

DISRUPTION AT ITS PEAK: POCKMARK OF COVID-19 ON IMMIGRANT RETAIL BUSINESS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has left a trail of untold damage in many countries, and there is no foreseeable end to its spread. Besides the loss of life, the impact of the virus on the economy and small businesses, in particular, is not yet clear. Even so, the policies aimed at containing the spread of the virus have exerted further pressure and uncertainty on the survival of small businesses in general and immigrant-owned business in particular. This study explored the pockmark of COVID-19 on immigrant retail businesses in selected outlets in West Rand, Johannesburg. A qualitative research approach was adopted as it best supports the exploratory intent of the study. The purposive sampling technique was utilised to draw participants for the study until a saturation point was attained. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews using unstructured, open-ended questions, with interviews recorded and transcribed. Atlas-ti 8 software was used to code, categorise and analyse the data to form themes and patterns, which helped to inform the outcome of the study. Findings indicate that none of the immigrant businesses were prepared for the pandemic and lockdown. Furthermore, it was found that most of the

businesses may cease to exist due to cash fragility should the lockdown be extended for a longer period and the pandemic not abate soon. Despite the government having announced some palliative measures to help reduce the impact of the pandemic and lockdown on small business, results from this study indicate that immigrant businesses received no such support from the government.

Keywords: COVID-19, immigrant, business, pandemic, survival, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

A tentative definition of COVID-19 is "a virus that attacks the immune system of a victim, causing severe phenomena, dry cough and high fever leading to respiratory problems which may, subsequently, lead to death" (World Health Organisation, 2020). The rate at which COVID-19 spreads is very rapid; having started in China, it then spread to Europe and is now proliferating across the African continent, including South Africa. The important and worrying question concerning this phenomenon is: what effect would this pandemic have on economies? An immediate answer that comes to mind is the

way it is posing challenges to humanity and the economy the world over, ranging from health, employment (loss of jobs), economic, financial to family sustainability (Hevia & Neumeyer, 2020). The extrapolating impact is predicted to spread for some time to come, thereby affecting future livelihoods globally. In a bid to curb the rapid spread of the virus, most nations quickly came up with precautionary measures, for example, social distancing and stay at home, as well as 'lockdown' measures (Hevia & Neumeyer, 2020). These policies have resulted in untold hardships to many economies and their citizens, although, it is assumed that these policy measures could assist in reducing the rate at which the virus could spread among citizens, since it is predicted that personal contact is the main source of contamination (Bouey, 2020).

Nevertheless, the negative effects of these policies, according to Hevia and Neumeyer (2020), are not limited to the following: partial or total loss of production, loss of employment, reduced consumption patterns, and decreased business activities or closure, thus leading to the impoverishment of citizens. The effects are seen to be more severe in countries where these policies are not favourable to certain groups of people (Hevia & Neumeyer, 2020), and could seriously impact business activities globally and more particularly, in developing nations including South Africa. The outbreak of COVID-19 is a global phenomenon that has had adverse effects on nations' economies the world over (Stanciu, Radu, Sapira, Bratoveanu & Florea, 2020). Strategy (2020) mentioned that this will have a negative impact on South African business and cause interruption or disturbance to the stability

of production, thus bringing uncertainty on what the future holds in manufacturing industries, the hospitality sector and retail businesses.

This pandemic is further contended to be a global human crisis adversely affecting business, through both restrictions and supply chain disruption. Part of the PWC (2020) findings indicates that, in times like this, businesses have little opportunity to prepare for unforeseen circumstances that may happen when disruption occurs. This article focused on the effects of COVID-19 on immigrant retail businesses in selected Johannesburg outlets in the Gauteng province of South Africa and their preparedness to absorb and whether the crisis, overcoming it in a manner that will help them to continue in business post-COVID-19. The study focused on, firstly, assessing the immediate challenges faced by immigrant retail businesses due to COVID-19, secondly, the measures put in place to reduce the impact of the pandemic on immigrant business, and thirdly, the long-term plan by immigrant retail businesses to ensure business continuity post-COVID-19. The rest of this article is structured as follows: a literature review on COVID-19 and its impact on immigrant retail business, the methodology adopted for data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results and a discussion thereof, and the conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Beginning from late December 2019, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in China. When the spread of the virus was unfolding, the general belief was it was restricted to 'there' and would not happen 'here'; this assumption therefore did not allow most

nations including South Africa, to prepare beforehand for the possibility of it spreading to them. The rate at which it was spreading across many nations in a short period of time necessitated a declaration by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020) on 11 March 2020, of a pandemic, which now affects all walks of life including retail business, on a global scale.

