

Spaza Shops and Community Resilience in Post-Pandemic South Africa: A Sustainable Livelihoods Framework Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the socioeconomic role of spaza shops in South African communities during the post-COVID-19 period, using the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework as an analytical lens. Spaza shops are embedded within township economies and emerged as critical lifelines during the pandemic, offering proximity-based access to essential goods, informal credit, and social support. The study employed a qualitative research approach, involving interviews with 25 participants. The study's findings reveal that spaza shops serve as both economic and social infrastructure, with their embeddedness in community networks enhancing trust and adaptability. However, challenges such as supply chain fragility, competition from formal retailers, and policy pressures surrounding formalisation threaten their sustainability. The study argues for calibrated policy interventions that preserve the accessibility and resilience of spaza shops while promoting accountability and safety. By situating spaza shops within the SLF, the research contributes to broader debates on informal economies, inclusive development, and post-pandemic recovery strategies in South Africa.

Keywords: Community Resilience, Spaza Shops; South Africa, Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, Township Economy

INTRODUCTION

The informal economy is an important part of the South African socioeconomic environment, offering a source of livelihood to millions of people who have no access to formal jobs (Gavaza et al., 2025a; Skinner et al., 2016). One of the most apparent businesses in this industry is a spaza shop, which is a small, family-owned enterprise that sells simple goods and services in townships and peri-urban communities (Belay, 2022). These enterprises have been significant in guaranteeing the survival of households and economic circulation in the surrounding areas by fulfilling the day-to-day consumption needs (Lamb et al., 2019). It is imperative in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic, when mobility restrictions destabilised the formal supply chains and access to supermarkets was constrained (Bernstein, 2020). Throughout this period, spaza shops served as lifelines, providing access to basic necessities, credit, and social services. It is thus essential to comprehend their evolving role in post-pandemic South Africa in order to design policies that strike a balance between livelihood protection and economic sustainability.

The structural inequalities in South Africa that existed before the pandemic were revealed and exacerbated by the pandemic, such as unemployment, food insecurity, and poverty (Kushitor et al., 2022). At times when movement has been limited, spaza shops have been decentralised points of access to basic commodities, which has subtly made them less dependent on supermarkets located far away (Skinner & Watson, 2021). They also gave

informal credit to cash-strapped families, which allowed the families to endure income shocks (Bernstein, 2020). This dual economic and social position indicates the role played by spaza shops in the community's resilience in a period of general crisis. There are concerns, however, about how such enterprises can be sustained in a dynamic, changing policy and economic environment.

Despite their significance, spaza shops exist in a volatile and conflicting policy environment (Muchineripi et al., 2025). Regulation, taxation, and compliance have been the central focus of government actions to formalise the informal sector, and these measures have the unwanted side effect of potentially endangering the survival of small traders (Kushitor et al., 2022). Shop owners do not have the administrative capacity and resources to comply with formal requirements in many cases, which may lead to the exclusion of the market (National Planning Commission, 2020). Simultaneously, the lack of control brings legitimate questions of consumer safety, responsibility, and health among the population. Striking a balance between these conflicting interests is one of the most urgent issues policymakers face during the post-pandemic recovery stage.

Spaza stores cannot be considered just commercial organisations; they are also interwoven in the social life of South African communities. They utilise trust, reciprocity, and informal networks, thereby strengthening social cohesion and collective resilience (Köhler et al., 2023). Informal credit systems, such as social capital, rely on the understanding between the shop proprietor and the shopper (Wegerif, 2022). More so, spaza shops tend to provide entrepreneurs with a chance of integration and mobility upwards, changing the local economies with innovation and adaptability (Gavaza et al., 2025b). These dynamics demonstrate that spaza shops are multidimensional, serving as economic, social, and cultural institutions that perpetuate the life of the townships.

The research problem is the limited understanding of the role of spaza shops in fostering resilience and inclusive post-pandemic development. Although their economic roles and challenges have been discussed in previous studies, little has been done to examine how they play their role in a post-crisis recovery framework or in the context of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework. This paper, therefore, examines the socioeconomic value of spaza shops in post-pandemic South Africa, in the context of their contribution to community resilience and the potential effects of formalisation. With the help of qualitative methods and under the guidance of the SLF, the research will inform balanced policy solutions to safeguard accessibility, enhance accountability, and enhance sustainability.

Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), developed by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), offers a multidimensional lens for understanding how individuals and households navigate poverty and informality through diverse livelihood strategies (Skinner et al., 2016; Belay, 2022). Central to the SLF are five forms of capital—human, social, financial, physical, and natural, which interact with institutional contexts and vulnerabilities to shape survival and development pathways (Buthelezi et al., 2020). This framework is particularly relevant to township economies, such as South Africa's spaza shop sector, where livelihoods are constructed through adaptive, resource-constrained strategies. Applying the SLF to spaza shops enables a nuanced analysis of how these businesses contribute to economic activity and community resilience, particularly in the post-covid 19 pandemic context where formal systems faltered and localised responses became critical.

