

# Investigating the resilience and challenges of informal street traders in South Africa's tourism sector: a focus on migrant entrepreneurship\*

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## ABSTRACT

Selling products and services to tourists is often the main or sole source of income for local and migrant informal traders participating in the tourism sector in developing countries. However, they are vulnerable to exogenous shocks, with the COVID-19 pandemic a recent example. During COVID-19, international travel and domestic movement bans affected the livelihoods of many local and migrant informal traders, with the absence of government support exacerbating the plight of migrant traders in particular. This study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by informal traders in three of South Africa's main tourist cities against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a concurrent mixed-methods approach, the study explores how migrant and non-migrant entrepreneurs navigated the crisis. This research not only highlights the critical role of resilience and other survival strategies for especially migrant traders but also offers practical implications for the recognition of their resilience and the contribution of both local and migrant traders to job creation within the realms of the informal tourism sector. This study extends resilience theory by applying it within the socio-economic context of the tourism sector of an important migration destination on the African continent.

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## 1. Introduction

Statistics from the World Travel and Tourism Council show that in 2019 (the year before the advent of COVID-19) tourism was responsible for creating nearly one in four jobs and accounted for 10.4% of global GDP (Rajani & Boluk, 2022). It is therefore not surprising that tourism is often seen to be pivotal to employment creation and sustainable economic growth, especially in the developing world. This is further supported by the notion that tourism fuels a range of activities, sectors and industries along its entire value chain (Rajani & Boluk, 2022).

The tourism value chain makes provision for formal and informal activities within the industry – creating opportunities for both local and migrant entrepreneurs. The history of migration and migratory labour in South Africa is intrinsically linked to the establishment of the mining industry in the latter part of the 1800s (Crush et al., 2015). Currently, South Africa is regarded as the most prominent destination

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for migration in Africa; it has one of the biggest economies on the continent (Kabwe-Segatti, 2008), with the accompanying perceived opportunities that it presents to foreign migrants.

The perceived employment opportunities are however limited because of the extremely high and persistent levels of unemployment (e.g. 32.1% in the first quarter of 2024 [Statistics South Africa, 2024]). The consequence is that new migrants have no choice but to compete with locals for the scarce job opportunities that are available (Charman & Petersen, 2015). Many of these migrating individuals, who are unable to secure employment in the formal sector, seek and find income-generating opportunities in the informal sector (Adams et al., 2013; Dunn & Maharaj, 2023), Gumedde and Moyo (2023, p. 531) confirmed this and found that;

The majority of the migrants from African countries previously came looking for job opportunities, but, because South Africa currently experiences a high rate of unemployment, a shift has been seen in the majority of migrants opening their own businesses mostly in the informal sector.

The informal sector offers a range of occupations and displays a continuum of motivations and activities (Çakmak et al., 2018). Street trading is a classic example of an informal activity within the above-mentioned range of occupations (Sassen et al., 2018). The importance of street trading in securing a living in the South African urban economy is clear when one considers that as long ago as the year 2000, it was estimated that 122,000 non-food traders and no less than 323,000 traders selling food items were active in the country (Mitullah, 2003, 2004).

Street trading (such as the selling of arts and crafts to local and foreign tourists) is a particularly important economic pursuit for African entrepreneurs who are desperate to provide for their families (Sassen et al., 2018). Çakmak et al., (2018) reported a similar finding in Thailand, with limited opportunities for local and foreign migrants – leaving the informal economy, and its link to tourism, as the only viable alternative. Informal entrepreneurs within the tourism sector fulfil an important socio-economic function. They purvey products and services (designed specifically for tourists) at affordable prices. In the process, the informal traders absorb some of the excess supply of labour and counteract unemployment (Çakmak et al., 2019).

Notwithstanding the importance of the tourism sector to many countries' economies, concerns are often expressed about the vulnerability of tourism to exogenous shocks, such as economic and financial instability, political crises, environmental change and/or degradation (Biggs et al., 2012) and health crises. Informal-sector workers are generally more vulnerable to shocks of this nature than their formal-sector counterparts (Ranchhod & Daniels, 2020). Their enhanced vulnerability in the tourism value chain was brought into sharp focus by the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives and livelihoods of informal sector participants in South Africa's informal economy.

In response some literature on the impact of COVID-19 on certain sections of the South African informal sector has developed. De Villiers (2021), for example, focussed on the informal street traders in Cape Town and Venter et al. (2024) focussed on the experiences of informal day labourers in Pretoria. However, the literature pertaining to the impact of COVID-19 on the informal component of the tourism industry in South Africa is not well developed, with only Fourie et al. (2024) that highlighted the plight and resilience displayed by informal traders in Cape Town.

In focussing on this gap in the research, this article contributes to two strands of the literature. Firstly, we contribute to the literature the impact of COVID-19 on a specific activity on the continuum of informal sector activities, i.e. informal street vendors who sell arts and crafts to tourists. Secondly, we contribute towards the discourse on the nature and effect of entrepreneurship from migrants in the South African economy by answering the following research question: What are the nature and extent of the challenges and the resilience brought about by the pandemic on migrant and South African informal street traders in the tourism industry?

