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Afro-entrepreneurship among Northeastern Migrant Women in Rio de Janeiro: Identity, Exclusion, and Adaptation in a Racialized Opportunity Structure

NATHALIA ZANELLA
UNIVERSIDADE DO GRANDE RIO PROFESSOR JOSÉ DE SOUZA HERDY (UNIGRANRIO)

ROBERTO P Q FALCAO
UNIVERSIDADE DO GRANDE RIO PROFESSOR JOSÉ DE SOUZA HERDY (UNIGRANRIO)

EDUARDO PICANÇO CRUZ
UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL FLUMINENSE (UFF)

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The challenges of afro-entrepreneurship among Northeastern women in Rio de Janeiro

1. Introduction

In 2022, Brazil's Northeast accounted for 27% of the national population but concentrated 43.5% of those living in poverty and 54.6% of those in extreme poverty; over 70% of this group self-identified as Black or Brown. Racial disparities remain striking: 40% of Black or Brown individuals lived in poverty, nearly double the rate observed among Whites (21%) (Agência de Notícias, 2023). These figures reflect enduring structural inequalities that prompt people to seek better living conditions elsewhere.

Migration, in this context, is less a matter of choice than a strategy for survival. Since the mid-20th century, the Southeast has attracted Northeasterners seeking to escape recurrent droughts, limited economic opportunities, and ineffective public policies (IPEA, 2010; Angelo, Fogaça & Barbosa, 2020). Although this migratory wave peaked in the second half of the 20th century, it continues to shape the demographic and cultural landscape of cities like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

In these urban centres, Northeastern migrants have contributed to local economies and transformed neighbourhood identities through music, cuisine, and festivities, while initially occupying labour-intensive roles in sectors such as food services and construction (Cruz & Falcão, 2016). Their presence also fostered dense social networks that, over time, became vital relational capital for the creation of small businesses.

For many (especially Black or Brown individuals) entrepreneurship activities becomes a pathway to economic inclusion, whether out of necessity or by seizing opportunity. According to GEM (2023), 87.5% of necessity entrepreneurs cite a lack of jobs as their main motive, while 74.1% of opportunity-driven ones aim to build wealth. In this environment, turning Afro-Brazilian cultural heritage into goods and services offers a competitive edge, aligned with identity-driven consumption and the creative economy.

Black and Brown Brazilians now represent over half of the population and 51.6% of the country's entrepreneurs (IBGE, 2023; GEM, 2023). This rise in Afro-entrepreneurship reflects not only economic agency but also a collective response to exclusion, as these ventures confront structural racism and barriers to credit, training, and market access (SEBRAE, 2023).

This study explores how Afro-entrepreneurship enables social mobility and identity affirmation among Northeastern migrants in Rio de Janeiro. Drawing on the Mixed Embeddedness theory, it examines how micro, meso, and macro factors shape their trajectories. Based on nineteen in-depth interviews analysed through the Gioia method (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013), the research aims to map opportunities, identify successful ventures, analyse strategies, and assess how racial identity can become a competitive advantage. The main findings highlight the central role of cultural identity, informal networks, and community resilience in enabling Afro-entrepreneurs to overcome structural barriers. They also reveal persistent challenges related to racism, bureaucracy, and lack of institutional support. Based on these insights, the study proposes targeted public policies focused on inclusive credit mechanisms, entrepreneurial training rooted in cultural contexts, and territorial support strategies aimed at enhancing visibility and sustainability for minority-owned businesses.

2. Studies on Northeastern migration and Afro-entrepreneurship

A brief search across academic databases reveals a notable scarcity of research on the intersection between Northeastern migration and Afro-entrepreneurship. On Spell, no articles were found on Northeastern migration, and only one addressed Black or Afro-entrepreneurship. Scielo yielded just one article on each topic. In the CAPES database, 120 theses focused on Northeastern migration, 17 on Afro-entrepreneurship, and 28 on Black entrepreneurship. The Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD) showed similar proportions. In

Scopus, 73 articles specifically addressed Black entrepreneurship, while 497 included broader terms such as “Black” or “minority” and “entrepreneurship” (table 1).

Table 1: Bibliographic *review* on Northeastern Migration and Afro-entrepreneurship

Database	Northeastern Migration	Afro-entrepreneurship	Black Entrepreneurship
Spell	0	1	-
Scielo	1	1	-
CAPES	120	17	28
BDTD	171	16	87
Scopus	-	73	497

Source: own elaboration

These results highlight a significant gap in the literature concerning the specific dynamics of Black and Brown migrants from the Northeast, particularly regarding the interplay between race, regional origin, and entrepreneurship (an intersection critical to understanding the barriers and possibilities shaping their trajectories).

Afro-entrepreneurship emerges as a collective response to the structural barriers that have historically excluded Black Brazilians (particularly Northeastern migrants in Rio de Janeiro) from formal employment, access to credit, and political representation. By transforming cultural assets such as cuisine, aesthetics, music, and African-based religions into marketable goods and services, these entrepreneurs respond to identity-based consumer demands while generating economic value and community resilience (Sabino & Pinheiro, 2022).

Yet, this transformative practice unfolds within a context of multidimensional adversity. Financial exclusion (exacerbated by institutional racism) limits access to credit, pushing many toward informal financing. Market discrimination restricts supplier relationships and customer networks, while bureaucratic obstacles (especially in underserved areas) add further burdens. These challenges are compounded for Black women, who often balance business responsibilities with domestic and caregiving roles (SEBRAE, 2023).

Despite such constraints, Afro-entrepreneurship significantly boosts local economies. Recent studies estimate that Black-led small businesses inject over one trillion reais into the national economy, generating jobs and reinforcing value chains tied to cultural identity (Campos, 2024). This flow of capital supports Black markets, samba gatherings, and other circuits where commerce, art, and solidarity converge, strengthening both economic autonomy and collective self-esteem. The visibility of Afro-led brands also helps dismantle Eurocentric beauty standards and promotes diverse representations in public discourse.

To move from subsistence to sustainability, inclusive public policies are essential. Microcredit programs, solidarity guarantees, and preferential procurement mechanisms can ease reliance on informal capital. Entrepreneurial training (particularly in digital marketing, management, and innovation) should be expanded through partnerships with SEBRAE, universities, and incubators. Tax incentives for companies integrating Afro-entrepreneurs into their supply chains can stimulate wider systemic change.

On the regulatory side, affirmative actions that facilitate access to cultural economy grants, fairs, and innovation hubs expand market reach and diversify sectors. The establishment of observatories that track race- and gender-disaggregated data would support more targeted and evidence-based policy. Strengthening mentoring networks and collaborative ecosystems can further link Afro-entrepreneurs with investors and strategic partners.

Recognizing Afro-entrepreneurship as a development strategy requires cross-sectoral coordination to dismantle structural racism. This includes investing in anti-racist education, reforming exclusionary banking norms, and enhancing Black representation in economic decision-making. When supported by inclusive policies and robust infrastructure, Afro-entrepreneurship transcends survival, it becomes a catalyst for equity, cultural affirmation, and inclusive growth in contemporary Brazil.

3. Mixed embeddedness as a theoretical framework

The mixed embeddedness perspective (Kloosterman & Rath, 2001) provides a framework that connects the individual resources of immigrant entrepreneurs, the market's opportunity structure, and the political-institutional context in which they operate. Unlike purely economic approaches, it emphasizes the interplay between human, social, and financial capital, available niches, and the formal and informal rules that regulate access to credit, licenses, and protection. Its foundations lie in Polanyi's (1957) notion of social embedding and Granovetter's (1985) critique of disembedded economic models, which argued for placing economic behaviour within social relations. Building on this, Rath, and Kloosterman (2000) suggest that immigrant entrepreneurs act within ecosystems shaped by both strong and weak ties, while navigating institutional norms that can either hinder or support business activity.

In one of their seminal articles, Kloosterman, and Rath (2001) present the mixed embeddedness model to explain immigrant entrepreneurship through an integrated, multi-level analytical lens. At the micro level, the model considers the individual characteristics of entrepreneurs, such as skills, motivations, and social capital. The meso level focuses on the opportunity structure within specific market sectors, examining how demand patterns, entry thresholds, and ethnic networks shape access to business opportunities. At the macro level, the model highlights the broader socio-institutional and regulatory environment, including labour market dynamics, immigration policy, and urban governance, which either constrain or facilitate entrepreneurial activity. By linking these three levels, Kloosterman and Rath (2001) argue that immigrant entrepreneurship cannot be fully understood without considering how individual agency interacts with both market conditions and structural-institutional contexts.

However, scholars have noted its limitations in contexts marked by racial and gender inequality. Ram et al. (2017) argue that regulation may reproduce exclusion; Barberis and Solano (2018) stress that opportunity structures are shaped by ethno-racial hierarchies. Intersectional critiques (Brieger & Gielnik, 2021; Kyrillos, 2020) call attention to informal networks and solidarity in precarious institutional settings.