Human and social capital are especially prominent in the operations of spaza shops. Human capital manifests in the entrepreneurial skills, community knowledge, and adaptability of shop owners, many of whom lack formal education but possess a deep understanding of township consumer needs (Mampheu, 2019; Kushitor et al., 2022). During the Covid-19 crisis, these skills enabled rapid adjustments to supply disruptions and safety protocols, while informal credit systems rooted in interpersonal trust helped township dwellers manage income shocks (Mkhize & Mugova, 2021). Social capital, defined by networks of reciprocity and cooperation, further underpins the resilience of spaza shops in South African townships (Gavaza et al., 2025a). These businesses are embedded in community relationships, functioning as hubs of information exchange and mutual aid (Ari et al., 2024; Battersby et al., 2021). The SLF thus highlights how non-financial assets, such as trust and local knowledge, are critical to sustaining livelihoods in township settings.

Financial, physical, and natural capital also shape the viability of spaza shops. Financial capital is often limited, with spaza shop owners relying on personal savings or informal loans due to restricted access to formal banking (Mukwarami et al., 2017; Cant et al., 2024). Despite these constraints, reinvestment of daily earnings supports continuity. Physical capital, such as refrigeration, storage, and transport, remains essential but underdeveloped, exposing shops to logistical vulnerabilities during crises (Mampheu, 2019). Natural capital, though less direct, influences spaza operations through food supply chains and environmental shocks that affect pricing and availability (Wegerif, 2022; Mwango, 2018). By situating township spaza shops within the SLF, the study highlights their role as dynamic livelihood systems, shaped by the interplay of assets and external pressures. This approach asserts that spaza shops are not merely commercial entities, but are integral to the social and economic fabric of township communities in South Africa.

Overview of Spaza Shops in South Africa

Spaza shops have long been embedded in South Africa's township economies, emerging as a response to spatial and economic exclusion under apartheid (Maisela, 2024; Wegerif, 2022). Spaza shops provide essential goods to township communities that were underserved by formal retail systems. Operating from converted rooms, shacks, or backyards, spaza shops offered low-barrier entry points for household-level entrepreneurship, often supplementing wage labour and social grants (Masisi, 2020; Adeniyi et al., 2021). Their proximity and affordability made them indispensable to daily survival, creating a parallel distribution system that filled gaps left by formal supply chains (Gavaza et al., 2025b). This informal retail model not only addressed immediate consumption needs but also laid the foundation for a resilient, community-based economy.

In the post-apartheid era, spaza shops have expanded in number and scope, reflecting the persistence of informality in South Africa's economic landscape (Nsomba et al., 2021). Despite the growth of supermarket chains in township areas, spaza shops continue to thrive due to their personalised services, flexible pricing, and ability to cater to small-volume purchases (Muchineripi et al., 2025). Their role in poverty alleviation is significant, especially for households without access to stable employment. However, township spaza shops face mounting challenges, including competition from formal retailers, rising input costs, and shifting consumer preferences (Cant et al., 2024). In addition, immigrant entrepreneurs have introduced new business models such as bulk buying and cooperative stocking, which have increased efficiency but also sparked tensions with local traders (Mampheu, 2019; Muchineripi et al., 2025). These dynamics underscore the complexity of ownership patterns and the need for inclusive approaches to managing diversity in informal retail.

Municipal responses to spaza shops have varied, oscillating between support and enforcement. Some local governments have attempted to integrate spaza shops into formal economic planning through licensing, zoning, and health regulations (Nicole et al., 2021). However, compliance burdens and enforcement actions have often led to harassment and displacement of traders. The Covid-19 pandemic brought renewed attention to the sector, as spaza shops played a critical role in maintaining food access during lockdowns. Yet, policy support remained slow and uneven, exposing the vulnerability of these enterprises to systemic shocks (Gavaza et al., 2025). Recognising spaza shops as more than microenterprises but social and economic institutions is essential for crafting balanced policies that protect their accessibility while enhancing their sustainability (Khambule, 2021; Skinner et al., 2016). Their embeddedness in community life makes them vital actors in local development and inclusive economic growth.

The Impact of Spaza Shops on Community Resilience

Community resilience refers to the ability of households and communities to absorb shocks and stresses, including economic downturns, health emergencies, or food insecurity (Cant et al., 2024). Spaza shops play a significant role in creating resilience in South Africa because they make essential goods available to residents, despite their dependence on structural lapses. Their presence close to the household helps reduce the dependence on long supply chains that are quite easily affected by the crisis. An example is how spaza shops remained open when people were unable to travel to supermarkets due to limited mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nicole et al., 2021). Through this functionality, the risk of food insecurity was reduced because the residents relied on the availability of affordable staples. In addition, spaza shops tend to offer a smaller selection of goods at reduced prices, which suits low-income households that cannot afford to buy in large quantities (Willie, 2024). The personalisation of their services to fit within the financial realities of their communities helps strengthen household coping strategies. This illustrates the buffering role played by spaza shops in promoting resilience in the face of socioeconomic shocks.

