

# COVID-19 pandemic and the South African township economy: A focus on King Williams Town, Eastern Cape, South Africa

## Solomon Omonona

Postdoctoral Fellow. University of Fort Hare. South Africa. ORCID: [0000-0002-4020-197X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4020-197X).

## Olabanji Oni

Professor. University of Fort Hare. South Africa. ORCID: [0000-0002-1127-0925](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1127-0925).

## Olugbenga Joseph Oluwole

Research Assistant. University of Fort Hare. South Africa. ORCID: [0000-0002-8717-6839](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8717-6839).

[Somonona@ufh.ac.za](mailto:Somonona@ufh.ac.za), [Oni@ufh.ac.za](mailto:Oni@ufh.ac.za), [oj.oluwole@gmail.com](mailto:oj.oluwole@gmail.com).

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## Abstract

This paper aims to assess the relationship between COVID-19 pandemic and the South African township economy in King William's town, South Africa. The research methodology utilized a descriptive cross-sectional (survey) design. The population included micro and small business owners and or managers in King Williams Town, South Africa. Random sampling technique was used to sample 210 participants. The data were collected from owners/managers of micro and small businesses using a questionnaire method. The average age of the participant was 29 years (SD = 1.12), 37.6% were males while 62.4% were females. The findings of this study revealed the impact of the pandemic on micro and small businesses in the township area and that COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected micro and small business performance. The study therefore concludes that South Africa's lockdown measures introduced to contain the virus have had a significant economic impact on the township economy, particularly on micro and small businesses, which account for the majority of the township economy.

## Key words

COVID-19 Pandemic; Township Economy; King William's Town; South Africa.

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## 1. Introduction

Townships are probably the most potent political, social and economic spaces in the country today. They accommodate most of the urban population on a relatively small physical footprint and have traditionally been viewed as dormitory settlements plagued by unemployment, poverty and crime (Strengthening Township Economies, 2019). What then is township economy? Township economy refers to businesses and markets that are located in townships; these businesses are heterogeneous, have a high rate of informality, and are also survivalist - 70% of them do not last more than three years (GEM, 2014). Thus 'township economy' refers to the microeconomic and related activities taking place within areas broadly defined as 'townships'. The township economy covers both the formal and informal sectors for example, the Retail businesses, professional services financial institutions, fashions and accessories, transportation and consumer fast moving goods etc.

According to Charman (2016), the term 'township' "is a legal term that refers to a formally promulgated urban area". The concept is also used to describe places that were historically developed (through central planning) to racially segregate South African cities and generate labour pools for the colonial and apartheid economies. According to the World Bank in Business tech (2016), about fifty percent of South African inhabitants live in the township and rural settlements, which comprises of sixty percent (60%) unemployed and about thirty-eight percent (38%) employed citizenry. The author further reiterates that the black South African were made to live in the dormitory-style townships that were built as far away as possible from economic city centers. However, the post- apartheid development policies have led to the construction of townships filled with government housing with an increase in the number of households living in formal dwellings over time from 65.1% in 1996 to 79.2% in 2016 (StatsSA ,2016; Business tech,2016).

Sadly, townships in South Africa are still marked by high population density, informality, poverty, crime, and general socio-economic backwardness, and apartheid's footprints can still be seen 26 years later. Thus, these townships still exude the footprints of apartheid spatial planning injustices which expose the townships to many social challenges such as infectious diseases (Pernegger & Godehart, 2007). These townships were bedevilled with social-economic challenges coupled with high crime rate, unemployment, poverty and of course high COVID-19 infection rate (Pernegger & Godehart, 2007; Mbambo and Agbola, 2020).

Previous scholars (Roy, 2020; Akbulaev, Mammadov and Aliyev, 2020; Mbambo and Agbola, 2020) have asserted that the pandemic COVID-19 have affected people and societies around the world and will have a lasting impact on the global economy/trade, it has also created a widespread economic slowdown both in townships and rural economies and has also affected different sectors of the economy. Therefore, it is on this premise that this study decides to investigate the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on the South African township economy with a focus on King Williams Town, Eastern Cape, South Africa.

