



**Journal of
CONTEMPORARY
SOCIETY & EDUCATION
(JCSE)**

**ISSN: 2709-832X (Print)
2709-8338**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69778/2709-8338/2026/5.2/EN>

Editorial Note:

This latest issue of the Journal of Contemporary Society Education (JCSE) arrives at a moment when the boundaries between the academic, the social, and the urgently practical have never been more porous. A glance at the twenty-one articles in this forthcoming collection reveals a publication that understands its mandate: to serve not merely as a repository of scholarship, but as a sharp, coherent lens through which to examine the pressing complexities of contemporary society, with a firm grounding in education as a transformative force.

What distinguishes this issue is its refusal to settle for disciplinary comfort. The contributions, drawn from institutions across Africa, demonstrate a welcome intellectual restlessness. We see scholars interrogating the intimate, such as Mudau et al.'s exploration of language as a source of family conflict within Vhavenda families alongside those grappling with structural questions, such as Sikwela and Diedericks' critical look at performance management as "a mirror of inertia" in public administration. This range is not a sign of incoherence; it is a testament to the journal's understanding that societal education occurs in classrooms, in homes, in municipal water governance (as Zulu and Nojiyeza's work on Zululand shows), and in the very language we use to communicate.

Several pieces stand out for their conceptual bravery. Maungedzo's reframing of academic literacy through sociocultural theory for rural teacher development tackles a perennial challenge with fresh theoretical rigour. Similarly, Lubombo and Zethi's work on "linguistic justice" and the Disciplinary Literacies framework asks a question that South African higher education can no longer afford to postpone: how do we re-imagine instructional communication not as a barrier, but as an equitable foundation? These are not abstract debates; they are core pedagogical interventions.

The journal also demonstrates a commendable commitment to surfacing marginalised voices and experiences. Nkumane's exploration of intersectionality and the lived experiences of Black women scholars at UNISA, and Sibango's ethnographic look at how belonging is negotiated in Anthropology departments, remind us that the university itself is a site of intense social contestation. When Lekoa and Nojiyeza connect off-campus housing to "ecologies of distress" affecting student mental health, they do what good contemporary scholarship must: they trace the material conditions of life directly into the outcomes of education. If there is a through-line to this collection, it is the insistence that no social phenomenon, whether climate governance under the AU (Yemisi and Ani), the antinomies of decolonisation in literature (Moopi), or the gendered nexus of marital status and poverty (Dunga), exists outside the purview of rigorous inquiry. The JCSE is building a platform where scholars can hold those complex phenomena up to the light.

This volume does not offer easy answers. It offers something more valuable: a coherent, sharply focused set of questions, pursued with methodological care and regional relevance. For a journal of contemporary society and education, that is precisely the work that matters.

Editor: Professor TJ Mudau
Institute of Gender and Youth Studies
University of Venda, South Africa
Thizwilondi.Mudau@univen.ac.za

TABLE OF CONTENT

1. Exploring the Influence of Language on Family Conflicts Among Vhavenḁa Families Mudau S.D., Raphalalani M.R., Tshikota S.L., & Mathabi Mashudu	6-22
2. Academic Literacy Reframed: Sociocultural Theory and Rural Teacher Development Robert Maungedzo	23-39
3. Analysis Of Omission Errors In The Academic Writing Of Level One Student s At A South African University Ndishunwani Vincent Demana, Ernest Kwesi Klu, Mzamani Johannes Maluleke	40-57
4. The Perceptions of Students on Sexual Harassment at the Rural University Mudau Thizwilondi Josephine	58-88
5. Understanding how belonging and originality are negotiated in three South African Anthropology Departments Asemahle Sibango	89-101
6. Employee Retention and Talent Management In The Hospitality Sector. Does Employer Branding Matter? Costa Hofisi&Munyaradzi Chikove1, Lilliosah Dowo	102-129
7. African Union (AU) and Climate Change Governance in Africa, 2002-2022 Olawale Yemisi, Kelechi Johnmary Ani	130-149
8. A Gendered Analysis of the Nexus of Marital Status and Poverty Hannah Mayamiko Dunga	150-167
9. The Influence of Authenticity, Credibility and Cultural Relatability on Consumer Trust and Purchasing Behaviour Aphelele Hlengwa and Andrisha Beharry-Ramraj	168-188
10. Performance Management: A Mirror of Inertia and a Lens on Public Administration's Evolution and Progress in South Africa Shereen Sikwela, Melvin Diedericks	189-211
11. The Underrepresentation Of Women's Leadership In Water Governance: A Case Study Of Zululand District Municipality, South Africa Nomfundo Nomcebo Zulu, Innocent Simphiwe Nojiyeza	212-234

12. Intersectionality and Academic Marginalisation: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Black Women Scholars at the University of South Africa
Dr Khabonina Grace Nkumane

235-251
13. A Philosophical Appraisal Of René Girard’S Archetypal Scapegoat Hypothesis In The Light Of Nigerian Migrants In Germany
Stanley Ekwugha & Kingsley Ekene Amaechi

252-268
14. The Effect Of Flood Risk Management Control On Property Protection In Lagos State, Nigeria
Margaret N. Jinadu & Akinseye Olowu

268-285
15. Antinomies of Afro-radical and liberal democratic decolonization in Zimbabwe and South Africa in Sue Nyathi’s *The Gold-Diggers* (2018)
Peter Moopi

286-304
16. A Collaborative or Disputed Space? Teacher Unions and The Professionalization of School Leadership
Thembinkosi Zwane, David Matsepe, Mugwena Maluleke

305-325
17. Dialectics On Humanitarian Action: A Necessary Action To The Less Privilege And Nations In Crisis Anselm Oyon
Anselm Oyon, Kelechi Johnmary Ani

326-338
18. Music As A Pedagogical Tool And Epistemology Within A Multiliteracies Approach To University Education
Maricel Botha

339-353
19. Ecologies Of Distress: How Off-Campus Housing Affects Student Mental Health In Rural South Africa
Mammusa Rosinah Lekoa & Innocent Simphiwe Nojiyeza