Applied to Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs in Rio, the model requires adaptation. Structural racism, bureaucratic hurdles, and weak support systems redefine opportunity structures. Here, community ties, informal credit, and cultural identity become vital resources. Thus, Afro-entrepreneurship must be understood not only as an economic strategy, but as a culturally grounded response to systemic exclusion.

4. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach (Lincoln, 2005) to explore the characteristics of Afro-entrepreneurs from Brazil's Northeast who operate in the state of Rio de Janeiro, with a focus on their life trajectories and the barriers they encounter. Moreover, it is evidenced some aspects of how racial and cultural identity can become a competitive advantage to their businesses.

The research adopts a qualitative approach, with data collection conducted through semi-structured interviews and field observations. Data collection involved 19 Afro-entrepreneurs from the Northeast, resulting in a total of 171 transcribed pages, with an average of 9 pages per interviewee and an average interview duration of 42 minutes. Only one interviewee was male (E15) and was therefore excluded from the final sample. All remaining participants were women.

To enhance the visualization and understanding of the participants' profiles, Table 2 presents their sociodemographic data, offering an overview of characteristics such as gender, age, state of origin, length of residence in Rio de Janeiro, year of business establishment, among other relevant details.

Table 2: Sociodemographic information of interviewees

Code	Age (Years)	State	Education	Professional Activity	Racial Identity	Company Size	Motivation	Place of Operation	Yeras in RJ	Opening year
E1	38	Bahia	High School Diploma	Braiding/ Housemaid	Black	MEI	Opportunity	At home	27	2021
E2	51	Bahia	Nursing Technician	Cook specialized in acarajé**	Black	MEI	Opportunity	Feira da Glória	29	
E3	57	Pernambuco	Completed high school	Craftswoman	Black	MEI	Opportunity	Santa Cruz and Feiras	25	2014
E4	39	Maranhao	Completed higher education (Tourism)	Fashion with African fabrics	Black	MEI	Need	Social media	23	2019
E5	38	Bahia	Completed Higher Education (Administration)	Cook specialized in acarajé	Brown	MEI	Opportunity	Barra da Tijuca	7	2018
E6	46	Bahia	Completed high school	Cook specialized in Bahian cuisine	Black	MEI	Opportunity	Feira da Glória	20	2023
E7	51	Bahia	Completed high school	Cook specialized in Bahian cuisine	Black	MEI	Opportunity	Ilha do Gov.	38	2007
E8	28	Bahia	Completed Higher Education (Advertising)	confectioner	Black	MEI	Opportunity	Morro da Conceição and Santa Teresa	1,5	2025
E9	25	Maranhao	Completed high school	Braiding artist	Black	Informal	Opportunity	Anchieta	1	2020
E10	48	Bahia	Completed high school	Beautician/ Daily Worker	Black	MEI	Opportunity	At home	25	2021
E11	NI	Bahia	Completed Higher Education (Accounting)	Hairdresser/ Megarrista	Black	ME	Opportunity	At home	NI	NI
E12	41	Bahia	Completed high school	Braiding artist	Black	MEI	Opportunity	Glória and home	25	2000
E13	45	Maranhao	Completed elementary education	Housekeeping/ Manicure	Black	Microenterprise	Opportunity	Rocinha and at home	26	2022
E14	63	Bahia	Incomplete elementary education	Cook specialized in acarajé	Black	Informal	Opportunity	At home, Penha and Social Networks	32	2015
E15*	36 (male)	Bahia	Completed high school	Ice cream shop/restaurant owner	Black	LTDA	Need	Jacaré	11	2021
E16	80 years	Maranhao	Completed high school	Dressmaker	Black	MEI	Opportunity	Saint Christopher Fair	61 years old	1975
E17	52	Bahia	Completed Higher Education (Gastronomy/ Nursing Technology)	Chef specializing in Bahian cuisine	Black	LTDA	Opportunity	UERJ, fairs and events	38 years old	NI
E18	61	Bahia	Incomplete elementary education	Cook specialized in acarajé	Black	MEI	Opportunity	Marshal Hermes Square	40 years	NI
E19	47	Bahia	Incomplete high school	Cook specialized in acarajé	Black	Informal	Opportunity	Recreio dos bandeirantes	7 years	NI

Source: own elaboration – NI = Not informed

* E15 was the only male interviewed within the sample;

**acarajé is Acarajé is a traditional African-Brazilian street food from Bahia, made from deep-fried black-eyed pea dough and typically filled with 'vatapá' paste, shrimp, and other spicy toppings, with roots in West African and Candomblé religious traditions. And the 'baiana de acarajé' is a traditionally dressed Afro-Brazilian woman, often in white lace garments and headwraps, who prepares and sells 'acarajé' on the streets of Bahia (and other states), serving as both a cultural icon and a preserver of Afro-Brazilian culinary and religious traditions.

The study employed snowball sampling (Atkinson & Flint, 2001) to identify participants, starting with initial contacts and expanding through fairs and events such as the São Cristóvão Fair, Glória Fair, and Lavradio Fair, as well as through Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp groups. The selected businesses were established between 1975 and 2024, ensuring both generational and sectoral diversity.

The field notes were transcribed and analysed using the Gioia method (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). In the first-order coding, interviewees' expressions were preserved; subsequently, the codes were grouped into second-order concepts that captured recurring and explanatory themes, such as identity-based market strategies or barriers to credit access. Finally, these categories were integrated into aggregate dimensions that articulate individual resources, meso-level community networks, and macro-institutional constraints, generating a theoretical model that highlights how Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurship is structured in the face of institutional racism, community solidarity, and niche opportunities.

5. Presentation and Analysis of Results

To contextualize the data from this research, it is relevant to compare them with the national landscape of entrepreneurship, particularly concerning the Black and Brown population. Data from the 2023 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) Brazil report, organized by Greco (2024), reveal national trends that, in some respects, align with the profile of Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurial migrants in Rio de Janeiro, but also highlight significant differences in terms of business formalization, educational attainment, areas of activity, and motivations for entrepreneurship. Table 3 presents a comparison between the main GEM indicators and the empirical findings of this study.

Table 3 - Comparative overview between GEM (2023) data and field research

Indicator	GEM 2023 (national)	Field Research (Migrant Afro-entrepreneurs)
% Black/Brown Entrepreneurs	51.4%	100% (18 Black and 1 Brown)
Educational Level	High school diploma (39.2%)	Completed high school
Reasons for starting a business		17 motivated by opportunity; 2 by necessity
Formalization	58.9% motivated by opportunity	13 MEIs, 2 MEs, 2 LTDAs, 3 informal businesses
Main Sectors of Activity	Growing motivation to "make a difference"	Afro-Brazilian cuisine, Black aesthetics, Afro-fashion, handicrafts
Gender		18 women, 1 man

Source: own elaboration

The Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs interviewed exhibit patterns that diverge from the national average: most are already registered as individual microentrepreneurs (MEI), microenterprises (ME), or limited liability companies (LTDA), while the 2023 GEM report indicates that 57.8% of Brazilian entrepreneurs remain informal. This relatively high level of formalization is linked to a predominance of women and a concentration of businesses in gastronomy, beauty, fashion, and handicrafts, sectors that capitalize on Afro-Brazilian cultural references. These findings challenge the notion of peripheral entrepreneurship as being exclusively informal and suggest the urgency of public policies that are sensitive to the cultural, territorial, and gender dimensions shaping Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurship in Rio de Janeiro (Agência de Notícias, 2023).

Migration motivations reveal multiple layers: individuals seek better living and working conditions (interviewees 1, 9, 14, 17), pursue specific occupational strategies (interviewees 2, 6), and follow pre-established family ties (interviewees 7, 16), confirming literature that links migration to urban opportunities and support networks (Fusco & Ojima, 2023; Cruz & Falcão, 2016; Alves et al., 2018). Regional inequality emerges as a structural axis of this flow: although the Northeast is home to 27% of Brazil's population, it accounts for 43.5% of those living in poverty and 54.6% in extreme poverty (Agência de Notícias, 2023). This reality drives migration to urban centres like Rio de Janeiro and underscores the economic and sociocultural relevance of these entrepreneurs for the state's development.

5.1 Motivations and Migratory Trajectories

Based on the interviews, it was possible to identify that one of the main factors leading these Afro-entrepreneurs to migrate from the Northeast to Rio de Janeiro was the lack of opportunities in their places of origin. Interviewees E1, E9, E14, and E17 reported that they migrated in search of better working conditions and income.

> "I came to Rio because there were more opportunities to make money here." (E1)

In other cases, the initial job served as a strategy for migrants to integrate into the Rio de Janeiro´s society. Due to the limited opportunities in their regions of origin, domestic work stood out as an entry point, providing not only access to the labour market but also housing, as they came to live in the households where they worked.