### 1.2 The Objectives of the Study

This paper aims to assess the effect of COVID-19 on South African township economy. The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the challenges confronting business owners during the COVID-19 pandemic era.
2. Determine the impact of COVID-19 on business performance.
3. Proffer strategies that will assist the business survive the pandemic period

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1 COVID-19 in South Africa

According to Kumar et al., (2020) in Oni and Omonona (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa is part of the current COVID-19 pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2, which is a new strain of coronavirus that has not been previously discovered in humans. COVID-19 was identified as the source of a respiratory infection outbreak that began in Wuhan, China. COVID-19, a virus, has rapidly spread across the globe; however, with the help of globalization, various government leaders quickly took proactive measures to halt the virus's spread to their territories, instituting national lockdowns to control the movement of people because humans have been identified as the virus's primary carrier or medium of transmission.

The Minister of Health, Zweli Mkhize, verified the virus's transmission to South Africa on March 5, 2020, with the first known patient being a male citizen who tested positive upon his return from Italy. The patient is a 38-year-old man who travelled to Italy with his wife, according to the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (2020). They were part of a group of 10 people that arrived back in South Africa on March 1, 2020. The patient consulted a private general practitioner on March 3, with symptoms of fever, headache, malaise, a sore throat and a cough. The practice nurse took swabs and delivered it to the lab. The first death to have occurred from the disease was reported on 27 March 2020.

However, on the 15th of March, the President of South Africa, His Excellency, Cyril Ramaphosa, declared a national state of disaster and also broadcast the measure to curtail the pandemic such as instant closures of schools from the 18th of March 2020 and immediate restriction on travels. The national coronavirus command council was also set up with the mandate to lead nation's plan to contain the spread and mitigate the negative impact of the coronavirus. Sequel to this, The President announced a national lockdown on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March, 2020, starting from 27th March, 2020.

### 2.2 King William's Town, Eastern Cape

In 1834, King William's Town began as a mission station on the banks of the Buffalo River, about 50 kilometres west of East London in what is now known as South Africa's Eastern Cape. Following the burning of the mission station, Governor of the Cape Colony Sir Benjamin D'Urban ordered the formation of a town named after King William IV of England. (SA Places, n.d)

King William's Town's economy used to be founded on its proximity to indigenous Xhosa tribes, who traded wool, hides, skins, and other items for manufactured and imported commodities from European settlers. The vast quantity of trade that took place between the two groups

contributed greatly not only to King's economic success, but also to the destruction of indigenous black culture (Dickinson, 2008)

Because the name King William's Town has colonial connotations, the province administration explored renaming the town with a traditional African name in 2007. On February 21, 2021, the town was renamed "Qonce."

Figure 1

### The township



Source: Ryan Koons (2010).

### 2.3 COVID -19 challenges and the Township Economy

There is paucity of literature on COVID-19 challenges and the township economy. Nevertheless, Mbambo and Agbola (2020), investigated the effect of COVID-19 in township and the lessons for spatial restructuring in South Africa, the author discovered that poor restructuring, unsettled land disputes and settlement over population frustrate government's interventions to control the spread of COVID-19 in KwaMashu and other South African townships. While in similar study, Oni and Omonona (2020) who studied the effect of COVID-19 on the small scale businesses in Alice metropolis, using a qualitative approach discovered that COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the performance of small businesses in South Africa. In addition, Bartik , Bertrand, Cullen and Glaeser et al., (2020) studied the consequence of COVID-19 on small business outcomes and expectations on the American economy and found out that the pandemic has a great negative consequences on the economy and therefore suggest that a large potential economic benefits for policies that can safely lead to reopening the economy quickly.

## 3. Theoretical framework

Fred Fielder proposed the first theory based on the contingency approach, the contingency theory of effectiveness, in the 1960s. The key notion of this early theory is that the success of leadership (in terms of group performance) is determined by the interaction of two factors: the leader's job or relationships motivations, and the situation (Seyranian, 2012). Contingency concept is a set of behavioural theories that asserts that there is no one-size-fits-all strategy to organizing and leading a business enterprise in a management setting. Instead, a leader ought to be chosen who will be in a position to make choices primarily based on the state of affairs and surrounding circumstances. Fred Fiedler popularized this concept with his well-known Contingency model, which cleared the route for different contingencies.