354-370
20. Post-COVID-19 Challenges Faced by Enterprises in Richards Bay, KwaZulu-Natal
Selena Moodley, Beharry-Ramraj, A

371-388
21. Linguistic Justice And Higher Education Futures: Leveraging The Disciplinary Literacies Framework To Re-Imagine Instructional Communication In South African Higher Education
Musara Lubombo, Thato Zethi

389-408

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69778/2709-8338/2026/5.2/a20>

POST-COVID-19 CHALLENGES FACED BY ENTERPRISES IN RICHARDS BAY, KWAZULU-NATAL

Selena Moodley

*Department of Management and Entrepreneurship,
Faculty of Law and Management, University of KwaZulu-Natal,
Durban, 3629, South Africa.*

Beharry-Ramraj, A

*Management and Entrepreneurship
School of Commerce
College of Law & Management Studies
University of KwaZulu-Natal (Westville Campus)
South Africa*

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5674-885X>
Beharrya@ukzn.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and intensified existing structural and operational weaknesses in enterprise ecosystems, particularly in developing regions such as Richards Bay, KwaZulu-Natal. Prior to the pandemic, many businesses operated with limited financial literacy, weak digital infrastructure, and no crisis management systems, making them highly vulnerable to external shocks. However, despite the growing literature on global impacts, there remained limited empirical data on how businesses in smaller urban centres in South Africa experienced post-pandemic challenges. This study, therefore, sought to identify the challenges enterprises faced post-COVID-19 in Richards Bay, KwaZulu-Natal. A positivist, quantitative research approach was adopted using a descriptive survey design. Data were gathered from 206 purposively selected enterprises via a structured questionnaire and analysed through descriptive statistics and one-sample t-tests. The results revealed statistically significant challenges, including financial losses, workforce instability, diminished customer demand, reduced productivity, and difficulties accessing government financial assistance. These findings demonstrated that the pandemic amplified pre-existing enterprise fragilities, while the lack of institutional support and digital capacity hindered recovery. Based on these findings, the study recommended decentralised, context-sensitive policy interventions to improve access to support; capacity building in financial and digital skills; and mental health and workforce resilience programmes. It further called for infrastructural investment in digital and logistical systems to enhance supply chain and market access. In doing so, the study not only addressed a local knowledge gap but also contributed to future policy design for more resilient business environments.

Keywords: *Post-COVID-19 challenges, Richards Bay, small and medium enterprises, business resilience, economic recovery strategies,*

INTRODUCTION AND

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The COVID-19 pandemic deeply disrupted businesses worldwide, but its impact was

especially severe in developing urban contexts like Richards Bay, KwaZulu-Natal. (Bhuiyan, 2023) asserts that prior to the pandemic, many enterprises were already structurally vulnerable, operating without the technological, financial, and strategic buffers needed to withstand shocks. These systemic weaknesses, including financial illiteracy (Fatoki, 2021), poor business continuity planning (Engidaw, 2022), and limited digital integration (Mazibuko, 2021), rendered small and medium enterprises (SMEs) particularly exposed. Furthermore, Daniels and Tichaawa (2021) explain that the sector-specific impact of the pandemic, particularly in hospitality, tourism, and retail, revealed the uneven distribution of adaptive capacity across business types and locations as well as sectoral dependencies, supply chain fragility, and shifts in consumer behaviour amplified the crisis in regional economies reliant on face-to-face transactions and global supply routes.

The literature suggests that businesses with limited access to digital tools, institutional support, and diversified markets were the most affected (Fatoki, 2021; Engidaw, 2022). However, Ancillo, del Val Núñez, and Gavrilă (2021) argue that internal organisational weaknesses, such as the absence of crisis planning and poor workforce flexibility, exacerbated the impact, highlighting the interplay between external shocks and internal preparedness.

In the context of South Africa, Aluko, Bayai, and Enwereji (2023) emphasise that, although numerous, government interventions were inconsistently accessed, often bypassing the most vulnerable enterprises due to administrative and compliance bottlenecks. Therefore, the pandemic presented not just a public health emergency but a critical lens through which the sustainability and responsiveness of local enterprise models must be examined. This study, therefore, sought to identify the nature and extent of challenges faced by businesses in Richards Bay in the post-

pandemic period, offering empirical evidence that advances both theoretical understanding and policy development to build resilience.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed many systemic weaknesses in public health and policy frameworks as well as deeply entrenched vulnerabilities within enterprise ecosystems. According to Bhuiyan (2023), enterprises in developing regions faced disproportionately high exposure to financial and operational disruption due to structural fragilities that predated the pandemic. While much attention has been paid to national and global trends, there remains a critical knowledge gap regarding how smaller urban economies, such as Richards Bay in KwaZulu-Natal, absorbed, internalised, and attempted to recover from the crisis.

Sibiya *et al.* (2023) assert that South African SMEs, particularly in semi-peripheral economic zones, suffered from a lack of institutional resilience, limited access to financial buffers, and workforce instability. However, Aluko *et al.* (2023) argue that many of these challenges are exacerbated by a chronic mismatch between government policy designs and local business realities. The problem, therefore, is not merely the existence of external shocks like COVID-19, but the extent to which pre-existing infrastructural, logistical, and human capital constraints magnify their effects. This is particularly urgent in areas like Richards Bay, where industrial and service-based businesses co-exist in a highly interdependent manner, often reliant on limited local supply chains and port-based logistics (Raj *et al.*, 2022).

Furthermore, Engidaw (2022) explains that without access to detailed, localised data on how businesses navigated operational challenges post-pandemic, such as staff layoffs, reduced productivity, and psychological burnout, support strategies risk remaining either overly generic or

misaligned. Mazibuko (2021) concurs, stating that without contextual insight into post-pandemic disruptions at a city or district level, recovery efforts may fail to address the granular, intersectional nature of enterprise challenges.

