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Research article

Shedding light on inequality: the economic and gender implications of women-owned Kota fast-food businesses

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ABSTRACT

South Africa has grappled with persistent loadshedding over the past decade, peaking in 2023 when the country experienced a record of 332 days of power outages. This has adversely affected the country, causing stifling across sectors, particularly the hospitality sector due to its heavy dependence on electricity for product storage and food preparation. Among these affected sectors are Kota fast-food businesses, which, like many other businesses, frequently suffer interruptions due to loadshedding. A Kota is a popular South African street food consisting of a hollowed-out loaf of white bread filled with fried chips, cheese, egg, Russian sausage, and various condiments, offering an affordable, customisable, and convenient meal, particularly in townships. This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the entrepreneurial journeys and lived experiences of ten Black women entrepreneurs residing in Soweto, South Africa. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture contextualised data, providing rich insights into the participants' life stories and motivations for engaging in entrepreneurship. Despite being a vital source of livelihood, Kota businesses experience significant losses as loadshedding disrupts production and reduces revenue. Furthermore, women entrepreneurs face multiple vulnerabilities such as domestic chores, gender-based violence, burglary and robbery in their businesses and homes. The findings highlight the degree to which loadshedding, combined with the intersecting identities of Black women, affects their well-being and livelihood, widening the existing power and gender inequalities.

KEYWORDS

South Africa;
black women entrepreneurs;
loadshedding, informal economy;
gender inequalities

Introduction

South African Black women are increasingly shouldering the economic responsibilities of their families due to rising divorce rates and the death of male breadwinners. To secure their families' financial stability, many turn to the informal economy, which, despite its challenges, provides opportunities for income generation and improved standards of living (Simatele & Maciko, 2022). The informal economy encompasses employment in the informal sector and informal self-employment that is not protected by formal regulations, both in law and in practice (International Labour Organisation, 1972). The informal sector makes up a substantial part of business activity in Soweto. A significant number of Sowetans, particularly Black women, engage in informal small businesses as a means of survival. These businesses are the backbone of Soweto's economy and provide economic opportunities for many (Mbokotho & Selepe, 2024). Through this economy, several types of businesses have emerged in South Africa, particularly in townships. These include 'Kota' businesses, spaza shops, salons, and street vendors, to name but a few. The focus of this paper is on Black women entrepreneurs who run small-scale Kota outlets, usually operated from home, rental spaces, or on the streets. These businesses specialise in selling the popular South African street food known as Kota sandwiches. This fast food originated from the Bunny Chow, a street food introduced by Indian immigrants in the 1940s as a convenient meal for sugarcane farm workers (Singh & Bhoola, 2018). A Bunny Chow is a street sandwich made from bread; when prepared, the top of a quarter loaf is removed to create a container-like shape; into which curry is served and then capped with; the removed top (Singh & Bhoola, 2016:7).

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Black South Africans later adapted it during apartheid, creating the Kota, as it is known today – a hollowed-out loaf of white bread filled with fried chips, eggs, sausages, and other ingredients. Its affordability, versatility, and accessibility have made it a popular street food, especially in townships. Kota businesses have thus become an essential part of the economic fabric of Soweto and provide significant income and employment opportunities for marginalised groups.

However, the informal economy remains precarious, exposing Black women entrepreneurs to multiple challenges, particularly external factors such as loadshedding and inflation, which have far-reaching effects on their businesses. These factors result in significant disruptions to business production, reduced profits, and decreased operational efficiency (Semenya, 2019). This often leads to psychological impacts as well, as financial instability affects their ability to provide for their families and maintain a work-life balance. Loadshedding not only forces them to reduce business output but also increases operational costs, as they must invest in alternative energy sources such as gas or generators, further exacerbating financial strain and business losses. The economic repercussions of loadshedding are therefore not only financial but also deeply gendered, as Black women entrepreneurs often bear the brunt of these disruptions, intensifying existing gender inequalities. Loadshedding, which refers to the interruption of electricity supply, is a measure implemented by Eskom, South Africa's primary energy supplier, to prevent the national power grid from collapsing (Steenkamp et al., 2016). This phenomenon has extensive effects across all sectors of the country; however, the hospitality and tourism industries are among those adversely affected. An unreliable power supply causes inconsistent service delivery, ultimately affecting accommodations and tourist attractions and potentially deterring tourists from visiting South Africa. Moreover, loadshedding poses significant challenges for restaurants and fast-food outlets, as food spoilage becomes a major concern during prolonged power outages. As businesses continue to face persistent and prolonged power interruptions, they may be forced to downsize to remain operational, further exacerbating the country's high unemployment rate (Chinomona & Maziriri, 2015). Therefore, the ongoing nature of loadshedding continues to threaten the sustainability and growth of South Africa's economy (Muridzi & Dhliwayo, 2023). The vulnerabilities of small businesses in South Africa are further exacerbated by high-energy costs and an inadequate energy supply from Eskom, threatening their sustainability. Existing research has explored the impacts of loadshedding on larger corporations and franchises, but a significant gap remains in understanding how small businesses, particularly women-owned Kota businesses, innovate and adapt to these challenges. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the economic and gendered implications of loadshedding for these businesses and providing practical recommendations for mitigating the effects of inadequate energy supply. This paper begins with a brief literature review of South Africa's informal economy and the economic and gendered consequences of loadshedding, particularly for small Kota businesses run by Black women in Soweto. The second section outlines the study's methodology, detailing the recruitment criteria, sampling technique, data collection methods, and analytical approach. The third section presents the study's findings, emphasising the economic and gender-related challenges encountered by these entrepreneurs. This is followed by a discussion that contextualises the findings within the broader South African landscape.

