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Business support for historically disadvantaged franchisees in the south African petroleum retail sector: an ecosystem analysis

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Abstract: The petroleum retail sector in South Africa, characterized by a significant franchise model, plays a crucial role in economic development and transformation. This study investigates the multifaceted business support provided by various actors within the petroleum franchise ecosystem to Historically Disadvantaged South African (HDSA) franchisees. Despite policy efforts to promote economic inclusion, HDSA franchisees often face unique challenges, including limited access to capital, operational expertise, and market networks. Employing a qualitative research approach, this study aims to identify and analyze the specific roles and contributions of franchisors, financial institutions, government bodies, and industry associations in fostering the success and sustainability of these businesses. Understanding the interplay and effectiveness of these support mechanisms is vital for enhancing entrepreneurial performance, reducing franchisee failure rates, and promoting equitable participation in the economy. The findings offer critical insights for policymakers, franchisors, and other stakeholders committed to strengthening the HDSA franchise segment within the South African petroleum industry.

Keywords: Petroleum Franchise, Historically

Disadvantaged South Africans (HDSA), Business Support, Ecosystem, Franchisee Success, South Africa.

Introduction: Franchising has emerged globally as a powerful business model, particularly in emerging economies, offering a structured pathway for entrepreneurship and job creation [4, 15, 31, 38]. In South Africa, the petroleum retail industry predominantly operates through a franchise model, making it a significant contributor to the national economy [25, 47]. However, the historical context of South Africa necessitates specific attention to the inclusion and empowerment of Historically Disadvantaged South African (HDSA) individuals in economic sectors. Despite legislative and policy frameworks aimed at promoting Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), HDSA franchisees in the petroleum sector continue to encounter distinct barriers that can impede their business sustainability and growth [29, 39]. These challenges often include limited access to finance, inadequate business management skills, and insufficient operational support [34, 44].

The success of a franchise unit is not solely dependent on the franchisor-franchisee relationship but is increasingly viewed through the lens of an entrepreneurial ecosystem [6, 53, 55]. An entrepreneurial ecosystem comprises various interconnected actors—such as government, financial institutions, industry associations, and support organizations—that collectively influence the environment in which businesses operate and thrive [6, 53]. Within the petroleum franchise context, this ecosystem extends beyond the direct franchisor-franchisee dynamic to include a broader network of stakeholders whose support is crucial for franchisee viability [10, 12, 14, 24]. Effective communication and trust within these partnerships are paramount for success [14, 26].

Existing literature on franchising highlights the importance of franchisor support services, including training, operational guidance, and marketing assistance, as critical determinants of franchisee performance [1, 5, 17, 18, 21, 22, 32, 37]. However, there is a recognized gap in understanding the comprehensive support mechanisms provided by the entire ecosystem of actors, particularly in the unique context of HDSA franchisees within a specialized sector like petroleum retail [4]. While studies have explored critical success factors for franchising firms generally [21, 22] and the role of micro-franchising in supporting women retailers in the energy sector in Sub-Saharan Africa [15], a detailed examination of the collective

support system for HDSA petroleum franchisees remains underexplored.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating the roles of various actors within the petroleum franchise ecosystem in providing business support to HDSA franchisees in South Africa. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Identify the key actors comprising the petroleum franchise ecosystem relevant to HDSA franchisees.
2. Analyze the types and nature of business support provided by each identified actor.
3. Evaluate the perceived effectiveness and impact of this support on the operational and financial performance of HDSA franchisees.

By adopting an ecosystem perspective, this research moves beyond a dyadic view of the franchisor-franchisee relationship to offer a more holistic understanding of the support landscape. This approach is critical for developing targeted interventions and fostering a more inclusive and sustainable petroleum retail sector in South Africa [16, 27, 29].

METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing an exploratory approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the complex interactions and support mechanisms within the petroleum franchise ecosystem. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for exploring nuanced perceptions and experiences of stakeholders in a specific context [3, 30, 52]. A cross-sectional design was adopted, focusing on data collection at a single point in time [48].

Participants and Sampling

The study participants were drawn from various stakeholder groups within the South African petroleum franchise ecosystem, with a specific focus on HDSA franchisees. A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to select information-rich cases [50]. The target participants included:

- HDSA Petroleum Franchisees: Individuals who own and operate petroleum retail stations under a franchise agreement and identify as Historically Disadvantaged South Africans.
- Franchisor Representatives: Key personnel from major petroleum companies responsible for franchise development, support, and relationship management.
- Financial Institutions: Representatives from banks or other lending institutions that provide financing specifically to franchisees in the petroleum sector.