In light of these concerns, there remains a significant empirical gap in understanding how businesses in regional economic zones, such as Richards Bay, have navigated the post-pandemic environment. This study is therefore significant because it not only investigates the lived experiences of enterprises in Richards Bay but also generates evidence-based insights to strengthen local economic resilience, inform targeted policy, and contribute to scholarly debates on post-crisis adaptation in emerging economies.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the key challenges faced by enterprises in Richards Bay, KwaZulu-Natal, following the COVID-19 pandemic. By identifying the structural, operational, financial, psychological, and market-related difficulties businesses face, the study sought to provide a clearer understanding of the factors hindering post-pandemic recovery. The findings of this research hold value for several key stakeholders. Policymakers and government departments can use the insights to design targeted support programmes that respond to the actual needs of small and medium enterprises. Business owners and entrepreneurs may benefit from the study by recognising patterns of vulnerability and adapting their strategies for future resilience. Development agencies and financial institutions can also draw on the data to improve funding criteria and business development services that are better aligned with the realities of semi-urban and industrial contexts. Moreover, academic researchers and economic planners can use the study as a foundation

for further inquiry into enterprise sustainability in crisis-prone environments.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To identify the enterprises' challenges post-COVID-19 in Richards Bay, KwaZulu-Natal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review critically examines the multidimensional challenges enterprises faced in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. It interrogates not only the direct effects of the crisis but also the underlying structural and contextual conditions that shaped enterprise vulnerability and recovery. The review is structured around five interlinked thematic areas: pre-existing structural weaknesses; sectoral and operational disruptions; shifts in consumer behaviour and market volatility; supply chain and infrastructural fragility; and the psychological, financial, and labour-related strains experienced by businesses. Together, these themes provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation for understanding the complex, layered impact of the pandemic on local enterprises, particularly small and medium-sized businesses, whose resilience was tested by both internal limitations and external shocks. By grounding the discussion in localised realities and scholarly insights, the review offers a nuanced picture of enterprise-level stress in a semi-urban South African context.

Structural Vulnerabilities in Pre-Pandemic Business Ecosystems

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on enterprises in Richards Bay cannot be fully understood without examining the structural fragilities that predated the crisis. As Bhuiyan (2023) asserts, many small and medium enterprises were already operating with minimal digital infrastructure, severely constraining their ability to pivot to online platforms during lockdowns that disrupted traditional operations. This

limited technological adaptation was especially problematic in areas like Richards Bay, where digital inclusion policies have lagged behind national averages, exacerbating digital inequality.

According to Mazibuko (2021), enterprises in KwaZulu-Natal's metropolitan regions, particularly among SMMEs, have long suffered from constrained access to financial management resources, rendering them ill-equipped to absorb unexpected economic shocks. This reliance on informal business practices and underdeveloped administrative systems left many enterprises exposed when formal support mechanisms required compliance with bureaucratic and audit requirements. Therefore, the pre-COVID business model was more reactive than resilient, relying heavily on short-term liquidity rather than long-term planning.

Fatoki (2021) reinforces this point by noting that financial illiteracy and the absence of emergency planning mechanisms were systemic issues among South African enterprises even before the pandemic. This deficiency in contingency preparedness meant that businesses lacked not only risk management frameworks but also the adaptive capabilities needed to respond effectively to prolonged disruption. Additionally, Engidaw (2022) explains that the failure to institutionalise business continuity plans was not just an operational oversight but a reflection of deep-seated governance weaknesses in small enterprises across developing economies.

Zhou and Gumbo (2021) add that SMMEs in KwaZulu-Natal, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas like Richards Bay, often operate in isolation from formal supply chains and support networks, further weakening their adaptive capacity. This isolation is compounded by spatial inequalities in infrastructure investment, with smaller towns receiving less economic

stimulus and digital upgrades compared to major urban centres.

Furthermore, Ancillo *et al.* (2021) argue that pandemics function less as disruptors and more as accelerators of pre-existing weaknesses. The structural inertia in Richards Bay's business environment, marked by outdated models, fragile customer networks, and poor strategic diversification, left many enterprises already on the brink, with the pandemic merely accelerating their decline. As Wenzel, Starske and Lieberman (2020) explain, organisational failure in times of crisis often reflects latent inefficiencies rather than crisis-specific shortcomings.

Sectoral and Operational Disruptions During the COVID-19 Crisis

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered unprecedented operational shocks across all sectors internationally, revealing the fragility of local business ecosystems. Daniels and Tichaawa (2021) assert that sectors such as tourism and hospitality were the first to experience systemic disruption, with restrictions on gatherings, travel bans, and event cancellations resulting in immediate revenue losses. The ripple effect of these disruptions extended to manufacturing and services, where the shutdown of global supply routes delayed production and logistics, particularly for export-oriented businesses.

The pandemic's sudden nature forced enterprises to halt operations, often without contingency plans in place, resulting in broken supply chains and unfulfilled contracts (Asif *et al.*, 2020). Sharma *et al.* (2024) highlight that small enterprises within the service industry were disproportionately impacted due to their limited digitalisation and reliance on face-to-face transactions. These conditions rendered many unable to transition to remote service delivery, unlike larger firms with existing online infrastructure.

According to Engidaw (2022), financial strain compounded operational issues, as declining revenues eroded working capital and made it difficult for businesses to cover fixed costs, including rent, utilities, and salaries. While large firms could access bridging finance or rely on reserve funds, small businesses had limited buffers, exacerbating their vulnerability. Raghavan, Demircioglu, and Orazgaliyev (2021) explain that employee retrenchments and unpaid leave were common responses to declining cash flow, which, in turn, created a labour crisis across both the formal and informal sectors.

However, Nyawo (2020) notes that the disruptions were not uniform across sectors. While the tourism sector experienced near-total shutdowns, certain retail businesses, particularly those in essential goods, managed to adapt through altered delivery systems and local sourcing. This distinction suggests that sectoral adaptability hinged not only on operational scale but also on policy classification and the ability to innovate in constrained environments.

Furthermore, Lamba and Jain (2022) assert that the digital divide significantly determined whether businesses could maintain continuity, as many rural or peri-urban enterprises lacked the infrastructure or digital skills to shift online. Therefore, while some sectors showed signs of resilience, others (particularly SMMEs dependent on physical infrastructure and customer proximity) remained highly exposed.

