, middle stages, and an ending. To better grasp transnationalism as a bridge that fills the gap between informal and formal business structures through TMEs' multifocal practices in settings such as EEs and the establishment of hybrid business models, narrative interviews seemed to be the best tool based on the research design.

Three male transnational migrant or returnee entrepreneurs in a Polish–German context were interviewed and represented as cases. The data were collected by an international research team of three researchers face-to-face and supported by emails, documents, and follow-ups. The interviews of two cases (TMEs I and II) lasted 120 min on average and were conducted at two points, April 2018 and September 2020. From previous interviews with migrant businesses, we knew that the CoR and relational ties play a role in business activities. Accordingly, during the first round, interviewees' were asked to narrate the business formation process from the first idea to the commerce of business activities using the following guiding question: "What prompted you to become an entrepreneur, and did your relational ties to the country of origin play a role?" Based on the findings from the initial round of interviews, the subsequent round of interviews was framed around the question, "How has the entrepreneurial process progressed since our last conversation?" In both rounds, the interviews were conducted in German. The data on the third case (TME III) were collected during multiple annual narrative interviews and participatory research between 2014 and 2018. These lasted between 60 and 180 min and were complemented by emails and ethnographic event participation. The interviews were conducted in English and complemented in a few cases of ambiguity by Polish enquiry.

For TMEs I and II, the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and in the case of TME III, field notes were also taken and supplemented by photos. The interviews ended after the interviewees finished their stories. Due to our focus on a few cases, instead of defining a point of data saturation, we paid attention to the integrity of the interviewees' stories. Usually, data saturation is an important index, but it is unsuitable for narrative interviews, which focus on single cases such as in our research. The integrity of the individual stories, a more in-depth view, and enquiries are of greater importance here (Yang, Qi, and Zhang 2022).

The analysis follows a qualitative approach by interpreting and analyzing elements first in a more inductive and exploratory sense, followed by reflecting theoretical elements in line with progressive focusing (Stake 1981, 2010). The second, more deductive, theoretically driven content analysis addressed the TME evolution and employed the business model canvas for organizing and analyzing the outcomes of the entrepreneurial activity. Here, we have two layers of interpretation: (1) the interviewees' perception of retrospective events, current activities, and plans and (2) the researcher's interpretation of the narration. Specifically, we explore the advantages of implementing a "progressive focusing" approach, which involves systematically narrowing down and refining the research focus during fieldwork to address exceptionally distinct and specific aspects of sociocultural behavior from an insider's perspective. Following such an "emic" approach gives leeway to capture the unique cultural nuances, beliefs, values, and behaviors of the individual studied, allowing for more contextually rich and culturally sensitive analysis. At the same time, it suggests that our research team understands the complexities of the problem before data collection while avoiding excessive commitment to a rigid plan. It calls for stages starting from observations and inquiry that lead to more abductive focus, allowing explanation to occur (Stake 1981). Or as Sinkovics and Alfodi (2012, 817) posit, "[p]rogressive focusing is well-suited to qualitative research in international business requiring complex iteration between theory and data."

4 | Polish–German TMEs' Hybrid Business Models

4.1 | Case Studies

The case studies provide insights into three male Polish–German TMEs and their business models. They shed light on the embeddedness of the entrepreneurs in multifocal places and groups and their involvement in multiscalar settings such as different ecosystems shaped by diverse national and regional regulations, customer relations, market demands, and country-specific understandings of the entrepreneurial culture and the status of an entrepreneur or businessperson (Szymanski, Valderrey Villar, and Cervantes Zepeda 2021). At the center of the case studies, it is possible to identify transformative pathways moving from informal to formal business structures. Investigating the formation and unfolding of how informality turns into formal activities uncovers the motives, incentives, and barriers related to such an undertaking. Also, the turning point becomes visible.

Access to the TMEs was achieved through weak ties of personal networks. The first case is an entrepreneur whom the authors have monitored for several years to document the transformative spirit of his entrepreneurship, which continues to develop. Additional information on, for example, framework conditions was provided by other Polish network members in Germany who participate as co-ethnic workers in similar businesses or are part of the Polish diaspora. Particular attention was given to transnational knowledge, goods, and ideas exchange. One of the cases (TME 3) established his business even as a relatively known medium-sized company.

4.2 | Crossing Borders for Transnational Entrepreneurship

The male Polish–German TME is, at the time of the interview, aged 44 and belongs to the group of German resettlers. At the age of 11, he immigrated with his parents to Germany but still holds dual nationality. After finalizing a comprehensive school in Germany, he started a job in the insurance sector. "I knew I liked selling things to people, but going door-to-door was never my style," he states. Focusing on Polish immigrants in Germany, he created a network of potential customers by selling

car insurance, first formally and later informally. With his marriage to a Polish woman, his transnational diaspora network to Poland, the Netherlands, and Belgium developed, and the beginnings of his informal business structures were established. "After my long relationship with a Polish woman in Germany didn't work out, it was still clear to me that I wanted to marry a Polish woman. There are cultural reasons for this. Quite simple," the entrepreneur explains. His wife's brother and brother-in-law owned a car repair shop in Poland, catering to Polish people's demand for luxurious cars with Western trademarks. Over the years and after the political transformation in Poland, the demand for Western car trademarks increased unexpectedly. Driven by the wage differences and quality of life disbalances between Western and Eastern Europe, the demand has changed from luxurious cars to cheaper cars, used cars, car parts, car services, and repairs—but remains lucrative. Repairs are particularly in demand among the Polish diaspora in Germany. In comparison to German standards, Polish car services are less expensive.

