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# Ethnic Latin American Entrepreneurship in Tijuana: Border Synergies in Five Case Studies

# Empresariado inmigrante latinoamericano en Tijuana: sinergias fronterizas en cinco estudios de caso

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ABSTRACT

This study on Latin American migration settled in the city of Tijuana, Mexico, aims to explore, describe and analyze the influence of the border condition in the creation, development and persistence of an emerging ethnic entrepreneurship and its respective businesses of and for immigrants from the global peripheries. To this end an ethnographic research is proposed in five observation units distributed in as various points of the border urban weave, belonging to gastronomic entrepreneurs from three national groups: Hondurans, Salvadorans, and Venezuelans. Participatory observation is carried out as a diner and several conversation techniques are implemented with the managers of these typical restaurants. Finally, through an interactive analysis, the presence of synergies between immigrant businesses and the border region is determined, which facilitate the existence of such businesses. The overall result is a first approach to the phenomenon, unpublished in previous studies in Mexico.

*Keywords*: 1. immigrants, 2. cultural nationalism, 3. ethnic business, 4. border, 5. Tijuana.

RESUMEN

Este estudio sobre migración latinoamericana asentada en la ciudad de Tijuana, México, pretende explorar, describir y analizar la influencia de la condición fronteriza en la creación, desarrollo y persistencia de un emergente empresariado étnico y sus respectivos negocios de y para inmigrantes de las periferias mundiales. Para ello, se propone una investigación etnográfica en cinco unidades de observación distribuidas en diversos puntos de la trama urbana fronteriza, pertenecientes a empresarios gastronómicos de tres grupos nacionales: hondureños, salvadoreños y venezolanos. La observación participativa se realiza como comensal y se instrumentan varias técnicas de conversación con los administradores de dichos restaurantes típicos. Finalmente, mediante un análisis interactivo se determina la presencia de sinergias entre los negocios de inmigrantes y la región fronteriza, la cuales facilitan la existencia de estos. El resultado en su conjunto supone un primer acercamiento al fenómeno, inédito en estudios previos en México.

*Palabras clave*: 1. inmigrantes, 2. nacionalismo cultural, 3. economía étnica, 4. frontera, 5. Tijuana.

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## INTRODUCTION

The content of this article lies within the field of migratory studies, exploring the experiences of individuals engaged in international mobility. Specifically, the research centers on businesses established by some of these individuals in the border city of Tijuana. The study examines how the unique border dynamics of this urban area intersect with migratory patterns, shaping the emergence and growth of ethnic businesses. To investigate this relationship, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in selected establishments throughout 2022, serving as both the setting and subject of the study. Five of these businesses were chosen as focal points for generating comparative analytical frameworks, drawing on qualitative data from interviews and field observations. This research aims to shed light on the social, economic, and cultural integration processes of immigrant communities from Latin American countries who have settled or are in the process of settling in Tijuana.

Below, the current findings are presented and supported through five sections, accompanied by preliminary conclusions. The initial section offers a synthesis of both theoretical and empirical backgrounds concerning different manifestations of entrepreneurship, business dynamics, and ethnic enclaves. Following this, the methodology employed and the execution of the fieldwork are elaborated upon. In the subsequent segment, a detailed ethnographic description of the observed units is provided. Subsequently, a brief overview of the municipal and state economy is presented, drawing upon bibliographic and statistical sources. Finally, preceding the conclusions, the data previously outlined are analyzed utilizing an interactive analytical model.

## SCIENTIFIC FOUNDATION AND CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT IN ETHNIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Both ethnic businesses and border regions serve as economic resources, albeit for different reasons. Ethnic businesses aim to generate income by leveraging cultural particularities, while border regions exploit economic differences and inequalities inherent in their political-economic structures. Consequently, these regions capitalize on such disparities through various means for financial gain. Examples include smuggling and cross-border commuting, which exemplify economic exploitation within border areas, while nostalgia markets (Besserer Alatorre, 2014; Hirai, 2014) contribute to our understanding of ethnic and immigrant economies. Initially, these may seem like disparate categories and phenomena, lacking explanatory or comprehensive relationships. However, the following pages will aim to establish the interdependencies and connections between these variables, exploring the degree of mutual integration and synergy they may exhibit.

The study of ethnic businesses originated in Anglo-Saxon academic circles in the late 1970s and solidified a decade later. This phenomenon and the ensuing scientific interest began to emerge globally from 1990 onward, reaching Latin America more recently. A comprehensive literature review on the phenomenon reveals a wealth of theoretical and analytical frameworks alongside a diverse array of case studies spanning continents. Initially, the focus in Anglo-Saxon literature

centered on ethnic minority immigrants concentrated[2] in specific urban sectors (Bonacich & Modell, 1980; Cochran, 1972; Light et al., 1994; Portes & Jensen, 1989; Wilson & Portes, 1980). Consequently, this initial wave of research introduced concepts such as "ethnic enclave" and "ethnic economy" to analyze the phenomenon observed among groups including Cubans, Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, Hispanic Americans, and others residing in the United States. It is important to emphasize that these studies not only examined immigrant communities densely populated in specific districts but also explored the intermediary role played by certain immigrant groups, acting as middlemen between segregated ethnic communities and dominant ones.

Regarding subsequent studies beyond the Anglo-Saxon framework, differences have emerged both in spatial context and in the specific experiences documented within each national ethnic group. From Rome to Bucaramanga (Colombia), these studies have contributed empirical material and theoretical constructs markedly different from those developed until the late 20th century. Consequently, the proliferation of this phenomenon in Southern Europe has generated a rich empirical landscape with diverse research objectives that build upon previous theoretical propositions (Buckley Iglesias, 1998; Garcés, 2011; Saiz de Lobado, 2021; Mudu, 2006; Solé & Parella, 2005; Riesco Sanz, 2003, 2014; Solé & Parella, 2009). Meanwhile, in Latin America, the exploration of this theme has been incipient, primarily focusing on the formation of national communities abroad (Pinto Baleisan et al., 2022; Luque-Brazán, 2007), early examinations of the phenomenon, and associated public policies (Bonilla-Ovallos & Rivero-Arenas, 2020). More recently, studies have emerged to follow up on processes initiated two decades ago, particularly examining the impact of successive economic and health crises on immigrant businesses in Spain (Bellido Jiménez et al., 2021; Cebrián de Miguel et al., 2016).