Consumer Behaviour Shifts and Market Volatility Post-Lockdown

Post-lockdown business recovery was significantly shaped by volatile consumer behaviours and altered market dynamics. As Mele, Russo-Spena and Kaartemo (2021) explain, the pandemic triggered long-term shifts in consumption, with many customers gravitating towards digital platforms while simultaneously reducing

discretionary spending. Enterprises that relied heavily on physical foot traffic, such as retail and personal services, experienced severe demand contraction, particularly as consumer anxiety about physical spaces lingered after the lifting of formal restrictions (Mele *et al.*, 2021).

Maharaj and Reddy (2020) assert that the pandemic catalysed a shift in purchasing patterns as consumers prioritised safety, accessibility, and convenience, often favouring contactless transactions and home delivery models over traditional in-store interactions. However, most businesses, especially small enterprises, lacked the infrastructure to transition to e-commerce or hybrid models, leaving them ill-prepared to respond to evolving consumer preferences (Maharaj & Reddy, 2020). This mismatch between consumer demand and enterprise capacity deepened the volatility of the local market.

Huang and Jahromi (2021) highlight that service firms globally needed to rapidly reconfigure customer engagement models to retain consumer trust, an adaptation that required both digital competence and agile leadership. Yet, the literature notes that many South African firms, particularly in semi-urban regions, lacked the technological readiness or capital investment required for such innovation (Huang & Jahromi, 2021). Consequently, businesses that could not offer seamless online alternatives were sidelined in a consumer environment increasingly driven by convenience and perceived safety.

Bailey and Breslin (2021) argue that the pandemic exposed a behavioural reorientation among consumers towards brands that demonstrated resilience, empathy, and flexibility. Businesses that maintained rigid pre-pandemic models found it difficult to connect with these shifting values, particularly in a market where customers had become more discerning, frugal, and digitally empowered. This erosion of brand loyalty

further destabilised demand and made recovery efforts inconsistent across sectors.

Nyamunda (2022) explains that even when restrictions eased, consumer confidence did not rebound uniformly, especially in non-essential sectors. This persistent caution, driven by financial uncertainty and ongoing health concerns, led to a reduction in in-person shopping and lower frequency of visits, disproportionately affecting informal businesses with limited marketing or digital reach (Nyamunda, 2022). Therefore, enterprises faced not just a decline in revenue but also a transformation in market logic, where the challenge was not only to regain speed but also to re-establish relevance in a changed consumer landscape (Maharaj & Reddy, 2020; Mele *et al.*, 2021).

Supply Chain Fragility and Infrastructure Constraints in Local Contexts

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep structural weaknesses in the supply chain systems that enterprises relied upon. As a logistics-driven industrial hub, Richards Bay's economic activities are closely tied to national and international transport networks. Zutshi *et al.* (2021) argue that the global shift towards just-in-time inventory systems left many firms unprepared for disruption, as delayed shipments and inventory depletion became widespread. These effects were acutely felt, where local manufacturers struggled to maintain production schedules in the absence of critical inputs.

Zhou and Gumbo (2021) explain that KwaZulu-Natal's inland logistics infrastructure further exacerbated these vulnerabilities. Road freight delays, limited rail functionality, and bottlenecks at the Richards Bay port created operational backlogs, especially for businesses dependent on timely delivery cycles. Additionally, many enterprises faced severe challenges in receiving raw

materials or exporting finished goods due to rerouted cargo and reduced port staffing.

Raj *et al.* (2022) assert that the disruption was intensified by international trade dependencies, as border closures and foreign lockdowns restricted the flow of goods and services. Richards Bay's exposure to global supply chains became a liability, particularly in sectors such as aluminium and mining, where inputs and buyers are often foreign-based. These dynamics introduced unpredictability into enterprise operations, making strategic planning difficult for firms of all sizes.

Sibiya *et al.* (2023) add that local sourcing, which could have been a potential buffer, was constrained by infrastructural and policy limitations. In particular, informal procurement networks were unsupported by regional economic policies, leading to price spikes and unreliable deliveries during peak disruption periods. As a result, many small and medium-sized businesses locally found themselves squeezed between collapsing global imports and an unresponsive local supply ecosystem.

Fatoki (2021) observes that the severity of supply shocks was also shaped by firm size and formality. Larger enterprises had better contractual safeguards and buffer stocks, while small businesses often operated without warehousing capacity or alternate sourcing plans. This imbalance meant that SMMEs bore the brunt of the delays, forced to suspend operations or cancel customer orders with no clear timeline for recovery.

Therefore, it is evident that the interaction among underdeveloped infrastructure, rigid supply models, and reliance on transnational trade created cascading disruptions. These challenges highlight how South Africa's industrial identity, once a strength, became a source of fragility when global and domestic systems were simultaneously destabilised (Zhou & Gumbo, 2021; Fatoki, 2021; Raj *et al.*, 2022).

Psychological, Financial, and Labour-Related Strains Among Enterprises

The post-COVID-19 period in KwaZulu-Natal was marked by multifaceted enterprise stress, with business owners and employees navigating an unprecedented mix of financial distress, labour-related uncertainty, and psychological exhaustion. Bhuiyan (2023) asserts that financial strain was among the earliest and most severe consequences of the pandemic, as businesses lost vital revenue streams during lockdowns. For many enterprises, reduced consumer spending and limited operations left businesses struggling to meet overhead costs (Fatoki, 2021). This financial fragility extended beyond profitability, affecting business liquidity and raising insolvency risks.

In a period of declining revenue, workforce-related issues emerged. Ancillo *et al.* (2021) explain that many firms were forced to reduce working hours or implement unpaid layoffs, particularly in sectors such as hospitality and retail, which are prevalent in Richards Bay. These decisions, though sometimes necessary, created mistrust and instability among employees. Sibiya *et al.* (2023) note that even where layoffs were avoided, job security eroded significantly, fostering low morale and productivity losses.