The study was conducted on a sample of informal traders (specifically street vendors selling arts and crafts and other items) in three of South Africa's main tourist cities – Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg – immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic. An analysis of the profile and characteristics of the traders in question revealed that a large proportion of the traders are migrants. Their

diverse experiences on how the pandemic affected their livelihoods, and how they adapted to ensure survival inspired this research.

## **2. Literature review and theoretical framework used in the study**

### ***2.1. Migration and South Africa's informal sector***

The patterns of migration flows and the urban informal sector as an avenue for possible income generation, is intrinsically linked to each other (Etzold, 2016). The co-existence of the informal economy and migration in the case of South Africa ties in with the prevailing view that many African migrants join the informal economy mainly because no realistic alternative is available (see for example Gumede and Moyo (2023), Adams et al. (2013) and Dunn and Maharaj (2023)).

Once in the informal sector, the perception is that migrants often do better than their South African counterparts. Significant evidence of this is seen with the informal retail sector or 'spaza shops'<sup>1</sup>. A seminal study in this regard was conducted by Charman et al. (2012) to investigate the emergence of Somali-run spaza shops in Delft, Cape Town. The overall, conclusion was that the entrepreneurship model of the migrant owners seemed to deliver superior results compared to the more traditional 'survivalist' approach of South African spaza shops (Charman et al., 2012). Migrants used their social networks to ensure cheap labour, achieve co-operative ownership, procurement in groups to get better terms, as well as improved distribution practices (Charman et al., 2012).

The question arises whether migrants in South Africa's informal tourist economy were able to better handle the significant challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of their entrepreneurial practices and levels of resilience – aspects that are investigated in this study. However, a review of literature on the activities, practices, survival strategies and issues of entrepreneurship within the informal tourism sector in particular is needed as background to these questions.

### ***2.2. Issues of entrepreneurship, agency, social capital and survival strategies of (informal) street vendors in urban (tourist) areas***

The theoretical approach most appropriate for the nexus between migration and entrepreneurship is the notion that the informal entrepreneurship is an activity that act as a 'go to option' in the event that people (arriving migrants) are unable to enter or are excluded from formal employment (Cakmak et al., 2018).

Bork-Hüffer et al. (2016) point out that migrants are subject to various degrees of exclusion from what they termed 'urban institutions, infrastructures, and services'. However, these constraints are neither cast in stone, not permanent. Migrants endeavour to change these constraints – often in subtle ways (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2016) such as displaying remarkable resilience in the face of challenges and economic and social crises.

Etzold et al. (2009) emphasise the importance of recognising and understanding the various forms of capital that participants in the informal sector use – including economic, cultural and social capital. Trupp (2015) provides an excellent example of the type of social capital at play within the informal sector. His study on Akha ethnic minority street vendors in Thailand's tourist areas revealed the importance of a solid group identity.

Social capital can be of significant importance in demonstrating resilience as part of their survival strategies in times of crisis. We review some of the relevant literature on these aspects in the following subsection.

### ***2.3. The informal tourism sector's resilience in times of economic strife***

Henderson and Smith (2009) investigated issues of vulnerability and resilience of small, informal, tourism-gearred enterprises after the 2004 tsunami. They highlighted how, in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, informal vendors were back on the beaches selling their wares. This illustrated the informal

sector's resilience in the face of tragedy. Biggs et al. (2012) compared the levels of resilience found among formal and informal enterprises operating in Thailand's coral reef tourism sector – when confronted by the 2004 tsunami and the 2008 political crisis in that country. What emerged was that informal enterprises reported better financial conditions and higher levels of social capital – in the form of government, family and community support – than formal enterprises during these crises (Biggs et al., 2012).

The South African literature on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic focuses mainly on the macroeconomic labour market effect (see, for example, Ranchhod & Daniels, 2020). However, De Villiers (2021) explored the commendable resilience displayed by these entrepreneurs when facing the impact of the pandemic on their livelihoods in the central business district of Cape Town – in the absence of special government support during the crisis. Fourie et al. (2024) studied the impact of the pandemic specifically on informal traders in Cape Town that served the tourist market. The authors highlighted the plight, but also the resilience displayed by informal traders selling arts and crafts to tourists in Cape Town's CBD. However, we did not find South African literature that focussed on the distinction between migrant and local informal traders in the tourism – hence the contribution of our study's focus. To this end we use resilience theory and aspects of survival theories – as discussed in the next subsection.

#### **2.4. Resilience theory as the theoretical framework**

Within a socio-ecological systems (SES) context, resilience (defined and grounded within the work of Holling (1973)) is the ability to self-organise, learn, adapt and innovate in response to changing circumstances (Folke, 2006; Prayag, 2023). A useful definition of resilience, provided by Biggs et al. (2012, p. 646), is: '... the ability of a system to maintain and adapt its essential structure and function in the face of disturbance while maintaining its identity'.

Ecological resilience goes hand in hand with social resilience. The latter refers to the ability of a community or group to withstand exogenous shocks and instabilities in the face of uncertainty, while keeping its essential features and identity intact (Adger, 2000; Biggs et al., 2012).

An important element of resilience theory is that it acknowledges the existence of uncertainty relating to the impacts of global change and the complex and dynamic ways in which people, organisations and society respond to these impacts (Biggs et al., 2012). This makes resilience a useful pillar in a study of this nature because global shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic follow an unpredictable trajectory (Biggs et al., 2012). Therefore, different individuals (and hypothetically different groupings such as migrants and locals) adopt different strategies to mitigate the uncertainty that they face when trying to build resilience (Van Breda, 2018). In an informal trading context, these often manifest as survival strategies – which can prove to be the difference between business continuity and collapse.