In summary, this second wave of research on the topic has reintroduced some of the preceding theoretical foundations, primarily stemming from Anglo-Saxon academic circles. However, it has also brought forth analytical variations such as *immigrant businesses, ethnic trade*, and, most importantly, a reconsideration of the questions and research objectives. Consequently, conclusions divergent from those observed in American, British, Canadian, or Australian contexts have emerged. These conclusions reflect the rise of an entrepreneurial class and self-employed individuals among newly arrived immigrants, often prompted by challenges in accessing the labor market or prolonged periods of unemployment (Solé & Parella, 2005). Additionally, this wave of research has highlighted the adoption of more diffuse and dispersed spatial settlement and domiciliation patterns (Buckley Iglesias, 1998; Mudu, 2006), with nodes centered around social, religious, sports, or political institutions of the immigrant national group (Buckley Iglesias, 1998; Luque-Brazán, 2007; Mudu, 2006).

The current global phenomenon permeates both the core and the periphery of the world system. Consistent frameworks across various contexts highlight their linkage with global cities and their

[2] Or segregated, both descriptors allude to the same situation, more common in societies with a dominant Anglo-Saxon cultural substrate.

secondary network, due to the conditions offered by their economic structures of opportunity.[3] Additionally, factors such as the tertiarization of certain economic regions—encompassing trade in products and services reliant on unskilled labor—alongside the resurgence of small enterprises limited to the lowest decile of profits, and the persistent migratory flows across time and space, form a complex matrix within regional contexts. These elements interconnect with the specific characteristics of each ethnic-national group or the prevailing conjunctures and historical circumstances. The most noteworthy outcome is:

> the establishment of businesses by specific groups of immigrants or ethnic communities is catalyzing processes of upward social mobility and contributing to the formation of a new social class, comprised of small business owners positioned at an intermediate point on the social scale (Solé & Parella, 2005, pp. 28-29).

In addition to facilitating and solidifying the integration of the respective national group or groups, the emergence of an ethnic economy ultimately serves as an indicator of the degree of settlement of immigrant groups (Portes & Jensen, 1989).

In attempting to synthesize the theoretical-analytical legacy generated in the early waves of studies on ethnic businesses, it is important to clarify the term "ethnic economy" (Bonacich & Modell, 1980, p. 6). This term refers to businesses established and operated by immigrants, employing immigrant staff, either with or without pay (through family networks). Notably, this definition excludes businesses lacking non-immigrant owners or administrators, wherein employment sources or income are not directly associated with immigrants. These definitions do not necessarily account for spatial segregation or concentration, nor do they require that the clientele of ethnic businesses belong to the same immigrant group (Garcés, 2011; Light et al., 1994). In contrast, the initial formulation of the concept of "ethnic enclave" is rooted in the theory of dual markets and underscores spatial segregation within processes of urban sector devaluation. Consequently, it is defined as a closed minority community situated in a central and degraded area of a city (Wilson & Portes, 1980, pp. 302, 315). Additionally, various elements interact in the formation of these enclaves, so that:

> Ethnic enclaves, as outlined by these authors, arise when immigrants, possessing significant financial, human, social, and/or cultural capital, cluster in an urban area. Subsequently, they establish numerous businesses and enterprises within this locale and subsequently draw upon successive waves of immigrants from their own country to provide low-cost labor (Solé & Parella, 2005, p. 36).

For this case study, the terms *ethnic/immigrant business*, *ethnic trade*, and *ethnic entrepreneurship* were selected due to their alignment with the collected data. While the analytical framework has varied between highlighting cultural characteristics and focusing on regional economic opportunities, recent approaches known as *interactive* or *mixed embeddedness* have

[3] Later on, this term is revisited to refine its definition and explore its applications within theories of ethnic economy.

been utilized, combining both perspectives. With this approach in mind, the methodological design incorporates the five theoretical-analytical lines for the study of immigrant entrepreneurship synthesized and proposed by Rath & Kloosterman (2000). The aim is to move beyond the cultural reductionism often present in existing literature on the phenomenon. Consequently, economic, sociological, and geographical perspectives are integrated to complement the focus on the cultural diversity inherent in ethnic businesses and their immigrant entrepreneurs. Adapting this framework to the Catalan context requires a methodological adjustment that translates the five theories into corresponding methodological operations, following the same sequence (Solé & Parella, 2005).

In addition, when applying the framework to this research, several key steps are taken. Firstly, the characteristics and motivations of the immigrant entrepreneur are examined, both as individuals and as part of an ethnic-national collective.[4] This includes an analysis of the business plan to grasp the subjective factors influencing the establishment and direction of businesses in Tijuana. Secondly, the study delves into the assessment of accumulated capacities and resources essential for initiating and sustaining entrepreneurial endeavors. Thirdly, drawing from the works of Rath and Kloosterman (2000) and Solé and Parella (2005), emphasis is placed on describing and analyzing social networks linking immigrants to their surroundings, which significantly impact the success of their ventures. For instance, these networks facilitate the recruitment of skilled employees and suppliers, or generate synergy by extending beyond local and national boundaries. From a business standpoint, economic networks and value chains are also considered, alongside their spatiotemporal evolution in relation to networks of immigrant entrepreneurs, as pivotal elements influencing the development and continuity of these businesses.

In a fourth step, the analysis considers the connections between entrepreneurial projects and the general processes of transformation of local and global economic structures. This involves exploring how each ethnic-entrepreneurial group leverages the opportunity structure of Tijuana and surrounding conurbated areas, and the specific niches they currently occupy or could potentially fill in the future.