Losing his job at the insurance office was the first step for the TME to start a business, followed by the motivation of earning quick money that he could not imagine gaining on the German labor market. The TME narrated that he struggled to gain entrance to the German labor market and the German qualification system for a long time. Accompanied by the feeling of a lack of acceptance, his perception of being a second-class citizen in Germany grew over time. He describes: "No matter what I did, people always recognised me by my accent. I never belonged. At some point, I stopped making an effort and thought: well, then I'll just hang out with Poles."

Driven by the wish to belong, he started to engage in the Polish diaspora and began a business idea. His original business model centered on purchasing and selling cars and car parts and offering car services and repairs to members of the Polish diaspora in Germany at lower prices.

He offered cars and car parts second-hand and often sold them damaged or had them restored by semi-professional car mechanics. In this process, he refers to his job position as the middleman or, later, the businessman. His main customers were members of the Polish diaspora or the immigrant group of ethnic German resettlers. The beginning of his informal activities strongly addressed the customer community mentioned above and the niche market offering car services in a low-price segment. Being just the middleman, he started to employ co-ethnic workers. At the same time, he continued concentrating on the buying and selling and the background activities of his business, such as the spinning of transnational networks. The buying and selling arrangements were also outsourced to other co-ethnic entrepreneurs. They received a commission for the official arrangements. To continue the cheap buying and selling policy, his services were tax-free, that is, with no invoices. Due to contacts with former colleagues in the insurance sector, he could provide on-demand car insurance and get an informal commission. His services were supplied via personal contacts and hearsay among the Polish diaspora customers.

Driven by the opening of EU borders, he went transnational and, with the help of his wife's family, made new contacts with members of the Polish diaspora in the Netherlands and Belgium. Expanding in such ways, buying and selling cars and damaged car parts and providing car services became essentially cheaper and faster. Hence, his customer circle grew transnationally. After 5 years as an informal TME, he returned to Poland and became a formal TME.

Once again, with the help of his wife's family, he restarted in Poland and established a limited company, joined by his brother-in-law, who had entrepreneurial experience with his garage business. The possibility of transnational cross-border activities between Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium, and vice versa, enabled formal, certificated car services to be offered at low prices. The immense differences in maintenance expenses and wages between Poland and Western Europe continued to support the low-price policies. As a result, the purchase of a damaged car in Western Europe, its repair in Poland, and subsequent resale either in Poland or through connections in Western Europe (such as Germany, Belgium, or the Netherlands) continue to yield mutual benefits for the customer, the middleman, and the car mechanic. This is particularly true when the vehicle is sold at a higher price in Western Europe following the repairs (see Figure 1).

After some time, the TME expanded again in Poland. In addition to the car repair shop, he and his business partners offered exceptional services to Polish customers. He explains: "With the transformation of the Polish regime, capitalism destroyed many jobs in Poland, but some business-minded people quickly became wealthy. These 'new rich' reach out for Western European standards, including solid German cars. As intermediaries, we search for their dream cars in Germany and subsequently across Europe. This is a trust-based business, as the customers fear losing their hard-earned money because of market failures. Our role is to find a car brand at a certain price and to accompany the purchase process." Using this new business idea, the TME now runs a car showroom in Poland for luxurious cars but continues to grow new transnational networks for further expansion.

4.3 | Entrepreneurial Return Migration

The second case study also refers to a male Polish–German TME who is aged 40. As the TME described in the first case study, he immigrated to Germany with his parents and younger brother when he was four. He also holds dual nationality. In contrast to the first case, he first graduated from high school and started his career in the food sector as a sales representative after completing an internship. After a while, he decided to become self-employed in the food sector and sold services related to "junk food" advertising. At the beginning of his entrepreneurial activities, he was still employed full-time and ran his one-person, informal, online business as an additional form of entrepreneurship. Simultaneously, after a while, he quit his job and self-employment due to poor access to the markets and the greater interest of customers in eco-products. Still in Germany, he restarted with a formal two-person logistics company. His business was now a car rental focusing on vans and trucks, less on passenger cars. "The guy I started with; I didn't know him well. We just didn't fit together. Then there were the personal problems with my girlfriend." After a time in which he had to

