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The Role of the Petroleum Franchise Ecosystem Actors in Providing Business Support for HDSA Franchisees

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ABSTRACT

Petroleum retail franchising plays a significant role in the South African economy. Despite the implementation of government policy regimes, this continues to be a complex industry for historically disadvantaged South Africans (HDSA) to navigate. To understand the business support required for HDSA franchisees, the study adapts the entrepreneurial ecosystem model through the theoretical lens of Stewardship theory, positing that a collaborative stance between the franchisor and franchisee is more suitable for long-term survival. The qualitative study was conducted with 19 HDSA franchisees in South Africa (SA) through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed four main business support themes required by HDSA franchisees, which are (1) Franchisor Engagement, (2) Preparation, (3) Business Model Adaptability and (4) Employee Transition. Although the findings align with existing literature on franchise relationships, this study offers new insights by exploring the distinct South African context, particularly regarding employee transition dynamics within franchise units. Notably, the research reveals that contrary to the classical view of franchising as a low-risk entrepreneurial path, HDSA franchisees often face significant challenges. This study enriches the literature by highlighting the unique complexities of employee transitions during ownership changes in SA, identifying a critical gap in the current franchising research and practice. The franchise ecosystem approach has provided clarity on the key actors and how their roles can be leveraged to enhance the petroleum franchising sector.

1 | Introduction and Aim

South Africa (SA) has a well-established petroleum sector that contributes significantly to the country's economic development. In 2023, the sector reached 35 billion litres inclusive of exported volumes (SAPIA 2024). The oil industry's annual impact on the economic development of the country is R163 billion, which equates to 3.2% of SA's GDP; close to 250,000 jobs are created, and R94 billion is spent towards capital investment projects (SAPIA 2024).

An understanding of SA's petroleum industry enables a seamless transition into the scope of the research study, which focuses specifically on the fuel retail segment. The retail segment relates to service stations and includes branded and non-branded offerings. The segment contributed 23.7 billion rand towards GDP, and 39.7% of the total employment from the sector can be attributed to retail specifically (SAPIA 2024). It is clear why the South African government perceives the fuel retail franchise segment as a strategic tool to address the disparity in wealth status among the population. According to the latest SAPIA

(2024) report, the fuel sector continues to be a focal point for transformation efforts, with policy and industry stakeholders recognising the need for more effective support mechanisms for historically disadvantaged South Africans (HDSA) franchisees to ensure sustainable participation and growth.

Although SA's petroleum sector significantly contributes to the national economy, including substantial employment and GDP, the fuel retail segment faces challenges in creating sustainable opportunities for HDSA franchisees. Many franchisees lack the necessary support, which is crucial for their sustainability and success within the industry. This study aims to investigate the business support required by HDSA franchisees in SA's fuel retail sector. Additionally, it seeks to explore the role of ecosystem actors in fostering integrated partnerships that enhance business continuity and support transformation efforts towards greater inclusion of HDSA franchisees.

This article is organised as follows: Section 2 covers the theoretical frameworks and relevant literature; Section 3 details the research methodology; Section 4 considers the ethical implications; Section 5 presents the findings and discussion; and Section 6 concludes the article, highlights limitations and offers suggestions for future research.

2 | Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

2.1 | Theoretical Framework

Agency theory provides a useful framework to research franchise business models (Dada 2021; Hizam Bin Hanafiah et al. 2022; Jang and Park 2019). The predominant reason is that the relationship structure between the franchisor and franchisee entails an element of control by the principal, being the franchisor, over the franchisee. The theory alludes to the principal and agent having individualistic motivations, which could coincide and result in no agency problem or diverge, which would lead to costly differences in behaviour (Bui et al. 2022; Raha and Hajdini 2020). In view of the current petroleum franchise landscape, the question arises as to whether Agency theory is best suited as an approach for ensuring franchisee business longevity.

In contrast, Stewardship theory looks at the principal and agent taking a more collective approach in that the goals and motivations outweigh individual benefit. The agent's behaviour is organisationally centred, and strong relationships built on trust are evident (Chrisman 2019; Davis et al. 1997). According to Hernandez (2012), Stewardship theory integrates elements from psychology and sociology, proposing that individuals form part of an organisation and deem prosocial behaviour as beneficial with a long-term view in comparison to a short-term, self-serving approach.

A typical view of franchising as a business stems towards Agency theory in that humans as rational actors seek to maximise self-interest given the opportunity (Davis et al. 1997; Hernandez 2012). However, applying a different perspective in that the appointed franchisee is not a manager dispatched by the larger organisation but rather an invested party in the business as the owner. This perspective provides a route to transition the approach towards Stewardship theory, which emphasises that relationship building and collaboration are critical in achieving a common goal. Consequently, the assumption generated is that both the franchisee and the franchisor align on a common goal of business success and continuity.

In the South African landscape, transformation in the petroleum industry is non-negotiable (Paelo et al. 2014). Franchisors aiming to defend or grow their market share need to adjust their franchising models to comply with these policy regimes. In stating this, Makiva et al. (2019) posited that HDSA franchisees require funding support, infrastructure, land and critical skills to sustain their entrepreneurial journey. The current franchise business model would need to adapt where both the franchisor and the HDSA franchisee take on a prosocial stance to align on one common organisational goal as opposed to viewing the relationship in terms of individual motivations.

In the review of both theories, what underpins the actions of the principal in Agency theory is the implementation of governance mechanisms to prohibit the agent's propensity to prioritise self (Madison 2014). However, with Stewardship theory, the principal behaves in a manner that creates a conducive environment for prosocial behaviour to occur (Madison 2014). The analysis of the theories leads to the selection of Stewardship theory as a foundation for this research study. This theory will guide the understanding of how stewardship can enable the franchise ecosystem towards a collaborated approach with the actors identified through the research.

