

The underdog advantage: exploring the resources and competencies of migrant entrepreneurs through the lens of multifocality

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Abstract

Purpose – The academic debate on migrant entrepreneurship is broad but remains heavily anchored in ethnic managerialism and disadvantaged or forced perspectives. By integrating managerial and sociological frameworks, this study aims to capture how resources and competencies are recombined and deployed by migrants in entrepreneurial practices, beyond mere necessity choices and ethnic minority perspectives.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts an abductive qualitative approach through a multiple case study design. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with North African entrepreneurs operating retail microbusinesses in the municipality of Modena (in the region of Emilia Romagna, Italy). The empirical material then underwent a thematic analysis using the resource-based view as an analytical heuristic framework to categorise the resources emerging from multifocal practices.

Findings – Through a rigorous cross-case comparison, the findings highlight how personal stories of migration are recombined with resources and competencies in everyday entrepreneurial activities. Two recurrent dimensions – multifocal adherence and recognition – emerged as deeply tied to the microbusinesses, while a third – multifocal rooting – only emerged as a more advanced and person-centred dimension in a limited number of cases.

Originality/value – The main theoretical contribution lies in extending the multifocality framework by demonstrating how the migratory experience operates as a multifocal generator of unique resources and competencies that drive both entrepreneurial action and social legitimization. Overall, migration can be leveraged as a distinctive strength rather than as, merely, a constraint.

Keywords Multifocality, Migrant entrepreneurs, Resource-based view (RBV), Microbusinesses

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Self-employment – small or microbusinesses – is a frequent choice taken by migrants when they settle in a host society and microbusinesses run by migrants are still frequently viewed through the lens of structural disadvantage or necessity, but this overlooks their contribution to social legitimization and the local economy (Audretsch et al., 2024; Onyima et al., 2024; Welter

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et al., 2017). Despite ever-greater attention on context-specific entrepreneurial opportunities (Hussain *et al.*, 2025; Ozasir Kacar and Essers, 2019) and performance factors (Hagos *et al.*, 2019), empirical research remains heavily anchored in narrow enclave perspectives and ethnic connotations (Dabic *et al.*, 2020; Ram *et al.*, 2017). These frameworks, criticised as “ethnic managerialism” (Law and Harrison, 2001), lack sociologically informed research (Ram *et al.*, 2012) and fail to capture how embedded entrepreneurial practices actually unfold (Welter *et al.*, 2017) by isolating the individual migrant within set, co-ethnic boundaries. We address this gap by postulating that the migratory experience may operate as a multifocal generator of unique resources and competencies that fuel everyday entrepreneurial practices and host-country social legitimation, far beyond the boundaries of ethnic enclaves.

The lens of multifocality is adopted (Solano, 2016, 2020; Solano *et al.*, 2022) as the main framework with the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm (Barney, 1996; Barney *et al.*, 2011) employed as an interpretative heuristic to categorise the entrepreneurial activities emerging from multifocal embeddedness. The aim of this study is not to advance the RBV theory itself, but to extend the multifocality lens (Solano *et al.*, 2022). It focuses on how migrant entrepreneurs mobilise and recombine resources and competencies across multiple groups and places (Dabic *et al.*, 2020; Van Burg *et al.*, 2022), showing how these actions are deeply interwoven with social legitimation (Kemppainen *et al.*, 2020). This multilevel analysis, which is fundamental to study migrant entrepreneurship (Dabic *et al.*, 2020; Onyima *et al.*, 2024), allows us to situate entrepreneurial actions in the light of the personal experience of migration and within the social context in which migrant entrepreneurs operate.

Methodologically, an abductive qualitative approach was used through a multiple case study design (Van Burg *et al.*, 2022), framing an interpretative stance focused on understanding emergent dimensions grounded in the field. This abductive orientation facilitates a continuous, dynamic dialogue between empirical insights and theoretical frameworks (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). The empirical analysis focused on North African entrepreneurs operating retail microbusinesses in the municipality of Modena (in the region of Emilia Romagna, Italy). Data, once collected through interviews, then underwent a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2017). The findings reveal how the personal story of migration and the interaction with the social structure, through multifocal spaces and groups (Solano, 2016, 2020), drive the recombination of resources and competencies (Sirmon *et al.*, 2007). This mechanism operates through three emergent dimensions – adherence, recognition and rooting – on two levels: while adherence and recognition secure firm-level market fit and organisational routines, rooting acts as an entrepreneur-specific capability, which emerges over time, and as a more advanced dimension, which is able to translate multifocal resources into strategic pathways and social legitimation (Kemppainen *et al.*, 2020). The main contribution to the academic debate lies in extending the multifocality framework and in reinforcing the role of migrant entrepreneurship beyond mere necessity (Aliaga-Isla and Rialp, 2013; Welter *et al.*, 2017). Policy and managerial implications are also derived.

The paper is structured as follows: section two sets out the literature framework; section three describes the research context and methodology; section four presents the findings and section five discusses them; section six offers conclusions, limitations and implications.

Theoretical background

Migrant entrepreneurship: beyond structural disadvantage

Research on migrant entrepreneurship has traditionally framed self-employment as a passive response to structural disadvantage. Early contributions on ethnic entrepreneurship and enclave economies emphasised how migrants often turn to self-employment due to limited labour market access, discrimination, blocked mobility and constrained employment opportunities. Within this, an entrepreneurial activity is frequently interpreted as a survival

choice rooted in necessity rather than opportunity. While traditional frameworks – like mixed embeddedness (Kloosterman and Rath, 2001; Polanyi, 1944) or transnational approaches (Rath and Swagerman, 2016; Villares-Varela *et al.*, 2017) – have been fundamental to explain how migrants adapt to binary origin-destination dynamics, they often overlook the active role and decision-making processes of the migrants as entrepreneurs. To overcome these limitations, multifocality (Solano, 2020; Solano *et al.*, 2022) emerges as a powerful lens, shifting the analytical focus from a condition of structural disadvantage or ethnic enclosure (Law and Harrison, 2001) to a dynamic understanding of how the migratory experience generates advantages that extend beyond ethnic enclaves. Overall, multifocality emerges not merely as a descriptive condition of geographic mobility, but as a socio-relational and cognitive orientation enabling individuals to operate simultaneously across multiple groups and spaces (Solano, 2016, 2020).