> "I went straight to a woman's house; I came to work as a house maid." (E2)
> "A friend invited me to come here to Rio to work as a nanny." (E6)

Migration, in addition to being linked to the lack of opportunities and the use of initial jobs as an integration strategy, can also occur through family or personal ties. It was found that some migrants moved during childhood to accompany parents who had already settled in the state, while others migrated alongside families they worked for, moving from one state to another due to their domestic work relationship.

> "My father came to work in a factory here, and he already had a sister who lived here." (E7)
> "When I was finally able to, when he handed me over to that family in Maranhão, they travelled from there on foot [...] until they reached Rio de Janeiro." (E16)

Thus, it is understood that regional socioeconomic inequalities, combined with the lack of opportunities in the state of origin and the economic hardships experienced, constitute decisive factors driving the migration process.

> "In my mother's hometown, it was 'really poor'. If you had lunch, you didn't have dinner. Or if you had dinner, you didn't have lunch." (E13)

5.2 Family, Community, and Social Support Networks

In the face of the challenges encountered during the migration process (such as adapting to a new city, seeking employment, and striving for better living conditions) the support of family, community, and social networks proved essential. This support was manifested through emotional care, access to job opportunities, professional training, and the sustainability of entrepreneurial initiatives. These support networks became a source of assistance during difficult times and served as spaces for collective empowerment and mutual exchange. The interviewees' accounts reinforce this aspect:

> "Just recently, I went through a tough time with my wife — she was diagnosed with cancer —and we received so much love, so much care (…). They themselves set up a schedule: one would stay with Lucinha here at home, and the other would stay with me at the kiosk." (E7)
> "Here where I work, it's a Black woman who's also a mother. She's on her second child and has a baby now. And then she looked at me too and gave me the opportunity to work here. Because most businesses don't give people like us a chance, right? So, this role of being an entrepreneur is about doing things differently. That's my aspiration." (E4)

Thus, it is understood that support networks (whether familial, community-based, or social) manifest not only during the initial phase of migration by providing emotional and practical assistance, but also play a fundamental role in the development, sustainability, and consolidation of these businesses.

5.3 Identity, Resilience, and Professional Recognition

The trajectories of Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs in Rio de Janeiro are deeply shaped by their racial and regional identities. This dual belonging (being both Black and from the Northeast) influences personal values, professional decisions, and business strategies. In a context marked by social and racial inequality, pride in one's origin becomes a pillar of resistance and a source of meaning.

> "Maybe if I hadn't been born in the Northeast, I wouldn't be a baiana de acarajé." (E19)
>
> "I'm proud — do you have any idea how proud I am? To be Black and to do the work I do." (E18)

Even as they proudly carry their cultural heritage, these migrants face stigma related to skin color, accent, and geographic origin. Discrimination appears strongly in their narratives, often experienced in schools, public spaces, and work environments:

> "I arrived in a state — which you probably know — a state that isn't exactly welcoming to people like us, who are Northeastern and Black. [...] I was really mocked at school; I couldn't even open my mouth without my accent being ridiculed." (E4)

This racial and regional prejudice deepens the challenges of social and labor integration, demanding constant resilience from these entrepreneurs.

Nevertheless, many have achieved social recognition and financial sustainability through their businesses. These ventures have become their main (and in some cases only) source of income, reflecting a trajectory of autonomy built amid adversity.

> "No, I don't have another source of income. (…) I feel very fulfilled at my acarajé stand." (E19)

Entrepreneurship thus emerges not only as a response to exclusion but as a platform for cultural affirmation, economic autonomy, and professional legitimacy. For these individuals, being an entrepreneur is also a symbolic act of resistance, a way of occupying public space with their identity, their voice, and their story.

5.4 Economic Integration

Upon arriving in Rio de Janeiro, Northeastern migrants sought various ways to enter the labour market, whether through formal employment (with signed work contracts) or by starting their own businesses. The development of contact networks was also fundamental in this process. However, experiences in the formal labour market were not always positive and, in some cases, were marked by situations that left behind trauma and frustration, leading some to permanently reject this type of employment relationship.

> "The job market just didn't welcome the mother. […] I came back from maternity leave, and not long after, they let me go." (E4)
>
> "I told myself, I told everyone: never again in my life will I work a formal job for anyone." (E18)
>
> "I worked a lot for others. But I had a disappointment at one of my jobs. […] And in that job, I was really let down." (E6)

Entrepreneurship became a significant alternative for those seeking economic integration in Rio de Janeiro. For some, it was an intentional choice, while for others (especially after negative experiences in the formal labour market) it emerged as the only viable means of livelihood. Unemployment also appears as a determining factor, driving many to seek autonomous ways of generating income. Through entrepreneurship, many Afro-entrepreneurs found not only a source of livelihood but also an opportunity for integration and empowerment in the local

market. Participation in events, fairs, and festivals became an important strategy to expand their client base, gain visibility, and strengthen their businesses.

> "Then I started partnering with other singers […] But for me, as always, it was about gaining visibility." (E17)
>
> "I'm going to be invited to the best events, to better venues... These kinds of food festivals, really. More fairs, because I'm more involved in the fairs." (E6)
>
> "There, at the Glória fair, you travel the whole world without leaving the spot. There's food from all over the world […] that's what makes the Glória Fair so […] so appealing." (E2)

It is therefore understood that entrepreneurship not only represented a viable path for economic integration for these individuals but also served as a means of strengthening identity and a sense of belonging in a context often marked by exclusion and hardship. These Afro-entrepreneurs have been carving out their space in the local market, building trajectories of resilience and success.

5.5 Mobility and Social Advancement

Through their engagement in entrepreneurship, many migrant Afro-entrepreneurs achieved significant improvements in their quality of life, directly reflected in financial stability and the acquisition of material assets, such as rental properties and other sources of income. This progress demonstrates a process of social mobility made possible by the financial autonomy provided by their own businesses.

> "I have rental properties. Today I can say I don't need to kill myself working. […] I feel like a tourist here in Rio." (E12)
>
> "God helped me and my friend, we bought a house […] it was comfortable." (E19)
>
> "So, with the sales of acarajé here in Rio de Janeiro, I ended up achieving, let's say, everything I had hoped to achieve back in Bahia. I managed to get ahead, I bought my car, and I financed some courses I had been wanting to take." (E5)

In addition to financial stability, social recognition emerged as a fundamental factor for these entrepreneurs to feel a sense of belonging to the territory and to feel valued in their professions. Participation in events, fairs, and social projects helped strengthen their visibility, consolidate their trajectories, and expand their networks.

> "Today I feel very fulfilled in my profession […], I was present at the Cachaça Festival […], and then immediately had another event in Rio das Ostras." (E17)
>
> "Now I'm already getting opportunities to be invited to work at events and restaurants." (E6)
>
> "I've already taken part in several events, like the Olympics — I did the pre-Olympic opening at the Museum of Modern Art […] and also fairs, things like that." (E7)
>
> "I take part in fairs and events. I teach in social projects. Sometimes the city hall of Itaguaí invites me to teach in those projects. I also teach private lessons. All in the field of soap making." (E3)

This financial mobility highlights that the process of social ascent, sustained by entrepreneurship, is especially strengthened when supported by solid support networks and the legitimation of cultural and racial identity, thus becoming an important tool for social transformation.

5.6 Mapping of Opportunities

Based on the reported trajectories and experiences, it becomes clear that Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurship in Rio de Janeiro spreads across various regions of the state, taking on specific characteristics depending on the territory in which it is embedded. This new category seeks to map the areas where these entrepreneurs operate and to understand the dynamics and opportunities present in those locations. The interviews revealed that many choose to work in favelas and peripheral neighbourhoods, where they not only find a target audience aligned with their services and products but also benefit from a higher footfall and, consequently, more consistent demand.

> "Anchieta. Because it's in the North Zone, and while it's not inside a favela, it's close to one. Like it or not, that's where there's more clientele to work with. These girls, they like to always be changing their hair and such. I find it much more appealing in these peripheral areas. I think it's much more accessible." (E9)
> "Because in Rocinha, we don't get customers every day from outside. In Rocinha, we have customers every day. The advantage is that you always have someone coming in." (E13)

In addition to operating in communities and peripheral areas, another territorial strategy adopted by some Afro-entrepreneurial women is providing home services or working in alternative spaces, such as their own residences or even hotels. This choice often arises from the lack of a fixed commercial location, but also to offer a more personalized and comfortable service for their clients.

> "I provide services at the client's home, especially because what I do is actually really nice — many people even prefer to be attended to at home. (...) I think it also makes the client feel more comfortable." (E10)
> "I work from my apartment, I do home visits, and I also attend clients in hotels, for tourists." (E12)
> "So today, I work with the girls going to clients' homes." (E11)

The activity of Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs in Rio de Janeiro also extends to more central and commercial urban areas. Many chose to establish their businesses in locations such as Recreio dos Bandeirantes, the city center, Marechal Hermes, and the Glória Fair. These spaces were strategically selected due to factors such as foot traffic, local recognition, safety, or even the tradition associated with certain areas, as is the case with street fairs.

