

Can Spaza shops survive in township competition with large Nationals? What does the future hold

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ABSTRACT

It is a known fact that worldwide there is a high failure rate amongst Small, Micro and Medium Enterprises (SMMEs), and this also applies to SMME's located in South African townships. The township economy in South Africa has gained significant attention in recent years due to its potential to drive inclusive economic growth and reduce inequality. As more than 40% of South Africa's population resides in the townships, the development of township economies via formal and informal business development is crucial for employment creation as well as the alleviation of poverty. In order to achieve this, a thorough analysis of the state of retail networks in townships in South Africa is needed. Despite their access to huge markets in the townships, most of the SMMEs do not grow to become established large and formal businesses. The purpose of this study is therefore to develop a growth and development framework to guide and support the development of spaza shops to become large, self-sustainable and profitable businesses operating in the township economy.

To obtain empirical data, 500 spaza shop owners were asked to complete a questionnaire. A total of 196 useable response were received back which represents a response rate of 39,2%.

It can be concluded from the research that marketing plays a vital role in the growth and sustainability of a SMME although 97% indicated they do nothing to market their spaza shop. The majority of spaza shop owners (97%) indicated that they buy their stock from wholesalers while 13,3% bought their stock from Shoprite, a retailer in the area. A total of 75,5% of respondents indicated that there are too much competition in the township and this competition is primarily from other spaza shops in the area (88,2%). It was interesting to note that 73,7% of spaza shop owners believed the township is big enough to sustain their business. A total of 63,7% of respondents indicate a propensity to work together with national brands. Based on the findings there is a need to work together with national brands on a more formal level in order to be more competitive and sustainable.

Keywords: spaza shops, sustainability, marketing communication, marketing training, township, government initiatives, national brands, SMMEs



1. INTRODUCTION

According to Statistics South Africa (2017), South Africa's national unemployment rate is one of the highest in the world at 27.7% in the last quarter of 2017. The South African Government has made SMMEs a priority growth sector to create employment opportunities and to grow the economy (OECD 2017). With five out of seven SMMEs failing within the first year, more support needs to be provided to current as well as new SMMEs (Entrepreneur 2015). In a previous study by Abor and Qaurtey (2010:218) it was noted that in South Africa SMMEs account for 91% of formal businesses and that these SMMEs contribute up to 57% to the South African GDP. With the current economic conditions in the world as well as the increasing rate of unemployment, specifically in South Africa, SMMEs are becoming even more important.

Unemployment is however a world-wide problem and similar problems are experienced by countries world-wide (Qaurtey 2010:218). Usually, countries comprise of two separate geographic areas namely rural and urban, but in South Africa it also includes townships and informal settlements that house close to half of South Africa's urban population (The World Bank 2014). Further, according to The World Bank (2014), South African townships and informal settlements house approximately 38% of working age citizens in the country but nearly 60% of township residents are unemployed. The National Development Plan (NDP) of the South African government set a goal to triple the size of South Africa's economy by 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2015) which is largely centred on the development of the SMME sector. In order to achieve this objective, it is imperative that SMMEs are assisted in any way possible to survive and to make a contribution to the economy of the country. However, many SMMEs are closing their doors for business every year, and this is not solely due to unpredictable or unstable external conditions. Many of these closures can be attributed to management not being able to react and make correct decisions about the changes in the business environment (Williams 2014:91). Added to this is the failure to respond to challenges posed by increasing competition in the townships from both other SMME's and spaza shops as well as national brands that are increasingly establishing a footprint in the townships. This problem of not reacting to changes correctly needs to be addressed for SMME's to be able to function better and to contribute to economic growth and development. A strategic business plan may assist in reducing this problem by providing a clear roadmap that guides SMMEs towards the successful running of their businesses. The question can thus be asked: do SMMEs operating in South African townships see the bigger picture as to what is happening in the township business composition and are they prepared to adapt to these challenges. Given the goal to triple the size of the economy, which is mainly centred on the development of the SMME sector, another question can be asked: are SMME's aware of the initiatives from government to support and promote the sector?

This study makes several key contributions at contextual and managerial levels. At a contextual level, the study contributes knowledge with regards to the township business environment of SMMEs in townships in South Africa.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The township economy in South Africa has gained significant attention in recent years due to its potential to drive inclusive economic growth and reduce inequality. As more than 40% of South Africa's population resides in the townships, the development of township economies via formal and informal business development is crucial for employment creation as well as the alleviation of poverty. In order to achieve this, a thorough analysis of the state of retail networks in townships in South Africa is needed. Apartheid-era policies forcibly segregated non-white populations, resulting in the creation of townships characterised by economic marginalization and limited access to resources (Magidimisha, 2017). However, post-apartheid policy frameworks, such as the National Development Plan and the New Growth Path, have recognised the township economy as a potential driver of inclusive development (Black, 2015). Spaza shops and other businesses in the informal sector play a prominent role in providing essential goods and services to township residents (Khumalo, 2018).