It is precisely in this simultaneous orientation that multifocality differs from earlier established concepts. Mixed embeddedness focuses primarily on the intersection between the migrant and the specific socio-institutional opportunity structures of the host country (Kloosterman and Rath, 2001) and transnational approaches look mainly at the binary connection between origin and destination countries (Rath and Swagerman, 2016; Villares-Varela *et al.*, 2017). Multifocality goes beyond both approaches: rather than operating on a binary axis (origin vs destination), migrant entrepreneurs navigate a complex web of geographic locations and interact simultaneously with co-nationals, host-country natives and other distinct migrant groups (Solano, 2016, 2020). Furthermore, while boundary spanning traditionally implies moving back and forth to temporarily bridge separate environments, multifocality represents a permanent state of simultaneous incorporation (Levitt and Schiller, 2004), where “ways of being” and “ways of belonging” are synchronised, shaping everyday entrepreneurial action (Solano, 2020; Solano *et al.*, 2022).

The microbusiness becomes, then, the focal point, where structural constraints are negotiated and where the multiple geographic locations and social groups identified by Solano (2020) cease to be backdrops and become concrete sources of “diverse” opportunities. According to the structuralist perspective, entrepreneurial action is actually bounded by institutional frameworks, market regulations and specific “group modes of behaviour”, such as localised consumption habits (Kloosterman, 2010), all of which the entrepreneur must navigate. Facing these constraints, the multifocal embeddedness of the migrant entrepreneur enables resources and competences to be recombined and their personal experience of migration to be leveraged (Solano, 2016, 2020). For instance, in cross-border import/export microbusinesses, the capacity to orchestrate logistics and legal compliance across several national frameworks allows the migrant entrepreneur to turn institutional fragmentation into an operational resource (Solano, 2016). Relationally, stabilising permanent ties with native suppliers, inter-ethnic partners and multi-local distributors allows the migrant entrepreneur to build a structural buffer against localised market shocks (Urban and Kujinga, 2017).

The microbusiness functions as an economic unit as well as a relational and symbolic location where interactions with regulatory entities, customers and local communities take place (Bolzani *et al.*, 2020; Ram *et al.*, 2017). Within these simultaneous socio-spatial interactions, the acquisition of legitimacy emerges as a multi-layered process (Kemppainen *et al.*, 2020). This may occur by shifting the migrant’s role from a subordinate worker to an active economic contributor, thereby reversing structural invisibility, or by turning the physical venue of the microbusiness into an element that revitalises urban neighbourhoods (Kemppainen *et al.*, 2020). Through multi-level institutional incorporation, the migrant is then legitimised in the eyes of the host society through the entrepreneurial activity and their microbusiness acts as the arena in which the personal experience of migration is converted from a structural constraint into an entrepreneurial asset. This study tackles this mechanism by assessing how migrant entrepreneurs systematically recombine multifocal resources and competencies to navigate structural constraints, thereby providing a deeper understanding of

how these practices drive both firm development and social legitimation (Audretsch *et al.*, 2024; Onyima *et al.*, 2024; Welter *et al.*, 2017).

Multifocality and the resource-based view of the firm to study migrant entrepreneurship

Instead of relying exclusively on bounded co-national social capital or ethnic resources (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Dana *et al.*, 2020), or focusing solely on localised customer relationships (Glinka *et al.*, 2023; Haq *et al.*, 2021, 2024), migrant entrepreneurs – under the multifocality lens – foster a specific resource recombination across multiple places and groups (Solano, 2020; Solano *et al.*, 2022). To interpret this phenomenon analytically, the RBV provides a useful heuristic, according to which a competitive advantage is derived from the combination and strategic management of unique resources and capabilities (Penrose, 1959; Barney, 1996). The RBV is widely used in strategic management and entrepreneurship studies (Barney *et al.*, 2011) due to its applicability to various contexts of inquiry and kinds of firms, even small ones. In line with the RBV, a firm's development is sustained by the dynamic mobilisation and combination of tangible and intangible resources, organisational capabilities, reputational assets and relational capabilities (Barney *et al.*, 2011; Sirmon *et al.*, 2007). This is thanks to their uniqueness and variable degrees of transferability: while some resources and capabilities can be structured at the firm level, others are subject to imperfect mobility, meaning that they cannot be transferred or replicated easily without losing value (Barney, 1996). The latter especially regards those resources or capabilities that are deeply embedded in individual actions and specific contexts, making them highly idiosyncratic and structurally non-transferable (Sirmon *et al.*, 2007).

To our knowledge, previous studies mainly used the RBV to conceptualise ethnic resources or co-national social capital in migrant entrepreneurship studies (Aliaga-Isla and Rialp, 2013; Yang *et al.*, 2012). Recently, the RBV has been combined with social capital theory to study customer service in ethnic microbusinesses (Haq *et al.*, 2021) or to grasp the role of shared values and ethnic cultural practices in customer relationships (Haq *et al.*, 2024). However, these contributions remain largely focused on bounded ethnic dynamics. In this study, the RBV serves as a heuristic and classificatory framework to identify and organise the different types of resources and capabilities emerging from multifocal entrepreneurial practices (Dabic *et al.*, 2020; Van Burg *et al.*, 2022). The integration of the RBV with multifocality shifts the focus from *what* resources are possessed to *where* and *how* they are multi-focally generated and combined (Sirmon *et al.*, 2007). By leveraging their migratory experience, migrant entrepreneurs blend previously unrelated resources to navigate an environment characterised by low degrees of munificence (Sirmon *et al.*, 2007; Solano *et al.*, 2022). Multifocality then provides the spatial and relational matrix for the recombination and deployment of those heterogeneous and valuable resources and capabilities stemming from the personal experience of migration. This approach is particularly suitable in the context of microbusinesses: given their scale (Runyan *et al.*, 2007) and informal organisation, these firms are heavily influenced by the entrepreneur's personal experience, skills and social relationships (Barney *et al.*, 2011; O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2000), as well as their everyday decision-making practices (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Ozasir Kacar and Essers, 2019). A firm's resources and capabilities are, therefore, closely intertwined with the entrepreneur's personal background in everyday entrepreneurial operations (Gherhes *et al.*, 2016).

Methodology

This study adopts an abductive qualitative approach within a multiple case study design (Van Burg *et al.*, 2022). By framing an interpretive stance focused on understanding processes directly from the field, this approach facilitates a continuous, dynamic dialogue between empirical insights and theoretical frameworks (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). The RBV is deployed as an analytical heuristic framework (Penrose, 1959; Barney, 1996) to structure and

categorise the heterogeneous resources and competencies emerging from the field, examined through the multifocality lens (Solano, 2016, 2020).