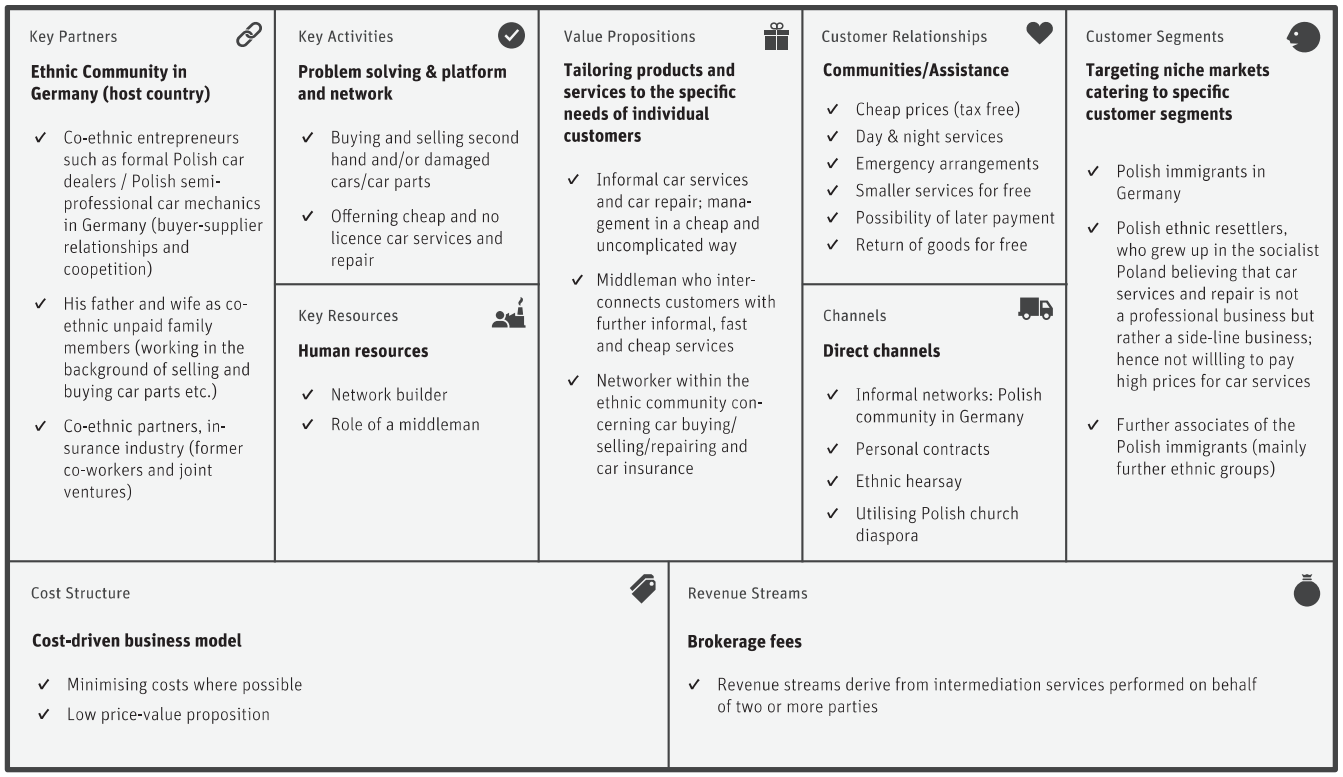

FIGURE 1 | Hybrid business model—Case I.
Source: Authors' compilation.

take care of his personal life, he realized that his business partner had seriously run down the joint entrepreneurship. With the shutting down of the company, they incurred debts, and he became unemployed again.

By networking with a friend in the food industry for a new job, he was able to establish contact with a Chinese company. The Chinese company specializes in food additives with a second headquarters in Europe. Here, the TME found a new job as a salesman and started traveling a lot. He created new and growing networks in Singapore and Eastern Europe by speaking German, English, and Polish (still his mother language). After his supervisor discovered that his Polish skills were still excellent, he sent him to Eastern Europe more often, especially to Poland, to build up the customer base there. An Asian–Eastern European axis was developed, and he was the middleman managing the intersections. The entrepreneur states: "That's what I liked. I love mediating, selling, living between worlds."

After two more years, still fully employed in the company, he worked almost exclusively in the East Block and thus also the Polish market, leading a small team to help him further develop the introduction of new food additives and palm oil, specialized for the Eastern European market. His popularity on the market grew, and his Polish customers were reluctant to cooperate with any other employee of the firm but him. As well as still being employed in Germany, he decided to start a franchise of the same Chinese company in Poland. Due to his dual nationality, he managed to live cross-border for almost a year, was employed in Germany for a Chinese company, and ran a franchise of the same company in Poland in a coupled formal and informal way (see Figure 2). Success with his franchise proved that he was right, and he decided to re-migrate completely to Poland. He established two offices there and now runs his franchise full-time and formally. He states: "I got married in Poland and bought a flat."

Meanwhile, the TME is no longer just a business owner in Poland; it also gives transnational consultations to Asian and Eastern Europeans on how to run franchises and establish transnational networks. He is working on developing new eco-based food additives serving what was initially a small niche market in Poland. Still, he has expanded in recent years, taking Western Europe as a role model.

4.4 | Returnee Transnational Entrepreneurship

The entrepreneur grew up in Poland during the communist regime. At the time of the interview, he is 60 years old. He spent his childhood in Poland but had early developed a critical view of the communist system, largely due to his parents' and grandparents' beliefs and experiences. His grandfather had been a successful entrepreneur, and the family legacy influenced his thinking. This background also influenced his entrepreneurial orientation. As for the children of his era, his school education took place in Poland, and his native language was Polish. The education was neither internationally nor entrepreneurially oriented. Hence, his life did not have many transnational elements beyond imaginary-ideal ones due to the regime, but his entrepreneurial drive was constant. He referred to his youth: "I had a big willingness and dream to be independent and run the business which will enable me to take the decisions of my own and at my