Accessibility and proximity stand out as one of the major processes by which the spaza shops create resilience. Located within the walking radius of households, these stores eliminate the need to visit supermarkets that are miles away and expensive transportation systems that are usually beyond the reach of poor neighbourhoods (Skinner, Caroline and Haysom, 2016). During the Covid-19 lockdown, when formal retailing was disrupted, spaza stores were the only ones that could provide the population with a consistent supply of their basic needs: bread, milk, and sugar (Nicole et al., 2021). Their distance naturally decentralised access to food and other necessities, which reduced the threat of hunger and ensured household stability. Moreover, the fact that spaza shops can sell in smaller quantities that fit the reality of cash flows in the daily operations of households gave low-income households the capacity to utilise their budgets efficiently, which strengthened financial resilience (Willie, 2024).

The other important resilience mechanism is the provision of informal credit systems, which serve as community-based safety nets. Most shop owners offer credit to loyal customers when there is an annual variation in income, which enables households to continue consuming between social grant or wage payments (Gavaza et al., 2025b). These sales are built upon high social capital, trust, and reciprocity between the shop owners and the community members and indicate the embeddedness of shop spaza in local networks (Magoro et al., 2023). These

credit arrangements became lifeboats during the pandemic, when many families lost their jobs and struggled to survive amid economic uncertainty. Nonetheless, these systems increase the resilience of the community, but they also subject owners of the shops to liquidity risks and late repayments, which shows the interdependence between economic vulnerability and solidarity in informal economies (Buthelezi et al., 2020).

Finally, job creation and the local economic circulation support resiliency in township communities. Spaza shops are often owned and operated by self-employed individuals, offering informal employment opportunities in delivery, stocking, and security, which is particularly valuable in areas with high unemployment rates (Willie, 2024). The revenues gained with such businesses tend to sustain larger families, helping to support the survival of the household and reduce reliance on external assistance (Cant et al., 2024). Additionally, the amount of money spent in the spaza shops is usually kept in the local economy and hence forms a multiplier effect that supports livelihoods in the neighbourhoods (Ari et al., 2024). Such a distribution of resources encourages economic and social stability. Comprehensively, spaza shops represent a hybrid resilience model, which incorporates economic flexibility, trust of the community and adaptability to enable inclusive development in post-pandemic South Africa (Belay, 2022). Policymakers can reinforce this role through fostering access to microfinance, networks of cooperative suppliers, and streamlined regulatory frameworks that allow for maintaining affordability and improving accountability (Wüid & Cant, 2021).

Access to Essential Goods During Periods of Economic and Social Disruption

Access to essential goods is a critical determinant of household welfare, particularly during times of crisis. Spaza shops played a vital role in maintaining food security and daily consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic, when mobility restrictions disrupted formal supply chains (Cant et al., 2024; Nicole et al., 2021). Their proximity to households eliminated the need for costly transportation and long-distance travel to supermarkets, making them indispensable to township communities (Gavaza et al., 2025b). Unlike formal retailers, spaza shops offered micro-retailing options such as selling single eggs or half loaves of bread, which aligned with the irregular cash flows of township residents (Masisi, 2020; Willie, 2024). This pricing flexibility enabled township families to manage their budgets more effectively and reduce waste, thereby strengthening their financial resilience. Moreover, the absence of transport costs and the ability to purchase in small quantities made township spaza shops more accessible during lockdowns, reducing the risk of hunger and ensuring continuity of supply (Skinner & Haysom, 2016; Kushitor et al., 2022).

Township spaza shops also demonstrated remarkable responsiveness to local demand and cultural preferences, stocking items that reflected community dietary habits and religious practices (Cant et al., 2024). During the covid-19 pandemic, when supermarkets struggled with supply chain disruptions, spaza shop owners leveraged local networks and suppliers to restock essentials quickly (Maisela, 2024). Their embeddedness within township economies enabled them to anticipate and meet community needs more effectively than formal retailers. Additionally, digitalisation trends such as the adoption of mobile payment platforms enhanced operational efficiency and financial inclusion, especially during a time when cash handling posed health risks (Khambule, 2021; Cant et al., 2024). Some spaza shops also began using online ordering systems and digital supplier networks to reduce costs and improve restocking processes. These innovations, combined with their proximity, cultural sensitivity, and pricing flexibility, positioned spaza shops as resilient and adaptive actors in South Africa's township economy during periods of economic and social disruption.

The Role of Spaza Shops Post-Covid 19 Pandemic

While acute lockdowns have ended, pandemic scarring, including lost jobs, depressed incomes, and heightened food insecurity, persists across vulnerable groups (Köhler et al., 2023). Spaza shops continue to mediate access by offering small packs and informal credit, enabling consumption smoothing amid income volatility (Abe & Mugobo, 2021; Cant et al., 2024). Their endurance indicates a structural niche within township economies that persists despite the expansion of supermarket chains into peri-urban markets.