2.2 | Fuel Retail Franchising in SA

The study focuses on the petroleum industry within the South African economy, with a lens on examining the franchising model, which is both complex and regulated. The complexity beyond the business can be drawn from the governmental compliance controls with respect to ownership and environmental regulation.

To increase the representation of HDSA franchisees in the fuel retailing sector, the government instituted three primary regimes to regulate the operations: (1) licensing for the sale of petroleum products, (2) petroleum compliance and (3) regulated petroleum pricing (Makiva et al. 2019). The petroleum licensing requirement has a substantial impact on fuel retailing; without a licence, a retailer is prohibited from selling petroleum products (Paelo et al. 2014). To obtain a fuel retail licence, the applicant must demonstrate how an HDSA individual will be incorporated into the business plan, particularly if an HDSA candidate is not the sole or majority shareholder of the operating entity (Makiva et al. 2019).

However, even with the government's policy initiatives aimed at prioritising distributed economic ownership within the sector, inclusivity remains insufficient. Klinger (2022) and Makiva et al. (2019) posit that upfront franchise finance requirements hinder inclusivity and lead to a less distributed ownership structure in the market. There are financial lending bodies that operate specifically to support these types of business ventures, like the National Energy Fund (NEF) and the Small Business Finance Agency

(SEFA); however, the process to obtain funding is prolonged and not always successful.

Even with the complexity of the SA petroleum franchise sector, at the core of the franchise model is the relationship between the franchisor and franchisee. The franchise business model is dependent on the relationship between the franchisor and the franchisee due to the general structure of the agreements in place (Gorovaia 2019; Hizam Bin Hanafiah et al. 2022) and resources that each partner brings into the partnership (Bui et al. 2022).

2.3 | The Franchise Relationship

Business franchising is seen as a popular entrepreneurship method and has increased over the years due to the perception of being a low-risk venture in comparison to other business models (Bretas and Alon 2021; Bui et al. 2022). This relationship is governed by a legal contract covering the mutual obligation from the franchisor and franchisee (Parker et al. 2018). The franchisee requires support through the franchisor's set capabilities within the market (Dube et al. 2020; Hizam Bin Hanafiah et al. 2022; Varotto and Aureliano-Silva 2017), and the franchisor would expect the franchisee to operate the franchise unit with rigour for profitability and growth (Parker et al. 2018).

It is evident in current literature that there are key expectations borne between both role players (Fernández-Monroy et al. 2018; Gillis et al. 2020). The franchisor's expectation is built on the premise that the franchisee is buying into an established business model with a proven offer (Dube et al. 2020). The franchisor gives the franchisee licence to utilise the brand, which is linked to the intellectual property on which the business is founded (Bui et al. 2022; Ghani et al. 2022; Hizam Bin Hanafiah et al. 2022). In return, the franchisor expects compliance and efficiency with operational requirements attributed to the overall brand offering and business profitability (Dube et al. 2020).

The expectation in the perspective of the franchisee includes the maintenance of brand reputation in the market by the franchisor (Parker et al. 2018), clear communication, collaboration (Jang and Park 2019; Kang and Jindal 2018) and relevant business support (Adeiza et al. 2017). Conflicts may arise in the franchisor–franchisee relationship due to the franchisee's unrealistic expectations when joining the business and a lack of business experience (Jang and Park 2019; Prihandono et al. 2021). A breakdown due to unmet expectations would result in dissatisfaction in the relationship and an implication to drive personal motivations over a collective benefit (Prihandono et al. 2021).

A productive approach is to view the relationship with a long-term perspective (Hizam Bin Hanafiah et al. 2022). Gillis et al. (2020) and Jang and Park (2019) argue that the franchisor–franchisee relationship should not only be viewed through the lens of a contractual agreement but also as a strategic alliance. To establish a quality alliance or partnership, multiple researchers have postulated that building trust through communication is a necessary antecedent (Melo et al. 2021; Fernández-Monroy et al. 2018; Hizam Bin Hanafiah et al. 2022). The dynamics of the petroleum franchise industry require collaboration with other actors in the ecosystem to achieve long-term success.

2.4 | The Franchise Ecosystem

In recent years, the concept of the entrepreneurial ecosystem has gained popularity. It explores the opportunity of providing goods and services within a physical environment through integrated interactions (Stam and van de Ven 2019). Building on this idea, this research study aims to identify the franchise ecosystem actors within the fuel retailing industry in SA, considering that a franchisee is viewed as a type of entrepreneur (Parker et al. 2018).

The entrepreneurial ecosystem concept depends on the mutualistic interdependence among actors within the system that forms a cohesion of support towards individual or organisational goals (Cao and Shi 2020). Zulu-Chisanga et al. (2020) state that government support in looking at inter-firm integration is imperative to achieve success. This relates to the interplay between different actors within the ecosystem and the need for a principal to create these links to initiate the ecosystem. A clear directive through this study is for the franchisor to take up this mantle due to the failure of the government to establish the necessary support needed by these businesses to be sustainable (Muriithi 2017; Gbetchi and Perrigot 2025).

Figure 1 is a diagram by Stam and van de Ven (2019) on the process and elements needed to achieve productive entrepreneurship, which will be adapted as part of this study. The diagram provides the necessary foundation to guide the identification and the integration of elements to achieve a sustainable franchise business. The basis of the ecosystem is built on 10 key elements that fit into two main categories. The first category is institutional arrangements that encompass the preconditions to economic activities, which are formal institutions like government and informal institutions like culture and social networks (Stam and van de Ven 2019).