Psychological stress compounded these labour and financial disruptions. Daniels and Tichaawa (2021) argue that prolonged uncertainty led to decision fatigue among business owners, who were continually adjusting strategies in response to volatile regulations. Additionally, Brown and Nwagbara (2021) emphasise the emotional burden of leadership during crises, suggesting that emotional intelligence became a crucial, though often undervalued, tool for organisational survival. These stressors were not confined to leadership; employees also endured heightened anxiety over income stability

and workplace health risks, further undermining enterprise cohesion.

Furthermore, Maharaj and Reddy (2020) highlight that the lack of adequate mental health infrastructure in local contexts meant business stakeholders often had to internalise these stresses without support. In SMMES, this psychosocial strain was intensified by the close-knit nature of small business communities, where the financial and emotional well-being of entrepreneurs and employees are interdependent. Mele *et al.* (2021) explain that such emotional contagion can impair organisational resilience, especially when burnout spreads across leadership and staff.

The intersection of financial losses, unstable labour dynamics, and emotional fatigue thus created a cycle of compounded vulnerability. While some firms attempted adaptive strategies, the absence of institutional buffers and psychosocial relief mechanisms prolonged the recovery phase. As Engidaw (2022) notes, the post-pandemic experience for many small businesses in developing regions was less about immediate closure and more about enduring prolonged psychological and financial uncertainty.

In conclusion, the literature reveals that the challenges enterprises encountered post-COVID-19 were not solely due to the pandemic but were exacerbated by long-standing systemic weaknesses. Prior to the crisis, many firms were already operating within fragile business ecosystems characterised by poor digital infrastructure, limited financial literacy, and weak contingency planning. The pandemic accelerated operational collapse through sector-specific shutdowns, broken supply chains, and market shocks driven by evolving consumer behaviours. Additionally, supply chain disruptions, shaped by both global dependencies and local infrastructural bottlenecks, exposed the vulnerability of industrial networks. At the human level, businesses were burdened

by emotional burnout, labour insecurity, and financial strain, with small enterprises experiencing disproportionate hardship due to resource constraints and psychosocial isolation. Collectively, these insights underscore that enterprise resilience was undermined by a confluence of structural, behavioural, operational, and emotional stressors. Understanding these dynamics is essential for contextualising post-pandemic recovery trajectories and designing more inclusive, shock-responsive business ecosystems.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a positivist research philosophy, grounded in the belief that business challenges can be objectively observed and measured through empirical methods. By maintaining a realist ontological position, the research assumed that the difficulties enterprises in Richards Bay experienced during the post-COVID-19 period existed independently of individual perceptions. The researcher took an epistemologically neutral stance, remaining detached from the data to avoid bias and uphold objectivity throughout the investigation. A deductive research approach was applied, guided by existing theories and literature that framed the known categories of challenges enterprises face following global crises. This approach allowed the study to test and quantify specific phenomena using structured tools.

The study employed a quantitative research design to assess the extent and nature of post-pandemic business challenges across key domains, including financial strain, labour-related issues, supply chain disruptions, and psychological stress. A descriptive survey design was chosen to facilitate broad data collection from enterprises operating across multiple sectors. Richards Bay, located in northern KwaZulu-Natal, was selected as the study site due to its significance as a regional economic centre with high exposure to both national and global market disruptions

during COVID-19. The city's sectoral diversity made it an appropriate context to evaluate varied enterprise-level impacts.

The study targeted small, medium, and large enterprises across industries, including manufacturing, services, tourism, and retail. Purposive sampling was used to select businesses that had remained operational or reopened post-lockdown, ensuring the sample included respondents with direct experience of pandemic-related business conditions. The sampling population comprised 845 businesses registered with the ZCCI in Richards Bay. These businesses represented a wide cross-section of the local economy, spanning sectors such as manufacturing, logistics, tourism, retail, and professional services. From this population, a sample of 206 businesses was selected using simple random sampling, and data were collected from owners, senior managers, or administrative staff who were directly involved in managing the business during the recovery period.

The selection of this sample size was based on a standardised formula for determining representative sample sizes from finite populations, ensuring statistical reliability and generalizability of the findings. The following Yamane (1967) formula was used to calculate the required sample size:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

- n = sample size
- N = population size (845 businesses)
- e = margin of error (0.10 for a 90% confidence level)

Substituting the values into the formula:

$$n = \frac{845}{1 + 845(0.10)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{845}{1 + 8.45}$$

$$n = \frac{845}{9.45}$$

$$n = 89.4$$

The calculated sample size was approximately 89; a total of 230 questionnaires were distributed, and 206 were returned, yielding a 90% response rate. The final usable sample comprised 206 businesses. This number remained within acceptable statistical thresholds, maintaining confidence levels and ensuring analytical depth (Huang & Jahromi, 2021).

Data was collected using a hybrid approach, combining in-person administration and electronic distribution of questionnaires. Following ethical clearance and formal authorisation from the Zululand Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ZCCI), the researcher made direct contact with businesses to schedule appointments for questionnaire delivery or, where face-to-face engagement was impractical, sent electronic copies via email. Prior to participation, respondents were provided with informed consent forms that clearly outlined the voluntary nature of the study, data protection measures, and confidentiality protocols. The questionnaire was developed based on key thematic areas emerging from the literature, with items addressing financial losses, workforce instability, operational constraints, and emotional stress.

The data collected from the structured questionnaires were analysed using SPSS, Version 27, a widely recognised tool for performing quantitative data analysis in the social and economic sciences. SPSS was chosen for its proven ability to efficiently manage large datasets, apply a wide range of statistical tests, and produce outputs that are both reliable and suitable for policy and managerial decision-making.

The data analysis process began with data cleaning and validation, ensuring completeness and accuracy before applying any statistical tests. This included checks for missing values, duplicate responses, and outliers that could distort results. Once validated, the data were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. These metrics were essential in summarising key trends and profiling the business's challenges (Stough & Lee, 2021).

To assess the reliability of the Likert-scale items used in the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each thematic section. Cronbach's alpha is a reliability coefficient that evaluates whether multiple items measuring the same concept yield consistent results. In this study, coefficients above 0.70 were obtained, meeting the minimum accepted threshold for reliability in social science research (Susanto *et al.*, 2024). This confirmed that the constructs used in the study were internally coherent and suitable for further statistical interpretation.