Resilience and survival strategies are even more important in informal tourism-gearred enterprises considering that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are known to be disproportionately affected in periods of protracted economic crisis due to their (often) limited financial resources (Bourletidis & Triantafyllopoulos, 2014). Additionally, their relatively limited technological and managerial capabilities and human capacity may further reduce their ability to survive a crisis (Bourletidis & Triantafyllopoulos, 2014). Many informal traders fall into this category. They operate on the margins of the economy and have limited financial resources to fall back on, putting them in a very precarious position. This raises the question of what survival strategies are theoretically and practically at their disposal during times of crisis.

Hofer (1980) identified several generic survival strategies which became the foundation of the discourse on firms' strategic attempts to overcome challenges during periods of economic crisis. Two of these strategies have relevance for entrepreneurship, i.e. alternative revenue generation and product/market refocusing (Hofer, 1980).

Hobfoll (2001) proposed conservation of resources, to help explain SMEs' reaction to economic crises. Doern (2017) suggests that most small businesses rely on their existing social resources, including networks of friends and family, for support when faced by an economic crisis. Furthermore,

to keep their businesses going, they will mobilise their existing economic resources, including personal savings; and invoke various personal attributes, e.g. inner strength, self-determination and/or self-belief, in the drive to stay afloat (Doern, 2017).

This study also contributes to this emerging literature, using the methodology as described next.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research design and method

A concurrent mixed-methods research approach, underpinned by a pragmatic philosophy allowed for the integration of both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain insights into the challenges faced by informal street traders and the impact thereof on their livelihoods, as well as their resilience and business survival strategies.

#### 3.2. Study population

The data were gathered from informal traders (street vendors) operating in the tourism sector in Durban in KwaZulu-Natal, Cape Town in the Western Cape and the greater Johannesburg area straddling Gauteng and the North-West province (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

#### 3.3. Sampling and measurement instruments

##### 3.3.1. Qualitative interviews

A process of purposive sampling was employed from September 2022 to March 2023 during which time a total of 35 (11 in Durban and 12 each in Cape Town and Johannesburg) successful interviews were conducted across the three locations.



Figure 1. Study locations in South Africa. Source: Google Earth (2024).

The interview guide was designed to elicit answers to open-ended questions, encouraging participants to share their perspectives, insights and lived experiences surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). The questions focused specifically on how the informal tourism traders coped during the pandemic. The authors conducted the interviews, which were recorded using a recording device and each lasted no more than 30 minutes.

### **3.3.2. Quantitative questionnaires**

The total population of informal traders selling tourist items in this study was 521 (226, 195 and 100 in Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg, respectively). With a confidence level of 99%, a sample size of 285 was required for the quantitative surveys. Similar to the interviews, purposive sampling was employed from September 2022 to March 2023 during which time a total of 363 completed questionnaires were successfully obtained from the three locations.

In Durban, 136 questionnaires were collected between 26 and 29 September 2022. In Cape Town, 143 questionnaires were collected between 13 and 17 November 2022. In the greater Johannesburg area, 84 questionnaires were collected between 8 and 19 March 2023.

The questionnaire had three sections, each section focusing on different aspects of the study. The first section was designed to gather demographic details, including gender, year of birth, education, nationality, tenure as an informal entrepreneur, prior work experience, business permits, gross income, product offerings and clientele. The second section comprised statements that respondents had to rank, using a three-point Likert scale. These statements related to motives, business decisions and resilience. The statements relating to resilience were based on the Conner – Richardson Resilience Scale, which consists of 10 items, while the statements relating to business decisions were adapted from Szivas (2001), Skuras et al. (2005), Kim and Shim (2018), and Zhao et al. (2011). The third section of the questionnaire probed the specific impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the respondents and their businesses.

Trained fieldworkers' interviewer-administered the questionnaires in all three locations, and each questionnaire took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

## **3.4. Statistical analysis**

### **3.4.1. Qualitative data analysis**

Each interview was fully transcribed from the interview recordings and field notes. These transcriptions, together with the collected data, were consolidated into a dataset in Microsoft Excel. Following the guidelines of Guest et al. (2012), thematic analysis was performed to identify, analyse and describe relevant themes in the dataset.

### **3.4.2. Quantitative data analysis**

The data gathered from the questionnaires were pooled and analysed using descriptive statistics (means, frequencies) for the full sample. The differences between South African citizens and foreign traders operating in South Africa were explored using the independent sample t-statistic. The effect sizes were calculated using Glass's delta which considers different group sizes and standard errors. All analyses were completed using SPSS.

## **4. Results**

The results from the qualitative interviews are firstly analysed before turning attention to the quantitative results.

## 4.1. Qualitative data analysis

### 4.1.1. Demographic and business characteristics

The findings discussed below contain the standard demographic and business characteristics of the respondents. Regarding the interviews that were conducted, 17 (48.57%) of the respondents were female and 18 (51.42%) were male. The majority (74.28%) of interviewees hailed from other African countries, such as Zimbabwe, Malawi, Kenya, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Eswatini. A significant number of South African traders were found in Durban, while in Cape Town and Johannesburg, most respondents were from other African countries. Those who reported being from other African countries had been residing in South Africa for an average of 13 years. All respondents indicated that they cared for children, grandchildren and other family members. Additionally, all respondents from other African countries stated that they sent remittances back to their home countries.