> "At Marechal Square, Montese Square, it's right in front of the Marechal Hermes station... my clients already know me, I've been there for 15 years, and I have a lot of clients there, a lot." (E18)
> "So, I live here in the central area, downtown. (...) And it was there at the Glória Fair. Because that fair is now a protected site, right? The Glória Fair today is one of the biggest fairs, right?" (E6)
> "In Recreio dos Bandeirantes... Just being able to stay there is already enough for me, and I think I ended up staying because, at the time I arrived, it was a less dangerous area." (E19)

The locations where these businesses operate are spread across various neighbourhoods of Rio de Janeiro, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Distribution of Businesses in Rio de Janeiro

Region	Identified neighbourhoods
Zona Norte	Penha, Praça de Marechal Hermes, Jacaré, Anchieta, Ilha do Governador
Zona Sul	Rocinha, Glória, Feira da Glória, Santa Teresa, Morro da Conceição
Zona Oeste	Recreio dos Bandeirantes, Santa Cruz, Barra da Tijuca
Centro	Feira de São Cristóvão, Morro da Conceição

Source: own elaboration

6. Target Audience of Northeastern Afro-Entrepreneurs

The Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs interviewed demonstrate an inclusive approach to serving their clients. Regardless of origin, social class, or skin colour, everyone is treated with the same respect and care. This practice reflects an egalitarian approach that seeks to break down social barriers and provide accessible services to anyone seeking their products or services—whether a Northeastern meal or a beauty service such as braids and hairstyling. This attitude is reinforced in statements like that of interviewee E18:

> "I treat everyone the same, I serve everyone the same — white, Black, blue — I believe the blood runs the same colour in our veins, that's how I see it, you know?" (E18)

Interviewee E13 shares a similar view:

> "I provide services for everyone. I don't choose who I work with, you know? Whatever comes, I do. Whether they're white, Black, homeless — it doesn't matter." (E13)

Interviewee E16, in turn, highlights the care and attention given even to clients from abroad:

> "…including tourists. All the tourists who come by visit my shop, they like the way I treat them, they salute me. Some even said, 'Look, there were people who didn't pay me any attention, but you did. If you like it, take it; if not, my dear, leave it and come back when something in my shop pleases you.'" (E16)

Thus, it becomes clear that, even while facing structural discrimination and prejudice, these entrepreneurs choose a path of inclusion and mutual respect. This openness expands the reach of their businesses and reinforces the values of solidarity and humanity that are present throughout their journeys.

6.1 Challenges and Barriers of Afro-Entrepreneurship

Despite their achievements, Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs in Rio de Janeiro continue to face numerous challenges that threaten the sustainability and growth of their businesses. Economic barriers remain central, including the high cost of supplies, limited access to promotional events, and rising fees that make participation financially unfeasible.

> "My difficulty is money — to be able to invest — because in my line of work you need a lot of materials to deliver good, satisfying results. And money is the key to everything. If you don't have it, it won't work." (E9)

Social challenges are also significant, especially for women who must balance entrepreneurship with childcare and household responsibilities. The lack of extended daycare and support networks often limits their availability and mobility.

> "There's no daycare that stays open long enough for us to be able to work… And sometimes there's no family member who can help because everyone is working." (E4)

Security and visibility further complicate entrepreneurial efforts. Episodes of vandalism, combined with a lack of institutional response and insufficient event promotion, contribute to financial losses, and discourage ongoing participation.

> "My plan is to buy a Kombi van for myself, but I don't have the money yet — I've been paying for expensive events but getting no return." (E18)

Above all, structural barriers linked to racism, xenophobia, and bureaucratic obstacles remain present. Being Black and from the Northeast often leads to prejudice, reduced access to public spaces, and feelings of exclusion.

> "Because sometimes there are many barriers to being able to open a business... And then you freeze. I could do this, but… there's always something in the way, you know? And it's not just about being Black either. As a Northeasterner, you also face many barriers." (E10)

These obstacles reveal that Afro-entrepreneurship, while a tool for social mobility and identity affirmation, continues to unfold within a landscape shaped by racialized and territorial inequality.

6.2 Coping Strategies

Even in the face of numerous challenges and barriers, these Afro-entrepreneurs have found ways to reinvent themselves and overcome adversity. Informal learning stands out as one of their main strategies, whether through family, friends, or even with the support of digital platforms. This exchange of knowledge—often passed down from generation to generation or built through community interaction—has enabled many to develop their skills and turn that knowledge into a viable means of livelihood and integration into the labour market.

> "I went on YouTube and used my ex-husband's head as a model. I never took a course." (E9)
>
> "I used to go to Guinle Park, in Laranjeiras, with the kids, and that's where I learned. I'd meet some old ladies who did crochet, made bed linens, all sorts of things, and I'd say, 'Can you teach me?' She said, 'You want to learn?' I said, 'I do.' Then she said,

> ‘Buy a needle, buy some thread, and I’ll help you.’ I said, ‘But my boss won’t let me.’ And she said, ‘No, when the kids are playing, you’ll learn.’” (E16)
> “When I was 11, my grandmother sold acarajé at Iguatemi mall, and she’d go out to sell while leaving me at home — that’s when I started messing with the pots.” (E19)

The diversification of services also emerges as a strategy adopted by these Afro-entrepreneurs to overcome barriers, both in the market and in structural issues. By expanding their areas of activity, they can serve different audiences, reach new clients, and consequently make their businesses more visible and sustainable. This strategy not only allows them to increase their income but also helps to minimize the impact of uncertainties and challenges that arise along the way.

> “I’m also a pizza maker. A bit of everything. I do a bit of everything. Whatever you say… if you say, ‘I want this dish,’ I’ll go and make it. And if I don’t know it, I’ll look it up and start cooking. I have no trouble in the kitchen.” (E14)
> “I sell lunch, and I also take orders for Bahian food. I also have an event,” (E7)

The use of technology and social media to promote these entrepreneurs’ products and services has proven essential for expanding and increasing the visibility of their businesses. According to interviewees E14, E9, and E4, these tools have played an important role, especially for those who do not yet have a fixed point of sale or who balance their business activities with other responsibilities.

> “So, I post it there and people place their orders. I put it on Facebook. I live here in Penha.” (E14)
> “I do it online because it’s easier to balance with motherhood.” (E4)
> “I advertise — me, my sister, and my mother — in local RJ groups.” (E9)

It is evident that the strategies adopted by these Afro-entrepreneurs serve as essential alternatives for overcoming the challenges encountered along the path to developing and growing their businesses. The pursuit of knowledge, diversification of services, and the ability to reinvent themselves have become fundamental means for these ventures to remain active, strengthen, and expand (even in the face of adversity).

6.3 Perceptions of Afro-Entrepreneurship or Black Entrepreneurship

According to the interviewees themselves, Afro-entrepreneurship carries meanings that go beyond merely generating income. It emerges as a strategy for survival, but also as a form of resistance, resilience, belonging, and cultural affirmation.

Table 5: Perceptions of the interviewees regarding afro-entrepreneurship

Perceptions	**Interviewees**
Struggle and resistance	E2, E7, E18, E17
Source of income and path to autonomy	E3, E5, E19
Courage, resilience, and starting from scratch	E10, E19
Strengthening of culture, ancestry, and identity	E11, E12
Political act and social mission	E8
Progress and achievement of visibility	E16

Source: own elaboration

These perceptions underscore that Afro-entrepreneurship functions not only as an economic strategy, but also as a form of identity empowerment and collective agency.

6.4 Contributions to the Economic Development of Northeastern Afro-Entrepreneurs

Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurship has yielded tangible results in economic development. What initially emerged as a means of livelihood and staying in a territory different from their place of origin has now become a gateway to opportunities, directly contributing to job and income generation. As many of these entrepreneurs expanded their businesses, they began hiring others (even informally) creating an economic support network that strengthens both their ventures and the communities in which they operate.

> "I have people who provide services for me — no one is formally hired, they're freelancers. I have four people working with me, because now I have two locations." (E2)
> "I have this kitchen in Santa Teresa, where I do all my production. And I have someone who's always helping me with the production, and at the fair, I need to have at least four people working with me." (E6)
> "I have two people who work with me." (E11)
> "So I had full-time employees, I really did. After the pandemic, we were left only with events. Just events, right? And now I have workers who provide services for me." (E17)

This financial autonomy gives these Afro-entrepreneurs independence, allowing them to avoid taking out loans or seeking credit. Their own investments have been sufficient to ensure the sustainability and growth of their businesses.

> "No, I had some savings. And my investment, thank God, I never needed any (external help)." (E11)
> "I don't really like… debts, credit, and that kind of thing. I prefer to work and have the money." (E6)

By generating jobs and stimulating the local economy, many of these Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs also develop a strong sense of social responsibility. Drawing from their own experiences of overcoming adversity, they feel a desire to give back to the community (not only economically), but also by sharing knowledge, offering training, workshops, and mentorship to those who wish to embark on an entrepreneurial journey.