- Industry Associations: Officials from relevant industry bodies, such as the South African Petroleum Industry Association (SAPIA) or franchise associations, involved in advocacy, regulation, or support programs [46].
- Government Agencies: Representatives from government departments or agencies responsible for economic development, small business support, or BEE initiatives.

The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, where data collection continued until no new themes or insights emerged from the interviews [30].

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the selected participants. This method allowed for flexibility in probing participants' experiences and perceptions while ensuring coverage of key research questions [50]. Interview protocols were developed for each stakeholder group, tailored to their specific roles and perspectives on business support. The interviews explored topics such as:

- The types of support provided/received (e.g., financial, operational, training, mentorship, marketing, regulatory guidance).
- The perceived effectiveness and challenges of existing support mechanisms.
- Interactions and collaborations with other ecosystem actors.
- Suggestions for improving support for HDSA franchisees.

All interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim to facilitate detailed analysis.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke [3]. This rigorous method involves:

1. Familiarizing with the data: Reading and re-reading transcripts to gain a deep understanding.
2. Generating initial codes: Identifying interesting features across the entire dataset.
3. Searching for themes: Collating codes into potential themes.
4. Reviewing themes: Refining themes to ensure they accurately represent the data and are distinct.
5. Defining and naming themes: Developing clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report: Selecting compelling

extracts and linking the analysis back to the research question and literature.

The analysis was iterative, involving constant comparison of data segments and themes. Pseudonyms were used to ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality.

RESULTS

Key Actors in the Petroleum Franchise Ecosystem

The analysis revealed several key actors actively involved in providing business support to HDSA franchisees within the South African petroleum retail sector. These include:

- Franchisors (Major Petroleum Companies): Identified as the primary and most direct source of support.
- Financial Institutions (Banks and Development Finance Institutions): Crucial for providing capital and financial services.
- Government Agencies: Involved in policy formulation, regulatory oversight, and direct entrepreneurial support programs.
- Industry Associations (e.g., SAPIA, Franchise Association of South Africa): Play roles in advocacy, networking, and information dissemination.
- Consultants and Mentors: Independent professionals offering specialized business advice and guidance.

Types of Business Support Provided by Ecosystem Actors

The thematic analysis identified several categories of business support provided by these actors:

1. Operational and Technical Support (Primarily Franchisors): Franchisors provide extensive operational manuals, initial and ongoing training, site selection assistance, supply chain management, and quality control. Franchisees consistently highlighted the importance of this support for maintaining brand standards and operational efficiency [1, 5, 17, 37]. One franchisee noted, "The franchisor's training on daily operations was invaluable, especially in the beginning" (Franchisee A). Knowledge transfer mechanisms are crucial in this regard [23, 36].
2. Financial Support and Access to Capital (Financial Institutions & Government): Access to finance was a recurring theme as a significant barrier for HDSA franchisees [34, 44]. Financial institutions offer loans, overdraft facilities, and sometimes specialized franchise financing. Government agencies, through various development funds and guarantee schemes, also aim to facilitate access to capital. However, franchisees often expressed challenges in meeting stringent lending

criteria. "Getting the initial capital was the biggest hurdle; the banks are very cautious with new entrants" (Franchisee B).

3. Training and Capacity Building (Franchisors, Industry Associations, Government): Beyond initial operational training, ongoing business management training, financial literacy, and marketing skills development were identified as crucial. Franchisors typically provide brand-specific training, while industry associations and government programs offer broader entrepreneurial development initiatives [32, 37]. "Continuous learning is essential; the industry changes so fast" (Franchisee C).

4. Mentorship and Networking (Franchisors, Industry Associations, Consultants): Mentorship, particularly from experienced franchisees or franchisor representatives, was highly valued for navigating operational challenges and strategic decision-making. Industry associations facilitate networking events, allowing franchisees to share experiences and best practices. "My mentor from the franchisor helped me through so many tough decisions" (Franchisee D).

5. Regulatory and Advocacy Support (Industry Associations, Government): Industry associations play a vital role in advocating for the interests of franchisees and the broader petroleum sector to government bodies [46]. They also provide updates on regulatory changes and compliance requirements, which are particularly complex in the liquid fuel distribution industry [43]. "SAPIA keeps us informed about new regulations, which is a huge help" (Franchisee E).