The position of the organizational theorist is that "the best way to organize depends on the nature of the environment to which the organization relates" (Scott, 1992: 89). Contingency theory is based on two main assumptions: First and foremost, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to organization. Second, not all methods of organization are equally effective (Galbraith, 1973). Therefore, operators of small businesses in King Williams's town, South Africa must imbibe the contingency skill and be creative in handling situation around their businesses because COVID-19 virus is novel and there is no prior knowledge on how to handle it.

#### 4. Materials and Methods

The study adopted a quantitative descriptive cross-sectional (survey) design. The population included micro and small business owners and or managers in King Williams Town, South Africa. The data were collected from owners/managers of micro and small businesses using a questionnaire method. Two hundred and forty-five (245) questionnaires were randomly distributed among owners/managers of micro and small businesses in King Williams Town, South Africa. However, only two hundred and ten (210) questionnaires were returned for analysis. This study utilizes descriptive tools on result presentation. The average age of the participant was 29 years (SD = 1.12), 37.6% were males while 62.4% were females.

#### 5. Results

**Objective 1:** To identify the challenges confronting business owners during the COVID-19 pandemic era.

Table 1

#### The descriptive frequency of the challenges confronting business owners

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Indifferent	Agree	Strongly agree	X	SD.
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We were confronted with low patronage	19 (9%)	0 (0%)	5 (2.4%)	13 (6.2%)	173 (82.4%)	4.53	1.18
Our supply chain channels were severely effected	24 (11.45)	7 (3.3%)	15 (7.1%)	27 (12.9%)	137 (65.2%)	4.17	1.37
Limited access to resources and basic infrastructure.	23 (11%)	13 (6.2%)	27 (12.9%)	22 (10.5%)	125 (59.5%)	4.01	1.40
Limited access to finance/capital.	28 (13.3%)	18 (8.6%)	7 (3.3%)	33 (15.7%)	124 (59%)	3.99	1.48
Limited access to markets	21 (10%)	3 (1.4%)	24 (11.4%)	44 (21%)	118 (56.2%)	4.12	1.28
Limited access to skills training and mentorship	34 (16.2%)	8 (3.8%)	56 (26.7%)	21 (10%)	91 (43.3%)	3.61	1.47
Cash flow issues	17 (8.1%)	8 (3.8%)	3 (1.4%)	10 (4.8%)	172 (81.9%)	4.49	1.22
Lack of Time	43 (20.5%)	0 (0%)	25 (11.9%)	26 (12.4%)	116 (55.2%)	3.82	1.58
Ineffective or absence of Web Presence	43 (20.5%)	0 (0%)	110 (52.4%)	21 (10%)	36 (17.1%)	3.03	1.27
Trouble Finding Good and suitable Employees	50 (23.8%)	3 (1.4%)	49 (23.3%)	28 (13.3%)	80 (38.1%)	3.41	1.57
Finding and Retaining Customers	42 (20%)	3 (1.45)	18 (8.6%)	29 (13.8%)	118 (56.2%)	3.85	1.58
Difficulties in the obligatory compliance measures to access government's loan relief	12 (5.7%)	7 (3.3%)	83 (39.5%)	8 (3.8%)	100 (47.6%)	3.84	1.23
High Overhead cost of running business	37 (17.6%)	8 (3.8%)	0 (0%)	3 (1.4%)	162 (77.1%)	4.17	1.58
<b>Weight average mean</b>						<b>3.93</b>	<b>1.40</b>

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 1 showing the descriptive frequency of challenges confronting business owners. The table shows that majority of the participants strongly agreed to all the items except one (ineffective or absence of web presence) as the challenges facing micro and small business owners/ managers since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. The results show that 88.6% of the participants agreed that they were confronted with low patronage, 78.1% agreed that their supply chain channels were severely affected, 70% agreed that they have limited access to resources and basic infrastructure, 74% agreed that they have limited access to finance/capital, 77.2% agreed that they have limited access to markets, 64.3% agreed that they have limited access to skills training and mentorship, 86.7% agreed that it affected their cash flow issues, 67.6% agreed that they are faced with lack of Time, 51.1% agreed they are faced with trouble finding good and suitable employees, 70% agreed that they are faced with finding and retaining customers, 51.4% agreed that they are confronted by difficulties in the obligatory compliance measures to access

government's loan relief, and 78.5% agreed to be confronted with high overhead cost of running business, while 20.5% disagreed, 52.4% were indifferent that they are confronted with ineffective or absence of web presence.