Literature review

Since the onset of loadshedding more than a decade ago, the standard of living for South Africans has declined sharply, leaving both citizens and industries significantly affected. While many have come to accept this as the new normal, its impact remains profound for individuals, businesses, and livelihoods (Erero, 2023). Businesses suffer losses in production, revenue, and goods due to ongoing power outages, while households experience damage to their electrical appliances when power returns abruptly (Masinga & Madzivhandila, 2023). South Africa is now facing an unprecedented frequency of loadshedding, a situation expected to persist due to the deteriorating state of the country's electricity infrastructure, which is in urgent need of replacement. The costs of loadshedding are both direct and indirect, with the latter becoming more significant when considering the broader ripple effects on the economy and society (Tembe & Hlongwa, 2022). Although the immediate costs at an individual level may seem minimal, the cumulative impact on businesses and communities is substantial. Further intensifying these challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, severely strained the livelihoods of South Africans, and ongoing power outages continue to hinder economic recovery (Erero, 2023). In 2021, the country experienced a total of 75 days of loadshedding, with numbers escalating to 205 days in 2022, before increasing further in 2023 to a total of 332 days of loadshedding, indicating the severity of the impact of blackouts on the economy (Rondganger, 2023). These interruptions have had a devastating effect on the economy and income generation. Loadshedding remains one of the country's most pressing issues, worsening over time and disrupting both daily activities and business operations, which in turn hinders community development (Mabunda et al., 2023). Small businesses are among the hardest hit, as they lack the financial resources to invest in alternative

power sources, often forcing them to shut down during scheduled outages, which results in job losses and increased economic strain (Rosen, 2020).

In developing countries, small businesses are fundamental to the economic development and growth of local communities since they provide employment (Rohini et al., 2018). Without these outlets, communities suffer, as was evident during the July 2021 looting spree when local and retail outlets were robbed of their merchandise and forced to close temporarily. Mlambo (2023) argues that these incidents resulted in the loss of employment and revenue for street vendors, which severely affected economic growth (Mlambo, 2023). Additionally, the looting disrupted the supply chains of businesses such as those selling Kota sandwiches, who had to travel to unaffected areas at a higher cost to restock Kota ingredients and replace or purchase additional equipment. While the COVID-19 pandemic and the July 2021 looting had a considerable toll on businesses and individuals, loadshedding has heightened these challenges, threatening multiple sectors of society, from business to healthcare. The retail sector is particularly vulnerable to the effects of loadshedding, as it disrupts operating hours and sales, especially during peak hours (Mbomvu et al., 2021). Loadshedding that lasts for three to four hours can result in the loss of nearly half of a standard working day for businesses operating in the Kota food industry. This prolonged disruption negatively affects economic viability, social stability, and psychological well-being, as entrepreneurs face significant revenue losses during outages. Despite being aware of scheduled power cuts, entrepreneurs struggle to mitigate losses and are often forced to rely on alternative power sources, further compounding their financial struggles. These disruptions result in loss of sales, which negatively affect the businesses' ability to restock, pay employees, maintain premises, and generate annual revenue. Furthermore, the manufacturing and production sectors are severely affected, with truncated production cycles and insufficient output, leading to unprofitable conditions (Matlou et al., 2026). Initially, the uncertainty surrounding loadshedding caused stress and anxiety among business owners due to the inevitable losses and challenges associated with preparing for power outages, which negatively affected business sustainability (Steenkamp et al., 2016). Despite these concerns, businesses continue to struggle, with many diverting profits to invest in alternative energy sources (Matlou et al., 2026). The hospitality sector, for example, faced significant disruptions in food production, including the loss of poultry by producers and delays in production at large companies like Clover, which eventually relocated to areas with fewer power interruptions (Ahadu, 2019). To adapt to the challenges caused by loadshedding, restaurants have adopted various strategies, including serving lukewarm food instead of hot dishes, limiting menu options, accepting cash payments, and relying on gas stoves and generators to remain operational (Olajuyin & Mago, 2022). These measures demonstrate the far-reaching impacts of loadshedding on businesses and the strategies entrepreneurs employ to navigate these challenges. Beyond its economic ramifications, loadshedding also perpetuates gendered inequalities, affecting the agency, livelihoods, and well-being of Black women entrepreneurs.