According to Suleymanova (2020), it was iterated that a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report estimated a loss of approximately \$220bn as a result of the pandemic in less developed nations, including South Africa with an anticipated 50% loss of jobs as a result of the virus (Suleymanova, 2020). Achim Steiner, the UNDP administrator, mentioned that "For vast swatches of the globe, the pandemic will leave deep, deep scars". He further stressed that, "Without the support from international community, we risk reversal of gains made over the last two decades and an entire generation lost" (UNDP, 2020).

Stephany *et al.* (2020) posit that the spread of COVID-19 has an extrapolating impact on various sectors of the economy, such as retail, transport, tourism and many others. Moreover, to reduce the effect of this impact, businesses would have to change their strategies as to how to adjust, in a manner that will help them cope and be able to remain in business (Roggeveen & Sethuranam, 2020). The manner in which consumers purchase products has also changed due to this virus, such that their buying pattern is now mainly focused on food and less on luxury products (OECD, 2020a) and as a result of restrictions, as Ho, Hui, Kim and Zhang (2020) explain, the world is now witnessing great changes in

not only the business environment but also economic stability (OECD, 2020b).

Entrepreneurship is important to economic development globally, therefore placing it at the centre stage of discussion among industry practitioners, government and academics (Omisakin, 2017). Khosa and Kalitanyi (2015) mention that migration has increased globally in recent years, which could be contributed to many reasons, ranging from, economic, and social, to political, or from issues associated with natural disasters to war (Omisakin, 2017). Migration is important because of the potential contribution it could have on the socio-economic factors that influence and affect people in various countries (McKinley, 2006). Post-independence South Africa has witnessed a substantial increase in the number of migrants whose main intention in undertaking this journey away from their homes, is the pursuit of economic opportunities (Crush & Ramachandran, 2009).

Apart from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human health, its effects are felt more intensely by small-scale businesses. Bartik *et al.* (2020) conducted a study to ascertain in what way this pandemic has affected small businesses and in what manner these enterprises have been able to adjust to the prevailing circumstances. The study was conducted by means of a survey of small business in the United States of America (USA), with their findings indicating that some of the challenges facing these small scale businesses range from imminent staff layoffs, to actual closure of businesses and low income or revenue generation (Bartik *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, some palliative measures are being put in place by

governments of many nations globally, and in particular South Africa, to help reduce the effect on various businesses.

Bartik *et al.* (2020) posited that some of the small business owners are planning to obtain support through an available relief fund and assistance projects in the country, to help support their next business decision. While a number of businesses support of this initiative, some are unfortunately not willing to harness the opportunity, due to anticipated bureaucracy that may evolve (Bartik *et al.*, 2020) along with the fear of non-qualification. The survival rate of most businesses would depend on the duration of the lockdown and the pandemic. According to Bartik *et al.* (2020), it is further argued that this varies across businesses. However, it is most likely to have more of an impact on businesses that require high human interaction or contact, for example, retail businesses, as opposed to those that operate with minimal human interaction. Disruption to the supply chain has been identified as one of the business processes impacted during lockdown due to the pandemic, thus having an effect on continued business sustainability, as well as a reduction in customer demand for goods, and impacting consumers' health and well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Interpretivist (Constructivist worldview) paradigm case study is a method in which participant opinion with regard to the subject of study is given careful consideration. Interview questions (Qualitative method – open-ended questions) were used for respondents to construct meanings of the situation being studied. This is adequate