Finally, the fifth theoretical-analytical perspective draws upon Institutional Theory (Veblen, 1971) and seeks to comprehend the interplay between the institutional political framework and entrepreneurial ventures. Within this analytical framework, the objective is to elucidate the relationship between ethnic entrepreneurship and its initiatives with the state model, encompassing social and migratory policies. Additionally, this methodological model must incorporate a comparative framework, as spatially delineated research outcomes are attained to facilitate the development of a social theory regarding the phenomenon.[5]

In summary, the goal is to address the following inquiries: Which particular cultural attributes of each ethnic-national group are leveraged as drivers for financial gain and business success?

[4] In other words, it examines how particular cultural traits of a national group influence individual choices within the entrepreneurial domain, thereby shaping distinct entrepreneurial motivations, expectations, and skill sets.

[5] This exceeds the objectives and resources outlined for the current study.

What factors within regional, national, and global contexts facilitate the establishment and growth of immigrant enterprises? Lastly, how do immigrants effectively strategize their business operations within specific regional frameworks?

Before proceeding, it is important to note the lack of consensus and methodological balance among the cited authors regarding the empirical intricacies of the phenomenon. Particularly notable is the dichotomy between the Anglo-Saxon perspective and that of other regions. However, a significant portion of the literature fails to encompass the considerable diversity within what can be categorized as ethnic businesses, largely due to the absence of analytical frameworks addressing how these enterprises materialize within the economic framework of supply and demand. Authors such as Luque-Brazán (2007), Solé & Parella (2009), and Ambrosini (1995) categorize these businesses based on the nature of the products or services they offer: those catering to the nostalgia economy (including cultural products such as traditional cuisine, ceremonies, artistic expressions, clothing, and body aesthetics); those fulfilling the needs of immigrants (such as legal advice, political-union organization, telecommunications, and transportation); and businesses integrated into the broader local and regional market without specific ethnic offerings, such as sewing workshops, mechanics, wholesale trade, and financial services.

Following the analysis of supply, it can be classified as "typically ethnic," "mediation, exotic, open," or "refuge" (Ambrosini, 1995, p. 480; 1996, p. 320), based on the ethnic-national groups of the business's users or consumers. Another significant organizing criterion is the scale of the business, as the resources and motivations driving a medium, small, or microenterprise differ. This distinction is particularly relevant for marginal entrepreneurship, such as street vending or participation in second-hand markets.[6] In fact, one of the criticisms of early works on ethnic enclaves (Wilson & Portes, 1980) was the exclusion of entrepreneurs[7] and self-employed individuals from the study.

## FROM THE FIELD TO HEARTH: DESIGN OF A CULINARY ETHNOGRAPHY

The methodological approach to studying the ethnic businesses phenomenon in Tijuana involved the use of participatory observation techniques within various establishments managed and frequented by Latin American immigrants. Initially, during the exploratory phase, around 20 such establishments were identified. However, further inquiries revealed that only around a dozen were still operational. These included established businesses as well as self-employed individuals with part-time dedication, operating from various locations including private residences, public spaces, and semi-mobile setups.

[6] This refers to the type of business known as a "refuge."

[7] According to the Dictionary of the Spanish Language (*Diccionario de la lengua española)*, the adjective "*emprendedor/a*" (entrepreneur) means "One who undertakes innovative actions or ventures with determination" (Real Academia Española [RAE], n.d.c, definition 1).

A schedule was established, taking into account the peak and off-peak times and days of customer flow, to mitigate potential biases in observation records. Utilizing peak hours allowed for a deeper understanding of the cultural ambiance and customer demographics. This schedule was then applied to the designated business circuit to ensure an adequate number of units for subsequent comparative analysis. Initially, conversation techniques included field access interviews and other informal methods during observations. Subsequently, two questionnaires were administered to three immigrant entrepreneurs and two employees to address any gaps or uncertainties identified during the initial analysis of field records. As indicated by the literature on pioneering ethnic entrepreneurs, the businesses in question primarily focused on cultural offerings, with national cuisine serving as the centerpiece and other cultural items such as crafts, music, and souvenirs complementing the commercial offerings.

As part of the methodological design, it was established that interactions (conversations and field presence), except in the case of in-depth interviews, would be based on the informed consent of the individuals in charge of the businesses, as well as kitchen and service employees. Additionally, other ethical guidelines were formulated to prevent the exploitation of collaborators and attendees of the establishments, while also ensuring the protection of their privacy rights and maintaining access to the field for other researchers and projects. As mentioned earlier, fieldwork was conducted between February and July 2022. Although the research concluded between August and September of the same year, contact with collaborators was maintained for several additional months. The conclusion of fieldwork was marked by the development and presentation of a community workshop aimed at fostering the growth and development of immigrant businesses.

The collected records were organized and analyzed according to the typological criteria outlined earlier, primarily within the interactive analytical framework consisting of five steps. Additionally, qualitative data analysis software and other programs for navigation and graphic design were employed for this purpose.

## LOVE LIES IN THE SEASONING, NOT IN GOOD REASONING. FIVE BUSINESSES OF TYPICAL LATIN AMERICAN CUISINE

This section outlines the characteristics of five Latin American immigrant businesses located in Tijuana and Playas de Rosarito. Alongside the establishments, significant features of their owners and employed staff will be thoroughly examined and described, culminating with an exploration of the opportunities presented by the city of Tijuana and its impact on the emergence and growth of these businesses.

The aforementioned studies consistently highlight the prevalent trend of establishing ethnic businesses in urban centers of large metropolises. The clustering of these enterprises gives rise to ethnic landscapes in streets, neighborhoods, or broader urban sectors. Among the five selected cases, only two were situated in downtown areas of Tijuana, with one maintaining a branch in the same downtown district for approximately a year. Of the remaining three, only one is positioned in a location with open and visible access points, while the other two are situated in popular

neighborhoods on the metropolitan periphery. In summary, the trend in this border city diverges from global trends, aligning with the local pattern of urban dispersion observed among Latin American immigrants and other ethnic minorities (Trapaga, 2022; Velasco Ortiz, 2010), except for a noticeable concentration in a few segments of the historic downtown area. Precisely, the first business to be discussed was established around thirteen years ago in the northern area of the downtown district, and up until early 2023, it operated a branch in the eastern downtown area as well.