**Objective 2:** To determine the impact of COVID-19 on business performance.

Table 2

**The descriptive frequency of the impact of COVID-19 on business performance**

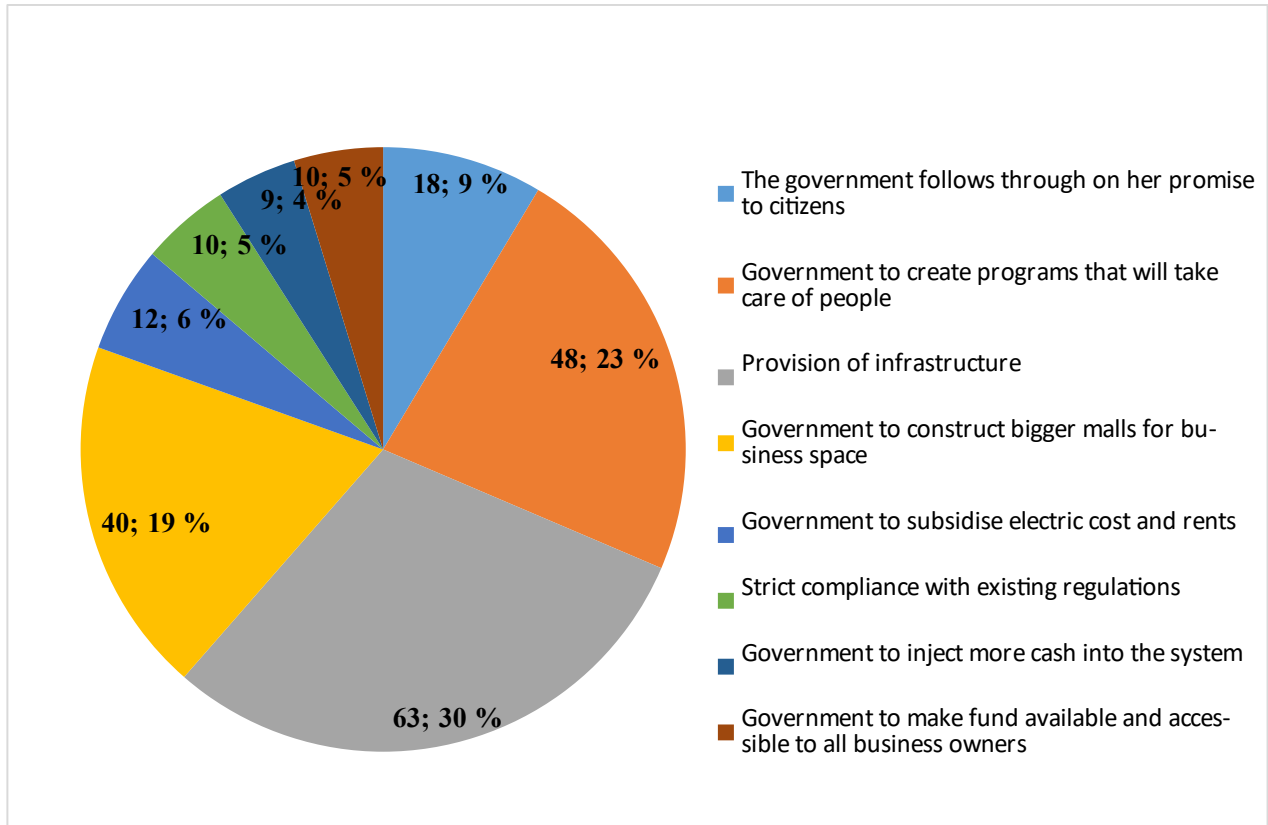
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Indifferent	Agree	Strongly agree	X	SD
Our total sales have grown dramatically since the beginning of COVID-19	153 (72.9%)	10 (4.8%)	10 (4.8%)	7 (3.3%)	30 (14.3%)	1.81	1.47
Our return on sales has increased over since the beginning of COVID-19	139 (66.2%)	11 (5.2%)	30 (14.3%)	0	30 (14.3%)	1.91	1.45
Our profit margin has improved since the beginning of COVID-19	179 (85.2%)	21 (10%)	0	10 (4.8%)	0	1.24	0.69
Our customers are happier than they were before the COVID-19	121 (57.6%)	20 (9.5%)	0	22 (10.5%)	47 (22.4%)	2.31	1.71
Our employee satisfaction has gone up since the beginning of COVID-19	112 (53.3%)	14 (6.7%)	20 (9.5%)	28 (13.3%)	36 (17.1%)	2.34	1.61
Our employee retention has been very good since the beginning of COVID-19	94 (44.8%)	20 (9.5%)	25 (11.9%)	34 (16.2%)	37 (17.6%)	2.52	1.59
<b>Weight average mean</b>						<b>2.02</b>	<b>1.42</b>