6. Marketing and Brand Development (Primarily Franchisors): Franchisors invest heavily in national marketing campaigns and brand development, which directly benefits franchisees by driving customer traffic and enhancing brand recognition [31]. Franchisees contribute to these efforts through royalty fees.

Perceived Effectiveness and Challenges

While the support mechanisms were generally appreciated, franchisees also highlighted areas for improvement. The quality and consistency of franchisor support varied, and some felt that the support diminished after the initial setup phase. Access to appropriate and affordable financing remained a critical challenge. Communication and trust between franchisors and franchisees were identified as areas needing continuous improvement to build successful partnerships [14, 26]. The "win-win" theory of sustainable franchisor-franchisee relationships emphasizes mutual benefit and support [24]. Furthermore, the complexity of stakeholder roles can sometimes lead to perceptions of conflict [45].

DISCUSSION

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the business support ecosystem for HDSA franchisees in the South African petroleum retail sector, moving beyond a singular focus on the franchisor-franchisee relationship. The findings underscore that franchisee success is a collective endeavor, influenced by a diverse array of actors providing multifaceted support. This aligns with the concept of an entrepreneurial ecosystem, where interconnected elements contribute to the environment for new and growing businesses [6, 53, 55].

The prominent role of franchisors in providing operational, technical, and marketing support is consistent with the resource-based view, where franchisors transfer valuable knowledge and capabilities to their franchisees [1, 5, 17, 18, 23, 36, 37]. However, the study also highlights the critical, yet often insufficient, role of financial institutions and government agencies in addressing the persistent challenge of access to capital for HDSA franchisees. This financial barrier is a common impediment for SMEs in developing economies [34, 44, 56] and remains a key area for targeted intervention to promote genuine economic inclusion [27, 29].

The emphasis on ongoing training, capacity building, mentorship, and networking reflects the importance of human capital development and social capital for entrepreneurial success [32, 35]. These forms of support are crucial for HDSA franchisees to not only manage their daily operations but also to adapt to market changes and pursue growth opportunities. The findings also implicitly support aspects of stewardship theory, where franchisors, as stewards, are motivated to ensure the long-term success of their franchisees, aligning their interests with those of the broader network [7, 9, 20, 28]. This perspective suggests that effective support is not merely a contractual obligation but a strategic imperative for the entire franchise system's sustainability [24, 49].

The study also sheds light on the importance of industry associations in providing regulatory guidance and advocacy. In a highly regulated sector like petroleum, navigating compliance and policy changes can be overwhelming for individual franchisees. The collective voice and information dissemination provided by associations like SAPIA are invaluable for creating a more predictable and supportive operating environment [46].

The perceived challenges, particularly regarding the consistency of franchisor support and the persistent financial hurdles, indicate areas where the ecosystem can be strengthened. Improving communication

channels, fostering greater trust [14, 26], and developing more accessible financing models are crucial next steps. Furthermore, recognizing the multi-stakeholder nature of the franchise relationship can help mitigate potential conflicts [45] and foster a more collaborative environment for organizational change [13, 54].

Limitations

Despite its valuable insights, this study has limitations. As a qualitative study, its findings are context-specific to the South African petroleum retail sector and may not be directly generalizable to other industries or geographic regions. The reliance on participant perceptions, while providing rich insights, may be subject to recall bias or individual interpretations. Future research could incorporate quantitative measures of franchisee performance to complement the qualitative data and assess the direct impact of different support types. Additionally, a longitudinal study could track the evolution of support mechanisms and their long-term effects on franchisee success.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a comprehensive understanding of the business support ecosystem for Historically Disadvantaged South African franchisees in the petroleum retail sector. It highlights the critical roles played by franchisors, financial institutions, government agencies, and industry associations in fostering entrepreneurial success. The findings underscore that a holistic, multi-stakeholder approach to support is essential for addressing the unique challenges faced by HDSA franchisees and promoting equitable economic participation.

Future research should explore the effectiveness of specific government support programs and financial instruments tailored for HDSA entrepreneurs. Investigating the role of technology in enhancing support delivery and knowledge transfer within franchise networks could also be a fruitful avenue. Furthermore, comparative studies across different sectors or emerging economies could provide broader insights into best practices for supporting disadvantaged franchisees. Ultimately, fostering a robust and inclusive franchise ecosystem requires sustained collaboration and commitment from all actors to ensure the long-term viability and growth of HDSA-owned businesses in the petroleum retail industry.

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