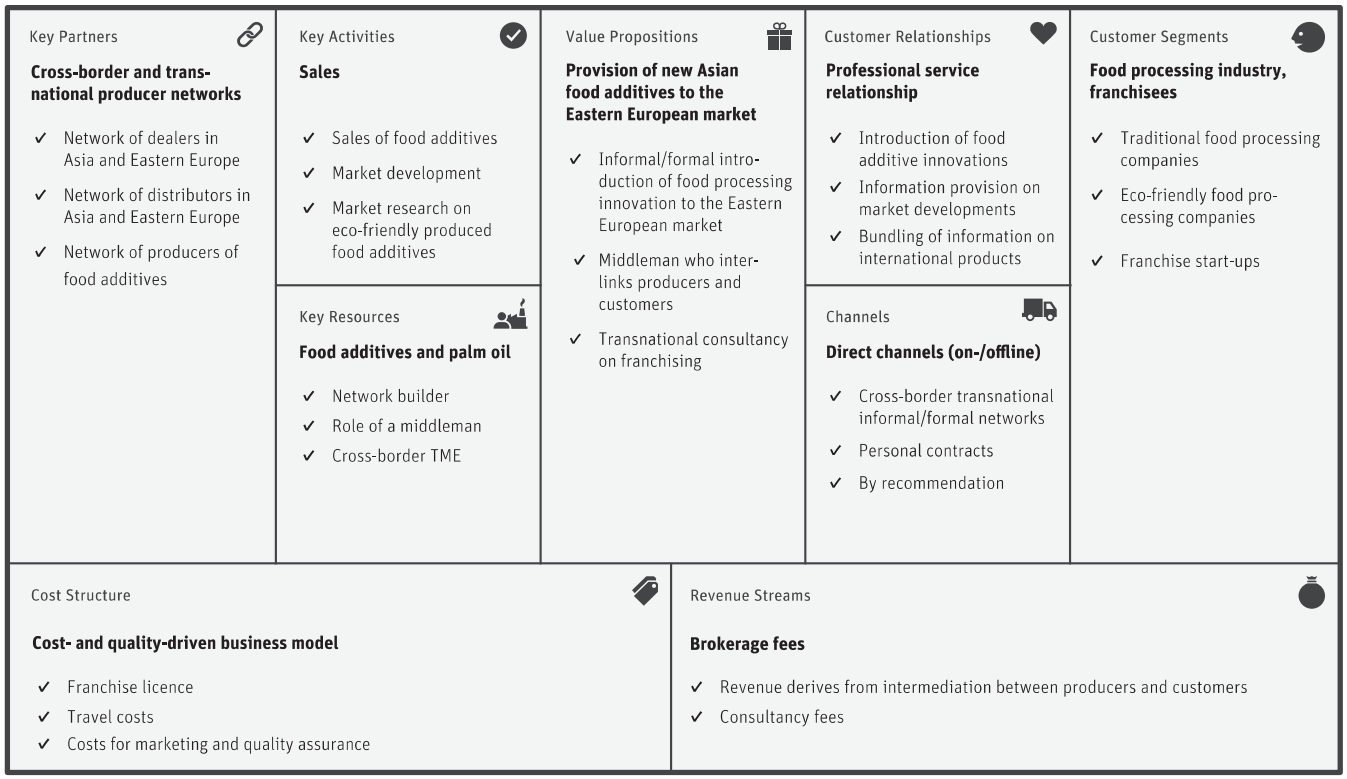

FIGURE 2 | Hybrid business model—Case II.
Source: Authors' compilation.

own risk." As a student, he developed his academic and professional skills and graduated from a Polytechnic University where he studied engineering, how to build automotive and other machines. Thus, it became a natural area for him to contemplate as a future opportunity. During this time, he also wanted to see beyond his geographic and political context and explore the free Western world as it was perceived. As a student, he used his summer holidays to work in other countries, like the United Kingdom and Germany, where he worked in the construction and automotive industries.

At that time, it was already possible to exit Poland. Germany especially attracted many young Polish people because of the availability of numerous unskilled jobs and other opportunities. His experience in the automotive business in Germany provided him with valuable insights, and he was able to learn and follow the transnational business operations taking place informally and formally across the two countries, perceiving the evolving Polish EE. He noted: "It was good learning for me before I started my own business. I could meet a few wise people running the private business and shared some basic rules and hints with me, which helped me understand the background and have more courage to overcome the first difficulties."

After working in Germany in his youth, he returned to Poland, which was changing. The time was ripe to become an entrepreneur. According to him, the late 80th was a particular growth period in Poland, which triggered many people to start a private business or some form of entrepreneurship, creating the base for an emerging Polish EE in the post-communist era. He commented: "Today it is not that easy to earn 'easy & quick' money anymore, so the majority of young people prefer to work for big corporations rather than take a risk and start their own business, as it is quite difficult nowadays to start a new private business." His sense of timing for establishing the business and his entrepreneurial alertness for the industrial sector succeeded as he could leverage the right time and sectoral change, similar to first mover companies.

Interestingly, his aspiration to be an impactful growth entrepreneur drove his entrepreneurial development from an early age to a successful business generation. It was not the only choice for his career. For example, his mother was somewhat against the idea, as she thought he should better work for some state-owned company in the '70s and '80s, which was considered a "good chance for a stable future and career." Nevertheless, he wanted to become an entrepreneur. This choice was highlighted by independence in general and "the opportunity to have the freedom to make my choices: in business and my private life. It is also important for me that I was capable of building a company which enables others to have a stable job and the team of people working for me can realise the ambitions and dreams." He was very clear about the locus of his business establishment stating "Poland was and is my home, so I did not want to do the business anywhere else." Hence, he set up a formal business together with his business partners. This made his father happy and proud, motivating him to develop the business further. He advanced the transnational–international elements of local business with his activities and described the period of business establishment as a "boom" in Poland. In this nascent phase, German transnational connections were particularly relevant. The business

developed rapidly in Poland from a start-up to an established business with these transnational connections. The business also grew internationally, first in the neighboring countries and then in other European countries. The firm continuously advanced its business model to keep up with changing markets (see Figure 3). Today, the company is a medium-sized international business employing hundreds of employees.