The second category is resource endowments, which include elements that enable key points of interaction to deliver outputs in the system, which are physical infrastructure, demand from customers, intermediaries like suppliers, talent and knowledge being human capital and education, leadership and finance (Stam and van de Ven 2019). Woolley (2017) asserts that the interdependence of the elements within each category is crucial for entrepreneurial success, which is evident in value created in the outputs.

The flow of the model indicated by P1–P3 illustrates how the resources and information are transferred between the layers and reintegrated into the system (Wurth et al. 2021). The interdependence of the various elements in the franchise ecosystem highlights how the actors in the process can enable a more fluid approach to franchising in the petroleum industry. However, there are key challenges and critical success factors that should be considered; this would have an impact on the support leveraged by the different actors in the ecosystem.

The challenges identified through literature that are experienced by franchisees encompass both the need for external resources and internal capabilities (Zulu-Chisanga et al. 2020). Recent literature has highlighted the increasing role of innovation and adaptability in the fuel retail sector. Hizam Bin Hanafiah et al. (2023) discuss how technological advancements and chang-

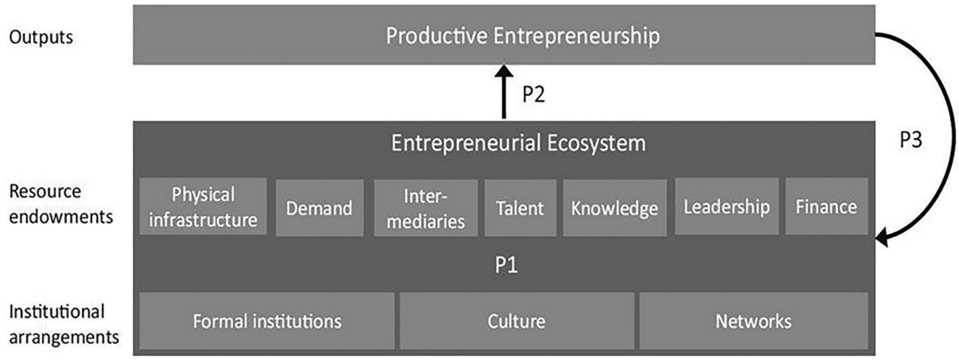

FIGURE 1 | Elements of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. *Source:* Stam and van de Ven (2019).

ing consumer preferences are reshaping operational dynamics, whereas Ghani et al. (2022) identify government support, product innovation and strong franchisor–franchisee relationships as key growth factors. These findings align with the need for more flexible and supportive franchise agreement models in SA (Sakoane 2024). A consensus on the insights covered in the literature draws on 'weak institutional structures coupled with human resource and financial constraints', building capacity and creating enabled opportunities, according to George et al. (2016), and Muriithi (2017) drew on 'electricity supply', 'access to financing', 'poor management', 'competency and capability' and 'government support'.

Ali and Johl (2022) stress that critical success factors enable firms to perform well, and therefore, businesses should identify and use these factors to create value. The value in identifying and implementing critical success factors within a business is attributed to optimising the decision-making process (de Resende et al. 2018). On the basis of the findings from their study, Hizam Bin Hanafiah et al. (2022) concluded that there are three categories of critical success factors that can be employed as enablers in the franchise space. The three categories are (1) franchisors' capability, (2) interconnection with franchisees and (3) constant innovation.

2.5 | Summary of the Research Study

The collaborated flow of the research study depicted in Figure 2 provides an overview of the different constructs considered in this research. The aim of this study is to identify through the research process who are the key actors relevant to HDSA franchisees in the petroleum franchise ecosystem, what is the range of challenges experienced by these franchises and to identify the critical success factors. These insights will provide guidance on what business support elements would enable the HDSA candidates to achieve continuity in the petroleum franchise industry.

3 | Research Methodology

The most recent evaluation by SAPIA (2024) indicates that SA[1] has a total of 4600 fuel service stations. The provinces with the highest number of service stations are Gauteng, Cape Town and KwaZulu-Natal, respectively (Kalibrate 2022). The population selection for this study will focus on HDSA candidates, being male or female, that fall within the race profile of African, Coloured or Indian.

An exploratory qualitative design was implemented to gather personal perspectives and experiences from the HDSA franchisees (Sutton and Austin 2015). Due to the nature of the study and the approach applied to obtain insights from HDSA franchisees in the fuel retailing industry, an inductive method has been carried out as this study aims to add to the current literary body of knowledge (Makri and Neely 2021).

The data for this study were collected through audio-recorded interviews that were conducted either face to face or online. There were 3 interviews completed in person and 16 were completed online; this was due to the availability of franchisees who were either from a province other than Gauteng or were travelling at the time. A total of 19 interviews were conducted for a duration of between 45 and 60 min. Each session was conducted, audio-recorded and transcribed in English. The data collection followed a cross-sectional design to allow for a focused study at a specific point in time that works well for finding initial evidence in a new area of inquiry (Spector 2019). The interviews were completed between July and September 2024. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide.

Non-probability purposive sampling was intentionally applied to select suitable HDSA franchisees for the interviews (Saunders and Lewis 2018). The predetermined criteria for the franchisee selection included: (1) The franchisee must fall in the HDSA individual classification. (2) The franchisee must have been currently appointed and operating a fuel retail service station. (3) The franchisee must be trading for a minimum of 3 months at the time of the interview. (4) The franchisee must be operating a service station with a fuel and convenience offer.

The study employed Braun and Clark's (2006) six-step thematic analysis process to interpret the data. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed, and the initial coding was ascertained from the unstructured data using the Atlas.ti software. The initial codes were grouped into categories that were similar, which led to the first set of themes. The researcher aligned the themes with the research objectives, which allowed for a second iteration of refinement where further collation of themes that overlapped were grouped, and insignificant themes were removed.