Despite their access to huge markets in the townships, most of these businesses do not grow to become established large and formal businesses. The purpose of this study is therefore to develop a growth and development framework to guide and support the development of spaza shops to become large, self-sustainable and profitable businesses

operating in the township economy. The objective of developing a sustainable growth and development framework for spaza shops must be based on a clear understanding of the issues that impact spaza shops in these township economies, such as competition, support, challenges faced, as well as opportunities that may exist. Additionally, during the past few years, the township market has witnessed the entry of national retailers into this space, and this potentially poses both opportunities and threats to spaza shops. The secondary purpose of this study is therefore to dissect this phenomenon to understand how it will impact on spaza shops.

Spaza shops have been in existence since the establishment of townships in South Africa during colonial times. It have historically served as important sources of employment, income, and distributor of essential goods within South African townships. Despite their potential to contribute to economic growth, employment creation, and poverty alleviation, spaza shops in townships face numerous challenges that hinder their growth and sustainability. Despite their socio-economic significance and access to huge and underserved markets, spaza shops have remained small, informal and perennially operate as survivalist businesses. There is therefore a need to conduct research to establish the key factors contributing to the lack of growth and development of these spaza shops. Furthermore, there is need for a framework to guide the growth and development of these spaza shops to ensure their profitability, sustainability and growth to become formal and large businesses. Such a model is more than necessary especially in view of the entry of national retailers into the township market.

Spaza shops play a significant role in the township economy of South Africa, contributing to its vibrancy, employment creation, and poverty alleviation. These small convenience stores serve as crucial sources of affordable and accessible goods for township residents, filling gaps in formal retail infrastructure (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019). By offering essential commodities, including food, household items, and basic necessities, spaza shops address the daily needs of local communities, ensuring their convenience and reducing the cost of travel to distant retail centres (Chauke et al., 2019). Moreover, spaza shops serve as essential nodes of economic activity within townships, providing employment opportunities for township residents, particularly the youth, and contributing to household incomes (Khumalo, 2018).

These microenterprises also create entrepreneurial opportunities for aspiring business owners, nurturing a spirit of self-reliance and economic empowerment (Matjila et al., 2020). Additionally, spaza shops contribute to the local economy through their supply chains, engaging with local suppliers and distributors, thus fostering economic linkages within the township ecosystem (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019). Overall, the presence and vitality of spaza shops not only addresses the socio-economic needs of township residents but also hold the potential to drive inclusive growth, reduce unemployment, and enhance community resilience. Understanding the factors behind the lack of growth of spaza shops operating in South African townships is therefore essential for devising effective policies and interventions to unlock their economic potential. Furthermore, the framework to be developed from this study will enable spaza shops to effectively deal with the threat and opportunities posed by the entry of national retailers into their traditional market.

Spaza shops, small and informal retail establishments, play a crucial role in providing essential goods and services to communities in South African townships. However, despite their significance, many spaza shops face challenges in achieving sustained growth and development. This literature review aims to examine the factors influencing the growth and development of spaza shops in South African townships, focusing on the perspectives of entrepreneurship theory, resource-based view, and social networks theory.

2.1 GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF SPAZA SHOPS

Spaza shops have emerged as important entrepreneurial ventures within South African townships, contributing to local economies and addressing the needs of underserved communities (Ewing et al., 2018). However, studies have highlighted various challenges that impede their growth. Limited access to financial resources has been identified as a significant barrier, restricting investments in infrastructure, stock, and expansion (Khumalo, 2019). Additionally, inadequate business skills, including marketing, financial management, and strategic planning, hinder their ability to compete and innovate (Sosibo & Bendixen, 2017).

2.2 ENTREPRENEURSHIP THEORY PERSPECTIVE

Entrepreneurship theory provides insights into the factors influencing the growth of spaza shops. According to this perspective, the entrepreneurial mindset and resourcefulness of spaza shop owners are crucial determinants of growth. Entrepreneurial orientation, encompassing a proactive and innovative approach, can foster growth by enabling spaza shop owners to identify opportunities and adapt to changing market conditions (Dlamini et al., 2020). However, a lack of entrepreneurial skills, limited access to business support services, and risk aversion may impede the growth potential of spaza shops (Binnekade et al., 2021).