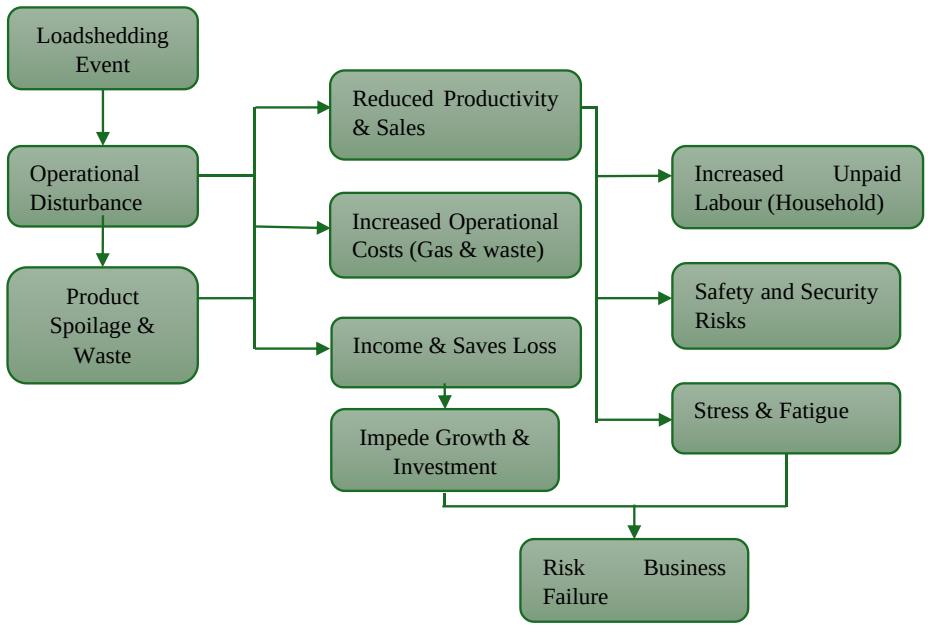

Figure 1: Loadshedding impact on women-owned Kota businesses
Source: Authors' compilation

Throughout the years, Black women have faced significant challenges that have hindered their development, with Black women experiencing compounded hardships due to the intersection of their identities. Due to systemic discrimination, Black women have historically been marginalised, and many have resorted to cost-friendly ventures to sustain themselves, often engaging in businesses traditionally seen as suitable for women, such as food outlets, beauty salons, and craft-making businesses (Mabilo, 2018; Odeku, 2022). These businesses are often reliant on electricity for their operations, making them vulnerable to disruptions caused by loadshedding. Although these entrepreneurs still contend with societal prejudices, the impact of loadshedding has made it even harder for them to thrive, forcing some to close their businesses due to limited resources and opportunities (Chinomona & Maziriri, 2015; Mabunda et al., 2023). The ongoing issue of loadshedding has exacerbated insecurity and anxiety across South Africa, with extensive consequences for business operations and personal well-being (Ibrahim, 2022). As power cuts disrupt business productivity, women, particularly those operating small or home-based businesses, face financial uncertainty due to loss of income and reduced customer traffic (Steenkamp et al., 2016). For those in the food sector, the need for consistent electricity to operate equipment such as heaters and refrigeration systems becomes a significant challenge, potentially leading to spoilage and loss of goods (Lilita, 2023). Furthermore, women are typically more involved in caregiving and household responsibilities, and during loadshedding, they are forced to divide their attention between managing their businesses and fulfilling domestic duties, further hampering productivity and ultimately contributing to increased mental and physical strain (Mukoni, 2012; Schoeman & Saunders, 2018). In some cases, this also results in unpaid reproductive labour, exploitation, and an elevated risk of illness for domestic workers (Moeti, 2022). For Black women entrepreneurs, these vulnerabilities are intensified by the racial and gender discrimination present in the business world, which often limits their access to capital and resources needed to mitigate the effects of loadshedding on their businesses and households (Matlou et al., 2026). Black women entrepreneurs are less likely to secure formal investments or loans, meaning they have fewer financial resources, such as savings or informal loan lenders, to invest in business continuity measures such as reliable backup power sources to operate during blackouts (Ngubeni et al., 2022; Olajuyin & Mago, 2022). However, without access to these resources, Black women entrepreneurs and their businesses are prone to burglary and theft during power cuts. Loadshedding has significantly increased the women's vulnerabilities, particularly those from crime-stricken communities (Charnley, 2023). This exacerbates Black women entrepreneurs' feelings of fear and anxiety, as they are being robbed or attacked by criminals, indicating the extent to which loadshedding affects the lives of Black women by placing additional strain on their financial and personal stability.