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2 showing the descriptive frequency of the impact of COVID-19 on micro and small business performance. The table shows that majority of the participants strongly disagreed to all the items describing factors of business performance. The results show that 77.7% of the participants disagreed that their total sales have grown dramatically since the outbreak of COVID-19, 71.4% disagreed that their return on sales has increased over since the outbreak of COVID-19, 95.2% disagreed that their profit margin has improved since the outbreak of COVID-19, 67.1% disagreed that their customers are happier than they were before the COVID-19, 60% disagreed that their employee satisfaction has gone up since the outbreak of COVID-19 and 54.3% disagreed that their employee retention has been very good since the outbreak of COVID-19.

**Objective 3:** To propose strategies that will assist the business survive the pandemic period.

Figure 1



Task technology fit model. Respondents opinion on how township economy can be improved.



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 1 above showing the distribution of participant's opinion on how township economy can be improved. The results show that 18 (8%) of the participants suggest that government should follow through on her promises to citizens, 48 (23%) suggest that government should create programs that will take care of people, 63 (30%) suggest provision of infrastructure, 40 (19%) suggest that the government should construct bigger malls for business space, 12 (6%) suggest that government should subsidise electricity cost and rents, 10 (5%) suggest strict compliance with existing regulations, 9 (4%) suggest that government should inject more cash into the system and lastly 10 (5%) suggest that government should make funding available and accessible to all business owners.

## 6. Discussion

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most serious concerns has been the economic impact of the objectives, particularly on the township economy, which is often characterised by micro and small businesses. Findings of this study revealed the impact of the pandemic on micro and small businesses in the township area. The results of objective one shows that majority of the participants strongly agreed to all the factors except one (ineffective or absence of web presence) that attempted to describe the challenges faced by micro and small business owners/ managers since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. The findings showed that the participants confronted with low patronage, their supply chain channels severely affected; they have limited access to resources and basic infrastructure; have limited access to finance/capital; have limited access to markets; they have limited access to skills training and mentorship; it affected their cash flow, also confronted with a lack of time, while some have trouble finding suitable employees. More so, the findings showed that micro and small businesses faced with finding and keeping customers; confronted with difficulties with the obligatory compliance measures to access government loan relief and are confronted with high overhead cost of running business. While some disagree, majority showed an indifference that they are confronted with ineffective or absence of web presence.

Second, the findings of objective two showed that majority of the participants strongly disagreed with all the items describing the indices of business performance. This implies that the extent to which COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected micro and small business performance. The results showed that micro and small business performance total sales was affected drastically, their return on sales decreased, profit margin dropped, customers were not pleased unlike before the COVID-19, employee satisfaction went down and employee release has been high since the outbreak of COVID-19. Last, the third objective attempted to identify strategies that will assist businesses to survive after the pandemic. The findings show that the micro and small business owners or managers want the government to follow through on her promises to citizens, create

programs that will take care of people, suggest provision of social infrastructure and construct bigger malls for business space. Also, the findings showed that micro and small business owners or managers want the government to subsidise electricity cost and rent, suggest strict compliance with existing regulations, inject more cash into the system and lastly make funding available and accessible to all business owners.