> "I take part in fairs and events. I teach in social projects. Sometimes the city hall of Itaguaí invites me to teach in their programmes. I also give private lessons — all in the field of soap making." (E3)
> "Today I'm a very happy woman, very happy with my profession. I have a… how can I put it… I feel fulfilled when I pass on my knowledge to my students — when I'm in class, when I'm in the classroom, when I'm there in the kitchen with them. And I always make a point of saying, 'Look, folks, I didn't learn this in a classroom.'" (E17)

It is evidenced that Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs have played a significant role in both the economy and society. Through their businesses, they have not only achieved financial autonomy but have also become role models and sources of inspiration for others seeking to become entrepreneurs. Their work strengthens the local economy, creates opportunities, promotes inclusion, and reaffirms their cultural and social identities within the territories they inhabit.

7. Discussion

7.1. Prejudice and Challenges Related to Racial, Ethnic, and Regional Identity (Macro Level)

Within the migratory experience, Northeastern Brazilians face a range of structural challenges, most notably prejudice, racism, and xenophobia (Valverde, 2011; Angelo, Fogaça, & Barbosa, 2020). These experiences are particularly evident in the narratives of interviewees E4, E13, and E3, who reported explicit forms of discrimination based on both their regional origin and racial identity. As Valverde (2011) notes, Northeastern migrants were often labelled with pejorative terms such as "Paraíba" (in Rio de Janeiro) or "Baiano" (in São Paulo)—expressions imbued with negative stereotypes linking them to violence, lack of education, and coarseness. These designations reinforce social stigma and pose enduring barriers to both economic and social integration.

Such accounts highlight that, beyond structural racism, regional prejudice remains a potent axis of exclusion, influencing access to employment opportunities, consumer spaces, and institutional support networks. In this context, gender and race intersect with territorial origin, intensifying processes of social marginalization (Angelo et al., 2020; Ferreira & Nunes, 2019).

7.2. Contributions to Economic Development (Macro Level)

Afro-entrepreneurship, beyond serving as a mechanism for income generation, has increasingly positioned itself as a relevant driver of employment creation, even if, in many cases, operating within the informal sector. According to interviewees E2, E6, E11, and E17, entrepreneurial activity has enabled Northeastern Afro-Brazilian entrepreneurs to attain financial autonomy, often avoiding the need for bank loans or credit. Many of these entrepreneurs rely on self-investment, which has proven sufficient to ensure both the sustainability and expansion of their ventures, as highlighted particularly by E6 and E11.

Nevertheless, this reality contrasts with findings reported by SEBRAE (2023), which identify two major structural constraints faced by Black entrepreneurs: (i) limited access to credit and (ii) low financial literacy: underscoring persistent barriers within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Notably, this economic independence often converges with a strong sense of social responsibility (Lopes & Parra, 2023). Drawing from their own experiences of overcoming adversity, interviewees E3 and E17 reported engaging in knowledge-sharing activities and offering training, workshops, and mentoring within their communities. This aligns with Matos' (2021) assertion that Afro-entrepreneurship transcends the mere presence of Black bodies in business leadership. It entails ideological and political engagements aimed at broader social transformation.

These practices reveal a conceptual gap in the original mixed embeddedness (ME) framework. While ME tends to prioritise legal, political, and economic structures, it overlooks the symbolic markers of stigmatisation that mediate access to opportunity (Bagwell, 2018). In the case of Northeastern Afro-Brazilian entrepreneurs, exclusion operates not solely along racial lines, but also through regional and linguistic markers, creating a multidimensional vulnerability (Angelo, Fogaça, & Barbosa, 2020). Accents, geographic origin, and physical appearance become symbolic filters influencing how these individuals are perceived and treated within the economic domain.

This context reinforces the need to expand the ME framework (Bagwell, 2018; Cunha, Nascimento, & Falcão, 2024) by incorporating the subjective effects of social identity into the structure of opportunity. When recontextualised in the Global South, the urgency of decolonising the analytical lens becomes evident, particularly in contexts where origin serves simultaneously as a marker of exclusion and as a source of resilience and productive reorganisation.

These findings corroborate the perspective of Wang and Warn (2018), who emphasise that entrepreneurial behaviour is shaped through the interaction of institutional (macro), market (meso), and individual (micro) factors. In the case of Northeastern Afro-Brazilian entrepreneurs, this interplay of structural barriers and agentic resources clearly demonstrates the need to reframe opportunity structures beyond economic and institutional dimensions.

Accordingly, we propose recognising a structure of opportunity that is permeated by symbolic stigma across race, gender, and territoriality (Ferreira & Nunes, 2019), dimensions still marginalised in the original formulation of ME theory (Barberis & Solano, 2018).

7.3. Afro-entrepreneurship as Identity Affirmation and Cultural Strategy (Meso Level)

Afro-entrepreneurship among Northeastern migrants in Rio de Janeiro emerges not only as a response to economic exclusion but also as a potent expression of identity, belonging, and cultural affirmation (Baia & Costa, 2023). For many of the interviewed entrepreneurs, their ventures became spaces of rediscovery and empowerment, enabling them to reclaim narratives historically silenced by racism, classism, and regional prejudice.

Several participants described their businesses as paths to personal fulfilment, revealing how entrepreneurial activity aligned with their sense of purpose and self-worth. Entrepreneurship was not just a means of survival—it was an act of pride and love for their craft, their ancestry, and their cultural roots (Nascimento & Trevelin, 2021).

> "I already knew this was what I wanted to do, and everything I've done in my life has been with a lot of drive, with a lot of love." (E6)
> "I fell in love with braiding. That's it, mom, I already know what my calling in life is." (E9)

This sense of rootedness often materialized through culturally embedded goods and services (Nascimento & Trevelin, 2021). From 'acarajé stalls' and Afro hairstyles to garments linked to Bumba Meu Boi and traditional Northeastern cuisine, these businesses transformed heritage into economic capital. As interviewee E16 put it:

> "Some of the things I make — like Bumba Meu Boi costumes or caipira skirts — are part of my homeland's culture." (E16)

Such practices exemplify how culture and ancestry (Nascimento & Trevelin, 2021) are mobilized not just as background elements, but as core components of entrepreneurial strategy. These identity-driven offerings serve simultaneously as tools of differentiation in competitive markets and as affirmations of symbolic resistance in racially exclusionary contexts (Baia & Costa, 2023).

From a theoretical standpoint, this intersection of business and identity resonates with authors such as Sabino and Pinheiro (2022), who frame Afro-entrepreneurship as a form of political engagement and collective self-determination, and Queiroga, Maurício, and Moraes (2024), who argue that Afro-Brazilian cultural products act as communicative artifacts transmitting memory, history, and belonging.

Furthermore, the Mixed Embeddedness framework (Bagwell, 2018; Cunha, Nascimento, & Falcão, 2024), while useful for understanding opportunity structures, must be expanded to accommodate symbolic dimensions such as race, culture, and regionality. In these cases, the structure of opportunity is shaped not only by market forces and regulations but also by cultural pride, community recognition, and the capacity to re-signify exclusion through commerce.

Afro-entrepreneurship, therefore, cannot be reduced to an economic transaction. It embodies a hybrid practice that unites survival, strategy, pride, and resistance (Matos, 2021). It enables Northeastern Black entrepreneurs to affirm their place in the urban economy while transforming their businesses into instruments of cultural legitimacy and social transformation.

7.4. Mobility and Social Advancement (Meso Level)

The empirical findings indicate that engagement in Afro-entrepreneurship has led to significant improvements in the living conditions of many Northeastern Black migrants in Rio de Janeiro. As evidenced by the narratives of interviewees E12, E19, E17, and E5, entrepreneurship has operated not only as a response to structural exclusion, but also as a pathway to upward social mobility and identity consolidation.

In this context, entrepreneurship emerges as a means of confronting systemic inequalities and creating avenues for self-determination. Siqueira and Nunes (2018) argue that Black men and women increasingly rely on entrepreneurship as a tool of empowerment and social ascent, drawing on their identities as a source of strength to reconfigure their realities.

Participation in events, fairs, and social projects plays a critical role in fostering territorial belonging, professional recognition, and expanded social networks. Interviewees E17, E6, E7, and E3 emphasized how such experiences promoted visibility and legitimised their entrepreneurial trajectories (SEBRAE RJ, 2017). These findings align with Silva, Estival, and Fontes (2023), who highlight the mobilisation of Black collectives in creating alternative economic and cultural spaces (such as Black cultural fairs now present in several Brazilian cities) as mechanisms of survival and resistance.

These dynamics are consistent with the theoretical propositions of Kloosterman and Rath (2001), who connect the institutional and economic context with the individual actions of entrepreneurs, demonstrating the importance of social networks, community organisations, and local market structures. For Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs, fairs, and community-based events function as strategic sites of knowledge circulation, identity negotiation, and

entrepreneurial consolidation. They expand the structure of opportunity through social and cultural linkages embedded in the host territory.