Methodology

This exploratory study used a qualitative research method to investigate the economic and gender implications of loadshedding for women-owned Kota businesses in Soweto. It also used the life history approach to delve deeper into the experiences of Black women entrepreneurs, exploring the challenges and complexities they encounter in their businesses and gaining rich insights into the Black women's stories and the meanings they attach to their experiences. A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit participants who met the study's criteria, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the research findings (Palinkas et al., 2015). Eligible participants were Black women entrepreneurs who owned and operated Kota businesses in Soweto and had experienced loadshedding both in their businesses and personal lives. Soweto is a densely populated urban area located on the outskirts of Johannesburg, developed during the apartheid era to house Black South Africans (Kgagudi, 2019). The selected subset consisted of ten Black women entrepreneurs who reside in deep Soweto (namely Zola, Dobsonville, Emdeni, Jabulani, and Dube), and are aged between 20 and 51 years. This provided a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. A comprehensive literature review was conducted using accredited journal articles to identify common themes and inform the development of the interview questions. A pilot interview was conducted using the initial draft of the interview questions, leading to minor refinements to the interview guide to ensure efficient and relevant data collection. Prior to conducting this study, ethical approval was obtained from the host institution. Participation was voluntary, with both written and verbal consent obtained before data collection. The data collection process was divided into three phases, which enabled the collection of in-depth, rich, and contextualised data. The first phase of the data collection process comprised semi-structured interviews, which explored the participants' experiences of loadshedding, its impacts on Kota businesses, and the coping mechanisms that Black women entrepreneurs had adopted to mitigate the impacts of power cuts. The second phase was based on life-story narration, which was facilitated by the rapport and relationship established during the first interviews. Participants shared their life narratives, spanning from childhood to the present, including their experiences and challenges as Black women entrepreneurs in a disadvantaged geographical location. The final phase, which ran concurrently with the first two phases, included non-participant

observations conducted during and after the interviews, offering insights from both the customers' and researchers' perspectives. This yielded a deeper understanding of the daily operations of Kota businesses and the impact of loadshedding on business production and profit margins. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, allowing for the identification of patterns, themes, and meanings within the participants' narratives. Interviews were audio-recorded, then subsequently translated and transcribed from vernacular languages into English while preserving the original context and meaning. The transcripts were manually coded, using the research objectives as a guiding framework. Codes were categorised, facilitating the emergence of themes and sub-themes. This iterative process allowed for a nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences, providing rich insights into the economic and gender implications of loadshedding for women-owned Kota businesses in Soweto.

Findings

Although the primary focus of the paper was to delve deeper into the economic impact of loadshedding on Kota businesses, as well as the gendered impacts on Black women entrepreneurs, a notable theme that emerged was the resilience of these women. Despite the challenges they faced, these women triumphed by starting their small-scale businesses driven by the dual motivations of pursuing their passion for cooking and entrepreneurship and achieving financial independence to provide for their families. "*Eh, (Pause) like I needed money to live and to take care of my child. There was no reason for me to stay at home; we needed something to eat. Also, my first job ended because of COVID-19; finding another job was difficult, so we decided to like start our own business*" (Nolly, age 34). Passion played a vital role in influencing them to engage in Kota-making businesses, because they believed that without authentic love and enthusiasm for cooking, it would be challenging to preserve high standards and satiate customers. "*Uhm, what I love about it is… I love to cook so much that is what makes it interesting; if you do not have interest, you would not be able to keep the business. You have to love cooking to be able to run the business, because if you do not, then you would not do the right thing.*" (Thembi, age 50). For these Black women entrepreneurs, cooking is more than a job; it is a fulfilling pursuit that aligns with their commitment to serving quality food while overcoming food insecurity in the community. However, despite their commitment and passion, which keep their businesses operational, external obstacles like loadshedding constantly affect businesses' operations and ability to deliver consistent customer service and quality sandwiches. This highlights that, while passion and necessity drive these businesses, external challenges such as loadshedding continue to create significant hurdles for Kota entrepreneurs.

Loadshedding consequences

Due to the Black women entrepreneurs' geographical location, their Kota businesses have been adversely affected by the occurrence of prolonged and persistent power cuts. Loadshedding has severely disrupted the daily operations of these outlets, causing significant losses in sales and revenue and diminishing Black women's ability to provide for their families and create stable employment (Darko et al., 2014). The theme shows the economic struggles these businesses face due to disruptions to production, profitability, operational costs, and customer dissatisfaction. The participants' responses revealed how loadshedding directly affects the economic viability of Kota businesses, particularly during peak trading periods. Furthermore, one participant expressed how loadshedding has caused a decline in business activity and uncertainty, as it is unknown when electricity might return. Consequently, participants adopt alternative power sources to mitigate the impacts of loadshedding on their business ventures.

Economic viability struggle

It has been noted that loadshedding adversely affects the productivity and profitability of Kota businesses, particularly during peak hours, such as late afternoons and evenings, when people usually get back from school and work. While loadshedding may cause some people to gravitate toward fast food because their ability to prepare homemade meals is interrupted, some Kota outlets experience a lower number of customers due to the inability to serve the full menu, leading to reduced customer interest. "*Uhm, like you cannot keep up with your customers; the time schedules, maybe like the electricity will go off at 4 pm, which is peak hour, affects us because people end up not showing in a number we were expecting*" (Tinashe, age 43). This highlights the significant losses in Kota businesses experience when loadshedding occurs during peak trading times. Loadshedding occurring during weekday mornings has a relatively limited impact on the Kota business because of lower customer traffic as people are at school or work. However, when it occurs during weekend mornings, it causes businesses to lose sales, as people are more likely to purchase fast food. This shows the importance of electricity, especially during peak hours, to maintain the stability and viability of Kota businesses as the economic backbone of the township.