Policy syntheses from NIDS-CRAM further document the uneven labour-market recovery that keeps many households dependent on proximate, flexible retail (Spaull et al., 2020). In development terms, spaza shops represent a livelihood strategy that converts limited financial and physical capital into steady, localised service flows (Department for International Development (DFID), 2015). They therefore remain crucial in a recovery that is spatially and socially unequal (Daniels et al., 2022). Recognising this role is essential for designing inclusive, shock-ready urban food systems (Masisi, 2020).

Yet the post-pandemic context raises headwinds: input inflation, supply-chain volatility, crime risk, and intensified competition compress margins for small outlets (Asmal et al., 2024). Debates on formalisation add compliance costs and uncertainty, with risks that well-intended regulation could inadvertently exclude under-capitalised traders. Scholars note a long history of policy oscillation recognition during crises and repression or

neglect during normal times, which undermines planning horizons for informal retailers (Gavaza et al., 2025a; Muchineripi et al., 2025).

Evidence-based support could include micro-finance, safer wholesale logistics, and light-touch licensing that protects consumer health without extinguishing small shops. Given their demonstrated contribution to food security and neighbourhood stability, blunt, one-size-fits-all formalisation risks net welfare losses (Muchineripi et al., 2025). Calibrated policy should therefore preserve accessibility while promoting accountability and safety (Kushitor et al., 2022). In short, resilience gains realised through spaza networks can be locked in or lost depending on policy design.

Employment Creation and Informal Networks

Spaza shops significantly contribute to employment creation in South African townships, offering both direct and indirect livelihood opportunities in areas with high unemployment rates (Cant et al., 2024; Köhler et al., 2023). Township spaza shops are often family-run, with women and youth playing key roles in daily operations, from stocking to customer service. For many owners, spaza shops provide a stable income that supports household needs such as school fees and food security (Willie, 2024). Youths engaged in part-time work within these shops described the experience as preferable to idleness, highlighting the sector's role in reducing exposure to crime and social vulnerability. Female proprietors, in particular, noted how entrepreneurship enabled autonomy and strengthened household resilience, especially in the absence of male breadwinners (Daniels et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research study presented a research design used to understand the socioeconomic importance of spaza shops in South Africa post the COVID-19 pandemic. Such informal economies can be closely explored through qualitative methods that are ideal to capture lived experiences, localised practices, and community features that may not be so easily quantifiable (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This enabled the research to discover how spaza shops served as both sources of livelihood and support mechanisms within communities strained by a time of discontinuity. The design also enabled a rich investigation of the complexities surrounding resilience, access, and policy, which are not addressed through statistical means but rather interpretive means (Denzin et al., 2017). Qualitative research sits within the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, as it emphasises various types of capital (human, social, financial, physical, and natural) that influence household survival (Tarnoki & Puentes, 2019). The methodology also recognised that the spaza shops exist within social and cultural frames where relationships and practices are just as significant as economic transactions. Hence, a qualitative focus provided the breadth and depth necessary to explore the use of spaza shops in post-pandemic society.

The data was collected using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty-five participants from the township in East London, Eastern Cape, South Africa. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they are partly structured and leave space for unexpected information (Dawadi et al., 2021). The sample consisted of spaza shop owners and community participants, as it aimed to cover both the demand and supply sides of informal retail. The sample size comprised 15 spaza owners and 10 community members. This two-pronged methodology enabled the research to study entrepreneurial strategies and the consumer experience of resilience and access. Interviews were conducted using a thematic protocol that addressed operational difficulties, community relations, access to goods issues, and perceptions of formalisation. Thematic flexibility allowed participants to expand on their personal experiences in their own words, yielding rich, descriptive data. Each interview lasted 30-45 minutes and was conducted in the language preferred by the participant, with the option of translation into the researcher's preferred language. The audio recordings of all interviews were transcribed for analysis.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participant Group	Number	Gender Distribution	Key Roles/Characteristics
Spaza Shop Owners	15	9 Male / 6 Female	Operate local shops; vary in size and location
Community Members	10	4 Male / 6 Female	Regular customers rely on spaza shops for essentials
Total	25	13 Male / 12 Female	Reflects diverse township representation

The sampling was implemented with the convenience and snowball strategies, broadly applicable in qualitative studies of informal economies where random sampling is not viable (Gastrow & Amit, 2013). Convenience sampling was used, where the sample was drawn from the communities close to the selected townships, whereas snowball sampling was employed to recruit additional participants through referrals. Although the given approach does not result in statistically generalisable findings, it allows reaching participants with the relevant knowledge and lived experience (Kegler et al., 2019). Participants included anyone who owned a spaza shop or used a spaza as a

leading provider of goods during the pandemic. This ensured that no participant was out of touch with the research objectives. The priority of ethics was taken into account, and informed consent was obtained from all the participants before any interviews took place. Protection was given to anonymity and confidentiality by providing pseudonyms during the transcript and reporting. These precautions were taken to safeguard participants and not to compromise the sensitivity of the informal economy activities.