In addition to descriptive statistics, inferential analyses were performed to test the study's hypotheses. Specifically, one-sample t-tests were used to examine whether the mean responses to business challenges differed significantly from the neutral midpoint of the Likert scale. This provided empirical evidence on whether businesses in Richards Bay experienced the hypothesised disruptions. Cross-tabulation and chi-square tests were also used to examine associations among categorical variables, such as business size, sector, and ownership structure. Furthermore, independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare mean differences across groups, for example, contrasting SMEs with larger firms, thereby revealing differentiated recovery patterns. These inferential tests enhanced the analytical depth and ensured that the findings moved beyond simple description to statistically

validated conclusions (Phair & Warren, 2021).

The use of SPSS enabled the researcher to apply quantitative rigour, ensuring that the findings were not only statistically valid but also analytically transparent and reproducible. The inclusion of both descriptive and inferential statistical methods strengthened the study's explanatory power, allowing it to identify not just patterns but also statistically significant relationships within the data.

RESULTS

This section presents the results. Using one-sample t-tests on questionnaire data, the section highlights key issues, including financial losses, job cuts, reduced demand, disengaged staff, supply disruptions, and weak institutional support. These findings offer a clear picture of the difficulties businesses encountered and lay the groundwork for analysing their responses and evaluating state support in later sections.

Table 1: Challenges of businesses in Richards Bay post-COVID-19

Challenges	N	Mean	Standard deviation	t	Df	p-value
B1 Loss of customers	206	3.44	1.426	4.398	206	<.001
B2 Loss of income	206	3.64	1.050	8.778	206	<.001
B3 Loss of jobs	206	3.46	1.366	4.819	206	<.001
B4 Business strategies that worked before COVID and are no longer working	206	3.23	1.158	2.888	206	.004
B5 Suppliers closed/relocated	206	3.15	1.199	1.815	206	.071
B6 Demand for our products and services has decreased	206	3.35	1.004	4.994	206	<.001
B7 Employees working from home, which results in issues of communication, etc	206	3.29	0.966	4.337	206	<.001
B8 Increased absenteeism of employees	206	3.30	1.078	3.954	206	<.001
B9 Reduced productivity from employees	206	3.41	0.973	5.959	206	<.001
B10 Loss of business assets (e.g. vehicles, machinery, etc.)	206	3.25	0.986	3.613	206	<.001
B11 Loss of premises/offices	206	3.09	1.094	1.210	206	.228

B12 Inability to get financial assistance from the government, due to, e.g. bad credit ratings	206	3.23	1.037	3.174	206	.002
B13 Demotivation and lack of retention of employees as a result of a reduction/lack of training and programmes	206	3.23	0.073	3.173	206	.002

Table 1 provides a summary of the key challenges faced by Richards Bay businesses after the COVID-19 pandemic, based on one-sample t-tests comparing mean responses against a neutral value of 3. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was used to assess agreement among respondents. Most of the 13 challenge items had p-values below this threshold, indicating strong agreement on their severity.

The most critical challenges were job losses ($M = 3.46$), income losses ($M = 3.44$), and customer loss ($M = 3.44$), each with p-values under 0.001 and high t-values, reflecting the sharp economic impact on employment and revenue. Operational difficulties also featured prominently, including reduced productivity ($M = 3.41$), increased absenteeism ($M = 3.30$), and remote work issues such as poor communication ($M = 3.29$), suggesting that internal disruptions compounded financial strain.

Further challenges included the loss of business assets ($M = 3.24$) and lack of access to government financial aid ($M = 3.23$), highlighting gaps in institutional support. Other concerns, such as reduced demand ($M = 3.16$), ineffective business strategies ($M = 3.23$), and decreased employee motivation due to limited training opportunities ($M = 3.23$), point to

shifting market and workforce conditions.

Two challenges, loss of premises ($M = 2.99$) and supplier closures ($M = 3.15$), were less severe. Notably, loss of premises was statistically insignificant ($p = 0.228$), suggesting varied responses or a lower impact in this area. In sum, the results paint a complex picture of post-COVID business strain, driven by economic, operational, and workforce pressures.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section critically examines the key challenges enterprises in Richards Bay have faced following the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on results from one-sample t-tests and insights from the literature review, the discussion presents a holistic interpretation of post-pandemic enterprise strain. The aim was to illuminate how financial, operational, labour-related, and infrastructural vulnerabilities manifested in this specific local context, and how these patterns resonate with or depart from established academic understanding. While the findings are statistical, the implications they carry reflect deeply embedded structural and systemic dynamics that shaped the capacity of businesses, particularly SMMEs, to

survive and adapt during an unprecedented global crisis.

The findings reveal that the most severe challenges faced by businesses included income losses ($M = 3.64$), job losses ($M = 3.46$), and customer attrition ($M = 3.44$), all of which were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. These mirror the pandemic's macroeconomic disruption, where decreased consumer demand, halted operations, and prolonged lockdowns triggered direct financial shocks (Bhuiyan, 2023; Daniels & Tichaawa, 2021). As the literature noted, the pre-pandemic business ecosystem in Richards Bay was already fragile, lacking digital infrastructure and risk management strategies (Mazibuko, 2021; Fatoki, 2021). This pre-existing weakness meant that once revenue streams were interrupted, enterprises had no fallback mechanisms to absorb the shock. The pandemic simply exposed and intensified vulnerabilities that had long been neglected.

Operational challenges, such as reduced employee productivity ($M = 3.41$), increased absenteeism ($M = 3.30$), and communication breakdowns due to remote work ($M = 3.29$), further disrupted internal processes. These internal dysfunctions exacerbated the external financial strain, confirming Engidaw's (2022) argument that business continuity plans were largely absent or ineffective in small enterprises. What becomes clear is that crisis management was not embedded in the operational DNA of these businesses. Ancillo *et al.* (2021) argue that many enterprises were unable to pivot because of outdated business models and weak organisational learning capacities. The Richards Bay data support this, particularly where

strategies that had previously been successful were no longer effective ($M = 3.23$), reflecting a dangerous rigidity at a time that demanded agility.