since we want to analyse each participant, case by case, to better understand their settings (Yin, 2017). The relevance to the study is attributed to the phenomenon being studied because it is relatively new, with limited literature available. This method engages in understanding the meaning individuals or a group of people attach to a research problem (Creswell, 2014) as applied to the views of participants being studied. According to Creswell (2014:37), "the more open-ended the questioning, the better, as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life settings". It involves understanding the environment to obtain a view on how they operate (Creswell, 2014) and aims to bring out the meaning they may make of their environment. Interview questions were developed based on the research questions in order to achieve the study objectives and aim. Important to note is that open-ended interview questions are acceptable for a study, most especially when trying to understand the meaning attached to a research problem by individuals or groups of people (Creswell, 2014) that deals with the studied participants' views.

The study sample was drawn from immigrant retail businesses in the West Rand area of Johannesburg, South Africa, focusing on 15 managers or owners of retail businesses, selected using a purposive sampling method, to be interviewed using open-ended questions. This is an important concept used in conducting qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). Of the 15 businesses selected, only 10 eventually participated in the interviews.

According to Creswell (2014:239), in employing a qualitative research method, the sample size is usually dependent on the type of

design to be adopted. Therefore, in a case study, a sample size of between four to five cases is adjudged to be adequate (Creswell, 2013, 2014). Interviews were conducted face-to-face using unstructured and open-ended questions to elicit responses from the respondents (Creswell, 2014). This was considered appropriate for the study as it would not only allow respondents to help provide historical information, but also afford the researcher the possibility of having control over the questions (Creswell, 2014). In purposive sampling, a researcher uses own judgment to identify and select cases that will enable the possibility of answering the research questions and achieving the objectives of the study (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016:328). In a study that intends to use few participants as the focus of the research, this is considered suitable (Neuman, 2005). Validity and reliability of the study (Carter *et al.*, 2014) were established through triangulation of the data collected from different respondents through convergence, which was carried out to assist in building valid justification for themes that emerged from the analysis. In addition, transcripts were checked for consistency to avoid obvious mistakes, ensuring that codes were regularly compared with data collected, as well as through the writing of memos (Creswell, 2014; Carter *et al.*, 2014).

DATA ANALYSIS

Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2013) posit that in developing qualitative questions, it is important to ask what and under which conditions participants engage in experiences. The interview date, place and interviewer name were recorded on the protocol used, thus avoiding the risk of recording device failure

after data collection (Creswell, 2014). Data was collected through personal interviews, conducted in a structured manner, ensuring that the same procedure was followed in a consistent manner for all respondents (Creswell, 2013). In a qualitative study, data analysis can be carried out simultaneously with data collection. In the case of a recorded interview, analysis of the completed interview can be performed prior to conducting the next interview (Creswell, 2014), which enables the researcher to develop notes that would be included in the final analysis.

Data was collected through personal interviews with a recording device and transcribed into Word format, maintaining the manner respondents answered the questions asked in raw format for analysis (Creswell, 2013).

Once the initial 18 codes were developed, it was decided to select those codes deemed as vital to the study, with similar codes grouped together to create categories. Four categories resulted from bringing several codes together, according to their relationship to the research questions (Stake, 1995). Those categorised were then labelled, based on their interconnectedness, with these themes subsequently described in relation to their connectivity. The categories and connections formed assisted in providing answers (results) to the study's research questions, which further aided in providing new knowledge with reference to the world view, based on the study participants' perspectives. The themes that emerged from the analysis are discussed with their interpretation and the results in the following section. The respondents were assigned a pseudonym, (R1 to R10) to help differentiate them during interpretation of result.

Interpretation of Results and Discussion

The total number of participants interviewed was 10, of which three were female, while the remaining seven were male business owners, all immigrants. The major themes that emerged were classified into four main categories; Immediate challenges posed by COVID-19 to business; Long-term plan to ensure business continuity; Measures to help reduce the impact on business during the pandemic; and General understanding of the virus and its implications for humanity, which serves as a challenge that negatively impacts immigrant businesses in the area of study. These are discussed in the following section.