The shift to alternative power sources contributes to customer dissatisfaction, as Kota preparation take longer than usual, causing customers to be frustrated. Gas stoves used on low settings cannot match the speed of an electric stove, while using a higher setting can burn the products and oil, completely altering the flavour and quality of the products. "*They get bored and impatient because gas is slow. Even when making fat cakes, we have to cook it right so it is cooked well. That takes time. It burns oil; I use 20 litres of oil for four days because I cannot reuse burnt oil. Fat cakes will end up having the smell of gas and of burnt oil. That is why we throw them out after one use, and that costs us*" (Tinashe, age 43). This often forces the women to dispose of food, as serving poor-quality food might lead to food poisoning. As a result, this practice often leads to food waste, increased operation costs, and customer loss resulting from inconsistent quality. While some business owners experience loadshedding, one Black woman experienced load reduction and yielded profound insights into it, such as that it can occur for six to ten hours and sometimes more. Unlike loadshedding, which adheres to the scheduled timeframe, load reduction is unpredictable and frequently forces businesses to temporarily close to prevent incurring high gas costs. As a result, Kota businesses lose hours, serve limited amounts of sandwiches, and increase dependence on gas stoves, which is costly and erodes the outlet's profits. As one of the women explained: "*Due to load reduction lasting for about 6 to 10 hours, I sometimes turn customers away because I have to save gas for cooking supper. This affects productivity and strains profit margin*" (Onalerona, age 20). Furthermore, it affects the supply chain, as the food suppliers tend to increase product prices when they have incurred a loss on their manufacturing, forcing business owners to pay more to cover the lost products, which then causes the price of Kota sandwiches to hike up. In turn, both loadshedding and reduction cause price inflation that affects customers' spending habits and strains customers' living expenses within tight budgets.

Coping mechanisms

Although the women had specified the adoption of alternative power sources to mitigate the impacts of loadshedding, they consequently faced the challenges of managing perishable commodities during blackouts. Inadequate energy supply makes storing perishable products difficult, resulting in food waste and financial losses. "*It [loadshedding] affects us badly because we are forced to stay two hours without production; food in the refrigerator gets spoilt as well, especially when it goes for four hours. It even costs us money because when we try to balance, we have to refill gas. However, refrigerated products still get spoilt*" (Thembi, age 50). Since 90% of the Kota ingredients are stored in refrigerators, loadshedding causes anxiety for business owners, as they have to discard a large amount of spoilt products, forcing them to take money from their pockets to restock ingredients. To mitigate the effects, some Kota owners have invested in the use of cooler boxes filled with ice and salt to store and maintain the quality of perishable products. However, the effectiveness of this method is limited, as the ice would not stay solid during long blackouts, which means that they cannot sustain it during the night outages. While some women have resorted to using gas to power their refrigerators, this becomes costly with frequent refills that charge at profit margins. The constant balancing of expenses, along with the uncertainty of power availability, increases operational difficulties. The findings of this study show that loadshedding has a direct and measurable financial impact on Kota businesses, since it has caused the Black women's profit margins to decline by roughly 35%, while the business's operational costs for gas and spoilt products have increased significantly. "*Though I have a gas stove to stay open during loadshedding, I still experience loss in my business because I spend more money on gas and restocking after throwing away spoilt food*" (Zozani, age 51). This shows how the volatility of energy supply erodes profits and affects long-term investment and the Kota businesses' ability to grow. The reality of power cutouts intensifies the informal economy's precarity, widening the gap between small enterprises and formal enterprises that can afford renewable power sources, further exacerbating unfair competition. Goldberg (2016) posited that most small businesses in townships back up the essential parts of their business production because alternative power sources are more costly compared to electricity supply from Eskom. Hence, the women in Kota businesses had developed innovative strategies that helped them mitigate the effects of power blackouts. For example, they utilise gas stoves for frying chips and other ingredients, reducing their reliance on electricity. On one hand, two business owners prioritised preserving their perishable products by using cooler boxes with ice or gas-powered fridges. On the other hand, other women adapted by limiting their weekly stock levels to minimise losses due to spoilage. "*Uhm, we stock weekly to avoid our products getting spoilt in this long loadshedding*" (Zozani, age 51). These resourceful approaches enable them to maintain production despite the constraints, which helps preserve customer loyalty and the continuance of offering good quality products.

Women: Safety and security

The Black women entrepreneurs, who are positioned within the intersection of gender, race, and social class, experience the disproportionate effects of power outages. As Black women entrepreneurs already own and

operate the Kota businesses in precarious economic environments, they experience aggravated vulnerabilities that affect their business production and sustainability. The absence of power worsens the existing structural and power inequalities, adding constraints such as physical, psychological, and emotional impacts on the lives of marginalised women (Nduhuura et al., 2021). The current study intended to capture the vulnerabilities these women are exposed to due to loadshedding. This theme explores the safety and security concerns raised by the occurrence of loadshedding. Since these women's businesses close at eight pm to accommodate customers from work, they are prone to experiencing crime, particularly during blackouts. These women's occupation and gendered identity thus put them at a higher risk of theft, robbery, and burglary. The occurrence of loadshedding has a profound impact on the well-being of Black women entrepreneurs, inducing significant stress and anxiety. The uncertainty surrounding potential losses due to spoilage and the need to utilise profits to restock or refill gas exacerbates their distress. Furthermore, the threat of robbery and burglary on Black women's homes and businesses looms large, causing a persistent feeling of fear and anxiety over their lives. "*I started closing my shop early so I can walk home while there are still people. Uhm, I had to sacrifice the 6 pm – 7 pm (rush hour) of people coming from work, for my safety*" (Prudence, age 38). The emotional impact caused by loadshedding on their lives is substantial, forcing women to pilot the dual challenges of economic instability and personal safety and security.