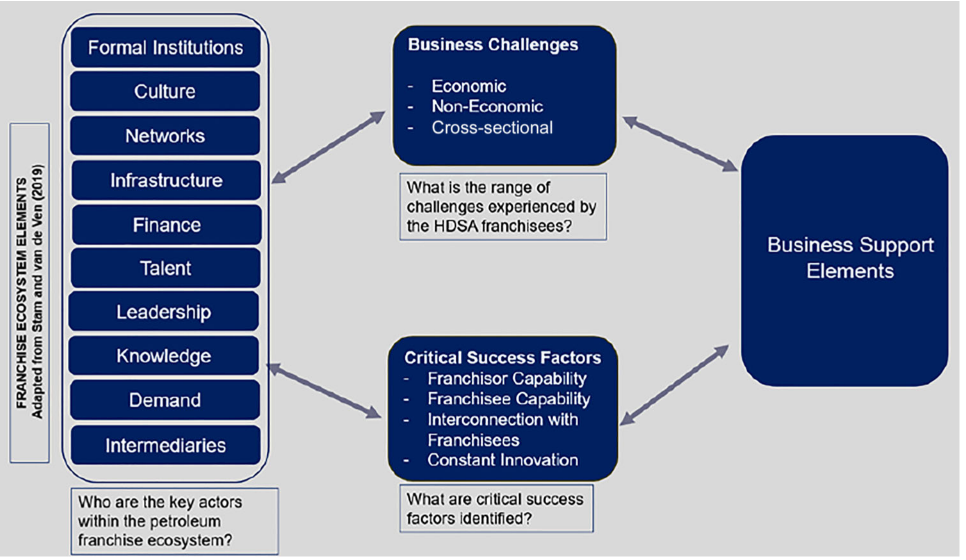

FIGURE 2 | Conceptual research model. *Source:* Compiled by author. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

4 | Findings and Discussion

4.1 | Overview

Table 1 provides a general summary for each interviewee. The table covers high-level demographic and operational specifics of the participants.

4.2 | Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis identified four key themes derived from the interview data, offering an in-depth understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by HDSA franchisees. These themes are (1) Franchisor Engagement, (2) Preparation, (3) Business Model Adaptability, which can be supported by existing literature, and (4) Employee Transition, a novel contribution to petroleum franchise literature.

4.2.1 | Franchisor Engagement

The first theme emerging from the data emphasised the franchisee's experience in relation to the franchisor's engagement. There is a clear dissatisfaction stemming from the franchisee's expectations in comparison to the realities encountered. This theme encapsulates two main codes, which are (1) Partnership and (2) Business Expertise, as seen in Figure 3.

4.2.1.1 | Franchisor Engagement: Partnership. The franchisees provided insight into the relationship dynamics based on their interactions with the franchisors. There are two prominent elements identified from the responses: (1) This is a one-sided relationship leaning towards the franchisee, who has control. (2) The franchisee expectation coming into this business is different from the reality of their position.

> Interviewee 8: The franchisor is literally God and is why it's so important that they are always operating in top form because when the system fails or not working, because of the nature of the arrangement all we can do is we merely implement their decisions. We are not able to take corrective measures and when things fail, we can only go complain to them.

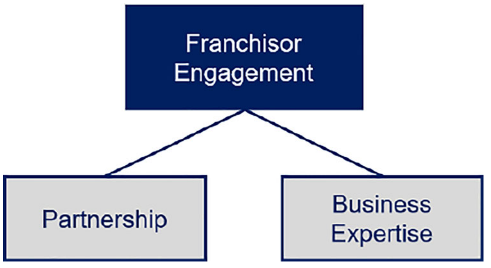

FIGURE 3 | Theme 1—Franchisor Engagement code diagram. *Source:* Compiled by author. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

> Interviewee 10: I thought it was a partnership I was coming into. There is no partnership. It's a dictatorship.

The responses from Interviewees 8 and 10 suggest that the current relationship in the fuel retailing sector aligns with an Agency theory approach, which is consistent with a traditional theoretical lens in this domain (Dada 2021; Hizam Bin Hanafiah et al. 2022; Jang and Park 2019). The responses highlight the tight controls in place and the rigidity of the franchisors processes in trying to obtain uniformity in the offer (Raha and Hajdini 2020), which is increasing negative perceptions of the franchisors.

> Interviewee 12: As a franchisee, if you win the franchisor also automatically win as your business grows, they grow. I feel like that connection sometimes is lacking. You almost must prove yourself before anything even happens for you, unlike your franchisor saying let's give you the best possible condition for you to succeed.

TABLE 1 | General summary of interviewee information.

Summary of Interviewees							
Interviewee #	**Gender**	**Race**	**Duration of being a franchisee**	**Multiple site ownership**	**Site location**	**Funding**	**Price (rands)**
1	Female	African	3 years	N	Johannesburg	Bank	Information not provided
2	Female	African	9 months	N	Johannesburg	Bank	5 million
3	Male	African	5 years	Y	Johannesburg	Bank	14 million
4	Male	African	2 years	N	Pretoria	Bank	6 million
5	Male	African	2 years	N	Pretoria	NEF	6 million
6	Male	African	7 years	Y	Pretoria	Bank	5.2 million
7	Male	African	1.3 years	N	Johannesburg	Bank	8 million
8	Female	African	2.5 years	Y	Johannesburg	Bank	12 million
9	Male	African	3 years	Y	Johannesburg	Bank	5 million
10	Female	African	1.8 years	N	Johannesburg	Bank	7.2 million
11	Male	African	17 years	Y	Durban	Bank	Information not provided
12	Male	African	3 years	Y	Johannesburg	Bank	Information not provided
13	Female	African	4 years	N	Durban	Bank	14 million
14	Male	African	5 years	N	Durban	NEF	Information not provided
15	Male	African	1.2 years	N	Johannesburg	SEFA	Information not provided
16	Female	African	2.5 years	Y	Johannesburg	Bank	Information not provided
17	Female	Coloured	17 years	Y	Cape Town	Bank	Information not provided
18	Female	African	4 years	Y	Cape Town	SEFA	Information not provided
19	Female	African	1 year	N	Durban	Bank	9.3 million

Abbreviations: NEF, National Energy Fund; SEFA, Small Business Finance Agency.
Source: Compiled by author.