4.5 | Cross-Case Comparison

The three cases present distinct manifestations of migrants' transnational entrepreneurial activities and levels of embeddedness, as depicted in Figure 4.

All three TMEs are of Polish origin, born in Poland and Polish native speakers. While TMEs I and II are fluent in both languages—considering that simultaneous bilingualism is mainly described up to the age of three—only for TME II, German is the second mother tongue in terms of "successive" bilingualism, for TME I, it is a second language (Tsimpli 2014). Despite this, both have Polish language skills at the mother language level and speak German almost faultlessly. TME III speaks German with an accent but communicates appropriately. Thus, concerning TMEs I and II, language was never a barrier to labor market integration in Germany. It was more about the identification with German society that "felt sweltering." TME II has never found a primary affiliation with German personal networks. His arrival just before he entered puberty made it challenging for him to navigate his new surroundings. During this stage, he spent much time with Polish peers, a phenomenon observed in other ethnic communities, particularly among young males. TMEs I and II are Polish and German nationals, whereas TME III is Polish. The phenomenon of dual nationality, commonly observed among resettlers from Poland or Russia in Germany, proves advantageous for the initial two entrepreneurs. It enabled them to easily navigate both countries and overcome bureaucratic obstacles when establishing a business. Distinct from TME III, Entrepreneurs I and II did not require the assistance of an intermediary to handle business registration and other related procedures in either of the countries. However, as an EU citizen benefiting from the EU's free movement law, TME III held a relatively advantageous position compared to other ethnic minorities who were not eligible for German citizenship.

Apart from that, there are differences in their pathways. The first striking difference between the three is the age at which they migrated to Germany. While the first two left Poland in their early and later childhood (four and 11), the third entrepreneur left temporarily for Germany in early adulthood, aged 18, which had several consequences. While the first two went through the whole education system or, as in the second case, from secondary school onwards, the third completed his education in Poland and only came to Germany for a study semester abroad. In addition, in the case of TMEs I and II, the parents took the decision to flee the regime and applied in Germany for the status of resettlers (this status could be used for by people originating from certain Polish regions that also had a proportion of German population between the two world wars; such a region was also Silesia from which TMEs I and II originated), Entrepreneur 3 decided himself to be a kind of economic migrant. A similarity of all three could be the re-establishment of business networks in the CoO. However, unlike TMEs I and II, TME III originates from an entrepreneurial family and

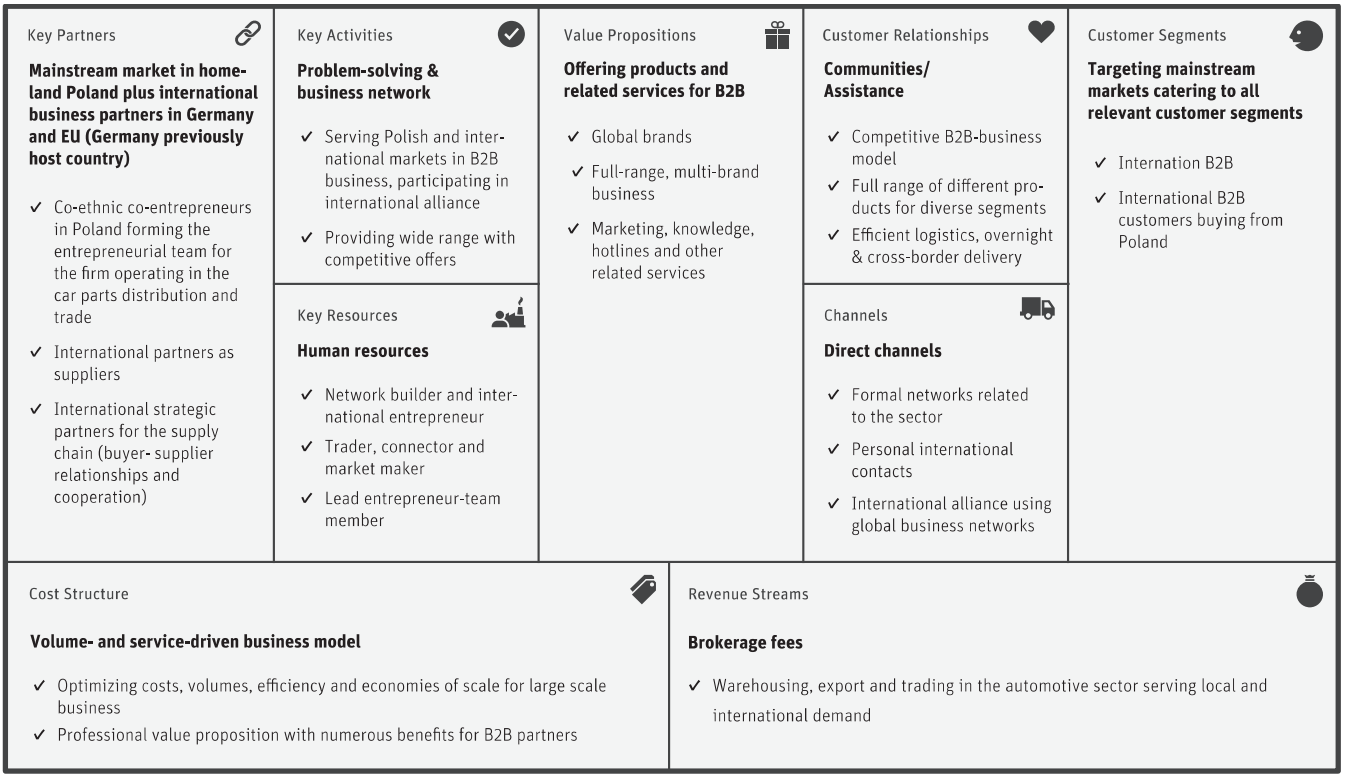

FIGURE 3 | Hybrid business model—Case III.
Source: Authors' compilation.