Impact of COVID-19 on Immigrant Businesses

A majority of the respondents iterated that during the lockdown instituted because of the COVID-19 pandemic, their businesses were faced with many challenges. Respondents mentioned that prior to the pandemic and lockdown, business moved at its expected pace. However, at the onset of measures implemented in response to the pandemic, a big difference was seen in customer patronage, as it was in diminished income and, as such, immigrant businesses were not selling the same amount of goods as before, leading to a drastic loss of income for all businesses. This assertion is consistent with the findings of Baldwin (2020), who mentioned that the impact of lockdown, along with the introduction of social distancing measures, affects the revenue generated by various businesses globally.

Further to this, a respondent (R6) mentioned that:

There is a significant difference because if you can check the number of people that are coming actually, they have reduced compared to before the corona virus, people are now spending more diligently, they are spending for their wants now the business is a little bit quiet.

Businesses were not allowed to open during level five of the lockdown, leading to loss of revenue, with the associated loss potentially being very high (Hevia & Neumeyer, 2020). Respondent (R4) stated: "That's why I said to you that the business was moving right before lockdown, lockdown lock down everything."

Another respondent (R5) iterated that:

Since I started work, I don't even think I have been able to repair one phone and then when we come here sitting down, we go back home doing nothing, so there is really nothing compared with the time everything was free, when there was no disease like this, sometimes I can fix like two to three phones in a day and can still get like five to seven hundred rand, but now there is nothing because people does not have money.

Some businesses, identified as organisations rendering essential services, were allowed to operate during level four of the lockdown. However, most of the respondents mentioned that even then they were faced with challenges of low patronage by customers, as some who were able to obtain a permit to operate mentioned that business was very dull. In terms of supply chain, this was also

affected and many retail organisations are of the opinion that should the lockdown extend beyond the initial end date announced by the government, business will be badly affected, as they will be out of stock due to their suppliers who import goods also being affected.

Below is a quotation on the impact of the pandemic regarding the supply chain from respondent (R7):

The lockdown has really affected our supply chain, because importation is not allowed since international travel has been banned and it is affecting us, because the goods we have now is the remaining ones from our supplier has in town and they were able to supply to us at a very high price more than what we used to pay unlike before, so if the situation continues like this for another one month I guarantee you we will be out of stock even the supplier also will not be able to supply goods, because they don't have since there is no flight to and fro and its affecting importation. What we are selling now are the goods we bought before the lockdown, because we don't normally sell, right now I don't even buy new stock or goods.

Payment of rent was one of the challenges faced by immigrant businesses. It was almost impossible to pay rent, with landlords not being considerate, exerting much pressure on them to pay. Respondents (R8) mentioned that:

In April the landlord asked us to pay half of the rent, in May he demanded for full amount even when the business was still closed and since we usually pay on the first of every month, but now sometimes he is even fighting us because of the delay and

we have to pay on the 7th of the month, he doesn't want to understand, he said no we have to pay the rent. I have been paying rent since that time, it was only the first month that we paid half of the rent.

Finally, payment of staff salaries was impossible, with some respondents (R10, R8, R4, R6 and R1) pointing out that they were unable to pay their workers on time, having been at home for two months without pay.

Knowledge of COVID-19 by Respondents

All the respondent understood COVID-19 as a virus that originated in China, which has since spread to South Africa. They know that it attacks human lungs and respiratory system and that people are dying from it, because of a previous or underlying sickness. Furthermore, it was iterated that it is a dangerous disease for everyone and we have to protect ourselves and stay home. Respondents (R2, R6, R7 and R9) specifically said:

Although it's a well-known virus all over the world, we know that originally it originated from China, it started like child's play throughout the whole world and that due to the virus it is very difficult for everybody in the whole world to survive around this time and we need help from each other, most especially the association and the government because individuals cannot survive alone.

Measures to Help Reduce COVID-19 Impact on Immigrant Business

The themes emerging from respondent feedback point to none of these businesses having been prepared for the emergence of the

pandemic and the resulting lockdown, which adversely affected their business and general well-being. Furthermore, the government advising the nation of a lockdown surprised most of the immigrants who were of the following nationalities (Cameroun, Uganda, Nigeria, Pakistan, Malawi, Ghana, Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique) and did not allow them time to prepare for eventualities that could arise as a result of the lockdown. Respondent (R7) mentioned that:

I must confess we did not prepare for it, it came as a surprise, the lockdown came too fast because I remember when the president announced on Monday that the lockdown will start on Thursday, we were not prepared, it was just three days in between so we were not prepared at all, it was a surprise to us.