Periodically, the street is transformed into a makeshift market.[8] Access to the restaurant is facilitated through a short, winding vestibule that obscures direct views from the exterior. Upon entering, the space is partitioned into three sections: a kitchen with a bar, a dining area, and restroom facilities. The dining area accommodates six to eight tables, ensuring a maximum capacity of approximately forty customers without overcrowding. The décor and furnishings are modest and budget-friendly, adorned with motifs reminiscent of Honduras: flags, macaws, soccer emblems, all featuring the national colors of white and blue. The incorporation of the number 504 into the establishment's name pays homage to the telephone code of the Central American country.

Until early 2023, the second location, in the central eastern area near Tijuana's Zona Río, was situated within the inner courtyard of a private residence. The spatial characteristics of this setting facilitated the hosting of activities catering to the Honduran community in Tijuana. Despite its brief existence, it is included in this article due to its connections and synergy with the border region. Upon entering through a large gate, the establishment, known on social media as Honduras 504 Sirak,[9] comprised three areas: a kitchen, bathrooms, an uncovered patio, and a second indoor dining area. Notable decorations included a large Honduran flag adorning the facade and colorful murals depicting Honduran symbols such as the macaw and the Lenca indigenous people. The cuisine offered at both establishments features typical fast food dishes, including *baleadas*,[10] *pupusas*,[11] fish soup, seafood soup, *mondongo*,[12] fried yuca, and the signature dish, chicken with

[8] It refers to street markets and popular markets that are set up periodically but are restricted to specific hours and days of the week. Common synonyms for this commercial model include second-hand market, flea market, *tianguis*, and swap meet.

[9] For being located on Sirak Baloyan Avenue in the historical center of Tijuana.

[10] Consisting of a folded flour tortilla filled with refried beans and some sort of stew. As a distinctive feature of Honduran cuisine, many dishes are served with sour cream and fresh cheese.

[11] Thick corn or rice tortillas, if they are Salvadoran, filled with pork, shrimp, cheese, etc., and accompanied by "*curtido*": various pickled vegetables. This dish is a staple consumed daily in many parts of Central America.

[12] The most elaborate dish on the menu at Honduras 504 is Mondongo soup. It features beef tripe (mondongo) along with a variety of vegetables, legumes, plantains, and "*pataste*" (known as chayote in Mexico). This dish is exclusively prepared on weekends due to its moderate complexity and is often enjoyed as a remedy for alcoholic hangovers. Consequently, Hondurans colloquially refer to it as "sopa de bolo" (drunkard's soup).

*tajadas*, or *pollo chuco*.[13] Prices are slightly higher than those found in Mexican restaurants of similar caliber. Additionally, a significant percentage of the ingredients used are imported from Honduras via the United States, with shipments typically received in Los Angeles County before being transported to Tijuana.

In this case, ethnic entrepreneurship is rooted in familial bonds and spearheaded by women. These two sisters arrived in Tijuana in 2011 directly from San Pedro Sula, making the journey "in three days" in response to their mother's call, who had been deported from the United States a couple of years prior. The first establishment was opened to the public between 2009 and 2010 by their mother and uncle. In 2015, the young entrepreneurs were left orphaned and decided to continue operating the business established by their deceased mother. Furthermore, all kitchen and serving staff are female and of Honduran nationality, a condition that accounts for the frequent presence of children in both locations, as they are often the children of the employees and entrepreneurs. Similarly, the majority of the clientele consists of Honduran migrants residing in the border region. Occasionally, other Central Americans and some Mexicans visit for breakfast or afternoon gatherings. Additionally, it is worth noting that political and social events hosted at Honduras 504 Sirak attracted participants from pro-migrant organizations in the United States and Mexico.

The second Honduran business is situated near another popular urban center in Tijuana: "la 5 y 10". Its name reflects a common rural term, and its dimensions are considerably more modest compared to the previous establishments, though it still incorporates customary references to national symbols in its interior decor. The entrepreneur hails from Tegucigalpa, the second city from which Honduran immigration to Mexico originates (Foro Social de Deuda Externa y Desarrollo de Honduras, 2022; Unidad de Política Migratoria, Registro e Identidad de Personas, 2023). His wife, alongside other Honduran immigrants, is part of the staff, and occasionally one of their children assists. The culinary offerings closely mirror those provided by the businesswomen from San Pedro Sula, with the added aim of catering to other Central American immigrants, particularly Salvadorans. Consequently, the clientele predominantly comprises Central Americans, though mixed Mexican couples are also occasional patrons. In addition to the gastronomic offerings, visitors can find Honduran patriotic crafts and trinkets, including football jerseys from "La H"[14] and other Honduran football teams such as Olimpia, Motagua, and Real España.

With four years of experience in the food industry, this entrepreneur lacks connections with networks of fellow citizens in the United States. The capital required to initiate the venture was sourced from family and personal savings, which proved adequate to secure a location outside the historic center. This aspect, as we will explore further, poses a challenge that recurs in other ethnic

[13] "Tajadas" are sliced and fried green plantains, with a firm and crunchy texture. They are served alongside a sauce made from pork cartilage, chili peppers, tomatoes, and various vegetables and spices. Typically, a breaded fried chicken piece or another type of meat (such as beef or pork) is placed atop the heap of *tajadas*.

[14] The Honduran national soccer team.

food businesses in Tijuana, highlighting the marginalized position of foreign entrepreneurs as one of the primary barriers in the local opportunity structure: the high costs associated with renting real estate.

The leading Latin American restaurant, inaugurated in 2009, is Venezuelan and bears a name referencing the capital of the Caribbean nation. Initially, it exclusively offered Venezuelan cuisine; however, three years later, it opted to target the broader national market for restaurant and nightlife services. While maintaining a menu of typical Venezuelan dishes, it now also offers desserts such as *quesillo*, *bienmesabe*, *cajeta* crepes with ice cream, and banana cake. Additionally, it features red meats like *pabellón* and *asado negro*, as well as traditional stews such as *carne criolla,*[15] *sancocho,*[16] and *mondongo*. Appetizers and snacks include cheese fingers, *tostones*, *arepitas*, yuca, and *empanadas*. Empanadas are served on weekends alongside Venezuelan barbecue and during the December holidays,[17] coinciding with gatherings of compatriots.