Research context

The focus is North African [1] entrepreneurs operating retail microbusinesses in the municipality of Modena (Emilia Romagna region, Italy). Two elements – both present – make this a meaningful research context. First, the peculiarities of the Italian retail system, which is dominated by microbusinesses, especially where non-groceries are concerned, with e-commerce playing an increasing but still limited role. In addition, Italian city centres are still key when it comes to opening a store and since there is no suitable space for large, mass-market retailers, they are the preferred location for many microbusinesses, in contrast to that seen in other developed countries. Second, and more importantly, the increasing attention paid to migrant entrepreneurship in the national and local contexts. Since the abolition of the reciprocity clause (1990s), it has become a structural phenomenon (Baycan-Levent and Nijkamp, 2009) with some distinctive features (Ambrosini, 2012), including in terms of the economic outlook compared to the native component. According to the Chambers of Commerce, between 2011 and 2022, the number of businesses owned by migrant entrepreneurs increased by 42.7%, while other activities decreased by 5% (IDOS, 2023). In 2022, over 70% of migrant entrepreneurs were self-employed, significantly higher than the native component (approximately 50%) (IDOS, 2023). Additionally, retail is among the elective sectors chosen by migrants (Baycan-Levent and Nijkamp, 2009; Ram *et al.*, 2012) and is dominated by North African ethnic groups, in particular Moroccans, who account for 14% of the main national migrant groups (China, Romania, Albania, Bangladesh) and 60% of the total (IDOS, 2023).

Regionally, the trend over the last ten years confirms an increase in the absolute number of businesses run by migrant entrepreneurs, with a percentage higher than the national average (Regional Immigration Observatory, 2024). The presence of small and micro businesses is confirmed (with more than three out of four involving self-employment), with 23.8% operating in the wholesale and retail sector – the second largest elective sector for migrant entrepreneurs. Among North African migrants, the Moroccan community is the second largest in terms of residents and business owners, with approximately 70% of businesses operating in the retail sector (Regional Immigration Observatory, 2024), creating a long-term, stable, migratory chain (Castle and Miller, 2009). Modena is the third largest province in the region for the number of migrant-owned businesses and the Moroccan community had the largest number until 2017 (17% in 2018), surpassed only by the Chinese community (Regional Immigration Observatory, 2018). Consequently, the municipality of Modena is a suitable choice to explore this phenomenon.

Sample selection and characteristics

The sample was selected on the basis of the microbusinesses (1) run by North African migrant entrepreneurs; (2) operating in the retail sector and (3) based in the municipality of Modena. The selection is based on qualitative typologies (Silverman, 2013; Solano *et al.*, 2022) which allow the selection of microbusinesses within the identified migratory chain. Other sources were used to identify potential cases (Solano *et al.*, 2022). First, a list of microbusinesses provided by the local Chambers of Commerce, sorted by nationality. Second, the street level visibility of the microbusiness based on an on-site field mapping. Third, the informed perspective of a community representative, affiliated with a local cultural and religious association: the connection with the local North African community allowed relevant cases to be included. This person also acted as a cultural mediator during data collection.

In 2019, the Modena Chambers of Commerce registered 38 foreign-owned retail activities (see Table 1), whose owners were of Algerian, Egyptian, Moroccan and Tunisian origin. The average age was 46. Most entrepreneurs are of Moroccan origin with connections that have

Table 1. Number of North African retail microbusinesses

Entrepreneurs/microbusiness		No.
Country of origin	Algeria	2
	Egypt	5
	Morocco	24
	Tunisia	7
	Total	38
Product	Food	20
	Objects and Furnishings	10
	Plants and flowers	8
	Total	38

Source(s): The authors’ analysis based on Chamber of Commerce data (2019)

been established over time, dating back to the early 1990s. The cultural mediator also confirmed the significance of this link, which could also be traced in the number of retail microbusinesses across different age groups, comprising both first generation migrants and entrepreneurs aged 18 to 29, many of whom are presumably second generation. Data constraints prevented an analysis of education levels. Most entrepreneurial activities are butcher’s stores or stores selling fresh and packaged food (52%) or stores selling objects and furnishings (Table 1).

Rigorous fieldwork in the municipality resulted in the selection of 10 micro-businesses and involved a direct, on-site verification of each location (gathered through secondary sources) between July and September 2019. The screening revealed business closures (11 cases), errors in the activity’s address (6 cases); in other cases, the address was a private home, a garage or a warehouse, or was the address of a professional firm of accountants or lawyers (11 cases). This may be symptomatic of one of the peculiar characteristics of the Italian context (Ambrosini, 2012), where self-employment is often an administrative choice (IDOS, 2023; Regional Immigration Observatory, 2024). The highly dynamic nature of opening and closing a business may also be indicative of the local economic context and of an ongoing change in the local economy.

A second round of fieldwork was conducted between March and May 2026 to track the evolution of the cases. The mapping revealed a high variety of developments, ranging from continuing operations under the same ownership, to liquidations and to acquisitions by other North African migrant entrepreneurs. To capture the granular meanings behind these developments, primary data collection was extended through unstructured interviews with two key interviewees – selected on the basis of voluntary participation and theoretical relevance: one migrant entrepreneur, who continuously operated a microbusiness from 2019 to 2026, and one new migrant entrepreneur who acquired one of the microbusinesses. These unstructured interviews allowed the interviewees to freely narrate the shifts that occurred over the seven-year period, providing a rich account of: (1) changes in store ownership from the original sample and (2) trends and impacts affecting small local retailers.

Table 2 outlines the characteristics of the final sample. No demographic characteristics, however – which were in line with the local population of North African migrant entrepreneurs – are provided (Table 1).