No.	Gender	Age	CoO / Migration Motive / Age at Migration	Sector / Main Countries of Operation	Motivation to TME	Favourable Factors	Language Skills
TME I	male	44	✓ Poland ✓ Resettler ✓ 11 years	✓ Motor vehicle ✓ Germany	✓ Marriage to a Polish woman ✓ Frustration with the German employment system ✓ Struggling with labour market entrance ✓ Exlusion	✓ Opening of EU borders ✓ New customer base in Poland & Germany ✓ Scaling through a further business idea in the same sector	✓ Polish as mother tongue ✓ German as 2nd language
TME II	male	40	✓ Poland ✓ Resettler ✓ 4 years	✓ Food industry ✓ Germany/ Poland/Asia	✓ Personal problems ✓ Passion for entrepreneurship ✓ Marriage to a Polish woman ✓ Escape from the old life ✓ Re-migration to Poland	✓ Multilingualism ✓ Sales experience ✓ Desire to restart life and career	✓ Polish as mother tongue ✓ German as 2nd mother tongue ✓ English as business language
TME III	male	60	✓ Poland ✓ Economic migrant/student ✓ 18 years (outmigration) ✓ Late 20s (return migration)	✓ Automotive ✓ Poland, Eastern Europe, Western & Northern Europe	✓ Escaping regime and lack of opportunity (outmigration) ✓ Developing skills & networks in the EU ✓ Establishing the company building on arbritage and new opportunities ✓ Taking advantage of the Polish economic shift to a market economy & EU membership	✓ Family support due to historical entrepreneurial legacy ✓ Market experience & international sectoral social capital ✓ International networking skills & access to markets ✓ Flourishing sector	✓ Polish as mother tongue ✓ German as business language ✓ English as business language

FIGURE 4 | Cross-case comparison.
Source: Authors' compilation.

overtakes the business's experience. TMEs I and II start from scratch without any prior knowledge. While TMEs I and III started businesses in the automotive sector, TME II placed his activities in the food sector. B2B is more the business focus of TMEs II and III, while B2C refers to TME I. In addition, TMEs I and II married Polish women, which made up a big part of their re-establishment in Poland and opened several new possibilities. Ultimately, TMEs I and II expanded their operations to encompass more significant regions (with TME II even venturing into China) and explored new business concepts. However, their businesses remain relatively small-scale, employing around five individuals, classifying them as micro-businesses. TME III developed a different approach as a growth business following the sectoral development in Eastern Europe. Today, it is a well-known medium-sized company that works multinationally and runs business across several EU countries.

4.6 | The German and Polish Ecosystems

All three case studies indicate that the hybrid business models presented, which vary between formal and informal structures, depend heavily on the regional conditions of the respective EE. While in two cases, the TMEs describe the German regional EE as structured, organized, and formal, they regard the Polish EE differently. According to their statements, the Polish EE is less formal and less organized. The TME III highlights the meaning of timing and the maturity of the EE. Above all, a culture of entrepreneurship in Poland makes it possible to try out entrepreneurial activities without the pressure attributed to the German EE—noting that there are also differences between regional and local EEs in Poland and Germany. When asked, TME II explained that the EE culture in Poland remains too strongly dependent on historical pathways. These include transformations such as shifts in national boundaries and regimes and the resilience and adaption of entrepreneurs and EEs to external shocks (Cliffton et al. 2014). Given this context, the Polish EE appears to be more flexible and receptive to adopting new methods and approaches to business operations. Hence, we propose that:

a. Emerging and shifting EEs open windows of opportunity for testing business models and chances different from those of more mature and structured EEs.

TME I explained that the entrance boundaries to the Polish EE are lower than those of the German EE. German EEs have

a specific dynamic to which you must submit. He stated, "[i]n Germany, your status is also important and how and when you founded the company. Also, what educational degree you hold." For the Polish EE, the focus lies more on the services provided and the potential for collaboration or mutual benefit from each other's entrepreneurial activities. On the other hand, both TMEs narrated that there is less state aid in Poland when your business is under pressure, and there is no "safety net" if your business fails. "In Germany, you are covered in case your self-employment does not work out," reported TME II. Finally, both commented that after the breakdown of a business, you could easily restart in Poland. In Germany, a failure remains "unforgotten," the meaning of networks and EE partners in business is significant in Poland. TME III noted, "Majority of my partners are coming from Poland, and it is obvious that I am dependent and closely linked with them," underlining the importance of trusted business relationships for further development of the formal growth business. Hence, we propose that:

b. The institutional systems and the EE influence the interplay of informal and formal business elements, that is, a suitable entrepreneurial setting leads to bridging the gap towards formal business operations.

c. Multifocal practices allow informational experimentation with business models and entrepreneurial activities and promote their embeddedness in multiple ecosystems.