Like in previous cases, the core of the business is family-owned, with the particularity of being composed of a mixed Mexican-Venezuelan couple. Among their suppliers stands out a network of Venezuelan entrepreneurs based in Baja California who provide them with cheeses, pastas, typical sweets, and red meats. The initial capital was obtained from a bank loan, their savings, and from their social networks developed and consolidated over the decade while working at the renowned bar restaurant Señor Frog's in Tijuana. Relations with their fellow countrymen residing in the United States are sporadic and not business-oriented. In line with the above, the clientele of this ethnic business belongs to the general border public, largely composed of Mexicans and Mexican-American origin. To a lesser extent, it caters to the Venezuelan community in the border metropolis. While a branch operated for several years in the northern area of downtown Tijuana, targeting exclusively Venezuelan customers, it closed in February 2022.[18]

Finally, the Salvadoran immigrant businesses studied for this article are respective *pupuserías* that share notable parallels with each other, along with some particularities described in the following lines. The pupusería can be considered the primary institution for secondary socialization and civic coexistence both in El Salvador and in other Central American nations. Accordingly, the opening of these businesses in the United States is considered a fundamental

[15] Made with beef, yuca and *guasacaca* (similar to guacamole).

[16] Made with beef, yuca, *malanga*, sweet potato, and green plantain; mondongo uses the same ingredients but substitutes the red beef meat with beef tripe, often incorporating the feet as well.

[17] Throughout the season, along with one or two banquets, *hallacas* and *pandoro* are prepared and distributed. *Hallacas* are cornmeal tamales filled with a meat or fish stew, all wrapped in banana leaves, similar to certain varieties of tamales found in the rest of Central and South America. The second dish, *pandoro*, is an Italian sponge cake that is highly typical of Venezuelan Christmases as well. The "Christmas plate" typically consists of a chicken salad, ham, *hallaca*, and ham bread.

[18] The owners of the establishment received threats related to extortion by alleged members of organized crime. These issues will be revisited in the analysis of the local opportunity structure.

factor for the generation and reproduction of immigrant communities from this subcontinental region (Pérez, 2016).

The first Salvadoran pupusería in Tijuana dates back to 2010, although it was actually inaugurated in the conurbated municipality of Playas de Rosarito, where Marlon, its owner, resides. Marlon has been living in Baja California since 2001, having just finished his journey from El Salvador, and began working in various sectors. Initially, he rented a small backyard with street access and set up several tents, two tables, and an improvised kitchenette. Marlon acknowledges that his business would have gone bankrupt if it hadn't been for his participation in the 2013 edition of the Rosarito Fair. Despite suffering financial loss, this event helped advertise his small establishment, which began to be frequented mainly by Mexican-Americans and the Salvadoran community residing in Tijuana or passing through to the United States. Launching the business depleted all his savings accumulated over nine years of wage labor, although he also received assistance from his Mexican in-laws who reside in the border region.

Marlon emphasizes the initial motivation behind his commercial venture: "to take pride in introducing others to the food of my country" (Marlon, personal communication, October 10, 2022). Alongside the renowned pupusas, these Salvadoran delicacies include beef soup and Indian chicken soup,[19] tamales, fried yuca with charales[20] or pork cracklings, plantain and milk empanadas, quesadillas,[21] as well as various typical beverages: chan,[22] Salvadoran coffee and chocolates, Salvadoran-style horchata water,[23] and cola champagne.[24] As is common in typical Latin American restaurants, prices are higher compared to their Mexican food counterparts. Currently, there are eight employees, including Marlon, comprising five Salvadorans and three Mexicans. Similarly to the case of the Honduran establishment and that of his compatriot from the pupusería "El Salvador TJ," salaries range from one to two minimum border wages, depending on the position held. The cooks, also referred to as *pupuseras*, earn approximately 16 000 Mexican pesos monthly,[25] while probationary waiters earn around 8 000. Based on the data collected, this represents the typical salary range for hired staff in all Central American food restaurants in the Tijuana conurbation: six to eight workers earning one to two minimum border wages. Apart from the family nucleus, a notable turnover of personnel was noted, influenced in part by individual migratory paths and the steep housing expenses in Tijuana, prompting some cooks to relocate to other Mexican cities.

[19] Which in Mexico is known as ranch chicken (free-range).

[20] Fried small freshwater fish.

[21] Sweet bread made with rice flour, cornstarch, sesame seeds, and white cheese.

[22] Lemon infused water with Chia seeds.

[23] With morro seeds (crescentia alata, known as *coatecomate* in Mexico) and other spices.

[24] Factory-bottled soft drink, the original brand hails from Puerto Rico, but it has other variations available in Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, as well as several South American countries.

[25] Equivalent to 898.4 USD using the official exchange rate as of May 24, 2023.

In terms of supplies, the pupuserías in Rosarito and "El Salvador TJ" procure up to 80% of their products directly from El Salvador. They supplement this supply with domestic products from southeastern Mexico, such as silk red beans, yuca, or rice flour, and obtain cheeses, cream, and red meats from the border region. Marlon argues that this approach is necessary "to preserve our authentic flavors" (Marlon, personal communication, October 10, 2022).

The alignment between the two Salvadoran pupuserías is not only based on their shared ethnic-national identity but also on the personal rapport between their owners, who convene regularly to review the advancement of their establishments. Additionally, Marlon served as the inspiration for the business model embraced by "El Salvador TJ," offering insights into decor, and exchanging networks of both national and international suppliers, along with his expertise as a culinary entrepreneur.

The "El Salvador TJ" pupusería is located in a popular neighborhood on the eastern outskirts of Tijuana, in an area periodically occupied by a large street market. This location prevents it from accessing the benefits of urban centers, particularly the steady influx of fellow nationals. Consequently, the eatery adopts a fast-food business model tailored to the neighborhood dynamics, relying on the urban transportation network and social media platforms to attract and retain co-ethnic customers. In practice, its clientele comprises primarily of Salvadorans and other Central American migrants residing in the Tijuana metropolitan area, with occasional visits from Mexican-Americans from San Diego and other Mexican patrons, local micro-entrepreneurs, or regulars from the nearby flea market.