Following the advice to justify the number of cases (by Saunders and Townsend, 2016), and in line with similar empirical studies (Ozasir Kacar and Essers, 2019; Solano, 2020), the sample size is considered suitable. In qualitative multiple case study designs aiming for theory extension, a scope of 10 cases represents an ideal standard (Van Burg *et al.*, 2022), as the objective of sampling is theoretical relevance and not generalisation. In addition, saturation was reached: additional interviews began to yield diminishing returns relative to the effort

Table 2. Final sample

Case ID	Assortment	Ethnic products	Employees	Status at the follow-up
ID-1	Store with fresh and packaged products	Included but not central to the offering	Not present	Store still in operation but run by other Maghrebi entrepreneurs. Slightly changed product selection
ID-2	Butcher's shop with a small grocery store	Prominent and distinctive (Halal butcher)	5, from co-national and other groups	Store still in operation, owned and run by the same entrepreneur
ID-3	Gifts and Decor	Prominent and distinctive	Not present	Closed
ID-4	Grocery store with a butcher's shop	Prominent and distinctive (Halal butcher)	3, one from the family group and 2 from the co-national group	Store still in operation, owned and run by the same entrepreneur
ID-5	Grocery store with a butcher's shop	Prominent and distinctive (Halal butcher)	One from the family group	Store still in operation but run by other Maghrebi entrepreneurs. Slightly changed product selection
ID-6	Grocery store with a deli	Not prominent in the grocery section but prominent in the deli	Not present	Store still in operation but run by other Maghrebi entrepreneurs. The product selection has changed (no deli)
ID-7	Flowers	Included but not central to the offering	Not present	Store closed for a long time and reopened, no longer run by Maghrebi owners
ID-8	Store with fresh and packaged products	Included but not central to the offering	4, from co-national and native groups	Store still in operation but run by other Maghrebi entrepreneurs
ID-9	Mattresses and home furnishings	Not included	Not present	Closed
ID-10	Gifts and Decor	Not included	Not present	Closed

Source(s): The authors' analysis

required to reach new migrant entrepreneurs and did not reveal any novel insights regarding the core dimensions which had emerged (Dubois and Gadde, 2002).

Data collection and analysis

To gather “thick knowledge”, data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Haq *et al.*, 2024) between September and December 2019. The interviews asked questions on (1) opening a microbusiness, with particular reference to the personal motivations, the evolution of the business and the difficulties encountered; (2) running the microbusiness and its characteristics, the daily activities and the strategic decisions – e.g. in relation to managing relationships with suppliers and customers, the changes made to the assortment, prices and promotions, future projects; (3) the entrepreneur's personal story of migration. The interview guide is based on open-ended questions to encourage individual expression on the role of their migration experience in everyday entrepreneurial practices and choices (Van Burg *et al.*, 2022). Probing and prompting questions were added to deepen the emerging results and the subjective interpretation. The interview protocol was tested and validated by the cultural mediator and refined slightly based on the feedback received. Interviews were held at the microbusiness and lasted, on average, between an hour and a half and two hours. To ensure analytical rigour, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, except for one case. This

non-recorded interview was immediately reconstructed into expanded narratives within 24 h to preserve data consistency and was then treated with the same coding protocols as the verbatim transcripts, although analysed primarily for thematic patterns rather than micro-nuances of meaning. In addition, on-site observations provided crucial contextual insights to triangulate and enrich the final corpus of data.

A thematic approach was adopted to analyse the data as it provides an effective, flexible tool to explore complex phenomena, suitable for socially interpreting data and generating contextual insights (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed recurring themes *within* and *across* cases to be identified and interpreted, deriving rich and nuanced insights from the experiences described (Clarke and Braun, 2017). Through an abductive orientation (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), the analysis conceptualised qualitative patterns through a dynamic dialogue between the empirical material and the theoretical framework, whilst maintaining rigorous standards (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The data analysis involved three iterative steps. First, the authors read the interview transcripts multiple times to ensure data familiarisation (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Employing the RBV as an analytical heuristic framework, initial codes were used to categorise the heterogeneous resources and capabilities embedded within the microbusinesses (Penrose, 1959; Barney, 1996). Following the traditional RBV classification, these categories were structured into financial, physical and, reputational resources, and organisational capabilities (Barney, 1996; Grant, 1991), reputational resources (Hall, 1992); market capabilities, defined as the ability to identify and exploit emergent opportunities, and relational capabilities, defined as the ability to build long-lasting ties with consumers and suppliers (Haq *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2012). The output from this first step was a qualitative mapping of the illustrative empirical evidence for each RBV category (Table 3).

Second, by moving back and forth between cases, and within the theoretical frameworks, by using an abductive approach (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), the authors analysed how these RBV categories were deployed by tracing the structural presence of multiple places and groups (Table 4). In line with Solano *et al.* (2022), the reference groups included families, co-nationals, natives and other migrants, while the reference places included the country of origin, the country of immigration and other countries. The purpose was to code all the relevant narrative segments and to check for recurrences forming the basis of overarching patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006). While no broader aggregate dimensions were finalised in this step (Figure 1), the interpretive synthesis linking the RBV categories to the multifocality lens was initiated.

The third step involved synthesising the empirical data into recurring patterns by tracing similarities and differences in how migrant entrepreneurs anchored their everyday business practices across multiple places and groups. Through this iterative abstraction process (Klag and Langley, 2013), a set of overarching themes emerged. These aggregate themes were systematically reviewed and refined until the final aggregate dimensions were identified and

Table 3. RBV categories

RBV categories	Definition
<i>Financial resources</i>	The set of liquid assets (cash or credit obtained through loans, payment deferrals)
<i>Physical resources</i>	The set of assets owned by a firm (buildings, machinery), including the company's premises (store location)
<i>Reputational resources</i>	The positive perception that external stakeholders develop towards the firm
<i>Organisational capabilities</i>	The firm's ability to combine and coordinate its resources effectively
<i>Market capabilities</i>	The ability to identify and exploit market opportunities
<i>Relational capabilities</i>	The ability to create and maintain supportive, long-lasting relationships with consumers and suppliers

Source(s): The authors' analysis based on Barney (1996), Grant (1991)

Table 4. Examples of coding

Market capability	“Over time, new products have been introduced, mainly to meet customer requests. For example, fresh fish has been added once a week to satisfy the needs of Pakistani and African customers. And cooked vegetables have been introduced to reduce food waste.” (ID-8) “I place special orders for specific customer requests or during holidays when I know there will be special demands.” (ID-7)
Physical resources	“I had to close the first store and move but then I came back to this place, where the original store was located. The main reasons were customer requests and the value of the street’s location.” (ID-3) “Most of the Italian customers are elderly residents in the neighbourhood who come to me to buy fresh food products or detergents for convenience. Therefore, location is very important.” (ID-6)
Reputational resources	“I am known as the oldest Islamic butcher in Modena!” (ID-2) “Customers choose me for the quality and the certainty that the meat sold is actually Halal. The reputation, with respect to Halal slaughter, is very important: in the Moroccan community we know who does real ritual slaughter and who doesn’t! This has allowed me to have trustworthy customers.” (ID-5)
Organisational capability	“I have a specific strategy for suppliers: I have two or three suppliers for the same product. This allows me to restock as needed, even one day for the next. They are all located in Italy, but some are of foreign origin!” (ID-2) “Among my suppliers, there is a major company that does not grant resale rights to everyone. With other suppliers, however, I have developed products under my own brand.” (ID-9)
Relational capability	“Reliability and quality: this is the point. I try not to damage relationships with people and always aim to maintain a good relationship with all my customers. There’s a bond that’s been built over a long time and I work hard to keep it.” (ID-4) “My customers asked me to make meat for them; it was their request to come only to me. So, I also introduced the butcher store.” (ID-8)
Financial resources	“Financial resources are not very important, just as, for example, physical ones are, like location to attract more customers, or reputation.” (ID-7) “Financial resources are important, but they are not an issue; what matters are personal experience and reputation.” (ID-10)