Importantly, these spaces do more than offer economic visibility; they provide platforms for symbolic affirmation (Baia & Costa, 2023), foster the re-signification of historically marginalized territories (Angelo, Fogaça, & Barbosa, 2020), and enable the construction of new economic imaginaries (Matos, 2021). Afro-entrepreneurs navigate these environments not only to generate income but also to affirm their presence, cultivate agency, and assert their identities in socio-spatial contexts often marked by racialisation and socioeconomic exclusion (Ferreira & Nunes, 2019).

Thus, Afro-entrepreneurship constitutes a multifaceted vehicle for social advancement—one that interweaves economic objectives with cultural resilience, social participation, and identity-based affirmation (Sabino & Pinheiro, 2022). It exemplifies how entrepreneurship can operate as a counter-hegemonic practice in settings where exclusion and inequality remain structurally entrenched.

7.5. Business Strategy: Target Audience (Meso Level)

The analysis reveals that Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs in Rio de Janeiro adopt inclusive approaches in their customer relations strategies, even in the face of racism, discrimination, and xenophobia. The testimonies of interviewees E18, E13, and E16 reflect a conscious decision to serve all clients equally, regardless of race, social class, or place of origin. This practice is not merely a market tactic; it constitutes a deliberate stance grounded in values of equity and human dignity.

This inclusive orientation aligns with the perspective of Tavares, Silva, and Monarcha (2018), who argue that while Afro-entrepreneurship has increasingly incorporated culturally specific products and Black-owned brands, its target market is not limited to Black consumers. Afro-entrepreneurship also represents a form of socially impactful business, one that must navigate and balance both cultural mission and economic sustainability.

By choosing to serve a diverse and heterogeneous clientele, Afro-entrepreneurs demonstrate strategic adaptability. Their approach is shaped not only by market demands but also by lived experiences of exclusion and resistance. These trajectories influence their values and business models, resulting in hybrid arrangements that merge survival strategies with opportunity recognition (Cruz & Falcão, 2016). Such entrepreneurial behaviour challenges traditional interpretations within the mixed embeddedness framework (Barberis & Solano, 2018), which often prioritises formal institutional and market structures over the socio-symbolic dimensions of entrepreneurial practice.

Moreover, the ability to navigate multiple social spheres reflects Granovetter's (1985) distinction between strong and weak social ties. In this case, strong ties—formed within dense and cohesive community networks—promote trust and solidarity, while weak ties—established across more heterogeneous groups—enable access to diverse information and resources. Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs actively cultivate both types of ties to broaden their consumer base and amplify their presence in the urban economy (Cunha & Schmidt, 2019).

Such cross-sectoral engagement not only expands their market reach but also reinforces their autonomy in an economic system that frequently marginalises them. It illustrates how entrepreneurial actors negotiate visibility, legitimacy, and agency by cultivating relationships that cut across social, cultural, and economic boundaries (Baia & Costa, 2023).

Ultimately, this multi-layered interaction between business strategy and social positioning underscores the importance of analysing Afro-entrepreneurship through an intersectional lens (Kyrillos, 2020). These entrepreneurs do not merely adapt to the market; they reinterpret and reconstruct it from their own positionalities, challenging dominant narratives of economic success and proposing new models rooted in inclusion, equity, and cultural affirmation.

7.6. Family, Community, and Social Support Networks (Meso Level)

Social support networks emerge as essential elements in the migratory and entrepreneurial trajectories of Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs in Rio de Janeiro. Particularly during transitional periods and in the search for economic opportunities, these networks have played a decisive role in enabling entry into the labour market, providing emotional and material support, and fostering resilience (Cunha & Schmidt, 2019). The testimonies of interviewees E7, E13, and E4 illustrate this dynamic: they received care during moments of illness, were encouraged to participate in training opportunities offered informally by friends and were hired by other Black women who recognised shared experiences of exclusion and solidarity.

These networks often transcend immediate familial or friendship circles, expanding into broader collective arrangements rooted in shared racial, regional, and gender identities (Lopes & Parra, 2023). This collective fabric acts as a counterweight to the absence or inadequacy of formal institutional support structures. It echoes the findings of Fusco, Duarte, and Gomes (2011), who argue that migrant social networks, built over time, play a pivotal role in guiding individuals toward destinations where they can access resources critical to social and economic integration—such as temporary housing, employment information, and local orientation.

This dynamic also reinforces the theoretical propositions of Kloosterman, Van der Leun, and Rath (1999), for whom community-based networks constitute a vital form of social capital. In contexts marked by structural exclusion, these informal arrangements help bridge the gaps left by formal systems (Ram et al., 2017), enhancing access to resources and opportunities otherwise unavailable to marginalised groups.

Support networks, in this regard, function not only as instruments of survival but also as enablers of entrepreneurial sustainability. They foster knowledge-sharing, emotional reinforcement, and the construction of alternative circuits of trust and legitimacy—particularly in environments where bureaucratic obstacles and racial discrimination hinder access to formal mechanisms (Ferreira & Nunes, 2019).

The solidarity expressed through these networks underscores the importance of expanding the mixed embeddedness framework (Bagwell, 2018) to include sociocultural dimensions that shape entrepreneurial trajectories in contexts of multiple exclusions. As argued by Ferreira and Nunes (2019) and Wang and Warn (2018), these informal social infrastructures serve as critical complements to formal markets and state interventions.

In sum, family, community, and social support networks emerge as foundational pillars for the entry, persistence, and development of Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs in Rio de Janeiro. They are not peripheral; rather, they are central to the construction of opportunity structures, acting as mechanisms for inclusion, agency, and the collective reorganisation of economic life.

7.7. Mapping Successful Enterprises (Meso Level)

Beyond the symbolic recognition and social validation of their products and services, several Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs reported achieving financial sustainability as a concrete outcome of their ventures. Interviewees E18 and E19, for example, pointed to economic stability as an objective that has been attained through entrepreneurial activity. This observation is consistent with findings from SEBRAE RJ (2017), which identified, particularly in Afro-focused fairs, Black entrepreneurs who pursue financial independence and reconfigure their socioeconomic trajectories through self-employment.

The spatial distribution of these businesses across the state of Rio de Janeiro reveals that Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs are not randomly located. Rather, they make strategic decisions that reflect both economic opportunities and social or identity-based affiliations (Angelo, Fogaça, & Barbosa, 2020). Their strong presence in communities, peripheral areas, and central urban zones demonstrates a notable capacity to adapt to local conditions, leveraging high foot traffic, community ties, and cultural affinity with their clientele. These territorial decisions suggest that success is not solely measured by revenue volume or business

infrastructure, but also by the ability to occupy and transform spaces where recognition, belonging, and visibility can be asserted.

This territorial embeddedness aligns with Bagwell's (2018) analysis, which argues that business development is shaped not only by the interaction between local opportunity structures and entrepreneurial resources (as the mixed embeddedness framework suggests) but also by the institutional, economic, and cultural configurations of host regions. In contexts marked by historical racialisation and structural inequality, Afro-entrepreneurs mobilise not only economic capital but also symbolic and cultural resources to engage their audiences and assert their legitimacy.

Moreover, the location of these businesses in historically marginalised spaces underscores the idea that geographic territory functions not merely as a backdrop (Valverde, 2011), but as an active constituent of entrepreneurial strategy. It becomes a site of network articulation, affective ties, and cultural innovation. These entrepreneurs are not merely responding to market conditions; they are re-signifying space by constructing new forms of belonging and community legitimacy.

Such practices support an expanded analytical interpretation of the mixed embeddedness framework (Barberis & Solano, 2018), one that integrates symbolic and affective elements alongside economic and institutional ones. Granovetter (1985) reinforces this by highlighting the role of social networks in constructing social capital and facilitating access to strategic information. These dynamics significantly influence territorial decisions and the consolidation of entrepreneurial ventures.

Therefore, the mapping of successful enterprises enables us to understand territorial choices as more than reactions to market forces; they are expressions of identity, community strategy, and political positioning. Territoriality thus emerges as a critical dimension of the opportunity structure, especially in contexts characterised by racialised inequality and social exclusion. By occupying spaces with dense social networks and rich cultural meaning, these entrepreneurs forge unique pathways to market integration and public visibility, challenging conventional models of success and inclusion.

7.8. Profiles and Personal Trajectories (Micro Level)

At the micro level, the entrepreneurial trajectories of Northeastern Afro-Brazilians in Rio de Janeiro reveal a complex interplay of demographic diversity, symbolic motivations, and structural constraints. The interviewees ranged in age from 25 to 80 years, with only one man among the 19 respondents, a striking indication of the gendered dynamics of this field. In terms of racial identification, 18 female participants self-identified as Black and one as parda (mixed race), reinforcing Ojima and Fusco's (2015) findings that Northeastern migrants in Brazilian cities are predominantly non-white.