2.3 RESOURCE-BASED VIEW PERSPECTIVE

The resource-based view highlights the importance of resources and capabilities in achieving sustainable competitive advantage and growth. Spaza shops' access to financial resources, inventory management, and infrastructure plays a vital role in their growth prospects. Limited access to formal financing and difficulty in obtaining loans restrict the ability of spaza shops to invest in expanding their operations or diversifying their product offerings (Khumalo, 2019). Moreover, inadequate infrastructure, such as unreliable electricity supply and poor storage facilities, hampers the growth and viability of spaza shops (Hlatshwayo, 2018).

2.4 SOCIAL NETWORKS THEORY PERSPECTIVE

Social networks theory emphasizes the role of relationships, social capital, and networks in influencing business growth and success. Spaza shop owners rely heavily on social networks to access resources, market information, and support (Ewing et al., 2018). Strong ties within the community, including relationships with suppliers, customers, and other spaza shop owners, can enhance access to critical resources and business opportunities. However, limited network connectivity, social exclusion, and lack of formalized support networks may restrict growth potential (Ewing et al., 2018; Sosibo & Bendixen, 2017).

3. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to develop a framework that will guide and support the growth and development of spaza shops operating in the township economy of South Africa. The study will thus accomplish this aim by fulfilling the following research objectives:

- **To investigate the factors hindering the sustainable growth and development of spaza shops operating in townships in South Africa.**
- **To establish the state of readiness of spaza shops owners to work with or compete with national retailers for market share in the township economy.**
- **To develop a practical and sustainable growth and development framework for spaza shops operating in the township economy**

4. METHODOLOGY

In this research study, a mixed-methods approach will be employed to investigate the reasons why spaza shops are not experiencing significant growth. The use of mixed methods allows for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complex factors that contribute to the stagnation of spaza shops, combining the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms.

The quantitative component of the study will be positivist in nature and as such, it will provide statistical data and numerical insights into the growth barriers faced by spaza shops. A survey questionnaire will be administered to a representative sample of spaza shop owners in South Africa. This quantitative approach, rooted in the positivist

paradigm, will allow for the collection of data that can be analysed using statistical techniques. It will provide a broad overview of the challenges, such as financial constraints, regulatory burdens, and competitive pressures, faced by spaza shops in their growth endeavours (Khumalo, 2019).

On the other hand, the qualitative component of the study, inspired by the interpretivist paradigm, will focus on exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of spaza shop owners, government officials, and other key stakeholders. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions will be conducted to delve into the underlying reasons and contextual factors contributing to the lack of growth. This qualitative approach will facilitate a deeper understanding of the socio-economic challenges, cultural dynamics, and informal networks that influence spaza shop growth (Ewing et al., 2018).

The integration of these two paradigms within a mixed-methods design offers several advantages. Firstly, it allows for triangulation, where the findings from different data sources can be compared, contrasted, and synthesized. Triangulation enhances the validity and reliability of the study by corroborating or challenging the findings from different perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Secondly, by combining quantitative and qualitative data, a richer and more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon can be obtained. The quantitative data provide breadth, while the qualitative data provide depth and context, enabling a more nuanced understanding of the complex reasons behind the limited growth of spaza shops (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

The use of mixed methods also aligns with the pragmatic paradigm, as it prioritizes the practical significance and applicability of the research findings. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, this study seeks to generate actionable recommendations and strategies to address the growth barriers faced by spaza shops, thereby contributing to their sustainable development and socio-economic upliftment.

In conclusion, a mixed-methods study combining quantitative and qualitative approaches will provide a comprehensive understanding of the reasons why spaza shops are not growing in South Africa. By integrating the research paradigms of positivism, interpretivism, and pragmatism, the study will offer valuable insights into the quantitative data on growth barriers and the qualitative exploration of underlying contextual factors, enabling the formulation of targeted strategies and policy recommendations for promoting spaza shop growth.

5 FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The research has shown that most of the profits declined in the past 3 years (Table 1). The main reasons for the profit decline are that the economy is bad (64.1%), more people became unemployed (57.9%) and too much competition (60%) for the spaza shops. These are the same reasons indicated by the respondents with profits that remained the same.

TABLE 1: BUSINESS PROFIT GROWTH OVER A 3 YEAR PERIOD AND REASONS ASSOCIATED.