Increased exposure to crime and violence

The persistent power outages have become a catalyst for crime and physical attacks in South Africa, particularly in impoverished and informal business districts. The consistent occurrence of loadshedding has created and enabled an environment conducive to illegal activities, as the infamous individuals take advantage of the absence of power. The lack of visibility and surveillance due to loadshedding makes it easier for criminals to target Black women entrepreneurs along with their businesses and homes. "*I was once robbed walking home from my business during loadshedding; it was late at 8 pm because I used to close at that time. They took both phones and the money I made that day. It was a traumatic thing I experienced*" (Prudence, age 38). Loadshedding exposes women to multifaceted vulnerabilities, including theft, gender-based violence, and psychological impacts. The predictable scheduling of loadshedding has also allowed criminals to plan and coordinate their activities, further exacerbating the problem. As a result, communities are left feeling vulnerable and insecure, with many businesses and individuals taking unnecessary risks to protect themselves and their assets. Loadshedding poses significant threats to the safety and security of women, particularly within marginalised communities like Soweto. Loadshedding causes women to be more vulnerable and helpless to attacks when walking home from work. This is exacerbated by the lack of home security and visibility of people outside during power cuts, leaving women entrepreneurs and women from work prone to crime, gender-based violence, and emotional trauma. An exemplary statement is from one participant, exclaiming that: "*Yes, generally when you experience loadshedding you not safe, you know, you exposed to robbery, theft, rape that has been statistically proven (moving hands to emphasise the point) that it is happening, that women are being raped. The stats keep increasing; the numbers are increasing, so I think based on stats you can say loadshedding is also contributing. Loadshedding is a recent occurrence, and so with the stats increasing, you can say it is working hand-in-hand. In addition, maybe because of abuse, loadshedding is increasing the levels of abuse that women are experiencing in Soweto*" (Onalerona, age 20). This sentiment echoes the alarming prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa, where 33.1% of women, translating to approximately 7 310 389 women, had experienced some form of GBV (Human Sciences Research Council, 2025). While the data does not explicitly link loadshedding to GBV, research has underscored the correlation between it and increased violence against women, citing inadequate lighting and home security as contributing factors (Charnley, 2023).

Household dynamics: Disrupted routine

This theme delves into the often-overlooked challenges women face in managing their household chores amidst the chaos of loadshedding. While the previous theme highlighted the devastating effects on their businesses, it is equally important to examine how loadshedding disrupts the domestic sphere. Through in-depth interviews, participants shared their personal struggles, revealing the ways in which loadshedding hinders their ability to perform everyday household duties, exacerbating their already complex lives.

Impact on domestic responsibilities

Loadshedding does not merely disrupt the Black women entrepreneurs' businesses, but their household duties as well. It significantly interrupts their daily routine, completely throwing them off their normal routine by increasing domestic workload. For Black women entrepreneurs, loadshedding disproportionately affects their normal routine, setting them off their normal grid while causing these women to lose track of time. Due to loadshedding, they fail to tackle their dual duties, causing them to choose one task to perform

at a time, which in this case is the operation of the Kota business using a gas stove to remain operational. Ultimately, increasing the amount of domestic work, as they have to rely on manual labour for cooking and cleaning. "*For me, I feel it delays the chores, especially when loadshedding occurs in the morning; the moment is coming back, it feels like the day is only starting*" (Ntombenhle, age 51). While operating one's own business is perceived as flexible, allowing the owner to manage work-life balance, the participant's experience highlights the intricate web of challenges women face, as blackouts disrupt the normal routine and increase domestic workload. These women entrepreneurs carry responsibility for both household and business obligations, which become increasingly difficult to perform during periods of loadshedding. Loadshedding exacerbates the burden of performing those tasks, gradually forcing them to adjust to the use of alternative power, often at the expense of other responsibilities. As a result, blackouts cause women to develop stress, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness, as they are uncertain about what they will feed their families, particularly when they do not have an alternative power source. "*I think loadshedding… what we can generally see is that it is causing anxiety in households and instability in households. Therefore, you can say that caregivers' day-to-day lives are exposed to uncertainty about what their kids are gonna eat." Ultimately, they resort to consuming fast food, as the ability to cook homemade food is disproportionately affected by the occurrence of loadshedding, with foods poor in nutrients that raise health concerns when consumed frequently*" (Onalerona, age 20). These findings highlight how energy insecurity extends beyond economic disruption, producing emotional stress and undermining women's capacity to provide consistent and nutritious meals for their families.