A thematic approach to data analysis was employed, as recommended by Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of coding and theme formation (Khumalo et al., 2023). The initial phase involved reading transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the data. Preliminary codes were generated, reflecting on patterns surrounding resilience, access to goods, community relationships, and perceptions of formalisation. These codes were refined into broader themes consistent with the SLF. The analysis emphasised convergence and divergence in individual accounts, underlining similarities in experience and variance in individual perspective. A reflexive approach was employed, and the researcher remained aware of their positionality and bias in interpretation (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). This formal analytic process yielded plausible and reliable results that reflected the realities of the participants' lives.

FINDINGS

This analysis employed an inductive-deductive thematic approach, informed by the SLF's objectives. Coding shifted towards a narrow-focused patterning of relationships among access, resilience, and policy exposure, utilising open tags to convey recurring ideas. Higher-order themes were organised in higher-level coding corresponding to livelihood assets and the roles played by spaza shops during and after COVID-19. The process aimed to achieve analytic saturation, which involved contrasting conflicting narratives from owners and community members across different age groups and genders. Flexion notes were kept in a separate sheet of paper to distinguish between descriptive statements and interpretive claims based on descriptive statements. The resulting framework comprises six themes: Proximity and everyday access, Informal credit and social capital, Crisis resilience and continuity of supply, Employment and livelihood effects, Competition, costs, and supply chains, and Formalisation, risk, and support needs. All themes will be supported with convergent evidence, numerous representative quotations, and implications for community resilience.

The coding matrix reveals that Formalisation Concerns were applied to the great majority of participants, 24 out of 25, and Pandemic Reliance was applied to 23 out of 25 participants, indicating both the universal salience of policy exposure and its future aftershocks through COVID-19. Proximity or Access appeared in 19 interviews and Community Trust or Role in 15, again pointing to the spaza shops' social embeddedness beyond the functionality of a retail outlet. Informal Credit was an interlocutor in 13 interviews, demonstrating its centrality in the context of smoothing consumption in the case of income volatility. Employment Creation and Youth Engagement have appeared in 18 and 21 interviews respectively, demonstrating more modest but significant labour impacts within high-unemployment environments. Gender influences were evident in 13 owner accounts, where spaza proprietorship was equated with the strength of a female-headed household. Lastly, Spaza trading was identified in 15 cases, related to bulk-buy networks and operating long business hours, which helps stabilise commodity prices and supply.

Proximity and Everyday Access

Spaza shops emerged as critical "last-mile" retailers, reducing distance and transportation costs for township residents. Participants explained that these shops, located within walking distance of their homes, provided affordable access to daily essentials, eliminating the need to travel to distant supermarkets. One participant (P01) explained that before spaza shops became common,

"I had to take taxis to buy groceries, and sometimes that meant using money that was supposed to buy food. Now, I walk a few houses down and get what I need for the day."

This account reflected how localised retailing contributed to social equity by closing the distance gap between consumption and supply. Another participant (P02) noted that being able to shop nearby also created a sense of safety and convenience:

"It is easier and safer to buy close to home, especially for women and older people. We can go early in the morning or late at night without worrying."

Proximity became an economic advantage and a means of protecting vulnerable groups from physical and financial insecurity. The convenience of proximity was amplified by the flexibility of micro-retailing, which aligned with irregular income patterns common in low-income communities. Many participants appreciated the ability to purchase items in small quantities, enabling them to manage their daily consumption without incurring debt. As one participant (P17) said,

"Sometimes I only have ten or twenty rand, but I can still buy what my family needs for that day instead of going hungry."

Shopkeepers similarly reported that selling in smaller units helped to build loyalty and trust with regular customers. Another participant (P04) explained that,

"People come every day to buy just what they need, and through that, we get to know each other. It is not just about selling but understanding your community."

Such exchanges show that economic activity was deeply intertwined with social interaction. The ability to buy and sell in small units maintained daily food security, reduced waste, and embedded spaza shops within the rhythms of community life. Together, proximity and flexible purchasing practices sustained household resilience and reinforced the social bonds that make township economies adaptive and cohesive.

Informal Credit and Social Capital

Informal book credit became a coping mechanism everywhere, challenging the linking of commerce and social capital. Participants characterised the book credit system as an informal safety net based on trust, familiarity, and mutual obligation rather than financial security. Shopkeepers claimed that credit provision was not only a business decision, but also a moral one, influenced by sympathy and a sense of belonging to the community. The participant observed that it was a very tough period, and most of their customers had lost their jobs.

"I appreciated those I knew and trusted since they had families to feed. Others would make payments after weeks, although at least I knew they were attempting" (P24).

While another participant, a community member, said he was grateful to receive goods on credit and pay later.

"In their absence, my children would have gone to bed hungry, explained the informal credit system (P06).