Reasons	Business profit growth			Total	
		It grew	It declined		It stayed the same
More people unemployed	n	1	113	35	149
	%	0.5%	57.9%	17.9%	76.4%
Economy is bad	n	1	125	42	168
	%	0.5%	64.1%	21.5%	86.2%
Too much competition	n	2	117	38	157
	%	1.0%	60.0%	19.5%	80.5%
I improved my marketing	n	4	0	0	4
	%	2.1%	0.0%	0.0%	2.1%
Cost saving measures	n	10	2	2	14
	%	5.1%	1.0%	1.0%	7.2%
Other*	n	0	1	1	2
	%	0.0%	0.5%	0.5%	1.0%

Several challenges faced by spaza shops in the townships are discussed below. The majority of the respondents identified the biggest challenges faced by spaza shops in the township as crime (85.2%), too much competition (75.5%) loadshedding (73.5%), lack of government support (68.9%), lack of infrastructure (51%), and unemployment (47.4%).

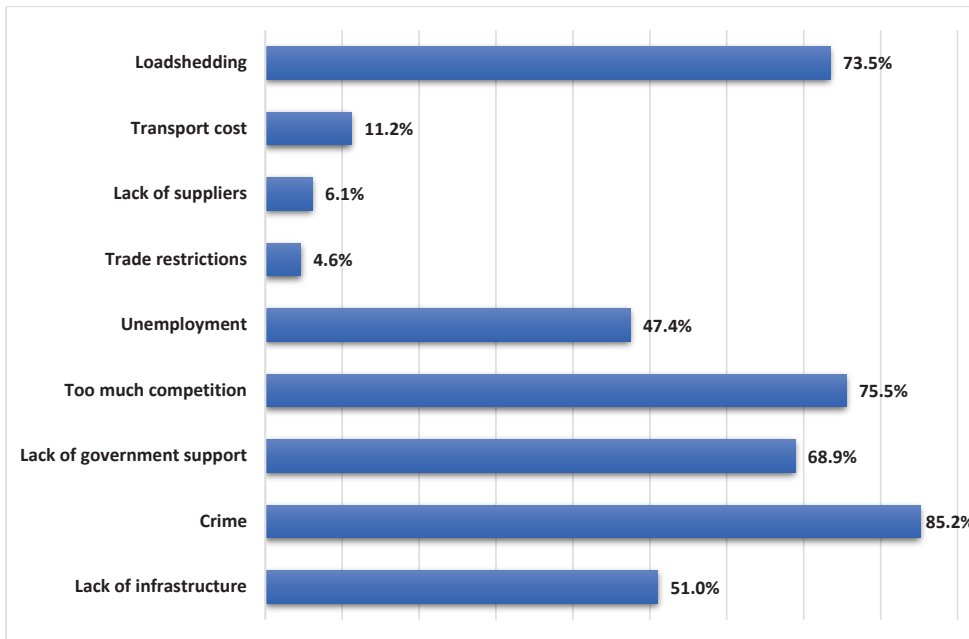


FIGURE 1: BIGGEST CHALLENGES FACING SPAZA SHOPS IN TOWNSHIPS.

The source of biggest competition is addressed next. The majority (87.8%) of the respondents indicated that the biggest competition comes from other spaza shops in the township. This raises concerns about customer distribution and market saturation as it implies a limited number of customers being shared across too many spaza shops.