The manager and proprietor of the business, not the establishment itself, has faced deportation from California twice. Around 2011, he opted to settle permanently in Tijuana, where he juggled multiple jobs and positions. Over the decade, he accumulated the financial, human, and social capital necessary to launch the pupusería through various odd jobs and wage labor without specialized qualifications. Moreover, he received an informal loan from a former employer to kickstart the venture and launched the business in September 2021 with guidance from his fellow national Marlon from the "El Pulgarcito" pupusería. While his wife, originally from the same Salvadoran region, manages the kitchen alongside several other experienced women from pupuserías in El Salvador, male staff members attend to the tables. Regardless, they are all Salvadoran nationals, some with official Mexican documentation and others without. The space can accommodate up to fifty guests without overcrowding the spacious hall, which includes a kitchenette separated by a counter from the rest of the dining area and the pupusera's grill positioned near the entrance. The décor, modest yet patriotic, showcases panoramic postcards of Salvadoran resorts and incorporates the blue-and-white hues of the Salvadoran national flag into the uniforms, furnishings, and interior paint. Outside, a prominent Salvadoran flag acts as an inviting centerpiece, welcoming customers.

## THE BORDER FACTOR: NOTES ON THE OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE OF TIJUANA

Tijuana and its hinterland[26] have undergone significant economic transformations over the past three decades, aligning with the evolving role of border regions in national development, particularly in the northern part of the country. This transition has been driven by enhanced integration with American counterparts and the leveraging of disparities in economic development, fostering complementarity between companies and institutions across both nations through a multi-scale spatial and political framework (Barajas Escamilla, 2016). The construction of this transborder region has relied heavily on the integration of capital and private entities, rather than on political and social articulation (Barajas Escamilla, 2016, p. 216). This has led to the consolidation of interdependencies and economies of scale, among other effects.

On the other hand, one of the main economic characteristics of Baja California is the preeminence of the industrial sector with a trend towards tertiarization, particularly evident in the hospitality, leisure, and restaurant industry (Fuentes et al., 2013), a trend corroborated by the economic census (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [INEGI], 2016). Tijuana, in particular, accounts for 55% of total employment in Baja California, with half of this attributed to the commerce and services sectors, predominantly comprising companies with 1 to 10 employees (92%); microenterprises contribute only 17% of total salary income (INEGI, 2014). Moreover, within the state's commerce sector, a significant proportion of individuals work without pay (self-employment, family businesses) or through outsourcing, constituting 55% of total commercial employment (INEGI, 2014). Recent data indicate a tertiarization trend favoring the services sector over commerce, evidenced by the decline in jobs in the latter. Specifically, in the domain of restaurants and food preparation services, the direct workforce surpasses 52 000 individuals across 4 256 establishments, accounting for 64.25% of direct employment and units within the broader hospitality and restaurant sector (Secretaría de Desarrollo Económico de Tijuana, 2020).

From a national standpoint, Tijuana is situated within an urban network centered around Mexico City, while in the border region, it is connected to Mexicali, Ensenada, San Luis Rio Colorado, and Loreto as a non-border point (Garrocho et al., 2013). This urban configuration, along with the cross-border region, integrates Tijuana with San Diego and Los Angeles, as well as with the broader American and global urban system.

In summary, the Tijuana metropolitan area offers dynamic conditions for business creation and employment, undergoing a progressive shift towards tertiarization led by services. The prepared food sector reflects a global trend of intensive labor force employment, particularly noticeable in processed and marketed foods compared to other hospitality, restaurant, or nighttime entertainment activities in Tijuana. Moreover, the cited sources indicate that in the realm of retail trade, cross-border economic activity's influence is indirect, as it primarily stems from capital flows and

[26] In geographic sciences, the term refers to the land influence zone of a port or city.

industrial production directed from the country's center and in connection with the global cities of the American Pacific.

From the field study, other characteristic elements of this urban and border economic structure stand out. Following the end of the health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, real estate costs tripled and continue to rise, impacting the capacities of small restaurant businesses. Additionally, the fee imposed by criminal groups for protection money must be considered a feature of the local opportunity structure, exerting pressure on the resources of immigrant entrepreneurs.

## THE INTERACTIVE ANALYSIS

The phenomenon of immigrant businesses in Tijuana exhibits both continuities and discontinuities with previous studies conducted in other global regions. It is observed, as noted by Solé & Parella (2005) for southern Europe, that the initial ethnic businesses established during the settlement phase primarily offer gastronomic products and services, along with cultural offerings in general. This is because "such products demand an in-depth understanding of the tastes, preferences, and needs of potential consumers, as well as connections with the countries of origin" (Solé & Parella, 2005, p. 60).

Based on the five analytical categories outlined in the theoretical review, namely *motivations*, *capital*, and especially *social networks*, *interactions with the local economic structure*, including the transborder factor, and the current nature of the *political-institutional framework* regarding foreign immigration and immigrant businesses in particular, we proceed to analyze and establish comprehensive relationships within the ethnic commerce phenomenon in Tijuana (Table 1).

Table 1. Individual Actor: Motivations, Capability and Innovation

| | Categories | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Business | Motivations | Capability | Innovation |
| Honduras 504 | Prosperity and self-employment | Familiar. Inflationary pressures | Partial with the location. |
| La Champa[27] típica | Prosperity | Familiar. Personnel rotation. Inflation | No innovation. Same model. |
| Caracas Rana | Prosperity | Family and ethnic networks. Pressure of cost and supplies. | Yes. Market opening; new business models |
| El Pulgarcito | Prosperity and national pride | Familiar. Inflationary pressure | None |
| El Salvador TJ | Prosperity | Family and social support networks. Rents; inflation; staff turnover | Social media management |

Source: Own elaboration.

[27] Extended dialectal term used in much of Central America, referring to a wooden and palm construction where food is offered or gambling games are held during the civic and religious festivities of a population (RAE, n.d.b, definition 2.2).