> Interviewee 14: They (Franchisor) come and present what they think is right without engaging, you know, those who are on the ground, who engage with their customers, who have better solutions.

A quality franchisor–franchisee relationship is a central component to the success of a franchise business (Gorovaia 2019; Hizam Bin Hanafiah et al. 2022; Jang and Park 2019). Considering the experiences of Interviewees 12 and 14, the current approach of the franchisor enforcing current standards and operational ways will form a chasm between this connection, increasing the negative stance currently growing in the mind of the franchisee. In accordance with Gillis et al. (2020) and Jang and Park (2019), the relationship between the two parties should not only be viewed through the lens of the legal agreement. Instead, the franchisor should work towards building a quality relationship with the franchisee network.

A managerial implication would be reframing the relationship dynamics through the lens of building a collaborative approach that would benefit both the franchisor and franchisee for the long term (Hizam Bin Hanafiah et al. 2022). In the context of the HDSA, franchisees stepping into this industry has been daunting. The inability to adequately leverage their partners has made their operational journey more difficult. By modelling the behaviour and providing an open avenue of communication, the franchisor would put in place the antecedents to forming a quality relationship (Melo et al. 2021; Fernández-Monroy et al. 2018).

4.2.1.2 | Franchisor Engagement: Business Expertise. The interviewees raised the inconsistency of the business expertise that is provided by the franchisor. As new entrants into the market, the perceptions were that the franchisor representative allocated to the franchisee would provide specialist support and guidance throughout the tenure of the agreement, but most importantly at the start of the franchisee journey. The findings

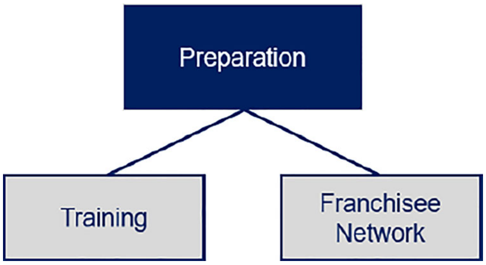

FIGURE 4 | Theme 2—preparation code diagram. *Source:* Compiled by author. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

highlighted that the business representative assigned did not have the necessary knowledge required and would only complete tick box exercises for compliance and safety elements.

> Interviewee 11: The oil company has expectations that when a new dealer comes in, you go and support them. The question is support them how? If a new dealer has a problem with the speed points that are not banking. That's an operational issue or the reconciliation is not balancing. That's an operational issue, but the Territory Manager [Franchisor Representative] is not trained for operations. They trained for compliance and in most cases compliance that protect the oil company, very little to do with the sustainability of the new dealer.

As noted by Interviewee 11, there is a misalignment between the support required by the franchisee and the support provided by the franchisor. This conflicts with achieving franchise business sustainability as posited by Prihandono et al. (2021), who state that franchisors should provide the support that franchisees deem important in relation to business performance.

The findings align with Jang and Park (2019) in that franchisees are usually in conflict with franchisors for inappropriate support. The HDSA franchisees that have joined the fuel network require support from a business and industry expert, as the transition from being an employee, regardless of the industry, to being a fuel franchisee is difficult. The franchisor-selected representatives should be able to offer this level of support to the franchisees. A managerial implication for the franchisor is to establish what support is required by the HDSA franchisee and align these requirements to the business representatives' tasks and upskill them accordingly.

4.2.2 | Preparation

The second theme covers the lack of practical training included in the onboarding takeover process. This led the franchisees to seek support from franchisees in the network who were willing to guide them through the process. This theme, as seen in Figure 4, will be covered by two specific codes: (1) Training and (2) Franchisee Network.

4.2.2.1 | Preparation: Training. The franchisees mentioned training programs from the different franchisors that need to be completed prior to a site takeover. These trainings were predominantly theoretical and were completed months before takeover. The franchisees that were onboarded during COVID-19 had to complete their onboarding training online. The franchisees mentioned the lack of practical training, which did not give them an avenue to apply their theoretical skills.

> Interviewee 10: Oh, my goodness and then having to actually go and do it practically are two totally different things. Especially when you have never been exposed to the industry. When learning the things in theory some of the concepts or things you have never heard before. Trying to match the theoretical learning with actions on site was difficult.

> Interviewee 16: It was definitely not adequate and there were gaps in the form of the real training and when you get to site to be quite honest, when I got to site I kind of forgot everything that I had learned on training … So, I think the actual practical experience was very important and we didn't necessarily have that.

According to Interviewees 10 and 16, the lack of practical training led to the inability to transfer knowledge between what was learnt through theoretical training and what needed to be implemented when operating the site. This is counterproductive in trying to establish a successful network, as posited by Perrigot et al. (2017), that the success of the franchise is dependent on the knowledge shared through appropriate mechanisms.

The insights provided by the interviewees lead to the importance of the transfer of knowledge in the franchise process. How the knowledge is shared is just as important as what knowledge is shared. According to Iddy (2020), the franchisor must use different knowledge transfer mechanisms to ensure effectiveness. The implementation of explicit knowledge is predominantly used in the onboarding phases for new franchisees; however, Perrigot et al. (2017) and Gbetchi and Perrigot (2025) suggest that including practical exposure in the working environment with more experienced franchisees improves the transfer of tacit knowledge.