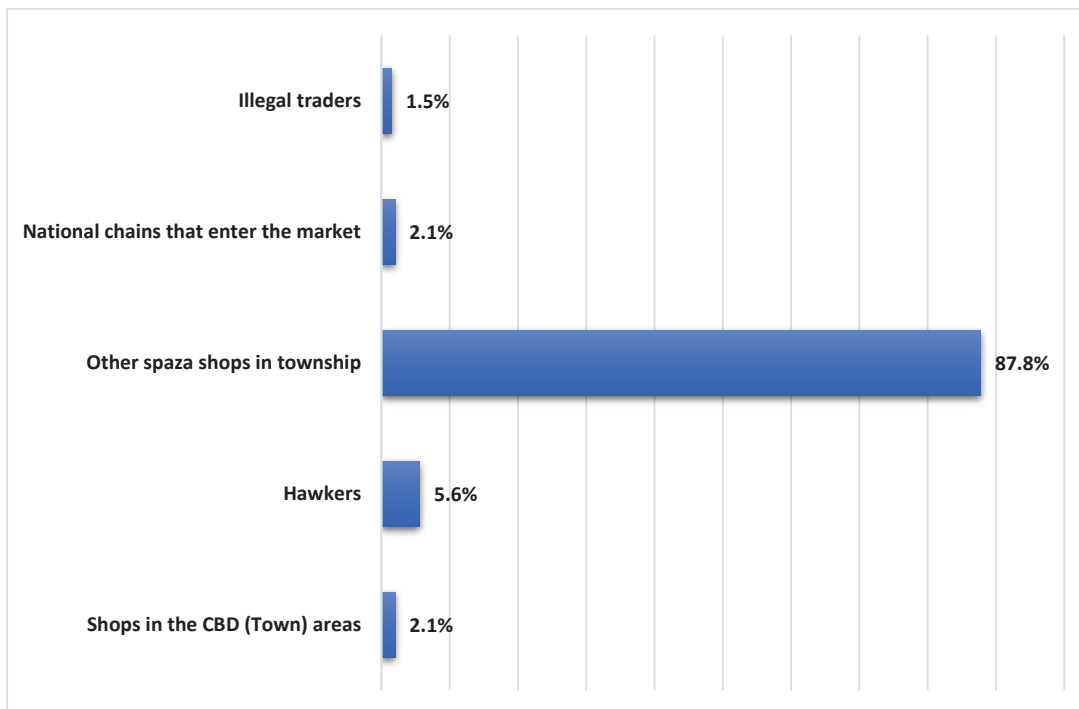


FIGURE 2: THE SOURCE OF BIGGEST COMPETITION IN THE TOWNSHIP

The respondents proposed some solutions for the challenges that they face as spaza shop owners and majority of those solutions point towards government intervention (21.4%) and the government supporting in the form of fighting crime (30.1%), stopping loadshedding (13.3%), providing security/protection for spaza shops (5.1%), providing skills development and training (6.1%), subsidising spaza shops (3.6%), providing business resources (2.6%) as well as providing infrastructure (2%). Other solutions include reduction of prices for stock and other products (9.2%) and removing national brands from township (4.6%). These findings indicate that government role is crucial in addressing most of the challenges faced by spaza shops in the townships (Table 3).

TABLE 3: SOLUTIONS PROPOSED.

	n	%
Government can support small businesses by providing skills development and training	12	6,1%
Government intervention/support	42	21,4%
Government to help fight crime	59	30,1%
Government must improve the economy and create employment	2	1,0%
Government must provide security/protection for spaza shops and police to improve on law enforcement	10	5,1%
Government must subsidise spaza shops	7	3,6%
Government and private companies must support spaza shops with business resources	5	2,6%
Provide us with infrastructure	4	2,0%
Reduce prices for stock and other products and also fight inflation	18	9,2%
Remove national brands from township	9	4,6%
Stop loadshedding	26	13,3%
The government must protect spaza shops	4	2,0%
Other (Sell different products + Stop corruption by government)	2	1,0%

Looking at information about national brands, 99% of the respondents are aware of national retail outlets in their township. Out of those who are aware of any national retail outlet in the township/market area, 89.7% indicated that they are aware of Shoprite currently operating in the township and 33.8% are aware of Boxer and Pick n Pay. Some of the spaza shop owners are aware of U-Save (14.9%) and Cambridge (13.8%) currently operating in their area (Figure 3).