As researchers continue to investigate, the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on micro and small businesses undeniably is felt globally. For example, Lewin (2020) investigated 200 start-ups in the United Kingdom. The findings show the devastating impact of the pandemic on these start-ups. According to the study, the drop-in revenue has forced these start-ups to make a slew of tough decisions in order to survive. The study found that majority of the respondents renegotiated office rents, half stopped hiring, and the budget for advertising was drastically reduced. Several start-ups have also implemented a pay reduction policy of at least 15% of an employee's salary. Similarly, most new businesses expect a cumulative revenue decline of over 25% in 2020. They predict that revenue for business-to-customer companies will fall by 50% this year. Many new businesses are considering venture capital. Because of a revenue shock, this pandemic period is not pleasant for businesses and service providers around the world. In a similar sense, Korankye (2020) investigated the effects of COVID-19 on the positions of small and medium-sized businesses in Kumasi Metropolis, Ghana. The findings revealed that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, SMEs are fighting for survival, which bring about revenue reduction, downsizing, reduction in demand, organisational restructuring and fear of remaining in business. This shows how COVID-19 affected the operations of small and medium-sized businesses.

Further, Catalyst for Growth (C4G) conducted a quantitative study to determine the impact of COVID-19 on SMME business operations in Africa, including South Africa. Analysis of the data collected shows that COVID-19 had a significant impact on SMMEs' daily business operations, revenue, and employment. Several SMMEs mentioned the possibility of closure during and after COVID-19. The findings show that, despite numerous obstacles, SMMEs want financial assistance to keep their businesses running. As a result, multi-stakeholder participation in mobilising financial and non-financial resources to assist SMMEs is required. The COVID-19 pandemic's multiple negative effects on MSMEs include labour market, supply chain, productivity and value chain, financing and liquidity, workforce, operations, and business sentiment (KPMG Advisory Services, 2020). Ojukwu (2021) investigated the financial performance of micro enterprises in Nigeria following the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings show that the COVID-19 pandemic has a significant negative impact on the revenue of micro enterprises. Further, the study found that COVID-19 has a negative and significant impact on the inventory and profit margins of micro enterprises. As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant and negative impact on the financial performance of micro enterprises in Nigeria.

In a study conducted by Harvard Business School, it was also observed that many small businesses are financially vulnerable as a result of the current outbreak (Bartik et al., 2020). A drop in demand could also be the result of a loss of customer or buyer flow. These findings imply that, in addition to other risks, the majority of MSMEs are vulnerable to financial, supply chain, and demand constraints. The impact of COVID-19 on South African businesses is compounded by the country's long-standing lockdown restrictions, which began much earlier than other African countries. Stricter trade restrictions have also harmed these businesses' ability to trade their

goods and services, whereas other economic factors are not subject to trade restrictions. To summarise, micro and small businesses are far more likely than medium and large businesses to bear the brunt of the economic fallout of COVID-19 pandemic. This is due to the fact that this business categories are often confronted with institutional shortcomings in Africa, including South Africa, which contribute to resource scarcity and persistently volatile economic conditions.

## 7. Implications of the study

South Africa's lockdown measures introduced to contain the virus have had a significant economic impact on the township economy, particularly on micro and small businesses, which account for the majority of the township economy. Many businesses in these categories have used the majority of their business savings to feed their families during the lockdown and now need capital to reopen their doors after the lockdown. As a result of the policy implications of this study, it is necessary to address support programmes for township and rural enterprises that can help mitigate the pandemic's impact on the township economy.

Second, the government's requirement that applicants be registered with the Companies and Intellectual Property Commission (CIPC), SARS, and UIF, as well as have a municipal trading permit, should be relaxed to ensure that those in greatest need of the support scheme are not excluded.

## 8. Conclusion

The study looked at the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on townships economy. The findings show that COVID-19 containment measures had a cascading effect on micro and small businesses. The findings show that they have low patronage, are severely impacted by supply chain channels, lack access to basic infrastructure and resources, lack access to finance/capital, lack access to markets, lack access to skills training and mentorship. It impacted their cash flow and made it more difficult for them to comply with the mandatory compliance measures required to access government loan relief. Also, it had a negative impact on their business performance, emphasising the strategies that will help businesses survive the pandemic. The study's implication was stated.

## 9. Avenue for Future Research

Despite this study holistically investigated the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on the South African township economy which focuses on King Williams Town in eastern cape, South Africa, future studies are encouraged to cover more geographical space i.e selected provinces in the country or the entire country. In addition, future investigation may explore different methodology approach of research i.e qualitative method or mixed method.

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