Note(s): Verbatim quotes were selected from the data. The analysis across cases tends to be more nuanced and layered

Source(s): The authors’ analysis

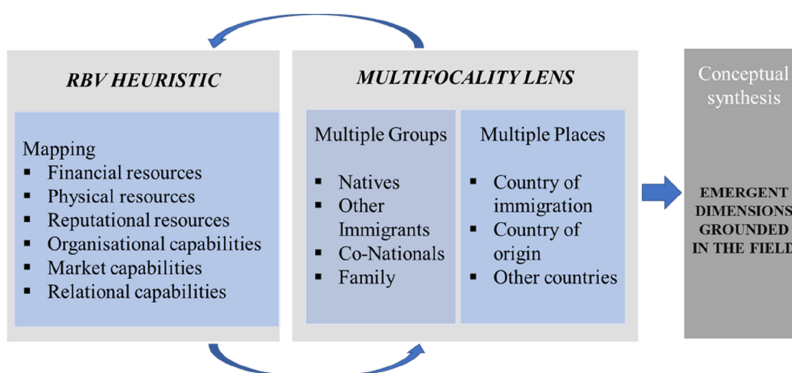


Figure 1. Coding procedure scheme. **Source(s):** The authors’ analysis

the authors formulated concise definitions to outline the scope and conceptual content of each (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The analysis was fully documented to ensure rigour and to mitigate interpretation bias, dedicating adequate time to each task to guarantee trustworthiness (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The empirical material gathered during the 2026 follow-up was incorporated into the final analytical stage to corroborate the stability and relevance of the emergent dimensions over time. Specifically, the unstructured narratives from the key interviewees were used to evaluate whether the emergent thematic labels captured the underlying mechanisms successfully. The authors performed the analysis individually and then compared findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006); they engaged in collective debriefings and conceptual reflections regularly to ensure that the emerging themes were grounded robustly in the data.

Reflexivity

Given the qualitative and interpretive nature of this study, reflexivity and author positioning were explicitly considered throughout the process and embedded in the research design. Two members of the research group participated in each interview, one as the primary interviewer, the other as an observer. They were introduced and accompanied by the cultural mediator, whose role was to facilitate the initial contact, explain the research purpose and build trust with the participants. The involvement of a cultural mediator was crucial in overcoming language barriers through translation between Arabic and Italian, facilitating access to the field. To strengthen interpretive consistency, a systematic double-check protocol was implemented, whereby translated concepts were reviewed immediately after each interview to disentangle cultural idioms from business-related meanings. This procedure helped ensure greater clarity and coherence in cross-language interpretation (Haq *et al.*, 2024). In addition, one of the authors worked as an “industry insider” (Haq *et al.*, 2024) and this enhanced contextual familiarity, improved the interview dynamics and supported the formulation of more meaningful and locally grounded questions. This position also facilitated deeper engagement with participants, enriching the interpretation of both verbal and non-verbal data (Haq *et al.*, 2024).

Taken together, these positionalities strengthened the interpretive depth but also introduced potential sources of bias related to power relations and over-familiarity with the research context. The cultural mediator’s presence could have influenced the interview dynamics and an interviewee’s account, while translation required interpretive decisions that, inevitably, involved some degree of meaning negotiation across languages. The industry insider position could have carried the risk of confirmation bias and reduced analytical distance, as prior familiarity with the context might shape the interpretation of emerging themes. These risks were mitigated through iterative reflexive practices, including collaborative interpretation, a comparison of alternative meanings, and the continuous interrogation of emerging themes during coding cycles. Therefore, the research team engaged in continuous, reflexive dialogue throughout data collection and analysis, critically examining how their linguistic, cultural and professional positioning shaped interview interactions, coding decisions and the interpretation of emerging themes. Consistent with the reflexive thematic analysis adopted (Braun and Clarke, 2006), coding and theme development were treated as interpretive and theoretically situated practices, and interpretations remained grounded in the empirical material. In line with the principle of methodological integrity (Levitt *et al.*, 2017), these procedures ensured coherence between the research aims and analytic practices, and balanced insider knowledge with analytical distance, ultimately strengthening the credibility of the findings.

Empirical results

The analysis provides an overview of the RBV categories deployed across the cases. First, financial resources appear marginalised. Interviewees (e.g. ID-3, ID-7) assert that access to

finance mirrors that of native entrepreneurs, except for potential language barriers, with no direct reliance on ethnic networks for capital. Crucially, the personal migratory experience emerges as a cornerstone, operating as an intangible individual asset that permeates everyday practices. As one entrepreneur stated: *“the migratory experience allows you to be a non-indecisive person. When you leave your home, your culture, your language and your things, you can decide what to do with your life, there is no fear”* (ID-2). This decision-making attitude, embedded in the individual, structurally shapes the microbusiness. Empirical configurations of market-related resources are heavily emphasised by the interviewees (e.g. ID-1, ID-2, ID-4, ID-5, ID-6, ID-10), as well as physical assets complemented by reputational resources (e.g. ID-4, ID-5, ID-6, ID-9, ID-10). Relational competencies and organisational resources are then frequently highlighted as complementary (e.g. ID-2, ID-6). Through an abductive cross-case synthesis (Table 5), these patterns crystallise into three higher-order dimensions (Figure 2): “multifocal adherence”, “multifocal recognition” and “multifocal rooting”, each related to the recombination of specific resources and capabilities. Among these, two recurring dimensions consistently emerged across the cases (multifocal adherence and multifocal recognition), while a third, more advanced configuration (multifocal rooting), emerged only in a limited number of cases, suggesting a more mature form of multifocal entrepreneurial development. Overall, the findings reveal how the multifocal experience of migrant entrepreneurs interacts with the opportunity structures of the host context.