4.2.2.2 | Preparation: Franchisee Network. The practical gap in the preparation process led the franchisees to seek guidance and support from existing franchisees in the network who provided the initial pre-takeover experiential training and eventually became mentors to these HDSA franchisees. In certain instances, this support was curated by the franchisor, whereas in other instances, the new franchisee reached out to existing franchisees in the network directly.

> Interviewee 18: I was blessed to have, mentors who had built in the industry right prior. they were able to come in and say, OK, let me see your back office, what are you doing? this is what you're supposed to do. This is how I'm doing it in my business, so let me show you.

Interviewee 18 noted that legacy franchisees provide support and guidance on how to run the business more efficiently, which is supported by Oliva (2014) who states that the knowledge provided

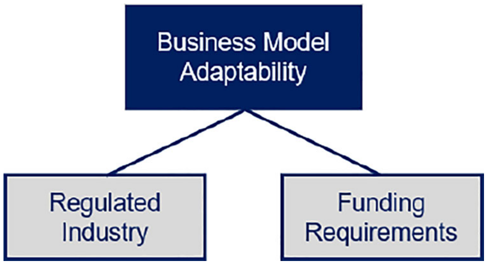

FIGURE 5 | Theme 3—Business Model Adaptability code diagram. *Source:* Compiled by author. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

by experienced franchisees helps new franchisees avoid making similar mistakes. The franchisor should leverage their specific networks to acquire upskilling and knowledge sharing for both head office representatives and the franchisees (Ghani et al. 2022).

The team that supports franchisees should have experience, knowledge and the necessary skills to transfer the shared learnings (Nathan 2016). Timms (2020) further advises that support personnel with these characteristics have been positively linked to a franchisee's success. This type of support is not delivered by the franchisor's business representatives based on the information gathered in the interviews. The managerial implication for the franchisor is to structure the knowledge share process to cover both explicit and tacit processes for a more effective learning outcome. This provides a practical transition from theory into the HDSA franchisee's own business, and it curates an ongoing link between a new entrant and an experienced member of the franchise network.

4.2.3 | Business Model Adaptability

A third theme was derived from the data related to the business model adaptability in the petroleum franchise sector. This is based on the ecosystem actors and how, in certain instances, their individual approaches are dogmatic and rigid, whereas the need for flexibility and agility is required to create a favourable trading industry. The codes derived were (1) Regulated Industry and (2) Funding Requirements, as depicted in Figure 5.

4.2.3.1 | Business Model Adaptability: Regulated Industry. Although policy regimes have been introduced to prioritise HDSA franchisees in the industry to foster economic ownership distribution (Makiva et al. 2019), these measures face significant operational challenges. Interviewees highlight multiple factors from various layers of government that impede franchisees' ability to enhance operational efficiencies. The following quotes illustrate some of the counterproductive actions encountered by franchisees:

> Interviewee 10: I can't put people on short time because of the agreements in place and to do that you need to write letters and motivate and all of that and for us coming in we don't have some of that information given to us to help us in those regards…It has been over a year, and I still don't have a response.

> Interviewee 11: Just the margins in general … 40% of our petrol price is levies and taxes, so it's basically government money… a Retailer would basically be making just about 12% margin.

> Interviewee 14: Department of Energy, time frame and that process of the licensing is so monotonous and so it's illogical to a certain extent and it takes just too long.

Interviewees 10, 11 and 14 provide firsthand experience in the various obstacles that have hindered business efficiencies as new entrants in this sector. According to the entrepreneurial ecosystem model, formal institutions should serve as enablers for business within the ecosystem (Stam and van de Ven 2019); however, in the petroleum franchising sector, these institutions obstruct business processes for franchisees.

In view of the franchisee responses, the intrinsic conflict within a government system is a common occurrence, in that different departments pursue specific targets that create counterproductive issues for other parts of the system. However, this is not a simple issue that can be resolved through a direct cause-and-effect approach. Dentoni et al. (2018) argue that a fixed solution is not suitable for businesses operating in dynamic markets. Instead, the perspective is to adopt a temporary synthesis approach to reconcile conflicting priorities among ecosystem actors, and in this case, among various government factions (Termeer et al. 2013).

4.2.3.2 | Business Model Adaptability: Funding Requirements. The requirements to obtain financing for upfront costs to purchase a service station and the additional funding to maintain operations are an ongoing challenge raised by franchisees. The inflexibility of mainstream banks and the uncertain process period in trying to secure funding from approved lending bodies like the NEF or SEFA have contributed to the lack of support.

> Interviewee 2: SEFA's (A HDSA Financier) timelines together with the oil companies' timelines did not match as the timelines that were set for me to be on site were just out of the ordinary… I had to get finance from a mainstream bank.

Interviewee 2 noted a key insight that even if an HDSA candidate qualifies for the financial investment from the designated lending bodies, the misalignment in the process timelines between the actors results in a lost opportunity. The lack of alliance capabilities between the franchise relationship and other agents in the ecosystem is evident in the lack of communication and coordination of activities (Gillis et al. 2020).

> Interviewee 7: 95% of us, or I could even safely say 100% of us, are financed, you know, so I didn't have the cash to buy the business that I'm operating now. So if I'm able to negotiate better interests or get favourable interests as an HDSA if I'm being given relaxation on repayment as and when the environment goes belly up, you know it's it would be helpful if there's any environment where we can have conversations with

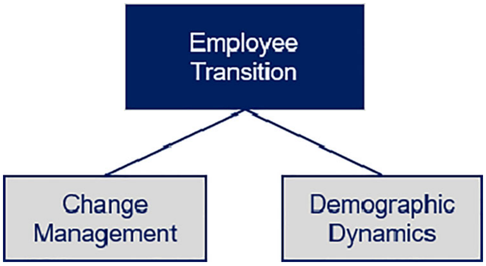

FIGURE 6 | Theme 4—Employee Transition code diagram. *Source:* Compiled by author. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

> our lenders and say that for the next six months, can you relieve me of just interest?