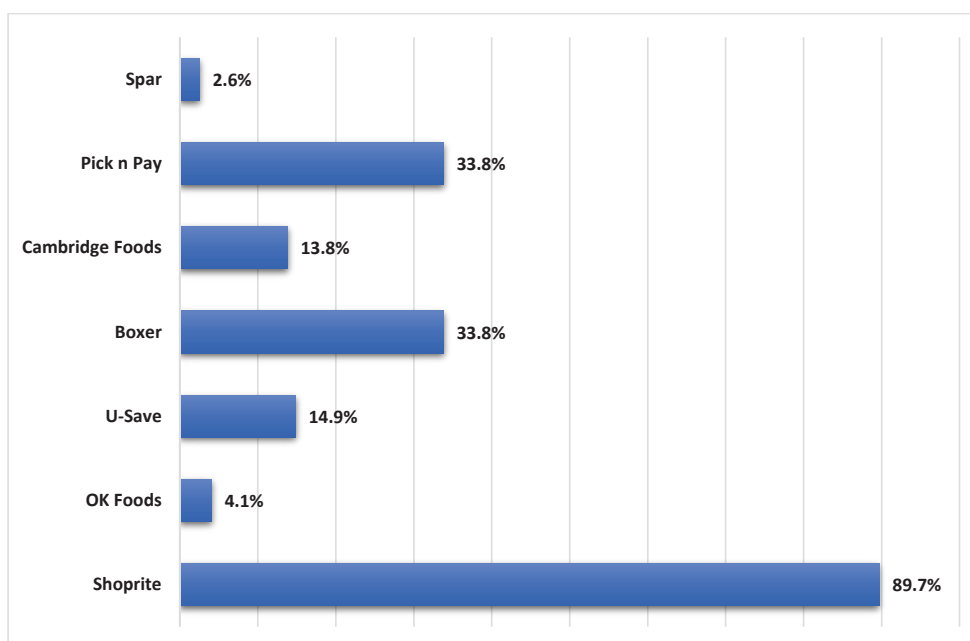


FIGURE 3: BRANDS CURRENTLY OPERATING IN THE TOWNSHIP.

A concerning finding is that 68.04% of the spaza shop owners reflected that the national retailers are taking away customers from their businesses, while 17.01% said the retailers are taking away customers only for some items (Figure 4).

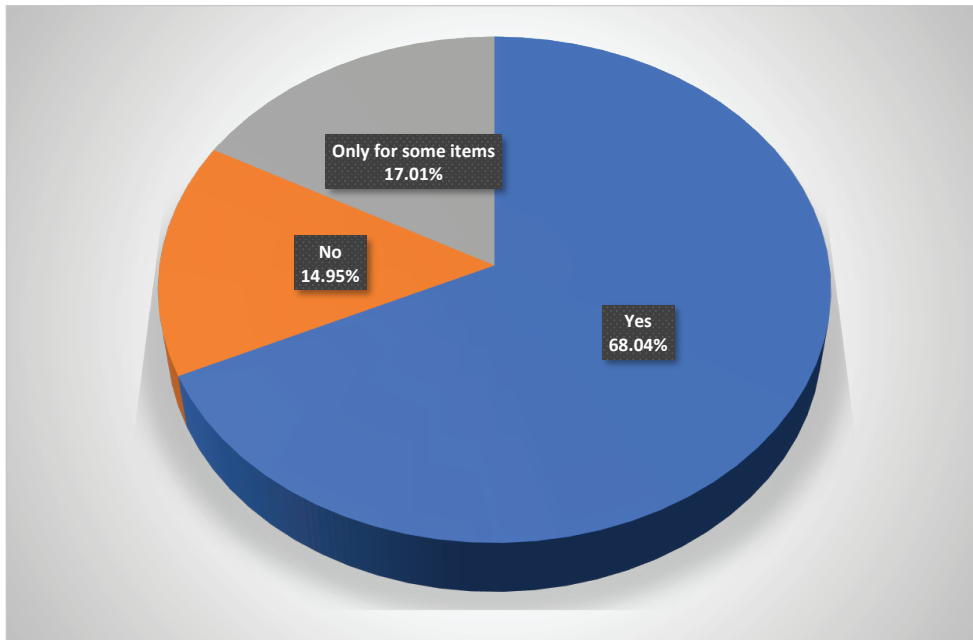


FIGURE 4: ARE THESE RETAILERS TAKING AWAY CUSTOMERS FROM THE SPAZA SHOP?

Since national brands started entering the township market, 88.7% of the respondents have lost sales/market share/profits, with 46.4% highlighting that their sales have gone down and 24.2% highlighting that customers are now buying more from big retailers.

This is a negative outlook towards the presence of national brands in the townships since they are negatively affecting the operations of the majority of spaza shops.

However, if given the choice almost all spaza shop owners (94.3%) are open to work with a national brand. This is a good and positive sign that could provide opportunities for spaza shops to be sustainable and profitable in the townships. This is also supported by the finding that 93.3% of the respondents are of the opinion that they can possibly work effectively with a national brand. Further analysis shows that the reasons why the respondents would consider working with a national brand include the possibility that national brands can help spaza shops by supplying stock at lower prices (41.8%) and they can help with training, skills development, mentorship, and exposure to the market (20.6%). Moreover, 5.7% of the respondents would not consider working with a national as they prefer working alone and some are afraid that national brands will take over their business (Figure 5).