The interviews that were conducted provided valuable insights into the descriptive aspects of the respondents' businesses. Just over 50% of the respondents reported that they had had no prior formal employment, relying solely on the informal entrepreneurial environment for their income. The products offered by the respondents showed some variation. In Durban, the traders mainly sold beadwork, with female traders even engaging in beading during the interviews. Interestingly, in Durban, some respondents had transitioned from selling tourist items to beachwear.

In Cape Town and Johannesburg, the products on offer by the respondents included traditional African masks, paintings, woodwork, leather products, stone statues, woven baskets, wire products and beadwork. The majority of respondents (57.14%) indicated that they personally made the products they sold. The remaining respondents sourced their products from Mozambique and West Africa. It was noted that respondents were operating at between 40% and 50% of their capacity in the pre-Covid period. One of the respondents from Durban reported being unable to replenish stock because of limited income, which only covered food and transportation costs, and therefore facing the problem of dwindling inventory.

### 4.1.2. Thematic analysis

The in-depth interviews confirmed the damaging effects that the COVID-19 pandemic had had on the livelihoods of the informal street traders in South Africa's three main tourist destinations. The thematic analysis of the effects of COVID-19 and how these informal tourism entrepreneurs survived revealed a number of broad themes and codes, which are summarised in [Table 1](#).

**4.1.2.1. Theme 1: Resilience.** Resilience emerged as a key theme in the interviews. This concept, central to resilience theory, highlights the capacity of individuals and systems to absorb shocks, adapt and innovate in response to changing circumstances (Folke, 2006; Prayag, 2023). A notable finding was that respondents had diversified their product offerings to cater for the local market in reaction to the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach was common among both South Africans and foreign traders. For example, a trader from Keyna in Johannesburg started selling clothes in addition to crafts, demonstrating market refocusing, a strategy identified by Hofer (1980) as crucial for business survival.

Besides diversifying their product offerings, there was a strong desire to return to work as soon as possible after the pandemic. One respondent from Eswatini in Cape Town shared, 'As soon as they said we can start working, I came back'. Similarly, a respondent from Zimbabwe in Johannesburg began trading as soon as he could in 2020, despite slow business. They expressed their commitment to trade every day of the week, regardless of the weather conditions. One respondent from Malawi in South Africa said, 'Right throughout the year, even when winter, raining, storming or what, we are here'. It appeared that some foreign traders were more eager to return to work as they had no other sources of income, unlike some South African traders who indicated they had access to government

**Table 1.** Broad themes emerging from the thematic analysis.

Theme 1	<b>Resilience</b> T1-1: Diverse product offering T1-2: Early start up after COVID T1-3: Adaptability T1-4: Sense of community
Theme 2	<b>Adverse effects of Covid</b> T2-1: Income T2-1 No customers T2-3 Remittances T2-4 Less traders
Theme 3	<b>Survival strategies</b> T3-1 Savings T3-2 Additional employment T3-3 Family and community T3-4 Religion

Source: Authors' own compilation.

grants. This quick resumption reflects their determination to rebuild their businesses and recover from the losses incurred during the pandemic.

The resilience of the respondents was also evident in their adaptability with regards to payment facilities. As one respondent from Harare in Cape Town remarked, 'I am an organised businessman, if you do not have cash, I have a machine'. Furthermore, a sense of community could be detected among the respondents. Traders had developed a strong bond and supported and looked after one another, such as by sharing the use and costs of an electronic payment device. This signalled that they understood that they were all on a challenging journey together – striving to make a living so that they could provide for their families. This community support and mutual aid underscore Adger's (2000) concept of social resilience, where communities withstand external shocks while maintaining core functions.

**4.1.2.2. Theme 2: Adverse effects of COVID.** In sharing their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic in the interviews, traders highlighted the fact that it was not only the travel bans that affected them but also the closure of all beaches in South Africa in an attempt to limit the spread of the Delta variant of COVID-19 in 2021. This had had a significant impact, as it not only restricted international tourists but also prevented locals from visiting the beaches during the popular summer holiday period. Traders in Durban reported that by the end of 2022, tourists had not yet returned. They described the noticeable decline in tourist activity and how they had previously been greeted by tour buses with tourists from countries like Italy, Spain, Germany and the United States. Traders in Cape Town and Johannesburg explained that the situation had improved since 2020, but it was still not the same as the pre-Covid period.

The interviews emphasised how difficult it was for informal traders during the pandemic, particularly in 2020 and 2021 when international tourist numbers dropped dramatically. As one South African respondent in Durban lamented, 'The locals they try to support us, but it is not the same as the international tourists'. The weak tourist numbers were a persistent concern, even towards the end of 2022. As one respondent from Malawi in Durban shared, 'I don't know when the tourists will be back'. Similarly, a respondent in Johannesburg stated, 'The tourists are coming back slowly but surely, but they also don't have that much money to spend because they have also been through a lot'. This aligns with Fourie et al. (2024), who explored the impact of the pandemic on the livelihoods of street traders in Cape Town and highlighted the severe decline in tourist activity. The decline in domestic and international tourism had a significant impact on their income, for instance a respondent in Cape Town highlighted the stark difference in daily earnings, noting, 'Before COVID, I would make up to R2000 (110\$), and now it is only R100 (5\$) a day' This reduction in income was a common experience among many traders, who reported operating at significantly reduced capacities compared to pre-pandemic levels.