Interviewee 7 raises the reality of getting into debt to fund these businesses; not only is it a form of entry, but also the need for continued financial support to operate the franchise is not a simple endeavour. This is supported by Makiva et al. (2019), who raised that franchisees must contend with low investor confidence, which increases the difficulty in financing processes.

Makiva et al. (2019) further postulated that negotiating favourable interest rates is nearly impossible, the prerequisites are excessively strict, and the required funding amounts must be at least 80% of the purchase value. Table 1 details the purchase prices of some interviewee sites. Although the franchising business model is often referred to as low risk for entrepreneurs (Bretas and Alon 2021; Bui et al. 2022), this is not the case for HDSA franchisees. Financing these ventures at 80% on millions of rand elevates the risk to an unsustainable level.

The findings for both the Regulated Industry and Funding Requirement codes verify the interdependency between the franchise ecosystem actors, which include the government, financial institutions, franchisor and franchisees, as posited by Stam and van de Ven (2019). The managerial implication would be to coordinate the activities related to the petroleum franchise model with a shared goal through the application of a temporary synthesis approach to reconcile conflicting priorities for a broader benefit as the market evolves.

4.2.4 | Employee Transition

The final theme that resonated throughout the interviews was about employees at different sites. There has not been much focus given to studying the employee transition from one franchisee as an owner to another, specifically within the South African petroleum sector. All 19 participants confirmed the importance of employees in the business, and this group of individuals was identified as a critical success factor. The interviewees also highlighted two specific challenges experienced in relation to staff. The codes that were derived, as indicated in Figure 6, are (1) The Change in Management and (2) The Cultural Dynamics.

4.2.4.1 | Employee Transition: Change Management. A significant finding from the interviews is that there is no change management process completed during a franchise takeover. Through their personal experience the franchisees noted that the onsite employees do not adjust well to change. According to Interviewees 1 and 7, the staff on site worked with the previous owners for several years, and the adjustment to a new franchisee who implements updated ways of working leads to discontentment and results in a high staff turnover.

> Interviewee 7: I got in there April 2024, as I said to date, I am probably only left with 40% of people who I found at site. The other 60% are fired and replaced, and that's the nature of the business.

> Interviewee 1: We pretty much got rid of everyone. Every single person except for maybe one or two, but everyone left, in hindsight, it actually worked out much better for me but in that time and whilst dealing with it, it was not nice at all.

Although the subject of employees and change management was not a focus of this study, what was evident from the interviewees was that due to the inability to specify timelines for takeover due to funding processes and license approvals, among other things, the outgoing franchisee and the incoming franchisee are not able to facilitate a change in management process. Errida and Lotfi (2021) highlight that there are numerous factors that contribute to an unsuccessful change management process. Key factors include a lack of communication and poor stakeholder engagement.

4.2.4.2 | Employee Transition: Demographic Dynamics. The HDSA franchisees shared that they had to face a demographic dynamic in taking over these franchise businesses in that predominantly African employees either did not accept how a fellow African would own the service station or there was a level of complacency that had to be addressed due to a lack of respect for relationship roles.

> Interviewee 10: it's like 'who are you', 'you are one of us', 'why are you telling us what to do'. You are taking over people who have been there very long and the previous dealer is a white guy who has been there for 15 years, 20 years.

> Interviewee 12: when you come in and I'm speaking from the perspective of being an African, the staff is excited, and I'll tell you why they say our Black brother is taking over. So, when they say our Black brother is taking over, the expectation is this place is going to be lawless. Now I'm gonna just come in and tell my brother that my taxi was late and he's gonna understand.

The insights gathered from Interviewees 10 and 12 reveal the employees' perceptions of the HDSA franchisee. The demographic elements of race and youth foster a resistance towards the new employer, potentially due to a belief that these individuals will not succeed. Stouten et al. (2018) refer to this as dispositional resistance, which is enhanced by the view that this change will threaten the employees' livelihoods or disrupt their set ways of working. Further research should be completed to explore the

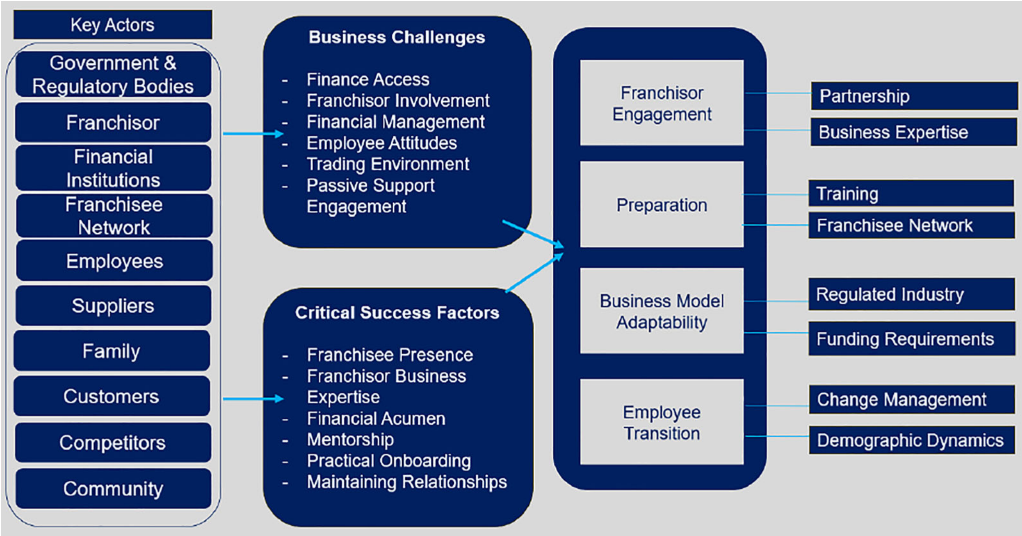

FIGURE 7 | Post-analysis concept model. *Source:* Compiled by author. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

demographic dynamics of the employees' perceptions of race and youth of franchise owners in the petroleum sector to understand if this may have an impact on business operations.