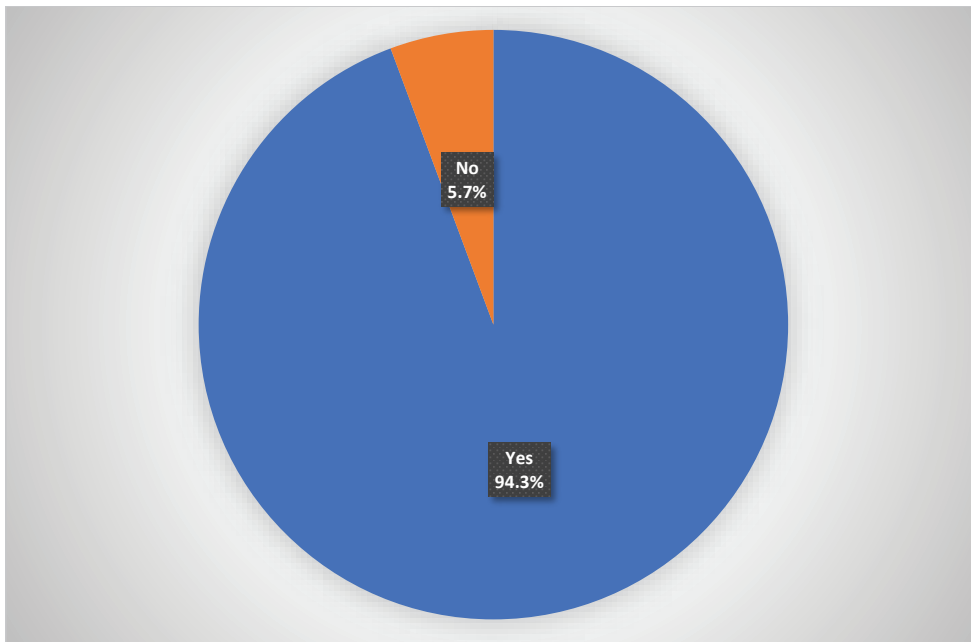


FIGURE 5: WORKING WITH A NATIONAL BRAND IN TERMS OF ASPECTS OF YOUR BUSINESS.

Shoprite is the most preferred national brand to work with 91.8% of the spaza shops choosing the brand, followed by Pick n Pay with 31.1% and Boxer with 24.5% (Figure 6).

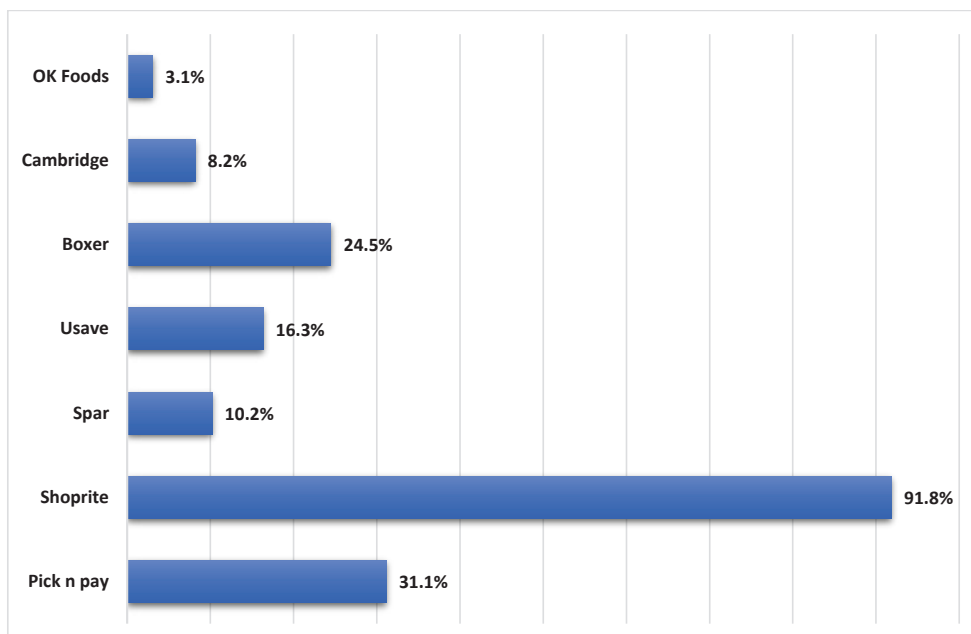


FIGURE 6: PREFERRED NATIONAL BRANDS TO WORK WITH

The areas that the respondents would like to work in conjunction with national brands include the big brands being suppliers to spaza shops (93.9%), on pricing (73%), on marketing advice (35.7%) and management structure and systems (35.2%). In terms of additional support from national brands, 21.4% spaza shops expect to receive equipment, 18.9% expect to receive support for delivery of stock and 12.2% of the respondents expect to be given a container.