Educational attainment varied: most had completed secondary education, five had higher education degrees, and a few had not completed basic schooling. However, formal training in business or entrepreneurial management was rare. Instead, these entrepreneurs often drew on informal learning (through family, community, and personal experience) to launch and sustain their businesses. They operated in diverse sectors such as gastronomy, crafts, beauty services, and Afro-fashion, including figures like 'baianas de acarajé', hair braiders, and seamstresses.

This diversity reflects not only local market demand but also the strategic mobilisation of cultural heritage. As SEBRAE (2023) notes, Black-owned enterprises tend to emerge from community needs and are concentrated in sectors with strong cultural ties. These ventures go beyond economic survival; they function as vehicles for self-representation, racial pride, and the exercise of citizenship.

The findings resonate with Ram, Jones, and Villares-Varela (2017), who argue that analyses of minority entrepreneurship must consider racial exclusion, gendered barriers, and the historical

context that shapes access to resources. Entrepreneurial profiles are not reducible to personality traits or business models; they emerge as responses to layered inequities and institutional voids. In this context, agency plays a central role. The decision to become an entrepreneur is frequently shaped by exclusion from the formal labour market, the desire for autonomy, and the will to affirm identity through work. These entrepreneurs are not simply reacting to market incentives but actively transforming exclusion into opportunity by embedding their ventures in networks of cultural meaning and community engagement.

Their profiles illustrate how entrepreneurship can serve as both economic strategy and cultural resistance (Sabino & Pinheiro, 2022). It is rooted in lived experience, identity affirmation, and the aspiration to redefine one's place in society. A contextualised and relational approach is thus essential for understanding how race, gender, class, and migration intersect (Ferreira & Nunes, 2019) to shape entrepreneurial agency in Brazil's urban peripheries.

7.9. Motivations for Entrepreneurship (Micro Level)

The data indicate that the decision to engage in entrepreneurship among Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs in Rio de Janeiro is shaped by a combination of structural constraints, subjective experiences, and opportunity recognition. For many of the interviewees, entrepreneurship emerged not from long-term business planning but as a response to exclusion from formal labour markets, episodes of unemployment, and the pursuit of autonomy and self-determination (Cruz & Falcão, 2016). For interviewees E4, E6, and E18, prior experiences in formal employment were marked by frustration, marginalisation, and lack of recognition, prompting them to seek alternatives through entrepreneurship. This echoes the analysis of Nascimento and Trevelin (2021), who argue that, for many Black Brazilians, entrepreneurship becomes one of the few viable paths to income generation given the persistent barriers to entry and advancement in the formal job market caused by structural racism.

Some interviewees exemplify what is often referred to as necessity-driven entrepreneurship, having been compelled to start a business due to unemployment. This aligns with SEBRAE (2023), which distinguishes between opportunity- and necessity-driven entrepreneurship, noting that the latter often arises from urgent economic pressures that compel individuals to create their own work rather than remain excluded from income-generating activity.

Conversely, interviewees E17 and E2 represent a different trajectory, where entrepreneurship was chosen as a strategic response to recognised market opportunities within their communities. This reflects the perspective of Cunha and Schmidt (2019), who argue that entrepreneurial activity is predicated on the confluence of two key factors: the presence of an individual willing to act entrepreneurially and the identification of a viable opportunity, whether economic or social.

In both cases (necessity- and opportunity-driven) the decision to engage in entrepreneurship must be understood within broader frameworks of racialisation, territoriality, and gender. Among Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs, the choice to start a business often combines structural exclusion with symbolic motivations such as self-affirmation, community contribution, and the revalorisation of historically devalued identities and knowledge.

Thus, motivations are not merely individual preferences or market responses; they are shaped by social histories, lived inequalities, and the desire to reconstruct life trajectories in the face of marginalisation. As Bagwell (2018) suggests, entrepreneurship in racialised contexts operates not only as an economic strategy but also as a socially and politically meaningful practice, deeply embedded in narratives of resilience, dignity, and transformation.

7.10. Challenges and Barriers to Afro-entrepreneurship (Micro Level)

The fieldwork revealed a series of structural and everyday barriers encountered by Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs in Rio de Janeiro, particularly those operating in informal or peripheral settings (Silva, Estival, & Fontes, 2023). Foremost among these challenges are limited financial

capital, high raw material costs, lack of visibility, bureaucratic hurdles, and the compounded effects of racial, regional, and gender-based discrimination.

Interviewees E2, E9, and E17 reported facing rising input prices and difficulties in accessing fairs or events that had previously been open to small businesses but have become increasingly commercialised and cost prohibitive. These accounts align with SEBRAE (2023), which highlights four major barriers confronting Black entrepreneurs: (i) lack of representation, (ii) difficulty in accessing credit, (iii) low levels of financial education, and (iv) weak integration into innovation ecosystems. Although some interviewees challenged the generalisation of low financial literacy (claiming confidence in managing their finances), there is convergence regarding the structural inaccessibility of funding and formal visibility channels (Baia & Costa, 2023).

Gendered dimensions of exclusion also emerged prominently. Interviewees E4 and E8, both mothers, reported the absence of childcare support and limited access to public daycare services. As a result, they must juggle parenting and business management simultaneously, often bringing their children to work or managing logistics around domestic responsibilities. This reinforces Silva's (2023) findings on how caregiving burdens constrain entrepreneurial agency and skill development, especially for women operating without support networks.

Marketing and publicity emerged as further obstacles. Interviewees E16 and E18 cited the lack of public communication about events, reducing their ability to reach wider audiences or participate in strategic sales opportunities. "Additionally, informal entrepreneurs face bureaucratic exclusion when trying to access regularised spaces or public events (issues raised by interviewees E6, E10, and E19), who noted repeated removals or denied access due to the absence of permits or official registration, even in spaces where they had built long-standing community ties (Oliveira & Santos, 2020).

These narratives confirm the need to analyse Afro-entrepreneurship through an intersectional lens, as proposed by Ram, Jones, and Villares-Varela (2017), who argue that race, gender, and geography collectively shape the opportunity structures available to migrant and minority entrepreneurs. Structural racism is not an isolated variable; it operates in tandem with regional stigma and socio-economic marginality to restrict access to markets, resources, and institutional support.

Thus, the challenges described by Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs go beyond technical barriers (Sabino & Pinheiro, 2022). They are embedded in a broader historical and socio-political context of exclusion. In this regard, effective public policy and support mechanisms must address the intersectional nature of race, gender, territory, and class, offering integrated responses that dismantle systemic inequities while fostering the resilience and autonomy already demonstrated by these entrepreneurial actors.

7.11. Coping Strategies (Micro Level)

In response to the multiple barriers they encounter, Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurs in Rio de Janeiro have developed a range of coping strategies aimed at ensuring both market insertion and business sustainability (Silva, 2023). Among the most prominent are informal learning, diversification of products and services, and the strategic use of digital technologies to increase visibility and client reach.

Informal learning surfaced as a key resource across several entrepreneurial trajectories. Interviewees E9, E16, E19, and E5 described acquiring entrepreneurial and technical skills through everyday experience, familial transmission, peer mentorship, and online platforms such as YouTube. This informal, practice-based learning environment compensates for the absence of formal vocational training and reflects the importance of accessible and adaptable knowledge sources in contexts of socioeconomic vulnerability. As Tavares, Silva, and Monarcha (2018) argue, Afro-entrepreneurship offers a critical pathway for individuals who lack formal access

to institutional training but possess valuable cultural, practical, and social knowledge that can be mobilised economically.

Another widely adopted strategy is diversification. Interviewees E14 and E7 described expanding their business offerings across sectors (such as combining food sales with crafts or offering different services within the beauty sector) as a means of mitigating economic instability and increasing their market reach. This multidimensional entrepreneurship is not merely a survival tactic but also a deliberate strategy to embed Afro-Brazilian and African cultural elements in a wider range of products and services, fostering identity affirmation while generating income (Nascimento, 2018).

The use of digital platforms (particularly social media) has emerged as a critical tool for marketing, communication, and client retention. Interviewees E14, E4, and E9 highlighted how online dissemination enabled them to build reputations, maintain client engagement, and reach audiences beyond their immediate geographic and social circles. Especially for those without a fixed commercial location or formal registration, digital tools offered an alternative infrastructure for sustaining business operations. This finding resonates with Oliveira and Santos (2020), who argue that digital technologies have become essential mediators in overcoming racialised and socioeconomic barriers to entrepreneurial visibility.

Brieger and Gielnik (2021) further emphasise that in environments with excessive bureaucratic restrictions and weak regulatory support, strengthening self-efficacy and building robust support networks is vital for enabling women entrepreneurs (those in marginalised contexts) to access economic and social resources. In the present study, digital platforms not only amplified visibility but also created new forms of collective interaction, informal mentorship, and customer loyalty, demonstrating how individual digital practices can substitute for missing formal structures.