Lower income levels also disrupted the foreign traders' ability to send remittances back to their home countries. A respondent from Cape Town, who used to send money home every second month, could not send any money during the pandemic and only managed to send funds once in 2022. Another trader, who regularly sent R500 weekly to his family in Malawi, could no longer afford to do so. He shared, 'Now I cannot send money at all'. These disruptions strained their familial relationships and financial obligations back home. The challenges faced by these traders are consistent with the broader literature on the impact of economic crises on informal sector participants (Adams et al., 2013).

Another concerning aspect that emerged from the interviews was the dwindling number of traders operating in the industry, implying that some may have left due to the pandemic's impact. As most informal traders were from other African countries, they may have left South Africa altogether. However, even in Durban, where most traders were South African, the situation was similar. One respondent in Johannesburg stated, 'There is a lot less stalls, there was no discount or leeway in terms of paying rent'. As a result, many traders chose to give up their stalls and try to find another job or way to survive. 'So, they are not back, and they are not coming back'.

**4.1.2.3. Theme 3: Survival Strategies.** Throughout the interviews, it became evident that informal traders had adopted various mitigation strategies to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic. One common approach was to diversify their product offerings to cater to local customers, a strategy identified by Hofer (1980). However, many traders had to rely on their savings to navigate the financial difficulties brought by the pandemic, highlighting the precarious financial situations they faced, aligning with Hobfoll's (2001) Conservation of Resources Theory, which explains how individuals strive to retain, protect and build resources in times of crisis.

Another a key theme that emerged was traders' profound reliance on their spiritual beliefs or religion. Respondents from Malawi and South Africa in Durban, Malawi and Zimbabwe in Cape Town, and Zimbabwe and Malawi in Johannesburg all echoed the reliance on spiritual beliefs. Statements such as 'I have hope, it will get better', 'God helped us to get through this' and 'It is only by the grace of God that we survived' were frequently heard, reinforcing how traders' resilience and unwavering faith functioned as a pillar of strength during trying times were noted.

Family and community support were also vital survival strategies. A South African respondent from Durban received food from her father during the pandemic, while a respondent from Malawi in Cape Town relied on food donations from churches. A respondent from Kenya in Johannesburg shared how local white farmers brought food to their community, saying, 'We are thanking God for them because otherwise, we do not know how we would have survived'. This community spirit and mutual support helped many traders endure the tough times. The importance of social capital in providing support during crises has been highlighted by Trupp (2015) and Cakmak et al., (2019), and Cakmak et al., (2018), who found that strong community relations and a solid group identity play a significant role in the resilience of informal participants.

To supplement their income, some traders took up day labour or piece jobs. A respondent from Zambia in Durban worked at a friend's warehouse, while a respondent from Zimbabwe in Cape Town found piece jobs to survive and support his family. These additional jobs provided much-needed income, even if temporarily, to help traders get through the pandemic.

## **4.2. Quantitative data analysis**

The quantitative data analysis aims to delve deeper into the themes of resilience, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on informal traders, and the survival strategies they employed, with a specific focus on differences between migrant and South African traders.

#### 4.2.1. *Trader demographics and business description*

The average age of the respondents was 44 years, with 55.2% of respondent's female. Most respondents (93.1%) were either single or married. Overall, more than 60% of respondents had some, or had completed their, secondary school education, with 13.8% having a post-school qualification.

Regarding the origin of the respondents, less than half of the respondents were South African. Respondents in Durban were mainly South African and respondents in Cape Town were mainly from other African countries, while respondents in Johannesburg showed a more even distribution in terms of their origin. Particularly noteworthy was the large percentage of traders from East and West Africa in Cape Town, while Zimbabwean traders were the dominant group in Johannesburg. These foreign traders had been in South Africa for a considerable period (an average of 14.8 years).

The respondents had an average of five dependants who relied on the income earned from their entrepreneurial activities. Most respondents (67%) were the only income earner in their family and their informal businesses therefore provided the livelihoods for their families and/or dependants.

The questionnaires also revealed the informal traders' former employment and business activities. Prior to starting their informal business, only 47.5% of respondents were formally employed. These results are similar to those for studies on other informal occupations, such as day labouring, where just over 50% of respondents had previously had formal employment (Theodore et al., 2017) in occupations such as teacher, cleaner, waiter, bartender, cashier, salesperson, police officer, engineer, pharmacist and bookkeeper.

Some 76.5% of respondents had a business permit and had been informal traders for more than 14 years on average. Most of the respondents in Durban did not employ people to assist them in their businesses; however, respondents in Johannesburg and Cape Town, employed one person on average.

The average monthly income of the informal traders was approximately R11 000 (€550), with traders in Johannesburg earning significantly more than those in Cape Town and Durban. While many traders had more than one product for sale, the main products on offer were craft products (63.3% of all merchandise), clothing and fabric (48.3%) and art (39.4%). The Durban-based traders often had a greater variety of products for sale, i.e. clothes, crafts and art, with traders in Cape Town and Johannesburg (by comparison) generally being more specialised in the products they offered.