The characteristics of ethnic entrepreneurship exhibit a tendency toward family-based businesses, typically led by an individual—more commonly male (four) than female (one)—who takes on the role of manager. With some variations, all cases initiated their ventures with the aim of enhancing their socioeconomic status following several years of employment in the restaurant sector (three cases) or through various jobs. In one instance, these savings stemmed from remittances sent transnationally, and upon arriving in Tijuana, there arose a need for self-employment. To varying degrees, the five cases under examination highlight their ethnic-national identity as a motivating factor in their decision-making process.

In terms of their capability to manage and sustain their businesses, this skill is partly rooted in intensive labor within the family unit. This aspect also highlights a congruence between employers and employees from the same ethnic-national background. The remaining staff—skilled kitchen workers of the same nationality—exhibit a high turnover rate between businesses and cities. Thus, the case studies align with the definition of ethnic businesses outlined in the theoretical background section. It is important to note that, given the economic challenges post-pandemic, all establishments encountered difficulties in maintaining their operations due to a significant increase in rent and food supply costs, coupled with a decrease in average customer spending.

Concluding the analytical review with the criterion of innovation, it's notable that four out of the five cases base their business model on traditional gastronomy, thus lacking the entrepreneurial aspect of implementing some degree of market innovation, whether technological or otherwise,[28] as noted by Aldrich and Waldinger (1990, p. 112). While the Venezuelan restaurant engages in marketing campaigns (led by Venezuelan professionals based in Tijuana) and has made attempts to diversify its offerings with various business models,[29] the other cases lack transformative initiatives[30] that create added value. The rudimentary use of digital social networks by the manager of "El Salvador TJ" and the short-lived attempt by "Honduras 504" to offer cultural and legal services alongside its gastronomic offerings should be approached with analytical caution.

In general, the entrepreneurs and their kinship groups, during their time of settlement in Tijuana, have established and maintained relationships with Mexican individuals, although the density of these networks varies depending on the national group. Venezuelan and Salvadoran entrepreneurs have forged strong (mixed marriages) and intense (lenders, frontmen, clientele, among others) ties

[28] As mentioned earlier, the entrepreneur of one of the pupuserías heavily relies on his social networks, although he admits that this effort hasn't significantly impacted sales. This case underscores the reinforcement of ethnic-national sentiment, as the communication established tends to bridge transnational connections rather than local ones.

[29] Like the opening of a typical fast food stall in the northern area of Tijuana.

[30] The case of Honduras 504 Sirak represents a failed attempt that could have potentially led to the exploration of the ethnic-national market. It hosted meetings of civil society organizations and American academics, and introduced complementary services for the Honduran community in Tijuana. This case warrants a focused study to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the attempted shift in the business model.

with Mexicans while also reproducing and expanding their connections with their compatriots (relatives, fellow countrymen, clientele). On the other hand, Honduran entrepreneurs primarily maintain their social capital within their own community, drawing financial capital from contributions and trust-based relationships within their compatriots. While they do engage in daily interactions with other groups of Latin American immigrants, as well as with Mexicans, these interactions tend to have lesser centrality and density.

For the second and third businesses in Table 2, the scale is considered international because they maintain connections with a small segment of relatives in their home country, while their networks are stronger with their fellow nationals within the border town. The transnational nature must facilitate the generation and sustainability of a social field whose members are interdependent, beyond the number of countries involved. Thus, the entrepreneurial group of Honduras 504 participates in a transnational social field whose members are distributed across three countries: the United States, Mexico, and Honduras.[31] In the case of El Salvador TJ, its transnational network spans Mexico and El Salvador, with its contacts in the United States having low density and lacking centrality regarding the operation of the business.

Table 2. Scale and Composition of Social Networks by Business

| | Social capital | |
|---|---|---|
| Business | Scale | Ethnic composition |
| Honduras 504 | Transnational; local | Hondurans: high density<br>Others: low density |
| Champa típica | Local; international | Hondurans |
| Caracas Rana | Local; international | Venezuelans and Mexicans |
| El Pulgarcito | Local; transborder | Salvadorans and Mexicans |
| El Salvador TJ | Local; transnational | Salvadorans and Mexicans |

Source: Own elaboration.

However, social capital can manifest in other ways when feelings of ethnic-national belonging intensify. The literature on this topic mentions *ethnic solidarity* and *reactive ethnicity* to refer to this anonymous social capital granted by national membership. As shown in Table 3, although the initial investment came from ties with natives, the clientele is predominantly composed of the national group of entrepreneurs, as well as the employed personnel. In the Venezuelan case, the apparent exception in the clientele is understood by the entrepreneurial focus on the open market and, in the employed personnel, by the reluctance of newly arrived Venezuelans to accept the combination of low social status and intensive labor.[32] On the other hand, the two businesses owned by Honduran immigrants present an opposite case, as they clearly demonstrate an almost

[31] They also have relatives residing in Spain; however, there are no elements to categorize them as integral to the Honduran transnational circuit and community or otherwise.

[32] This statement was made by the business manager and owner (Frank Mijares, personal communication, August 16, 2022). Alternatively, it could be attributed to a lack of strong ethnic solidarity among Venezuelans.

absolute dependence on the aforementioned compatriot networks. Moreover, the presence of financial loans from Mexican entities and individuals points to an economic immigration that, as Marlon points out, only had the opportunity to ascend in its socioeconomic status in Mexico (Marlon Rafael, personal communication, October 10, 2022).

Table 3. Ethnic-National Distribution by Business and Business Segment

| Business | Main clientele | Employed personnel | Initial capital |
|---|---|---|---|
| Honduras 504 | Hondurans, Central Americans | Hondurans | Honduras |
| Champa típica | Central Americans | Hondurans | Honduras |
| Caracas Rana | Mexicans | Venezuelans, Mexicans | Mexico |
| El Pulgarcito | Salvadorans, Mexican-Americans | Salvadorans, Mexicans | Mexico, El Salvador |
| El Salvador TJ | Salvadorans, Mexican-Americans | Salvadorans | Mexico |

Source: Own elaboration.