Institutional limitations also became evident through the reported inability to access financial assistance ($M = 3.23$), echoing concerns in the literature about bureaucratic barriers and financial exclusion (Zhou & Gumbo, 2021). Many businesses did not qualify for relief due to informal operations or poor credit ratings, highlighting the disconnection between policy design and ground-level realities. In this context, government support appeared not as a stabilising force, but as a missed opportunity for meaningful intervention. The literature argues that this disconnect stems from systemic governance gaps and poor alignment between public finance instruments and the needs of small businesses (Fatoki, 2021).

Meanwhile, the reduced demand for products and services ($M = 3.35$) and demotivation due to diminished training and development ($M = 3.23$) point to a more subtle transformation in market and workforce dynamics. The literature identifies a sharp shift in consumer preferences towards digital, contactless, and convenience-driven engagement post-lockdown (Maharaj & Reddy, 2020; Mele *et al.*, 2021). Yet, many of Richards Bay's enterprises lacked the digital maturity to respond. Huang and Jahromi (2021) explain that firms without technological readiness were unable to reconfigure customer interfaces, leading to erosion of brand relevance and customer trust. Businesses in Richards Bay, especially those reliant on physical interaction, were structurally unprepared to reinvent their value propositions in a

changed consumer environment. This failure to respond to new demand logic compounded the crisis and prolonged recovery.

The results also illustrate a dual strain on enterprises' tangible and intangible assets. On the tangible side, losses in business assets ($M = 3.25$) and supplier disruptions ($M = 3.15$) reflect infrastructural and supply chain fragility, which was extensively discussed in the literature. Zutshi *et al.* (2021) and Raj *et al.* (2022) observed that just-in-time supply systems were vulnerable to shock, and Richards Bay's heavy dependence on national and international freight made it highly exposed. On the intangible side, demotivated employees, mental fatigue, and reduced morale align with Daniels and Tichaawa's (2021) finding that business owners and staff experienced emotional exhaustion amid persistent uncertainty. The erosion of psychological resilience was compounded by the absence of institutional or workplace mental health support (Maharaj & Reddy, 2020), showing that human capital stress was just as debilitating as financial loss.

Interestingly, the only statistically insignificant challenge was the loss of premises ($M = 3.09$, $p = .228$), suggesting that while the financial and operational dimensions crumbled, the physical infrastructure remained relatively intact. This divergence may be attributed to regional property-ownership dynamics or to commercial lease moratoriums during the pandemic, which temporarily shielded businesses from evictions. However, even this relative stability did not translate into operational security, as the other challenges proved overwhelming. In contrast, the

literature placed less emphasis on physical premises and more on digital spaces and logistical flows as sites of vulnerability, indicating a shift in how business continuity must be conceptualised.

Taken together, the findings present a densely interlinked web of challenges, each reinforcing the other. Financial fragility undercut operations; weakened operations demotivated employees; demotivated staff impaired recovery; and infrastructural breakdowns limited flexibility. These are not isolated problems but mutually reinforcing crises. The literature correctly characterises the pandemic as a stress test that revealed the cumulative impact of poor planning, weak digital infrastructure, and institutional neglect (Wenzel, Starske & Lieberman, 2020; Ancillo *et al.*, 2021). What the Richards Bay data adds is a grounded view of how these forces collided in a semi-urban setting, where businesses sit at the periphery of formal economic policy and are structurally disadvantaged in navigating complex crises.

Ultimately, the challenges experienced by Richards Bay enterprises post-COVID-19 reflected a convergence of longstanding systemic weaknesses and the immediate consequences of a global health emergency. The findings align strongly with literature that critiques both the internal capacities of small firms and the external environments in which they operate. The significance of these challenges lies not only in their statistical weight but in their interconnectedness. It is this layered interdependence among economic, operational, and psychosocial strains that makes the post-pandemic business

landscape so complex and critical to understand.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several targeted interventions are necessary to address the structural, operational, and psychosocial challenges that enterprises in Richards Bay experienced in the aftermath of COVID-19. First, there is a pressing need for a more inclusive and responsive institutional support system tailored to the realities of semi-urban and township-based enterprises. Many firms, especially SMMEs, struggled to access financial relief due to rigid compliance frameworks and poor integration with informal economies. Government relief programmes should therefore be decentralised, with simplified eligibility criteria, stronger partnerships with local chambers, and direct outreach mechanisms that consider varying levels of formality and digital literacy.

Moreover, the findings underscore the urgent need to prioritise digital transformation among small and medium enterprises. Public-private initiatives should support digital upskilling, subsidised access to technology, and the development of e-commerce infrastructure that allows businesses to operate in hybrid or fully online environments. Without such interventions, SMMEs will remain excluded from emerging consumer markets and vulnerable to future disruptions. In addition, capacity-building programmes focusing on financial literacy, contingency planning, and adaptive strategy development are essential to shift businesses from reactive to resilient operating models.

Addressing human capital challenges also requires a dual approach. Psychosocial support for both entrepreneurs and employees should be institutionalised, particularly through accessible mental health services and peer mentoring initiatives embedded within local enterprise development centres. Simultaneously, labour-focused interventions, such as skills development, flexible work systems, and worker protections, should be reimagined to accommodate the evolving dynamics of post-pandemic employment. Finally, infrastructural investments in the Richards Bay region must go beyond industrial development and include targeted upgrades to logistics, digital networks, and local procurement systems, ensuring that supply chain resilience is rooted in both global connectivity and local self-reliance. Collectively, these recommendations aim not merely to facilitate recovery but to rebuild a business ecosystem that is equitable, future-ready, and crisis-resilient.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should build on the current study by exploring sector-specific recovery trajectories and resilience mechanisms among enterprises in Richards Bay. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how businesses adapt over time, particularly in response to evolving consumer behaviours, digital integration, and institutional support. Additionally, comparative research between urban and semi-urban business ecosystems within KwaZulu-Natal could illuminate contextual differences in vulnerability and recovery. Further inquiry into the gendered and generational dimensions