Owing to the diversity of products offered, their origins varied. Some were locally produced, and others were imported. It is noteworthy that, overall, most traders (53.3%) obtained their products in the city where they traded (i.e. locally sourced). Foreign tourists represented the main market for the traders, although the traders in Durban have a much larger domestic tourist clientele (38.6%), than traders in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

#### 4.2.2. *Resilience*

The 10-item Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale was used to assess the resilience of the informal traders. Nartova-Bochaver et al. (2021) found this scale to have a high level of reliability, with a Cronbach alpha of 0.84. In the current study's sample, the reliability coefficient was lower, at 0.56. However, similar to Nartova-Bochaver et al. (2021), the reliability could not be improved by deleting any of the items on the scale. One possible explanation for the lower resilience was that a three-point Likert scale was used in this study.

The means of the resilience items are summarised in Table 2. The informal traders showed high levels of resilience, with the highest scores going to adaptability to change, not being easily discouraged and perceiving themselves to be strong individuals. There were significant differences between migrant traders and South African traders in their (i) adaptability to change, with South Africans viewing themselves as significantly more adaptable than migrants; (ii) handling of unpleasant feelings, with migrants appearing to be significantly better at this; (iii) coping with stress, and (iv) achieving their goals despite obstacles, with the migrants showing significantly ( $p < 0.1$ ) better resilience – both in (iii) and (iv) – than South African informal traders. The effect sizes, however, were quite small.

**Table 2.** Resilience of the informal traders.

	Mean	Migrants	South Africans	Effect size
I am able to adapt to change.	2.94 (0.279)	2.91 (0.350)**	2.97 (0.209)**	0.073
I can deal with whatever comes.	2.90 (0.365)	2.91 (0.369)	2.90 (0.351)	0.011
I try to see the humorous side of problems.	2.78 (0.580)	2.80 (0.551)	2.75 (0.608)	-0.048
Coping with stress can strengthen me.	2.75 (0.597)	2.80 (0.516)*	2.68 (0.685)*	0.071
I tend to bounce back after illness or hardship.	2.90 (0.394)	2.89 (0.405)	2.91 (0.369)	0.003
I can achieve goals despite obstacles.	2.92 (0.359)	2.95 (0.275)*	2.89 (0.436)*	0.016
I can stay focused under pressure.	2.87 (0.411)	2.88 (0.428)	2.86 (0.458)	0.070
I am not easily discouraged by failure.	2.93 (0.302)	2.92 (0.323)	2.94 (0.275)	0.043
I think of myself as a strong person.	2.93 (0.321)	2.93 (0.304)	2.93 (0.345)	0.022
I can handle unpleasant feelings.	2.85 (0.467)	2.89 (0.354)**	2.78 (0.606)**	0.082

Source: Compiled by authors.

Notes: Standard deviations in parentheses; \*\*\* =  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* =  $p < 0.05$ ; \* =  $p < 0.1$ ; effect sizes determined by Glass's delta.

The commendable resilience and adaptability displayed by these traders, which was evident in their ability to withstand the onslaught of COVID-19 and resume their trade, is reflected in the high score of 2.878. However, while such a high level of resilience is encouraging, De Villiers (2021) emphasises that the long-term sustainability of informal trading ventures hinges on various external factors – notably, the availability of government support during economic crises.

#### 4.2.3. Effects of COVID-19 and informal trader survival strategies

When COVID-19 took hold, the South African government imposed various travel restrictions, affecting both international and domestic tourists, to curb the spread of the virus. With the later discovery of the beta and then omicron variants of the virus in South Africa, travel bans continued until mid-2022. To assess how these bans affected the informal traders, they were asked to rate how their businesses had been affected during 2020, 2021 and 'currently' (the latter defined as the period between the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023) on a four-point scale ranging from 'not affected' to 'strongly affected'.

Generally, traders reported that during 2020 their businesses had been strongly affected, with 94.7% of both migrant and South African traders respectively choosing the 'strongly affected' category. The scores for 2021 remained high, indicating that traders' businesses had remained strongly affected by the pandemic (89.5% of South African traders and 82.7% of migrant traders). By the end of 2022/beginning of 2023, the situation has changed, especially for South African traders ( $t = 3.282$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Only 30% of South African traders indicated they were still moderately to strongly affected two years after the pandemic, compared to 47% of foreign traders.

To obtain a more complete picture of the difficulties faced by the informal traders during the pandemic, their concerns about (i) access to products, (ii) access to customers and (iii) difficult trading conditions, were also probed. The overwhelming majority (96.5%) of traders stated that access to domestic supplies was a constraint, while 95% stated that access to imported goods was a constraint. On aggregate, 81.8% indicated that they had experienced difficult trading conditions.

The main factors that could potentially have affected the informal traders' businesses were assessed on a three-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = 'no effect' to 3 = 'severe effect'. The mean figures are reported in Table 3 along with the differences between South African and migrant traders from elsewhere in Africa. The effect sizes are also reported, as determined by Glass's delta.