Multifocal adherence

“Multifocal adherence” is rooted in the awareness of the presence of multiple groups, including other migrant communities settled locally, and involves a precise understanding of their needs. Market-related resources are leveraged to identify and address the consumption habits of multiple groups, including co-ethnic individuals, natives (e.g. ID-1, ID-9) and other migrants (e.g. ID-2, ID-8). While family groups are referenced primarily for initial support, co-nationals, natives and other migrant groups are structurally integrated into everyday practices, e.g. in adapting product assortments or organising supplies around diverse religious holidays. The personal migration experience allows entrepreneurs to map alternative configurations of market resources, such as “nostalgia” products (ID-6), which become visible exclusively through the lens of multifocality. For instance: *“during some periods, like summer, demand drops because foreigners often go back home, especially mothers with children who return to Morocco for the summer months. Generally, demand increases around the 10th to 15th of each month because customers receive their pay cheques”* (ID-5). This dimension evolves from the engagement with the community of origin as well as the native one. For example, one entrepreneur recalled that, dating back to their father’s store: *“at that time in Modena there were no Halal meat suppliers and families used to purchase an animal to be slaughtered according to the Halal precepts at local slaughterhouses. It was not possible to import meat from Morocco and my father, therefore, came up with the idea of opening a store dedicated to Halal meat. Over time, new products have been introduced mainly to satisfy customer requests”* (ID-6).

The follow-up observations provided additional support that this emergent dimension was not merely a temporary coping mechanism. The tracking of the surviving cases demonstrated that formal institutional compliance and multi-group market adaptation had crystallised into market-related resources, capturing the formal and institutional layer, according to which a migrant entrepreneur aligns their microbusiness with the market expectations of both the host and origin contexts.

Multifocal recognition

“Multifocal recognition” is structurally built on physical assets, including layout and cleanliness, and combined with reputational resources. Regarding physical resources, the store is conceptualised as a socio-spatial anchor, recognised by both co-nationals and native groups.

Table 5. Synthesis of relevant cross-case comparison

Case	Multifocal adherence	Multifocal recognition	Multifocal rooting
ID-1	Tailoring products to the needs of the elderly, cross-cutting products for multiple groups, including native and ethnic minority groups	Recognised as the first ethnic market in the city centre, it has long served not only the residents of the central area but also small restaurants	Marginally emerged. Although an emerging relationship with a supplier was evident, it did not develop into a lasting advantage
ID-2	Dynamic configuration of offerings (halal meat integrated with dried/frozen fish varieties) matched to a systematic assessment of the customer base	Strong reputational and historical anchoring within the urban landscape, recognised as “the oldest Islamic butchery”	Managing relationships with customers by blending native cultural practices with those of the host society, creating a unique advantage
ID-3	A selection of ethnic jewellery and home decor items to meet the needs of both members of the ethnic community and others	Not clearly emerged	Not clearly emerged
ID-4	Dynamic configuration of offerings (halal meat integrated with dried/frozen fish varieties) matched to a systematic assessment of the customer base	Recognised as a neighbourhood convenience store, frequented by people from diverse ethnic backgrounds and serving as a gathering place for them	Strategic leveraging of an extensive, multi-place supplier network to construct a highly diversified assortment to satisfy the shifting demands of a multi-group customer base
ID-5	Assortment structurally synchronised with multi-group flows	Venue location positioned at high-volume pedestrian nodes in close proximity to critical urban anchors (bus stops and pharmacies) and recognised by multiple groups	Marginally emerged. Inventory management practices designed to balance the needs of various groups: this does not translate into a lasting advantage
ID-6	Proactive mapping of market niche demands via “nostalgia products”	Deep, localised anchoring and cross-group recognition: the physical venue functions as a primary daily convenience store in the neighbourhood	Marginally emerged. Trying to collaborate with local industrial food manufacturers to replicate nostalgia products demanded by cross-border customers. Not translated into a lasting advantage
ID-7	Not clearly emerged	Not clearly emerged	Not clearly emerged
ID-8	A selection of fruit and vegetables, supplemented by ethnic products (frozen fish) to attract members of the ethnic community and other migrant groups	Despite changes in ownership, the physical location is still recognised as a go-to spot for fresh produce	Not clearly emerged
ID-9	Not clearly emerged	Not clearly emerged	Not clearly emerged
ID-10	Not clearly emerged	Not clearly emerged	Not clearly emerged

Source(s): The authors’ analysis

The physical venue functions as a localised space of socialisation where North African and Italian customers interact (e.g. ID-1, ID-6). For example, being located in a high-traffic area helps attract a broader range of customers (ID-5). This is echoed by ID-6: “*most of the Italian customers are elderly residents in the neighbourhood who come to me to buy fresh food products or detergents for convenience. Therefore, location is very important*”. This ultimately strengthened the reputational resource (e.g. ID-1, ID-2, ID-4, ID-5, ID-6, ID-8). Although physical location acts as a logistic attribute of the retail service offered, it also becomes an element of reputational recognition by multiple groups, strongly reflected by ID-2: “*I would*

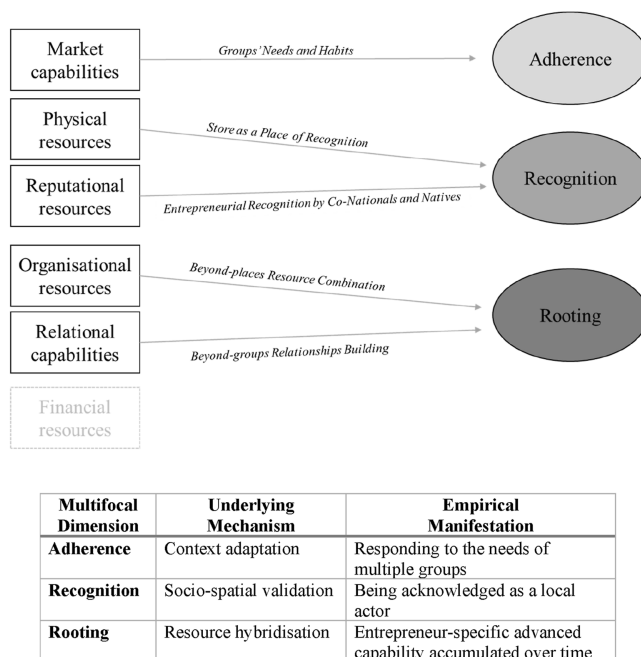


Figure 2. Emergent multifocal dimensions. **Source(s):** The authors' analysis

never leave the current venue because customers know me as the oldest Islamic butcher in Modena". The co-national group strongly emphasises the historic nature of the store, with which a long-lasting, trusting relationship has been developed, thus reinforcing the reputational asset.