5 | Conclusion and Discussion

This article has approached transnationalism and multifocal practices as an instrument that may bridge the gap between the informal and formal business structures of migrant entrepreneurs and promote their embeddedness in multiple EEs. Transnationalism may demonstrate itself in different phases, contexts, and elements of the business (David et al. 2022; Elo, Täube, and Servais 2022). We argue that hybrid business models develop through TMEs' multifocal involvement in EEs, allowing the entrepreneur to step "informally" into the preformation phase of a business, exist in the shadow of the market, and try things out before turning formal. Also, transnational entrepreneurs may learn and benchmark the studied cases and go directly into a business opportunity using a formal business model with their transnational knowledge (Figure 5).

Theoretically, the findings indicate that transnational entrepreneurship is highly dynamic and may shift across industries following business opportunities and ecosystem developments. Factors associated with specific countries and transnationalism play a vital role in shaping the requirements and responses of business models, including the development of transnational EEs, particularly those spanning across borders. Hence, a solid contextual dimension needs to be understood (e.g., David, Schaefer, and Terstriep 2021). Addressing transnationalism from many perspectives (Drori, Honig, and Grinsberg 2013; Portes, Haller, and Guarnizo 2002; Guarnizo 2003), the findings suggest that TMEs benefit business creation, influencing EEs and vice versa (Spigel 2015; Malecki 2011). The ecosystemic interconnectedness between Germany and Poland illustrates that the relational structures and proximities matter for EEs, but these relations also disperse and connect markets beyond neighboring countries. Following Thai, Mai, and Do (2023), EEs are by nature evolutionary, that is, they change over time concerning actor constellations, formal and informal institutions, culture, and other soft factors. Earlier studies indicate a reciprocal relationship between EEs, their outputs, that is, entrepreneurial activity, and outcomes (e.g., well-being). Thus, we concluded that migrant entrepreneurs' multifocal embeddedness in multiple EE would contribute to shaping these EEs. In this respect, we can assume that this relationship is not limited to neighboring regions such as Germany and Poland but also occurs in other spatially more distributed regions. It represents a form of in-between advantage dynamics that, as aggregated dynamism, shape international entrepreneurship, international business, and related frameworks (Brinkerhoff 2016).

Furthermore, TMEs may gain a status that empowers migrants' social mobility and the growth of their habitus (De Clercq and Voronov 2009; Ucbasaran, Westhead, and Wright 2008). TMEs' employment and sponsoring-charity effects on the local context are rarely addressed, yet these need further research attention as part of the family and social embeddedness (Mustafa and Chen 2010). The entrepreneurial success and pathway may balance the individuals' feelings of not belonging with a sense of acceptance, especially for those migrants who remain in the CoR (David, Schaefer, and Terstriep 2021).

Regarding the *managerial implications* and actions, the results propose a paradigm shift in business start-up support. While start-up activities have only been considered in singular places, it is time for stakeholders and actors of a start-up and (or) EE to better network with other ecosystems to support the budding entrepreneurs in their multifocal practices. Such action would not only lead to the emergence of hybrid business models and the more rapid transformation of informal practices into formal ones but also to network EEs transnationally and act in multifocal ways.

Regarding *policy implications*, our study does not endorse tax evasion but instead proposes transformative tax incentives during the preformation stage of businesses operating informally. It would be beneficial if informal businesses transitioning towards formal structures could be removed from adverse conditions and be given serious consideration as a potential opportunity for formal establishment and registration. Transformative policy programs, such as start-up support, would provide an opportunity for entrepreneurs who cannot directly assist themselves in initiating a formal business but would leverage their knowledge and skills positively without generating unfavorable implications.

Illustrated by the narratives of Polish–German TMEs, we argue that transnational business and business model creation involve multifocal activities and a highly performative, entrepreneurial action and often long-term planning by migrant business drivers (David and Terstriep 2019; Schmiz 2011; Casson et al. 2008). In the literature, hybrid business models based on entrepreneurs' multifocal practices in diverse settings are still seldom