Discussion

This study explored the impacts of loadshedding on Kota businesses and contributes to emerging scholarship on energy insecurity, informal entrepreneurship, and gendered economies in the Global South. Contrary to the assumption that informal food enterprises like Kota businesses would benefit from increased consumer demand during power outages, when households are unable to prepare meals at home, the findings demonstrate that loadshedding significantly destabilises Kota businesses' productivity and revenue. Rather than creating economic opportunity, infrastructural failure exposes the deep entanglement between informal enterprise survival and reliable energy systems. Kota businesses are highly reliant on electricity, with approximately 90% of their equipment – such as deep fryers and refrigeration units – dependent on a stable power supply (Odeku, 2023). Electricity interruptions prevent these businesses from operating at full capacity and meeting daily sales targets, which are key indicators of productivity within informal food economies. Participants reported reduced output, interrupted workflows, and declining revenues during outages. These findings reinforce broader literature demonstrating that energy-intensive culinary enterprises are disproportionately vulnerable to loadshedding due to the centrality of refrigeration, cooking technologies, and digital payment infrastructures (Olajuyin & Mago, 2022). Energy disruptions therefore function not simply as technical interruptions but as structural constraints shaping economic participation.

The lack of consistent electricity has severely reduced productivity in these businesses, disrupting their operations and negatively affecting the broader economy (see Figure 1). As power cuts continue, many businesses experience significant revenue losses due to the inability to operate efficiently. Additionally, the duration of loadshedding directly affects the amount of diesel needed to maintain operations (Erero, 2023). Literature suggests that culinary businesses, especially those in the restaurant industry, are among the most affected by loadshedding due to the energy-intensive nature of meal preparation. Many restaurants are forced to switch to cash-only transactions, rely on candles, and use gas stoves to cook food during power outages (Olajuyin & Mago, 2022). The ingredients used in Kota businesses are primarily perishable, requiring a stable power supply to prevent spoilage and bacterial growth. Unscheduled power cuts, such as load reduction (a deliberate form of load shedding in densely populated areas), catch entrepreneurs off guard, as they cannot predict the duration of the power cuts. This uncertainty often forces businesses to close after only a few hours to conserve fuel. Loadshedding affects businesses in two primary ways (Matlou et al., 2026; Mbomvu et al., 2021): first, it prevents Kota businesses from generating sufficient profit margins; and second, it increases production costs, including the expense of alternative power sources such as diesel, gas refill and maintenance costs, and the need to restock ingredients when spoilage occurs due to power outages. This study thus extends existing work by showing how these dynamics operate specifically within township-based informal economies characterised by limited infrastructural redundancy.

Beyond documenting economic disruption, this study advances a theoretical contribution by conceptualising load shedding as a form of gendered infrastructural precarity. While existing research on informal entrepreneurship has primarily focused on market access or regulatory constraints, less attention has been paid to how failing infrastructure itself becomes a mechanism through which inequality is reproduced. Since democracy, the South African government has attempted to redress the existing

inequalities and discrimination that the apartheid government imposed on Black women. Numerous policies and legislative acts such as Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) and the Equity Act were implemented to redress the imbalances and empower Black women to partake in economic activities and attain the same skills and knowledge other groups accessed. However, gender inequality remains persistent, as new challenges emerge, such as the significant income gap between Black women and White men in similar positions (Klaa, 2020:6). Intersectionality provides a critical framework for understanding these dynamics (Vorobeva, 2022; Simatele & Kabange, 2022). When it comes to entrepreneurship, Black women often encounter difficulties in both starting and sustaining their businesses, as their intersecting identities introduce additional layers of challenges. These include limited access to finances, resources, knowledge, and support (Simatele & Kabange, 2022). Some small businesses in Soweto temporarily shut down as they wait for the restoration of electricity because they do not have access to alternative power sources. However, the findings revealed that Kota businesses strive to continue operating to remain competitive and generate profit. The literature outlines a lack of financial accessibility, resources, knowledge, skills, and socio-cultural factors as the challenges that Black women entrepreneurs face in their businesses. There is limited knowledge about the vulnerabilities caused by the occurrence of loadshedding on these women's lives, particularly as it relates to safety and security, which is the study's fundamental contribution. The informal economy is an unsafe economy with no job security or insurance in case of hazardous or criminal activity, yet loadshedding adds to its hazardous nature by putting Kota businesses and women at peril.

The findings revealed that Soweto, a densely populated township, frequently experiences loadshedding and load reductions to address the excessive demand for energy. These blackouts are primarily due to the high-energy consumption from homes, backrooms, shacks, and nearby informal settlements. Eskom schedules these power cuts to prevent over-consumption. Although loadshedding typically lasts for three to four hours, it still significantly hampers the operations of Kota businesses, forcing women entrepreneurs to rely on alternative and costly power sources. The use of gas stoves is ineffective during load reduction periods, as they require frequent refills, further reducing profit margins. In terms of safety and security, loadshedding increases women's vulnerability to gender-based violence, theft, and burglary, as the absence of power disrupts home security systems and interferes with Wi-Fi and mobile networks. All participants in the study stated that they prefer to close their outlets early when loadshedding is scheduled at night to protect themselves and their businesses from potential criminal activities. Load shedding also blurs the boundaries between productive and reproductive labour. Household responsibilities and domestic duties tend to intensify during power cuts, as the absence of electricity forces many tasks to be done manually, exacerbating gender imbalances in Black households. Literature suggests that loadshedding worsens these inequalities, as men often perceive the additional domestic workload as solely the woman's responsibility (Mukoni, 2012). This dynamic can lead to tensions, with some women purchasing Kotas to prevent disputes over food shortages. Women are also exposed to exploitation during loadshedding, as they are expected to manage both their household chores—such as cleaning, washing, and ironing—and their entrepreneurial duties. The findings revealed that loadshedding significantly affects women entrepreneurs' ability to balance home and work life. The women in the study reported feeling tired and less productive as they struggled to juggle both responsibilities. Completing tasks in the home, such as running washing machines, becomes difficult when there is no electricity, leaving women with the only option to focus solely on their businesses during loadshedding.