However, it was iterated that had they been given three or four weeks' notice prior to the country being locked down, they may have been able to manage better. The majority were not prepared and as such no plan was put in place to help mitigate the impact on their business. Some mentioned that "you only prepare for what you are aware is coming, because nobody expected that it will result to lockdown in the country, since it was happening in China." To help reduce the impact of the lockdown on some businesses, the government announced in level four of the lockdown that certain businesses, identified as providing essential services, should obtain permits to operate. The essence of this was to help reduce the impact on both businesses and citizens, thus allowing a number of businesses to obtain a permit. Respondents R7 and R10 mentioned that:

We were able to get the permit to open our business because it was declared as one of the essential service which is retail business dealing with groceries. Even now that we are open, we only open from like 10am and before 4 or 5pm we normally close because the law enforcement agents (the Metro) don't allow us to open beyond 6pm. So from 5pm we normally close, honestly customer patronage has really changed when compared to before COVID-19."

To further assist in reducing the lockdown impact the effect of the pandemic had on businesses in the country, the government announced some palliative measures. Regrettably, all respondents mentioned that they did not receive any help from the government because they are immigrants and the provisions announced were meant only for citizens. One of the respondents said:

Government support the citizen they don't support foreigner, the truth of the matter is, the South Africa president are supporting the citizen of south Africa not foreigner, it will be very hard for you to see a foreigner that will say they receive a cup of tea from the government, we don't see any support even we don't see a cent from them, I don't know but I am talking from my own side even most of the foreigners in Johannesburg they did not receive any government support, even when the president announced he only talk about his people he didn't talk about the foreigner at all.

Other respondents (R7 and R10) stated that:

We never received any support from the government, because we even went to the website, since the government promised

that they will help small scale businesses, but they prefer the locally owned business, the business owned by South Africans not foreigners, so we are out of it completely, we never received any support even if it is through palliative or financial support.

Respondents are of the opinion that government should become more involved, as most businesses situated around the Westrand (study location) are owned by (Cameroun, Uganda, Nigeria, Pakistan, Malawi, Ghana, Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique) nationals and they are affected the same way as the locals. In addition, they stated that if the government included immigrant small scale businesses in the palliative measures; it would go a long way to alleviate their suffering. Some lessons have been learnt by respondents regarding the effect of this type of emergency on their business. Part of this is to make arrangements for adequate stock and to save enough money to take care of their families for an extended timeframe, in case of an emergency situation such as the pandemic. Even at this time it is envisaged that once the lockdown has eased completely, it will take a while before business will pick up.

Long-Term Plan and Business Continuity After the Pandemic and Lockdown

Most of the respondents mentioned that should lockdown be extended and the pandemic continue for a long period of time, they may be forced to close down their businesses due to loss of revenue and anticipated accrual of debt as a result of operating costs associated with rent and utilities. This is consistent with results by Bartik *et al.* (2020) in a study

on how small businesses are adjusting to the effects of COVID-19. Their findings indicate that by the end of December 2020, most small businesses with limited cash to operate may cease to exist. One of the common themes emerging on how respondents could better plan to sustain their businesses in the future and post the pandemic is that they have learnt that "this world is not our own, anything that happen is that we need to prepare because anything can happen so that we will not suffer much like now."

Furthermore, new business strategies will need to be developed to include business continuity. For example, business owners mostly believe they must have an office, however, during the lockdown they have come to realise that moving some of their businesses online is a strategy that needs to be considered going forward, as this will assist with better visibility and accessibility for their businesses and their customers, even during a lockdown.

Another strategy mentioned by some respondents is to diversify their business to include more than one line of business that could still be running, even when this type of problem should occur in the future, to enable sustainability. Respondent (R3) mentioned that one of the first aspects to consider is to

"abide with whatever the government asked us to do to manage the crisis because every business should be law abiding for the safety of life."