The majority of the respondents (over 50%) disagree that there are too many national brand outlets in the townships, instead there are too many spaza shops trading in the township (87.2% strongly agree). It is also indicated that 63.6% of the spaza shops strongly disagree that the entry of national brands in townships will lead to the extinction of spaza shops. 67.7% of the respondents also disagree that they do not trust national brands in townships. This indicates some level of trust which is a good basis for collaborations between spaza shops and national retailers

6. CONCLUSION

Research findings highlight the sustainability and development of spaza shops in the townships amidst the increase presence of national retailers into the market. There is positivity among spaza shop owners that their businesses are not in danger of being shut out of townships, that the township they operate in is big enough to sustain their business there's a display of a strong entrepreneurial spirit and confidence that these businesses will still be running in the near future. However, the township businesses are faced with several challenges that include crime, competition, loadshedding, lack of government support, and infrastructure as well as unemployment.

Over the past 3 years, most spaza shops experienced declining profits mainly because of these challenges. For the township businesses to survive, succeed, and be profitable, larger efforts are needed from the government, private companies, spaza shops and national retailers. The proposed solutions for these challenges are government intervention to fight crime, stop loadshedding, provide skills development and training and infrastructure, as well as subsidizing spaza shops. These findings underscore the critical role of government in addressing spaza shop challenges within townships.

The national retailers operating in the township are Shoprite, Boxer, Pick n Pay, U-Save and Cambridge. As much as spaza shops are aware of the presence of national retailers in the township, there seems to be a gap between the operations of spaza shops and national retailers. Majority of the township businesses don't think they can compete against the national brand stores. National retailers are taking away some customers from their businesses, and when national brands began entering the township market, spaza shops lost sales, market share and profits. The prevalence of national brands in townships has raised concerns, as their impact on the majority of spaza shops has been detrimental.

An encouraging finding is that most spaza shop owners are willing to collaborate with national brands if the opportunity arises. Remarkably, the quality of national brand stock is not superior to that of spaza shops, which aligns well with customer preferences for better quality products. Despite the competitive threat posed by national brands in townships, respondents' express confidence in their ability to compete effectively, particularly in terms of convenience, shopping hours, and quality. This positive outlook could pave the way for sustainable and profitable spaza shops in townships. Reasons for considering collaboration with national brands include the potential for training, skills development, mentorship, and market exposure as well as lower-priced stock supply. The potential areas for collaboration with national brands are establishing supplier relationships, pricing strategies, being an independent outlet for national brands, marketing advice and management structure and systems. Spaza shop owners still prefer independence in advertising, management, and procurement, possibly indicating a lack of trust between spaza shops and national retailers.

Spaza shop owners proposed several ways to enhance the situation for township businesses and these are government support, funding from government and/or private companies and government subsidies for spaza shops. Overall, these suggestions emphasize the need for government intervention, financial assistance, subsidies, and training resources. Additionally, spaza shop owners require support from township residents, with the emphasise on the importance of building trust between stakeholders and spaza shops. These findings highlight the need for government and private sector support to enhance spaza shop sustainability in townships.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

In the findings section, several conclusions and recommendations were drawn based on responses from spaza shop owners in various townships. The major finding is that township businesses face challenges of crime, loadshedding, high competition, and lack of infrastructure. A recommended solution to these challenges would be for the government to make efforts in reducing crime in the townships, ensuring that there's positive economic growth and reduced unemployment in South Africa.

The main recommendations highlighted are to address the challenges faced by spaza shop owners by the government so that they can be profitable, and sustainable. The government intervention and support include providing funding, infrastructure, business resources as well as skills development and training. A bigger challenge is the

economic situation in South Africa which has contributed to increased crime, loadshedding, increased unemployment and lack of resources. With a focused effort to address these challenges, spaza shops would have a chance to survive and grow and be able to successfully compete against national brands.

Township businesses have an opportunity for improvement through exploring ways for spaza shop owners and national retailers to collaborate fully and enhance business performance. Spaza shops should intentionally work in conjunction with national retailers in their townships in areas such as supplying and delivering stock, uniform pricing, marketing efforts, and management systems. It is also essential to acknowledge the critical role played by the township residents in the growth and sustainability of township businesses and make efforts to encourage township residents to actively support spaza shops. The government is encouraged to assume the pivotal role as a key coordinator and facilitator between township businesses and national brands as well as between township businesses and township residents.

There's great potential to overcome these challenges and foster township business growth and sustainability because these township businesses are keen to collaborate with national brands and have an entrepreneurial drive to succeed.

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