In this way, retail dealings became a form of solidarity, strengthening the moral economy at work in township life in times of crisis. The same level of trust that supported informal credit also created vulnerability among small-scale operators, who bore the financial cost of non-loaned money. Shopkeepers noted that default rates were higher when unemployment continued to grow, thus putting a strain on their limited liquidity and forcing them to make difficult decisions. Some participants said that not all customers could pay because they did not want to, but life was too hard. The extract below is from (P19)

"I needed to balance serving them and keeping my shop open; others said they had to limit themselves to serving regular customers or necessary goods only."

In participant (P08)'s words, he noted,

"I trusted people, and the majority returned my favour, but some did not. I could understand them, but sometimes I also had no money to refill my stock."

Therefore, the problem of social capital is a paradox because it is good at maintaining a community but bad at sustaining a business. A different participant encapsulated this predicament as provided in the quotation below,

"Credit keeps the community alive; however, sometimes it kills the business slowly-slowly" (P20).

So, all in all, informal credit worked both as a stabiliser and a stressor. On the one hand, it made households resilient; on the other hand, it subjected the spaza owners to severe financial fragility.

Crisis Resilience and Continuity of Supply

Participants recounted how spaza shops became a reliable source of lifeline support during lockdown, when mobility was limited. This is shown in the excerpts below;

"Because of the curfew's, we could not go anywhere, and the spaza shop was the only one open. Even when there was fear of infection, we still felt safe going there, as it was nearby and not full of people." (P10)

Another participant posited that decentralised outlets in the township avoid household shortages. This was demonstrated in the extract below;

"We could still buy bread and paraffin every day without worrying about bulk shopping or long queues. The shopkeepers were consistent, even when the prices at the big shops went up." (P25)

These accounts suggest that the geographic dispersion and adaptability of spaza shops mitigated single points of failure within grocery systems. Continuous functioning of these micro-retailers stabilised community routines, calmed anxiety, and helped sustain food security in the face of profound uncertainty. Consequently, spaza shops served as an informal emergency infrastructure, sustainably keeping households afloat through accessibility, affordability, and trust during systemic breakdown. Spaza shops' ability to continue operating depended on local cooperation, labour improvisation, and moral conduct under pressure. Some township entrepreneurs reported using youth volunteers to provide security and delivery services, thereby keeping the area safe and accessible to vulnerable citizens. One participant noted,

"I asked the boys in the street to come and help deliver groceries to older people who could not walk." (P12).

This reciprocity fostered micro-communities of mutual aid that transcended commerce. Participants also emphasised the empathy of township spaza owners who kept in contact with isolated elders. A community member shared,

"When I was ill, the shopkeeper would check on me and bring me what I needed." That kind of care is not something you get from supermarkets." (P13) S

Such acts enhanced the social legitimacy of spaza shop owners as community anchors rather than mere vendors. However, maintaining these operations was risky to the individual, involving theft and exhaustion due to long hours spent. One spaza shop owner (P14) said,

"We worked till late at night, sometimes with no rest, because people needed us." It was dangerous, but closing was not an option."

Therefore, the resilience was not merely economic, but relational, anchored in local trust, cooperation, and shared responsibility in crisis conditions.

Employment and Livelihood Effects

Spaza shops provided self-employment and auxiliary employment opportunities to assistants, delivery personnel, and security personnel. One of the spaza owners, P06, said,

"At least with very little profit, my shop has been able to pay school fees to my children over the years".

The owner's ability to afford school fees and household maintenance over time emphasises the importance of making the income regular, even though it was achieved with very low margins. The young people explained the significance of part-time employment as shown below,

"The wages were inadequate, but not as much as being at home and doing nothing" P05.

The youths obtained part-time employment, which, although low, was still considered better than doing nothing at all. Family labour, particularly in female-owned stores, held the home together and enhanced family efficiencies. Participant P18 explained the following,

"My daughters work in my shop after school and help me to organise, sell, even when I am out getting stock for the shop, which has made my life much easier and the family".

Some spaza stores recounted co-ethnic collaborations that reduced labour exposure and risk-sharing, stabilising business operations. Such arrangements were about the SLF principle of livelihoods comprising multiple resources and shared strategies. Community members identified these employment impacts as concerning, reduced petty crime and increased local activity. Spaza shop ecosystems were therefore distributed livelihood platforms, rather than micro-firms operating in isolation. Competition, low margins, and susceptibility to shocks limited the quality of employment. Spaza owners recognised that "wages were low and hours long" (P09), but these were not a result of personal choice, but rather structural pressures. Youth labour was usually informal, reflecting a mixture of flexibility and precarity in the informal labour market participant, P08 said

"Sometimes I worked the whole day and got only a small allowance, but at least I gained experience."

Gendered narratives suggested that entrepreneurship enabled women and caregivers to exercise autonomy, but also placed them at risk. The competition increased, and owners lowered the number of helpers, weakening the absorption of local labour. The participants imagined that the specific *"aid, microfinance, cooling units, bookkeeping"* (P16) could improve productivity and quality of jobs. Additionally, secure wholesaling and fundamental security could stabilise changes and the flow of customers. Employment benefits are not merely imagined but somewhat dependent on the policies, which can increase overall productivity without being significantly cost-prohibitive.