Although several interviewees initially expected an exclusively North African clientele, their customer base progressively expanded to include other migrant groups (e.g. ID-2, ID-3, ID-8). As a perceptual estimation of customer distribution, ID-2 noted that: *"overall, 65% of the customers are migrant; of these, 70% are Moroccan. The other customers come from Eastern Europe and Africa. The remaining 35% are Italian customers. Customers want to find everything in the same store without having to move between different places: for this reason, over time, I decided to stock other products besides meat. For example, African customers requested and are large consumers of frozen and dried fish"* (ID-2). This was also the case for the native group; ID-1 explained that, initially, there was an expectation that customers would mostly be co-nationals but after the 2012 crisis, the store expanded its targeted groups by serving more Italian customers. Similarly, competitive dynamics transcend co-national boundaries: *"when thinking about competitors, it's not fellow countrymen but the Bangladeshis who have arrived in recent years and run numerous stores. Moreover, they sell alcohol, which is not offered here"* (ID-1).

Distinct from adherence, the "multifocal recognition" dimension represents the relational layer, specifically referring to the social validation and visibility of the microbusiness by multiple interacting groups (natives, co-nationals and other immigrants). Within this dimension, all the groups identify the retail microbusiness as a permanent part of the local economic fabric and social landscape. Consequently, these entrepreneurial resources are enacted within fluid, multifocal social and spatial contexts. This dimension was seen widely across the cases (e.g. ID-1, ID-2, ID-4, ID-5, ID-6, ID-8) and the related physical and reputational assets proved to be a critical survival factor over the seven-year span. The follow-up observations revealed that even

when ownership transferred, incoming migrant entrepreneurs specifically acquired those venues to inherit the established relational recognition and neighbourhood-level reputation, proving that this dimension operates as a transferable asset.

Multifocal rooting

Empirical material indicates that migrant entrepreneurs increasingly coordinate organisational resources across multiple social groups. Rather than reflecting recognition, these practices concern the active orchestration of suppliers and product assortments to respond simultaneously to the expectations of different customer groups. For example, one entrepreneur explained that he had one long-time supplier for “foreign” goods, and “*if a customer asks for a specific product that’s not in stock or has run out, a phone call is enough, and the product will arrive*” (ID-1). This also involves drawing on networks in the country of origin, the host country and other countries in the search for the best products. Each entrepreneur describes their own daily practices in terms of assortments, product rotation and using space within the store to display products effectively: “*fresh product restocking happens about once a week; for fruit, vegetables, and meat, about once or twice a week, and the bazaar once a month or as needed*” (ID-5). Ultimately, their entrepreneurial role bridges multiple places while accounting for the needs of multiple groups. For example, “*customers returning from their holidays in Morocco often ask to introduce new products experienced during the holidays – I recently listed a yoghurt that resembles the flavour of a pomegranate yoghurt sold in Morocco. It is produced in Italy and very much reflects the characteristics of the original product. Producers in Morocco have no interest in exporting, also due to regulations, and some Italian producers had the idea of copying these products*” (ID-6).

Although references to solid relationships with native groups, co-nationals and other migrants appeared across several cases, the complete configuration of multifocal rooting emerged only in two cases and should therefore not be interpreted as a widespread pattern. Its analytical relevance lies not in its prevalence, but in the specific mechanism it captures: the hybridisation of personal migration experience, relational capabilities and organisational practices. In the first case (ID-2), rooting is seen in the blending of diverse commercial cultural practices with customers, such as providing informal credit to customers in financial distress or adjusting interactions to align with the specific cultural codes of different groups. In the second case (ID-4), rather than relying on localised or mono-ethnic suppliers, entrepreneurs bridge geographically dispersed and culturally distinct suppliers to build a diversified assortment to satisfy the nuanced demands of native residents and co-ethnic and diverse immigrant communities. In both cases, “multifocal rooting” relates to entrepreneurial practices described as cultural hybridisation, where multiple spaces and groups are orchestrated in a unique combination. This provides a critical insight: while “multifocal adherence” and “multifocal recognition” are essential for market fit and external validation, “multifocal rooting” should be understood as qualitatively distinct, representing an advanced dimension rather than a condition shared by all microbusinesses. It serves as a strategic approach to the development of microbusinesses over time but also as the means through which migrants consolidate their position as entrepreneurs. Ultimately, while “multifocal adherence” and “multifocal recognition” appear as structurally anchored to the microbusiness itself – and are, therefore, replicable and transferable independently of the specific owner – “multifocal rooting” seems more anchored to the individual entrepreneur. It develops only after sustained interaction across multiple groups and places and reflects a later and more advanced stage in which resources and capabilities become deeply embedded in an entrepreneur’s accumulated migration and business experiences.

Discussion

This study conceptualises the migratory experience as a distinctive advantage. Findings reveal that multifocal places and groups (Solano, 2016, 2020), in which migrant entrepreneurs are

embedded, recombine and leverage RBV categories to create firm value (Sirmon *et al.*, 2007), although migrant entrepreneurs do not merely participate in markets with their microbusinesses. The microbusiness itself functions as the socio-spatial site where interactions with regulatory regimes, customers and local communities take place, and where recombined resources emerge as transferable and firm-level (“multifocal adherence” and “multifocal recognition”) or as non-transferable and individual-level (“multifocal rooting”) assets for both the continuity of the entrepreneurial activity and the individual legitimisation as entrepreneur. Furthermore, migrant microbusinesses are neither forced nor established out of necessity (Welter *et al.*, 2017): they are built strategically on a deliberate recombination of market-related resources and relational capabilities (Sirmon *et al.*, 2007) and they are optimised under specific socio-contextual conditions (Kloosterman, 2010; Solano, 2020). Our findings, therefore, extend the multifocality framework by shifting its analytical focus from multiple embeddedness as a contextual condition (Solano, 2016, 2020) to multifocality as an entrepreneurial resource orchestration mechanism. Rather than simply occupying multiple social and spatial contexts, migrant entrepreneurs continuously coordinate heterogeneous resources across them through everyday business practices.