The main factors affecting the business operations of informal traders were (i) temporary shut-down of their business due to the lockdowns; (ii) reduced income; (iii) reduced hours of trade; and (iv) reduced logistical services. Employee absence, deaths or liquidation of suppliers and reduced business operations due to layoff of employees created only mild disturbances in the business operations of informal traders. It is evident that the lockdown restrictions had the most severe impact on their businesses. This is consistent with the findings of Fourie et al. (2024), who highlighted the severe impact of COVID-19 restrictions on informal traders in Cape Town.

**Table 3.** Factors affecting informal traders' businesses during COVID-19.

	Sample mean	South Africans	Migrants	Effect size
(i) Temporary shutdown of business	2.89 (0.424)	2.87 (0.469)	2.91 (0.388)	-0.088
(ii) Employee absence due to sickness	2.16 (0.961)	1.78 (0.957)***	2.45 (0.863)***	-0.768
(iii) Reduced logistics services	2.84 (0.482)	2.95 (0.264)***	2.77 (0.582)***	0.305
(iv) Reduced hours to trade	2.88 (0.422)	2.97 (0.212)***	2.81 (0.514)***	0.323
(v) Reduced income	2.89 (0.417)	2.96 (0.232)***	2.84 (0.506)***	0.244
(vi) Caused the layoff of employees	2.22 (0.952)	1.85 (0.975)***	2.48 (0.843)***	-0.746
(vii) Loss in customers	2.66 (0.743)	2.45 (0.887)***	2.81 (0.576)***	-0.620
(viii) Death/shutdown of craft/product suppliers	2.16 (0.973)	2.04 (0.999)**	2.26 (0.946)**	-0.231

Source: Compiled by authors.

Notes: Standard deviations in parenthesis; \*\*\* =  $p < 0.01$  \*\* =  $p < 0.05$ ; \* =  $p < 0.1$ ; effect sizes determined by Glass's delta.

Almost all factors were viewed differently by migrant traders, who experienced significantly more severe effects from employee layoffs and absenteeism (with a high-effect size), loss in customer base (with a high-effect size) and death or closure of suppliers' businesses (with a medium-effect size). South Africans, in contrast, encountered significantly more severe (with a medium-effect size) business interruptions due to reduced logistical services, and reduced trading hours and income.

Since changing location and product offering are often viewed as survival strategies, the respondents were asked whether they used these strategies firstly, with a yes-no answer. Many traders did not consider such strategies. Only 14.1% of migrant traders and 9.6% local traders moved location during the pandemic to attract other markets. In addition, only 10.6% of local traders changed their product offerings, compared to 22.4% of migrants ( $t = 2.457$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). This aligns with the findings of Cakmak et al., (2018), who observed that informal entrepreneurs often adapt their strategies based on their immediate environment and available opportunities.

To determine which strategies the informal traders mainly used to survive, the difficult circumstances created by the pandemic, and the changes required to their business orientation and strategies, as described in the literature review, were assessed using a three-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = 'never' to 3 = 'always'. The average scores are reported in Table 4, with significant differences highlighted.

The strategy most frequently followed was to temporarily reduce the number of employees, followed by the laying off employees permanently. Using promotions and taking out loans were the least popular strategies that informal traders followed. Having said that, only 40.4% of the traders indicated that they always followed a temporary reduction strategy, while 28.6% indicated that they always tended to lay off workers permanently. On aggregate, 11.1% of traders always took out loans, while only 9.9% relied on grants to sustain themselves during the pandemic. This is not particularly surprising, since the grants and other assistance that were offered to the tourism industry in South Africa were inadequate and often targeted formal instead of informal businesses. This observation is supported by the work of Fourie et al. (2024), who highlighted the lack of sufficient government support for informal traders during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 4.** Survival strategies followed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

	Sample mean	South Africans	Migrants	Effect size
Temporarily reduced employment	1.91 (0.946)	1.55 (0.820)***	2.17 (0.947)***	-0.663
Laid off employees	1.68 (0.891)	1.35 (0.685)***	1.91 (0.951)***	-0.587
Lent employees to other businesses	1.37 (0.743)	1.18 (0.526)***	1.52 (0.843)***	-0.399
Worked at different locations	1.49 (0.826)	1.35 (0.744)***	1.60 (0.869)***	-0.287
Took out loans	1.27 (0.655)	1.19 (0.564)**	1.33 (0.711)**	-0.203
Switched to a different product offering	1.53 (0.854)	1.38 (0.751)***	1.64 (0.910)***	-0.285
Started sourcing new suppliers	1.50 (0.834)	1.36 (0.746)***	1.61 (0.882)***	-0.283
Ran promotions	1.26 (0.625)	1.17 (0.518)**	1.32 (0.689)**	-0.218
Relied on grants	1.60 (0.891)	2.11 (0.971)***	1.21 (0.586)***	1.525

Source: Compiled by authors.

Notes: Standard deviations in parenthesis; \*\*\* =  $p < 0.01$  \*\* =  $p < 0.05$ ; \* =  $p < 0.1$ ; effect sizes determined by Glass's delta.

There were significant differences between the strategies followed by migrant traders and South African traders respectively. Not surprisingly, South African traders relied significantly more (with a large-effect size) on grants than foreigners to sustain themselves throughout the pandemic. This reliance on grants by local traders aligns with the findings of De Villiers (2021), who noted that government support during the economic crises often targeted formal and local businesses more effectively than informal and migrant traders.