All respondents attested to their having learnt one or more lessons during this period that will help to shape and guide the way they

view, plan and run their businesses. They are also now more aware that business is a risky venture. Nonetheless, this pandemic has affected businesses in an unprecedented manner, due to it being a global phenomenon affecting the entire world, including the richest countries. Businesses were not allowed to open for operations during lockdown, leading to loss of revenue, with the associated loss potentially being very high (Hevia & Neumeyer, 2020). In a study conducted by The Small Business Institute (SBI, 2020) of South Africa, mentioned that all the small business were affected by the pandemic, for example; this has affected their liquidity, leading to their inability to pay their bills as well as the survival of their business. Findings from this study is in consonance with Baldwin (2020), who mentioned that the impact of lockdown, along with the introduction of social distancing measures affect the revenue generated by various businesses globally. Further, Bartik et al. (2020) argued that small businesses are adjusting to the effect of COVID-19. Nevertheless, most small businesses with limited cash to operate may cease to exist by the end of December 2020.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This article focused on the effects of COVID-19 on immigrant retail businesses in selected outlets in Johannesburg. Covid-19 has socio-economic effects on the world economy. Thus, it is important to better understand the impact of this pandemic on citizens and most especially on immigrant retail businesses. Understanding the role of the small business sector in general and immigrant-owned businesses in particular can play a role in the economic development of a nation and the impact of the pandemic on their

sustainability. It will assist policy makers to come up with policies that will help to cushion the effects of the pandemic. This study recommends that digital transformation should be embraced by immigrant retail business so as to become more resilient and connect better with their customers during trying periods. This study adopted a qualitative method, therefore it is recommended that other methods for example, quantitative and mixed methods, could be adopted to study the impact of COVID-19 on immigrant retail business using larger sample in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

Retail entrepreneurship has an important role to play in economic development, as well as with job creation and employment opportunities. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed untold hardship on both human beings and immigrant retail businesses in the West Rand, Johannesburg area of South Africa. Findings of this study indicate that most of the immigrant businesses sampled were seriously affected by the pandemic and the lockdown in the country. In addition, most immigrant business, as well as locally owned small business, may cease to exist due to their financial fragility should the lockdown be extended for a longer period. Furthermore, the themes emerging from this study indicate that most immigrant businesses were temporarily closed, while those identified as essential services and businesses that opened were faced with low patronage by customers, when compared to before the pandemic and lockdown, thus leading to low income generation. It further showed that some do not have enough cash at hand

and are struggling to pay their rents and also affecting their inability to sustain their businesses. The results also indicate that these businesses were not prepared for an emergency such as the pandemic and the resulting lockdown, which adversely affected their businesses and general well-being. Although the government announced some palliative measures to help reduce the impact of the pandemic and lockdown on small businesses, it was mentioned by all of the respondents that they did not receive any help from the government because they were immigrants and assistance was provided only to citizens. In conclusion, respondents iterate that some lessons were learnt during this period, which have empowered them to start thinking of developing new business strategies that would help them to manage this type of crisis in the future, should such arise again.

A study on this pandemic's impact on immigrant businesses and their preparedness to engage with the crisis, as well as stand up to and prevail against it in a manner that will help them to continue in business post

COVID-19 becomes very important for the following reasons. Primarily, understanding the impact of the pandemic on business survival can help to reveal how immigrant business owners can develop more strategic initiatives that can assist with being more prepared in the future when disaster occurs. Further, one of the underlying means of business survival is the development of contingency plans; necessary so that these plans can be invoked in case of emergency. In addition, it will initially assist policy makers to better understand challenges that could impact immigrant businesses and subsequently allow for the development of conducive mitigating measures in a holistic manner, to accommodate bail out initiatives to this type of business, considering their contribution to the economic development of any nation. Finally, it will serve as useful reference material for scholars who wish to study and better understand the way Cameroun, Uganda, Nigeria, Pakistan, Malawi, Ghana, Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique immigrant retail businesses can position themselves before, during and after a pandemic.

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