The three dimensions capture different mechanisms through which multifocal embeddedness is converted into entrepreneurial value. Adherence enables initial market alignment across heterogeneous groups, recognition stabilises this alignment through socio-spatial legitimacy, whereas rooting reflects the progressive capability to hybridise heterogeneous organisational and relational resources across groups and places. Unlike recognition, which concerns the socio-spatial legitimacy achieved by the microbusiness, rooting appears to represent an emergent and person-centred dimension associated with the stabilisation of multifocal practices over time. However, given its reliance on entrepreneur-specific capabilities and situated relationships, not all entrepreneurs necessarily progress towards it.

While Solano *et al.* (2022) found that most entrepreneurs in their sample were multifocal with respect to places but not with respect to groups, this study advances our understanding by showing that the characteristics of multifocal groups are crucial in defining opportunities and recombining resources. By embedding their everyday practices within these multifocal relational networks (Solano *et al.*, 2022), these actors systematically reconfigure resources and competencies for market-fit opportunities that transcend ethnic enclaves. These businesses are highly transferable and able to survive ownership transitions when inherited by successors, who purchase the venue, for example, specifically to capitalise on its pre-existing market positioning and localised reputation. Conversely, rooting represents a higher order configuration that develops only when multifocal entrepreneurial practices are repeatedly orchestrated over time. Unlike recognition, which concerns the legitimacy anchored to the microbusiness itself, rooting resides primarily in the entrepreneur’s accumulated experience and in the ability to hybridise heterogeneous resources, making it idiosyncratic and socially complex and then harder to be purchased or transferred (Sirmon *et al.*, 2007). Migrant entrepreneurs do not need physical cross-border mobility to leverage multiple places (Solano *et al.*, 2022); rather, it is through the networks of relationships and the organisational practices they implement in their microbusinesses that multifocal spaces connect with one another. This suggests that “multifocal rooting” is not enacted through episodic boundary spanning, but through the continuous synchronisation of heterogeneous social and spatial ties within everyday entrepreneurial routines. These multifocal entrepreneurial practices enable migrant entrepreneurs to adapt and develop their microbusinesses dynamically over time (Sirmon *et al.*, 2007). In addition, this recombination process, which happens within the localised institutional context (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Bolzani *et al.*, 2020), earns the migrant a multifocal integration and legitimisation as entrepreneur in the host society (Kempainen *et al.*, 2020). Ultimately, while adherence and recognition provide the firm with market anchoring and socio-spatial legitimacy, rooting transforms multifocal embeddedness into an

Conclusion

Answering calls for sociologically informed, context-embedded research (Ram *et al.*, 2017), this study examines the mechanisms through which migrant entrepreneurs translate their migratory experiences into entrepreneurial practices (Welter *et al.*, 2017). By deploying the RBV (Barney, 1996; Sirmon *et al.*, 2007) as an interpretive heuristic, together with multifocality (Solano, 2016, 2020), a migrant entrepreneur's microbusiness emerges as the socio-spatial site where an entrepreneurial activity and the processes of social legitimation unfold. As its main theoretical contribution, this study advances the multifocality framework (Solano *et al.*, 2022) by explaining how multifocal experiences are transformed into entrepreneurial resources at both the firm and individual levels through three emergent dimensions. While multifocal adherence and recognition are structurally anchored to the microbusiness and, therefore, remain transferable across owners, multifocal rooting resides in the entrepreneur's accumulated ability to orchestrate heterogeneous organisational and relational resources across multifocal groups and places. Ultimately, the study shows that multifocality is not merely a condition of multiple embeddedness but a mechanism through which migrant entrepreneurs convert complex migratory experiences into sustainable entrepreneurial value and legitimacy.

This study advocates for a comprehensive approach that balances targeted integration pathways with small business support activities (Law and Harrison, 2001; Urban and Kujinga, 2017). Although traditional ethnic entrepreneurship policies focus heavily on financial barriers (Hagos *et al.*, 2019; Villares-Varela *et al.*, 2017), our analysis suggests that public interventions are significantly more effective when targeting soft competencies, relational networks and cross-cultural skills. First, to enhance multifocal adherence, vocational training and support networks should move beyond generic legal or administrative skills, incorporating specialist language training and cross-cultural orientation to deal with the complex regulatory framework. Second, to foster multifocal recognition, local trade associations and policymakers should launch inclusive neighbourhood initiatives to highlight the structural economic contributions of migrant microbusinesses as service hubs, particularly for vulnerable or elderly native residents. Third, to sustain multifocal rooting, treating the entrepreneurial choice as an intentional resource-driven decision rather than a necessity response (Hussain *et al.*, 2025; Ram *et al.*, 2017) allows complex qualitative data to be translated into actionable insights that enhance community cohesion and actively value diversity.

Some limitations remain, which open avenues for further inquiry. First, due to the exploratory nature and design of this cross-case analysis, the findings lack generalisability (Van Burg *et al.*, 2022). Future study could expand the geographic scope or replicate the study in other sub-national contexts, migratory chains or sectors. Second, the structural and temporal evolution of the three dimensions warrants further investigation. Given the limited follow-up assessment, which was primarily intended to provide additional contextual validation, the longitudinal evidence should be interpreted with caution. Particular caution is required with regard to multifocal rooting, as its complete configuration emerged in only two cases. Its interpretation as an emergent and more advanced dimension requires further research to establish whether, and under what conditions, it represents a broader pattern of multifocal entrepreneurial development. Future research based on longitudinal designs could examine how the dimensions evolve over time and how legitimacy is negotiated or institutionalised. Third, the external macro shocks that occurred in the period (i.e. COVID-19) remain outside the empirical scope of this study and may require specific analysis. Fourth, although RBV is employed intentionally as an analytical heuristic rather than as the primary object of theoretical advancement, future research could build on these findings to explore how multifocal resources relate to broader RBV debates. In particular, further studies could examine whether

the resources emerging from multifocal entrepreneurial practices exhibit VRIN characteristics (Barney, 1991, 1996), how they evolve into dynamic capabilities through repeated resource recombination (Sirmon et al., 2007; Teece, 2007), and under which contextual conditions they generate a sustained competitive advantage.

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Notes

1. The United Nations Statistics Division has divided the African continent into five regions. The Northern Africa region is made up of Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia and Western Sahara, which are generally characterised by more prosperous economies compared to other regions in the continent and by a strong Islamic population.

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