Migrants indicated that they were more likely to use all the other strategies, but from the effect sizes it was evident that there were large differences in strategies relating to employees, in particular. Migrant traders were much more likely than South African traders to lay off employees temporarily or permanently and to lend employees to other businesses. Besides cutting their personnel costs, they were also willing to experiment more with different locations, products and suppliers. Some of the products that the traders switched to included masks (28.2% of traders offering new products), fruit and vegetables (23.1%), new and second-hand clothes (15.4%), and cigarettes and weed (5.1%). Altogether, 12.8% of those who offered new products simply expanded their arts and craft product ranges to offer a wider variety. This willingness to diversify product offerings aligns with the findings of Cakmak et al. (2018), who observed that informal traders often adapt their business models to respond to changing market demand and opportunities.

## 5. Implications and Conclusion

This research explored the nature and extent of the challenges and the resilience brought about by the recent pandemic on migrant and local informal street traders in the South African tourism industry. Through qualitative interviews, three themes were identified, namely (i) resilience, (ii) the adverse effects of the pandemic and (iii) survival strategies. These themes were further explored with a specific focus on differences between migrant and local traders. Firstly, the resilience demonstrated by these informal traders, migrant or South Africa, is commendable and the lived experiences of the traders are confirmed by the results from Connor-Davidson scale. *Resilience*, as their ability to adapt, diversity and support underscores the importance of resilience in overcoming challenges. Resilience not only facilitated their swift recovery but also highlighted the critical role of community and innovation in sustaining informal trade during crises. This is an important finding, considering that informal-sector participants in South Africa are often judged to be passive and lacking in imagination. On the contrary, the study revealed the traders' ability to be adaptable and innovative.

Furthermore, the differences observed between migrant and South African traders in their resilience levels align with the literature on the role of social capital and community networks in enhancing resilience. Trupp (2015) and Cakmak et al. (2019) found that migrant traders often rely heavily on social networks for support, which can contribute to their ability to handle stress and achieve their goals. Theoretically, this implies that within the process of resilience it is evident that social capital and community networks play an integral role in mediating the effects of adverse events and fostering resilience.

Secondly, the pandemic brought informal tourism trade to a standstill, severely affecting the livelihoods of traders. All aspects of their informal business were affected, underscoring the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on informal traders in South Africa. The lived experiences of the traders put the significant challenges they faced in perspective and align with existing literature on the vulnerability of informal sector participants in time of crisis (Biggs et al., 2012; De Villiers, 2021; Fourie et al., 2024). On almost all business-related aspects, migrants were more affected than South Africans. This distinction between the experience of migrant and local traders is supported by Adams et al. (2013) and Gumede and Moyo (2023), who noted that migrant traders often face additional challenges due to their migrant status and lack of access to formal support systems. From a sustainability perspective, additional support also to migrant workers in times of crisis can improve the future resilience of the tourism industry.

Thirdly, the results revealed that the informal traders had to re-strategise by diversifying into new products or markets, and/or find additional sources of finance to compensate for a significant drop in income. The interviews revealed that informal traders employed a range of mitigation strategies to navigate the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These strategies collectively underscore the traders' adaptability and determination to survive during a crisis, echoing the broader literature on resilience in the informal sector (Biggs et al., 2012; Prayag, 2023). The quantitative results indicated that it was especially migrant traders that thought creatively about their business strategy. This behaviour is consistent with the findings of Adams et al. (2013) and Gumedde and Moyo (2023), who noted that migrant entrepreneurs often adopt more flexible and adaptive strategies to cope with economic uncertainties.

Although it was heartening that the informal traders participating in the study had the strength of character and resolve to persist in the face of hardship, their businesses will only really have an opportunity to grow and become sustainable if they are given proper attention at the policy level as well as various forms of practical support. It is evident that the informal tourism sector is here to stay and is playing an important role in providing jobs not only to the proprietors, but also in the form of employment for others and through local product sourcing. Recognition of this importance is the first step towards crafting a policy to support informal traders in developing economies. Foreign traders are often neglected; however, our results show that they are more likely to employ others to assist with their business when they are travelling home. From this perspective, negligence of their importance (by offering no support) also signals a disregard for the important part they play in offering employment and on-the-job-training in countries that struggle with high and persistent levels of unemployment.

It is also noteworthy that many of the traders are in possession of business permits, which already indicates a form of commitment and also the desire to be recognised for their contribution to the economy in this continuum of formality. From the differences in responses observed above, it is evident that skills do matter, with more educated traders being more creative in their strategies to mitigate crises. Although the traders already possess some form of business skills, additional training could go a long way in strengthening their hands to ensure that informal tourism businesses can indeed become sustainable.

This study paves the way for more in-depth research on the challenges and coping skills of the informal sector in South Africa when confronted by major disruptions (which are becoming more frequent in today's complex world). For example, future studies could focus on other sectors (besides tourism), and other locations and sample sizes. Studies of this nature could play a valuable role in informing government policy on the informal sector which, though a key contributor to the economy, is largely misunderstood and neglected.

## Notes

1. Wikipedia defines a spaza shop as an informal convenience shop business in South Africa, usually run from home.
2. The aim of the project was explained to participants and no incentives were provided for participation. All participation was voluntary, and the respondent could stop at any time he/she wished to. No names were recorded and therefore no response can be linked to a respondent. A copy of the informed consent form given to the participants is available from the authors on request.

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