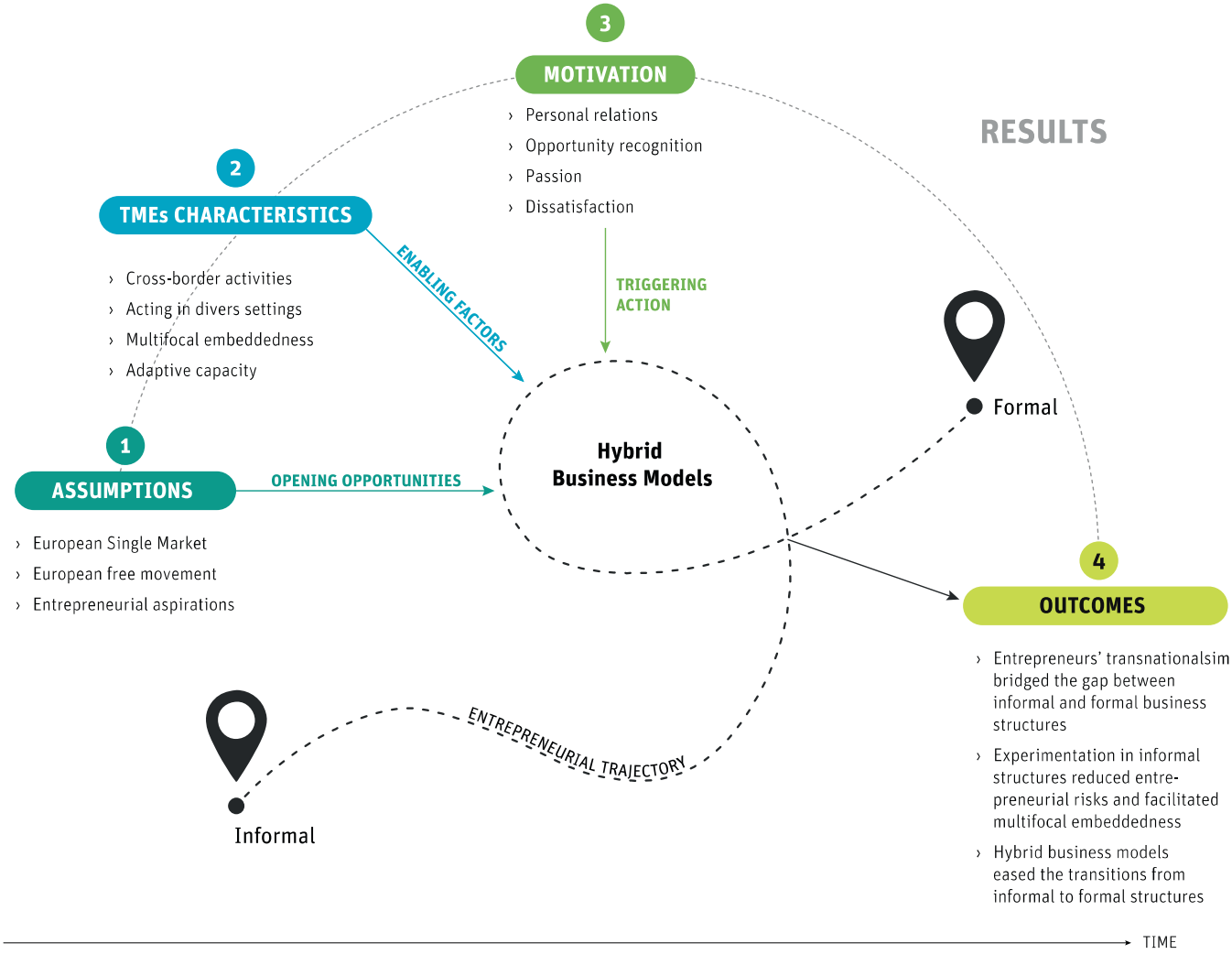

FIGURE 5 | Graphical summary.

highlighted, similar to hybrid business models and their transformations from informal to formal. The cases suggest policy implications for creating flexible schemes for TME that allow easy testing of ideas in a legitimate manner and foster turning already started operations into formal businesses at the right time (Elo and Silva 2022). Leaving possible gray areas without attention hinders and reduces transnational businesses' employment and sustainable prosperity effects on the respective societies.

Transnationalism is frequently described as an element of international entrepreneurship (e.g., Drori, Honig, and Wright 2009; Pries 2007; Guarnizo 2003), and in these two cases, it demonstrates a way through the barriers to entrepreneurship that exist in Germany by bridging the gap into formal TMEs' business actions in Poland. The third case illustrates the role of the transnational phase as the seed of entrepreneurship, triggering nascent returnee entrepreneurship and later international business operations. In this process, the EEs on both sides play an essential role as containers (Granovetter 1985; Polanyi 1957), in which the TMEs can turn their ideas into action by forming social ties and embedding themselves in the entrepreneurial culture and business market. In turn, the EEs are shaped by the TMEs and can benefit from their transnational connections and the multifocal practices and imported ideas, finances, cultures, and knowledge (David, Schaefer, and Terstriep 2021; Elo and Silva 2022; Szymanski, Valderrey Villar, and Cervantes Zepeda 2021). These findings imply that TMEs, as managers and founders, must carefully assess and orchestrate their ideas, resources, and business operations in contexts that are not limited to one country but connect EEs and business transnationally. While TMEs are subject to time and opportunity windows, they are also co-creators of them.

As with research endeavors, our study is subject to certain limitations. It possesses idiographic characteristics resulting from the context of the specific country and the period in which it was conducted. Also, despite the depth of the case studies and the analysis of the business models, the number of cases is small and has limited comparative power. As the pathways of the TME diverge over time (despite sectoral commonalities at a given point), the horizontal comparison of the sector-related business model becomes limited. Identifying identical sectoral TME pathways posed challenges. Another limitation refers to entrepreneurs' gender and ethnicity. All three TMEs are male and have the same cultural background (Polish), being resettlers (TMEs I and II) and economic migrants (TME III).

While two had limited sources to start with (TMEs I and II) and needed cross-border business development as an opportunity to establish a business idea, TME III uses cross-border actively and strategically for business starting and scaling. It would be interesting to see whether women who informally act cross-border show similar traits or whether they avoid informal cross-border connections and tend to focus on one country only. It would also be beneficial to see if there are ethnic differences. Due to similar historical economic traits, there is probably another approach to informal cross-border business with TMEs who act between two Western European countries, such as Germany/the Netherlands or Germany/France.

Based on that, we identify three primary avenues for future research. First, there is limited knowledge of what kind of mechanisms and aspirations drive TMEs and shape their respective business models. Second, it is crucial to explore further the mechanisms and networks underlying TMEs' intermediary roles in bridging and connecting EEs over time. Third, we contend that in the research on EE, greater emphasis should be placed on assessing the hybrid nature of TMEs' business models, entrepreneurial lifestyles, and transnational entrepreneurial mindsets. Lastly, there is a need for further analysis of the interconnectedness between institutional responses and regulations, support structures, and the level of acceptance for unconventional business structures and models within both national and transnational EE contexts.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

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