The HDSA franchisees entering these businesses must learn how to manage a group of employees, and this lack of experience is supported by Zolfagharian and Naderi (2019). The current onboarding process focuses on technical skills; however, these findings highlight the importance of soft skill training. The managerial implications that should be considered are the inclusion of the human resource management process in the takeover process. This will provide franchisees with the ability to manage and retain the necessary talent.

5 | Conclusions, Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

5.1 | Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the business support required by HDSA franchisees in SA's fuel retail sector and to explore the role of ecosystem actors in fostering integrated partnerships that enhance business continuity and support transformation efforts towards greater inclusion of HDSA franchisees. The key actors identified through the interviews for the petroleum franchise ecosystem are the government and the franchisor, financial institutions, franchisee network, employees, suppliers, family, customers and community. The business challenges and critical success factors stem from these key actors, which led to the four high-level themes that were extensively discussed.

The necessary business support derived from the four themes can be addressed by the collaboration of the ecosystem actors identified. Figure 7 depicts the research findings, which were laid out as the objective for this study.

Some of the findings confirm the relevance of traditional franchisee challenges covered in the literature. The evidence indicates a misalignment between the franchisor's support and the franchisee's expectations, resulting in a dissatisfied franchisee. The managerial implication is to understand the support required by the franchisee, implement practical onboarding and leverage the expertise of the existing franchisee network to address some of the challenges experienced.

In contrast to traditional franchise literature, the petroleum franchise industry in SA is not perceived as low risk based on the experience of the interviewees. The evidence suggests that HDSA franchisees struggle due to being highly financed and not receiving the level of support required. The new insights derived from this study focus on the lack of coordination in process timelines between the relevant ecosystem actors, which introduces a new challenge in acquiring funding by HDSA franchisees. The study also provided insight into the frontline employee dynamics and established the importance of applying HRM practices in the takeover processes on-site.

The recommendation from this study is for franchisors to initiate improvements that promote collaboration among the key actors in the franchise ecosystem. Franchisors should assess and update their onboarding processes to reflect market changes, ensuring these changes align with the needs of franchisees. The coordination between ecosystem actors and franchisor processes is imperative, particularly for business-critical elements, such as access to funding. Knowledge sharing should follow a comprehensive approach that includes both explicit and tacit knowledge transfer. Leveraging the expertise of the current franchise network should be formalised and included as foundational learning in the onboarding process. Additionally, the onboarding process should include human resource management elements to facilitate the management of change process and provide franchisee with essential people management skills.

5.2 | Practical Implementation of Findings and Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study have several practical implications for both industry stakeholders and policymakers. Franchisors should prioritise structured onboarding and ongoing support for HDSA franchisees, with particular attention to employee transition processes during ownership changes. This could include mentorship programs, targeted training and clear communication channels to ensure continuity and minimise disruptions. Policymakers can enhance the impact of transformation initiatives by developing guidelines that require franchisors to implement employee transition plans as part of franchise agreements. Furthermore, financial institutions and government agencies supporting HDSA franchisees should consider tailored funding mechanisms that address the unique challenges identified in this study, such as upfront capital requirements and the need for business model adaptability. Sakoane (2024) highlights that agreements should be designed with flexibility and clarity, which supports the need for adaptive agreement models and ongoing collaboration. By fostering collaboration among ecosystem actors, these measures can contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable petroleum franchise sector in SA.

5.3 | Limitations

The research study focused on the franchise ecosystem from the perspective of HDSA franchisees and their business support requirements. However, a multi-analytic view of gaining insight from the franchisors would have provided richness to the research process. In addition, a key limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size comprising 19 semi-structured interviews with HDSA franchisees. Although this qualitative approach enabled in-depth exploration of individual experiences and provided rich, context-specific insights, it may not capture the full diversity of perspectives within the broader HDSA franchisees in SA. As such, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory and indicative rather than broadly generalisable.

5.4 | Suggestions for Future Research

As a continuation of the limitations of the study, a suggestion for future research would be to not only employ a larger sample but also to gain the franchisors' perspective on HDSA franchising and the transformation process that is being carried out in the industry. Further research can be applied to the ecosystem actors that have been identified through this study to gain insight into how synergy can be created to ensure HDSA franchisees and the actors supporting them can all succeed through this transformation imperative. A study on frontline employee perceptions during the change in management and the relevance of HRM practices. A final suggestion would be a case study to obtain firsthand insights into the onboarding and site takeover process of an HDSA franchisee.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethics Statement

Ethical clearance for this research article has been approved, as per the notification from the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), University of Pretoria. All ethical considerations have been met. For any questions or concerns regarding this clearance, the GIBS Research Admin team can be contacted. PriceG@gibs.co.za. Moreover, ethical clearance for this study was obtained through Ethics Committee of a South African University.

Consent

The participants provided informed consent as confirmation of their voluntary willingness to be part of this research study.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study are available in the form of interview recordings and transcriptions. Access to these materials can be provided upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

[1] BP, Engen, Astron, Sasol, Shell and Total are the brands with the biggest market share.

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