Following the examination of ethnic-national traits, the analysis proceeds to compare the businesses studied with the economic, institutional, and particularly, border environment of the Tijuana conurbation. The aim is to propose hypotheses that elucidate why Tijuana accommodates more instances of ethnic businesses compared to other Mexican cities.

Like in other major global regions, the tertiarization of Tijuana's economy fosters the establishment and growth of commercial and service-oriented ventures that heavily rely on the utilization of unskilled labor. This sector caters to a diverse audience, encompassing both white-collar and blue-collar workers from the maquiladora industry and the cross-border commercial sector. Moreover, Tijuana hosts more than half of all restaurant and hospitality-related businesses and employment opportunities in Baja California. Furthermore, as a gateway to the United States, Tijuana serves as a focal point for both national and international migration flows from the south and north, leading to the retention of residents, whether on a temporary or permanent basis. In essence, this border city exhibits dynamic economic development, with substantial investment inflows from Mexico and abroad, and features a business landscape predominantly comprised of small and medium enterprises involved in food preparation, entertainment, hospitality, and various other services and commerce, all facilitated by its border location.

Additionally, municipal policy regarding business establishment appears to be permissive and flexible. This was evident during recent public events, where ethnic businesses and their clientele were prominently featured.[33] In this regard, political and institutional barriers have been observed to be relaxed and inclusive regarding foreign entrepreneurship.

[33] Such is the case of the organization and celebration by the Tijuana City Council of the Feria Internacional Gastronómica y Cultural (First International Gastronomic and Cultural Fair), which took place at the City

Indeed, ethnic entrepreneurs have seized the opportunities presented by this economic structure, not merely by occupying socially marginalized or neglected economic sectors and urban areas, as local entrepreneurs might, but by integrating into the business landscape with lower capital requirements. The case of Honduras epitomizes the exploitation of the border's character by sourcing ethnic supplies in the United States for processing and marketing in Mexico, leveraging the differential import facilities and economies of scale[34] through alliances with other ethnic businesses in California. Salvadoran typical restaurants attract a portion of their clientele from US residents who visit Tijuana periodically for family or border tourism reasons. Both Honduras 504 and El Salvador TJ capitalize on the attraction of nearby second-hand markets, exploiting this aspect of the urban economic structure. The continuous migratory flow facilitates access to skilled labor (cooks) and clients of the same national origin, to whom they offer products catering to the nostalgia market, establishing reciprocal relationships based on ethnic solidarity and the reinforcement of their own identities (reactive ethnicities). Only the Venezuelan case is somewhat detached from the structural advantages directly afforded by the border condition, as it has fully integrated into the urban open market oriented towards Mexican nationals. However, it synergizes in obtaining food supplies and professional services through networks of fellow countrymen entrepreneurs and professionals, based on the trust provided by ethnic solidarity.

## CONCLUSIONS

Ethnic businesses in Tijuana predominantly comprise typical restaurants offering Latin American cuisines. These establishments cater to a market driven by nostalgia, influenced by recurring binational flows and the settlement of Latin American immigrants in the border region. Their characteristics align with the common definition of ethnic entrepreneurs and businesses, where management, ownership, and employed personnel belong to the same ethnic-national group of international immigrants. However, empirical evidence reveals differences compared to global trends. For instance, in Tijuana, these immigrants lack a concentrated urban district where their commercial or residential presence is prominent. Unlike Anglo-Saxon countries and in contrast to the Southern European case, the Mexican scenario features a pattern of dispersed businesses, with many even located on the periphery. Additionally, they lack dedicated social institutions that consolidate ethnic commerce, as seen in examples from Madrid and Chile (Buckley Iglesias, 1998; Luque-Brazán, 2007), with the exception of typical restaurants and other associations lacking a permanent headquarters.

However, this entrepreneurial sector has effectively capitalized on the urban-border opportunity structure and the advantages of ethnic solidarity to establish and sustain their businesses over time.

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Hall facilities in September 2022, featuring participation from various ethnic businesses and entrepreneurs residing in Tijuana. The second edition of the fair was held in July 2023 on Avenida Revolución.

[34] This concept refers to the situation where a company, through increased business volumes (production or marketing), can lower importation, distribution, and processing prices. Another concurrent phenomenon is the reduction in costs due to lower wholesale rates.

While each case discussed here exhibits differences, they also share commonalities. National characteristics prominently feature among the skills necessary for generating and maintaining commercial enterprises. Expert knowledge of the tastes and cultural habits of their compatriots serves as a cornerstone of their success. Additionally, their engagement in multiscale social networks allows them to leverage connections with both locals and fellow nationals to access capital, markets, and a labor force. Another noteworthy but often overlooked characteristic present in all five cases is the familial nature of the business core, where ethnicity and kinship intersect as key business factors. In general, the typical Latin American restaurants in Tijuana cannot be classified as entrepreneurial ventures due to their lack of innovation in their field and their business model; instead, they are rooted in the preservation of traditions.

The border factor, within a business-friendly context, is evident in the economic strategies pursued by several of the cases outlined: attracting cross-border visitors; leveraging economies of scale through binational procurement of ethnic supplies; drawing labor and clientele from the same nationality; engaging in transnational advertising; and benefiting from the local urban environment, which facilitates business establishment due to its gradual shift towards tertiarization. Additionally, active business networks and institutions, the growing significance of hospitality and restaurant activities for the local gross domestic product, and the supportive stance of local government institutions towards foreign entrepreneurial initiatives all contribute to the success of Latin American ethnic entrepreneurship in Tijuana, distinguishing it from other Mexican cities.

The present study exhibits several deficiencies, absences, and opportunities worth noting: its exploratory nature; the absence of censuses documenting the Latin American population in Tijuana and its economic activities; the scarcity of data or studies in other Mexican regions to corroborate the findings presented here; and the lack of a longitudinal perspective due to the absence of ongoing projects on the discussed phenomenon. Furthermore, ongoing projects may face challenges posed by the current (anti-)immigration policies of Mexico and the United States, which could threaten the continuity and depth of research in this area.

Translation: Erika Morales.

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