Despite the compounded challenges of load shedding, Black women operating Kota businesses demonstrated resilience as an active, socially situated practice shaped by adaptability, experiential learning, and identity-based agency. In contexts of infrastructural fragility, participants adopted strategic responses, such as fuel diversification, precooking, and task prioritisation, to sustain productivity and minimise disruption. As one participant noted: "*I deep fry chips early when loadshedding will occur… Sometimes, I sell cold Kotas… until I am out of chips*" (Ntombenhle, age 51). Such practices illustrate resilience not as passive endurance but as embodied knowledge formed through experience and reduced reliance on formal technological systems. By reworking constraints into opportunities for continuity and innovation, these women enacted forms of entrepreneurial agency that fostered leadership and positioned them as role models for emerging women entrepreneurs.

Recommendations

Women in informal catering businesses, such as Kota businesses, face disproportionate challenges from South Africa's inadequate power supply. Loadshedding not only affects the women's business productivity and profit margin, but also their household management, economic viability, and safety (Odeku, 2022; Halile, 2023), which further entrenches gender inequality in marginalised communities like townships. Therefore, to ensure inclusive township development and sustainability, the state must implement a multi-

pronged strategy focused on informality, energy infrastructure, financial, and policy-based interventions. The study recommends that the government enact legislation aimed at protecting and empowering women-owned enterprises through a business hub that offers networking opportunities, access to resources, and mentorship. In addition, more Black women entrepreneurs should be integrated into decision-making regarding energy and business, ensuring that their challenges are not overlooked. Government bodies should collaborate with financial institutions such as First National Bank (FNB) and Nedbank – which offer renewable energy kits (the Avo Solar panels) – to subsidise or have low-interest rate loans to informal traders seeking sustainable power. Local government must play an active role in providing education and training to business owners about energy literacy and monetary planning to build business resilience and stability. While the government bears the primary responsibility for the energy crisis solution, Black women entrepreneurs are encouraged to take proactive measures by utilising the loadshedding application to anticipate blackouts; allocate an emergency power budget for gas refills, and plan ahead to prevent production loss.

Conclusion

The study explored the economic and gendered implications of loadshedding for women-owned Kota businesses in Soweto, revealing the compounded challenges faced by Black women entrepreneurs during loadshedding. Employing a qualitative research approach enabled an in-depth and contextualised understanding of Black women entrepreneurs' lived experiences and the ways in which recurring blackouts adversely affected their work-life balance, finances, and business sustainability. The study found that the persistent and prolonged loadshedding experienced in 2022/23 significantly hampered the production and profitability of Kota businesses, forcing women to work under volatile operating conditions. Frequent power cuts interrupt food storage and preparation and disrupt service delivery, often resulting in increased operational costs as the women use alternative ways to remain operational, such as refilling gas cylinders and replacing spoilt products. Despite the economic impact experienced by the women in their businesses, they have shown resilience and adaptability by using various coping mechanisms. These proactive strategies demonstrate the women's innovation in sustaining their livelihoods in unpredictable working conditions. Although these coping mechanisms are efficient and useful during power cuts, they also create additional financial constraints on these women's businesses, hindering business growth and long-term investment. Furthermore, the findings highlight the unequal burden of unreliable power supply and the economic pressure it places on women entrepreneurs, as the additional costs affect their ability to provide sufficiently for their families and maintain the business. Beyond the economic strain, the study found that the energy crisis is not gender neutral. Black women entrepreneurs experienced multiple challenges due to gendered roles, unequal access to resources, and exposure to safety risks. These women often shoulder the responsibilities of both their business and household; they require reliable power to balance both spheres of their lives without additional physical and emotional demands. However, loadshedding disrupts this balance, complicating the women's ability to manage their business while caring for their household. Loadshedding adds extra hours to their daily routine, increasing fatigue as the women are forced to perform most tasks manually – such as doing laundry and using a gas stove to cook for their families and customers simultaneously during loadshedding. Moreover, evening blackouts heighten women's vulnerability to violence and crime, forcing them to close early and consequently lose income from evening peak trading hours. In conclusion, loadshedding not only has adverse effects on the economic viability of the women-owned Kota businesses in Soweto, but it also entrenches gender inequalities by increasing the paid and unpaid labour burdens the Black women entrepreneurs carry.

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