of entrepreneurial resilience may also enrich understanding of differential impacts and capacities among business owners. Employing mixed methods approaches in future research would allow for a more nuanced analysis of both quantitative trends and lived experiences, thereby advancing a more holistic understanding of enterprise sustainability in post-crisis environments.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that enterprises in Richards Bay faced a complex and multi-layered set of challenges in the aftermath of COVID-19, shaped by deep-rooted structural vulnerabilities, sectoral disruptions, shifting consumer behaviours, fragile supply chains, and heightened psychological and financial strain. The evidence revealed that the pandemic did not merely introduce new problems but intensified pre-existing weaknesses

within the local business ecosystem. Most notably, small and medium enterprises bore the brunt of the crisis due to limited digital readiness, constrained access to institutional support, and insufficient resilience planning. The findings confirmed that enterprise challenges were not uniform, but differentiated by sector, size, and location, reflecting broader patterns of inequality in infrastructure and economic inclusion. By aligning empirical data with critical literature, this study established that recovery efforts must move beyond short-term relief and address systemic issues that preconditioned these businesses to fail under pressure. Ultimately, the study affirms the need for a fundamentally restructured support framework, one that is context-sensitive, inclusive, and capable of fostering long-term sustainability in South Africa's semi-urban economies.

REFERENCES

- Aluko, T., Bayai, I., & Enwereji, P. (2023). Effects of Government Intervention on SMMEs: A Review of Empirical Evidence. *ACTA UNIVERSITATIS DANUBIUS*, 264-289.
- Ancillo, A., del Val Núñez, M., & Gavrilă, S. (2021). Workplace change within the COVID-19 context: a grounded theory approach. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja*, 2297-2316.
- Asif, M., Pasha, M., Shafiq, S., & Craine, I. (2022). Economic Impacts of Post COVID 19. *Inverge Journal of Social Sciences*, 1(1), 2959–4359.

- Bailey, K., & Breslin, D. (2021). The COVID-19 pandemic: what can we learn from past research in organisations and management? *International journal of management reviews*, 3–6.
- Bhuiyan, M. (2023). The challenges and opportunities in the post-COVID situation for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Bangladesh. *PMIS review*, 145–163.
- Brown, C., & Nwagbara, U. (2021). Leading change with the heart: Exploring the relationship between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership in the era of COVID-19 pandemic challenges. *Economic Insights - Trends and Challenges*, 1–12.
- Daniels, T., & Tichaawa, T. (2021). Rethinking sport tourism events in a post-COVID-19 South Africa. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 1241–1256.
- Engidaw, A. E. (2022). Small businesses and their challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic in developing countries: in the case of Ethiopia. *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, 1–14.
- Fatoki, O. (2021). COVID-19 and South Africa's small, medium and micro enterprises: Challenges and Recommendations. *Journal of Entrepreneurial Innovations*, 16–18.
- Findlay, P., Lindsay, C., & Roy, G. (2021). Business models, innovation, and employees' workplace experiences: challenges for the post-COVID-19 economy. *Productivity and the Pandemic*, 132–146.
- Huang, A., & Jahromi, M. (2021). Resilience building in service firms during and post-COVID-19. *The Service Industries Journal*, 138–167.
- Lamba, J., & Jain, E. (2022). *Business revolution in the post-COVID era: an evolving economy outlook*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.

- Maharaj, A., & Reddy, P. (2020). Local government's economic response to COVID-19: The case of eThekweni City Council in Durban, South Africa. *Responses in the Time of Pandemic*, 197–223.
- Mazibuko, W. S. (2021). The challenges of enriching small, medium and micro enterprises with financial management knowledge in the KwaZulu-Natal Metropolitan area. *Doctoral Dissertation*, 1–163.
- Mele, C., Russo-Spena, T., & Kaartemo, V. (2021). The impact of coronavirus on business: developing a service research agenda for a post-coronavirus world. *Journal of Service Theory and Practice*, 31(2), 184–202.
- Nyamunda, J. (2022). The COVID-19 pandemic is a driving force for transformational change in organisations. *Journal of Contemporary Management*, 19(1), 198–218.
- Nyawo, J. C. (2020). Evaluation of government responses and measures on COVID-19 in the tourism sector: A case of tour guides in South Africa. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 1144–1160.
- Phair, D., & Warren, K. (2021, January). Saunders' (2019) Research Onion. Retrieved from GradCoach: <https://gradcoach.com/saunders-research-onion/>
- Raghavan, A., Demircioglu, M., & Orazgaliyev, S. (2021). COVID-19 and the New Normal of Organisations and Employees: An Overview. *Sustainability*, 11942.
- Raj, A., Mukherjee, A., de Sousa Jabbour, A., & Srivastava, S. (2022). Supply chain management during and post-COVID-19 pandemic: Mitigation strategies and practical lessons learned. *Journal of Business Research*, 1125–1139.
- Sharma, G., Kraus, S., Liguori, E., Bamel, U., & Chopra, R. (2024). Entrepreneurial challenges of COVID-19: Re-thinking entrepreneurship after the crisis. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 62(2), 824–846.
- Sibiya, A., van der Westhuizen, J., & Sibiya, B. (2023). Challenges Experienced by SMMEs and Interventions by the South African National and Provincial

Government: A Literature Review. *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, 1–11.

Stough, L., & Lee, S. (2021). Grounded Theory Approaches used in Educational Research Journals. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1–13.

Susanto, P., Yuntina, L., Saribanon, E., Soehaditama, J., & Liana, E. (2024). Qualitative method concepts: Literature review, focus group discussion, ethnography and grounded theory. *Siber Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary*, 262–275.

Wenzel, M., Starske, S., & Lieberman, M. (2020). Strategic responses to crisis. *Strategic Management Journal*, 3161.

Zhou, H., & Gumbo, V. (2021). Rural-Urban Comparison of Manufacturing SMMEs Performance in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. *African Journal of Development Studies (AJDS)*, 7–31.

Zutshi, A., Mendy, J., Sharma, G. D., Thomas, A., & Sarker, T. (2021). From challenges to creativity: enhancing SME's resilience in the context of COVID-19. *Sustainability*, 6542.