Competition, Costs, and Supply Chains

Competition pressures were also evident, with owners mentioning supermarkets and larger, more networked spaza operators as their main competitors. Inflation, extended supply chains, and wholesaler unreliability contributed to cost pressures both during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. A spaza owner responded,

"If the government puts strict rules, running these shops might be tough for us." (P03)

Several spaza owners noted that they manage by keeping their micro-units and being reasonable to customers as input costs increase. Spaza owners recalled bulk-purchase systems that reduced the unit prices and stabilised local stocks, as noted below,

"We order in bulk and at a discount, which reduces our costs" P17.

Such networked procurement had the advantage of positively impacting consumers through price reduction. However, it also contributed to the perception that playing fields were uneven for smaller operators. Community participants, however, were more focused on affordability and the continuity of the staple than on the proprietor's origin, appreciating whoever made it available. The competition story is a mixture of tension and consumer welfare benefits, and generalising is insufficient. Intervention should consider the stability of household prices and the sustainability of the unaffiliated small shops.

Supply-side fragility, combined with security and working hours, determined service levels. The spaza owners, operating between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m., maintained availability at the cost of their personal safety. The delivery to older people and late-night services were received positively by the customers as a gesture of unity that needed to be acknowledged and appreciated. Thin margins constrained investment in refrigeration, storage, or transport that would help to improve efficiency and prevent spoilage. Participants offered joint purchasing programs accessible to local and spaza shops to balance prices without distress. They also proposed safer, designed wholesale areas that minimise the danger of crime and have uniform standards. These steps can shift the competitive narrative from

zero-sum competition to one of mutual resilience. Therefore, collaboration within the supply chain, in conjunction with the implementation of sufficient safety structures, enhances system-state welfare.

Formalisation, Risk and Support Needs

Almost every responder expressed concern that formalisation would result in the closure of small stores and loss of community accessibility due to its stringent requirements and unaffordability. Spaza owners were concerned about licensing fees, compliance documentation, and taxation, given their slim profit margins. This was voiced in the below extracts,

"If the government puts strict rules, then running these shops might be tough for us," (P24).

Residents expected the spill-over effects: a decline in the number of choices locally, increased prices, and the possibility of losing credit. Several participants preferred light-touch formalisation, safeguarding health and safety without shutting out under-capitalised traders. They continually demanded training, microfinance, streamlined licensing, security measures, and, where possible, access to bulk-buy lines. Women owners worried that supportive formalisation would enhance household resilience, but punitive systems would remove essential income.

"It was tough to run your shop during this time. For the first time, law enforcement officers were making us close our shops and restricting movement; however, this was when we needed more support." P21.

Spaza owners sought equitable and reasonable avenues to compliance that respect their role in ensuring access and price stability. The most widely agreed-upon solution was a calibrated policy, where accessibility is maintained and accountability and safety are encouraged. Support preferences were strongly associated with the SLF, attacking areas of financial and physical weaknesses. Support request was also consistent among participants as expressed in the excerpts below,

"Microcredit or guarantee-backed loans would ensure stable cash flow as informal credit increases during shocks" (P19).

"Refrigeration and storage systems would eliminate wastage, increase the variety of products, and nutritional alternatives during hot seasons." (P01)

"Simple bookkeeping and cash-flow training would help to avoid losses due to defaults and stockouts, improving productivity" (P22).

Easy-to-obtain licenses at minimal rates were also a recurring concept mentioned by the participants, which would transform panic into meaningful interaction with municipal frameworks. Furthermore, community-police relationships or safer trading zones were mentioned to curb the crime risks that prolonged hours increase. Joint wholesaling or inter-municipal negotiated bulk purchasing could make the advantages of networks accessible to groups beyond co-ethnic communities. Collectively, these supports outline a realistic path to resilient formalisation that preserves the very qualities relied upon by communities.

DISCUSSION

The study results confirm that South African communities heavily rely on spaza shops, particularly following the COVID-19 outbreak. The participants repeatedly cited their use of these shops due to their convenience and low prices, which demonstrated the role of spaza shops in filling structural disparities in access to retail (Charman et al., 2012). The thematic analysis reveals a high level of community trust, founded on credit systems, social relations, and mutual support in the event of a crisis; this aligns with the sustainable livelihoods framework, which emphasises the importance of both social and financial capital. Notably, spaza shops were not only economic entities but also provided a means of survival and social solidarity, thereby defining the landscape of South Africa.

Resilience was another central theme that emerged from the interviews. Resourcefulness also emerged when shop owners could adapt quickly to micro-retailing, late closing hours, and effective stock management. This stability mitigated the impact of disruptions caused by the pandemic, as observed in the study by Kushitor et al. (2022) on how the informal economy responds to crises. However, participants also mentioned broader issues, such as crime, unreliable supply chains, and an influx of competition from supermarkets and foreign-owned shops. This reveals the fragility of the spaza ecosystem in which resilience is always subjected to threats.