Finally, these coping strategies reflect more than adaptability; they embody entrepreneurial resilience forged in contexts of historical inequality. As Cunha, Nascimento, and Falcão (2024) suggest, the personal and migratory trajectories of Afro-entrepreneurs often merge ancestral knowledge, community bonds, and daily innovation into pragmatic solutions that allow businesses to survive and evolve despite structural adversity.

In this sense, the strategies described by the interviewees not only illustrate their capacity for innovation and adaptation but also highlight the embeddedness of entrepreneurial agency in wider social, cultural, and historical processes. These actors are not merely reacting to constraints, they are transforming them into platforms for self-affirmation, collective engagement, and economic resistance.

7.12. Identity Empowerment (Micro Level)

In the context of Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurship in Rio de Janeiro, identity empowerment emerges as a central and multifaceted process. Many interviewees described their entrepreneurial trajectories not only as economic endeavours but also as expressions of cultural belonging, self-realisation, and political commitment (Matos, 2021). Through their businesses, they reaffirm ancestral ties, re-signify marginalised identities, and construct life projects anchored in pride, autonomy, and resistance.

One notable dimension of this empowerment process is the pursuit of training and capacity-building aimed at improving the quality of products and services. Interviewees E10, E1, and E3 emphasised that access to professional development was a transformative factor in their business growth, enabling them to better understand their clientele and strengthen their position in the market. These findings align with Ojima and Fusco (2015), who noted that migrant populations tend to present higher levels of educational attainment compared to non-migrants, particularly regarding the lower incidence of incomplete formal education.

Beyond skill acquisition, the business itself becomes a space of purpose, emotional investment, and cultural preservation. For interviewees E9, E17, E6, and E2, entrepreneurship is not merely

a source of income, it is an affective and identity-driven commitment, often described in terms of love for the work and pride in their craft. These accounts reinforce the argument made by Baia and Costa (2023), who contend that for Black entrepreneurs, business ownership is frequently about more than profit: it is also a means of realising dreams, honouring legacies, and imagining alternative futures.

This affective and symbolic dimension of entrepreneurship expands the theoretical scope of the mixed embeddedness framework (Cunha, Nascimento, & Falcão, 2024). Traditionally focused on economic, legal, and institutional factors, the ME model has limited capacity to account for the subjective and political dimensions of entrepreneurial agency, especially in racialised and postcolonial contexts. The present findings suggest that identity, culture, and belonging are not peripheral to entrepreneurial action; they are foundational to the way many Afro-entrepreneurs conceptualise success, navigate challenges, and build sustainability.

Entrepreneurship, in these terms, becomes an act of resistance, a response to systemic exclusion that reclaims space, voice, and value. It is a means of producing not only goods and services but also narratives of dignity and visibility. As Baia and Costa (2023) and Ojima and Fusco (2015) argue, Afro-entrepreneurship must be understood as a cultural, emotional, and political practice embedded in trajectories of struggle and collective affirmation.

In this light, to be an entrepreneur is to engage in a form of cultural and economic self-determination. It is a choice informed not only by necessity or opportunity, but by a deeply felt commitment to heritage, community, and social transformation. Such motivations demand a decolonised and expanded reading of the entrepreneurial experience, one that centres affect, memory, and symbolic agency alongside capital and institutional access.

Therefore, entrepreneurship in this context is not only a response to adversity but a declaration of existence. It constitutes a path to autonomy, a form of ancestral continuity, and a mode of building futures otherwise denied within dominant socio-economic structures.

8. Final considerations

This study examined the challenges and strategies of Afro-entrepreneurship among Northeastern migrant women in Rio de Janeiro, drawing on an intersubjective and intersectional framework that articulates race, gender, class, and territory. Based on 19 in-depth interviews analysed through the method of Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013), the research revealed how these women construct their entrepreneurial paths amid structural exclusion, while also activating cultural resilience, community solidarity, and informal knowledge networks.

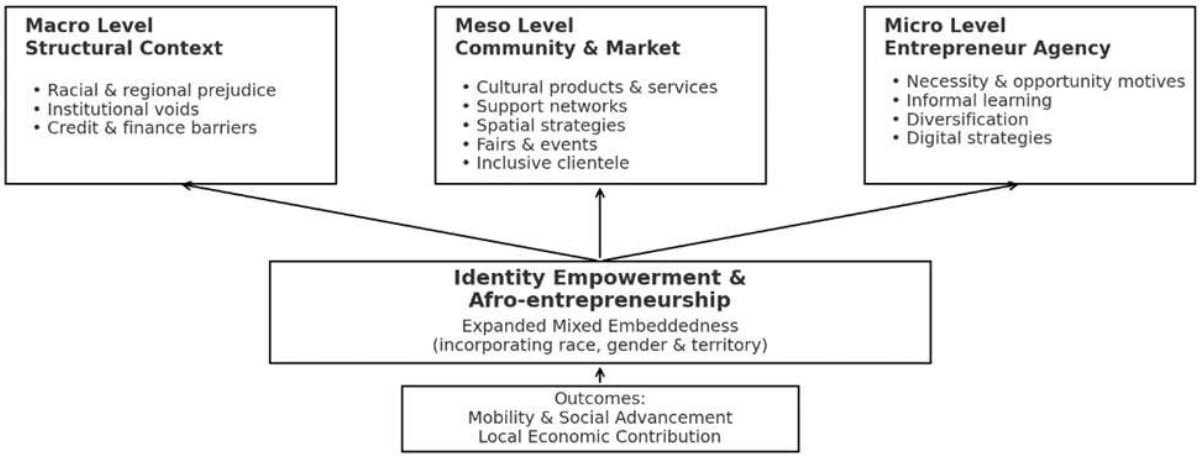
Afro-entrepreneurship, in this context, should not be reduced to an economic activity. Rather, it operates as a cultural strategy, a form of symbolic affirmation, and a response to everyday discrimination. This understanding aligns with Sabino and Pinheiro (2022) and Matos (2021), who frame Black entrepreneurship as a vehicle for reconstructing narratives, reclaiming memory, and asserting social belonging. The participants in this study mobilize ancestral knowledge, community trust, and digital tools to navigate systemic barriers such as racism, precarious urban infrastructure, and the absence of state support.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings contribute to expanding the scope of the Mixed Embeddedness framework proposed by Kloosterman and Rath (2001). Originally designed to explain immigrant entrepreneurship in Western contexts, the model integrates micro-level resources, meso-level networks, and macro-institutional structures. However, as argued by Ram, Jones, and Villares-Varela (2017) and Brieger and Gielnik (2021), this framework does not fully account for symbolic filters (such as skin colour, accent, or regional origin) that mediate access to opportunities in racialized and postcolonial societies.

Empirically, the study documents trajectories of social mobility and symbolic recognition achieved through entrepreneurship. Despite the constraints of informality, financial precarity, insecurity, and structural racism, the participants generate income, create jobs, and reconfigure urban spaces historically marked by exclusion. In line with Granovetter (1985) and Polanyi

(1957), the findings highlight the centrality of embedded social relations and the moral economy in sustaining entrepreneurial agency. Strong and weak ties play distinct but complementary roles in expanding access to knowledge, markets, and collective legitimacy.
Furthermore, the findings resonate with Ferreira and Nunes (2019) and Wang and Warn (2018), who emphasize the role of informal learning and grassroots networks in contexts where formal institutional mechanisms are weak or exclusionary. Many of the participants learned their trade through family mentorship, digital platforms, and experiential practice, underscoring the value of situated knowledge in entrepreneurial ecosystems.
Considering the empirical findings, the authors propose a conceptual broadening of the opportunity structure to include not only economic and legal constraints, but also affective and cultural dimensions that shape legitimacy and visibility. The entrepreneurial trajectories examined in this study unfold within a racialized and territorially segmented landscape (see figure 1).

Figure 1 - Opportunity Structure in Afro-Entrepreneurship: A Multilevel and Intersectional Perspective



Source: own elaboration

In practical terms, the study highlights the urgency of public policies tailored to the cultural, maternal, and territorial realities of Black women entrepreneurs. Proposals include microcredit schemes with collective guarantees, context-sensitive training in management and marketing, and fiscal incentives for companies that integrate Afro-entrepreneurs into their supply chains. Additionally, public procurement programs and the recognition of cultural production in entrepreneurial ecosystems may serve as powerful levers for inclusion.
This research is not without limitations. The geographic scope is limited to the state of Rio de Janeiro, and the cross-sectional design prevents analysis of long-term trajectories. Future studies should consider longitudinal perspectives and comparative analyses across regions or countries of the Global South.
In summary, Northeastern Afro-entrepreneurship in Rio de Janeiro emerges as a multifaceted and strategic practice that combines economic adaptation, identity affirmation, and spatial agency. These entrepreneurs transform exclusion into innovation, and ancestral heritage into productive strength. Their actions contest dominant narratives of success and open pathways for decolonizing the meaning of entrepreneurship in peripheral urban economies.

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