The formalisation question was met with divided opinions. Some participants identified possible advantages, including enhanced support, legitimacy, and financial access. The majority feared mandatory licensing and taxation would incur prohibitively high costs and risk locking out the poorest operators. This conflict highlights the balance between the state's plans to generate revenue and the community's sustainability, as observed in previous works by the Food and Agriculture Organisation on informal micro-businesses. Policy support should be as non-punitive as possible for most participants, including registration at low costs, subsidised training, and microfinance provisions.

Women participants explained how the shops were a significant source of family livelihood, an exercise of independence and survival in times of unemployment, or even the death of a male figure (Daniels et al., 2022).

Youth involved in spaza work as informal labourers highlight the industry's potential in curbing idleness and reducing exposure to crime. These results indicate that a spaza shop has wider development outcomes that cannot be attributed to short-term economic indicators, thereby underlining its significance within the local social system.

This interpretation is supported by comparative evidence in other countries. In Kenya, kiosks and small shops, known as informal retailers, make a central contribution to the food security of urban populations, offering more affordable access to daily needs and informal credit to low-income households (Okello et al., 2020). On a parallel note, Kirana stores in India have existed based on trust-building relationships, providing communities with access to goods and social support, especially in rural regions of the country, thereby highlighting the duality of social and financial capital in supporting livelihoods during crises (Kumar & Agarwal, 2021). In Nigeria, digital-enabled small and medium-sized enterprises managed to continue their activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this aspect of technological access and financial capital affects resilience (Olugbenga et al., 2025). Such cross-national analogies demonstrate that informal retail structures worldwide offer dynamic responses that stabilise domestic consumption and enhance social integration, which are key principles of SLF.

The debate also highlights the conflicts in livelihood sustainability and regulatory systems. Formalisation policies, which can potentially increase access to infrastructure, finance, and training, may entail compliance costs that jeopardise the sustainability of small informal enterprises. According to the SLF theory, interventions should take into account the interplay of different types of capital; when the resilience of households that rely on informal retail connections is threatened through policies that break social capital or limit financial flexibility, this can be unintentional (Scoones, 2021; Tarnoki & Puentes, 2019). Comparative analyses indicate that informal retail can be reinforced with supportive regulatory frameworks (simplified licensing, microfinance initiatives, or cooperative procurement systems) without undermining its embeddedness within communities (Okello et al., 2021; Rohini Kumari & Deepak Kumar, 2024). Lastly, incorporating the SLF into comparative literature underscores the importance of context-specific, multi-capital interventions to support informal economies. Understanding the interrelations among social, financial, and human capital enables policymakers to develop strategies that can strengthen community resilience without compromising the accessibility and social legitimacy of informal retail. Experience in other nations suggests that formal support systems, when tailored to the realities of small-scale retailers' operations, can stabilise livelihoods, mitigate vulnerability, and support inclusive township economies. Such a view supports the extension of the applicability of the SLF in informing policies to address the development of the informal sector and recovery after crises.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the township economy is crucial to the post-pandemic recovery efforts in South Africa, and spaza shops play a pivotal role in this process. During the Covid 19 pandemic, spaza shops provided township communities with access to essential goods. The study revealed that spaza shops are resilient in terms of proximity, flexibility, and informal credit systems, which protect household survival. Meanwhile, the industry is burdened by intense competition, security threats, and the constant looming threat of heavy regulation. Whereas formalisation may improve accountability and expand the tax base, it will likely erode the accessibility and inclusivity that characterise the value of spaza shops. The study suggests that a compromise solution is needed that maintains the informal strengths of spaza shops while gradually building their sustainability capacity.

Policy interventions must focus on enhancing the resilience and sustainability of spaza shops in ways that do not compromise their accessibility and embeddedness within their respective communities. Specific proposals involve engaging female and Spaza shop owners in microfinance programs to support financial sustainability, offering training in bookkeeping and cash-flow management to enhance business sustainability, and implementing community-based cooperative systems for procurement to reduce costs and improve the reliability of the supply chain. In addition, establishing a safer trading environment and streamlining licensing processes would reduce risks associated with longer working hours and regulatory compliance, enabling informal retailers to flourish while protecting the community's safety. National development requires the recognition and encouragement of informal economies. Informal retail provides a source of household livelihoods, local employment, poverty reduction, and social cohesion, making informal retail an essential element of inclusive economic growth. Therefore, government policy, local assistance, and development strategies must be crafted to incorporate informal retail into a broader economic strategy, so that regulatory and financial frameworks enhance, rather than hinder, these essential micro-enterprises.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although qualitative interviews were more in-depth, they may not accurately reflect the range of spaza life across provinces, ethnicities, and business models. It is proposed that future research replicating this study should consider mixed-methods designs, whereby ethnographic case studies are balanced with large-scale surveys to enhance credibility. Future longitudinal studies will help determine the survival and adaptation of spaza shops in light of current economic reforms and digitalisation trends.

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