Editorial:

Retail at a Crossroads: Charting South Africa's Next Chapter

Prof MC Cant

Manager Retail and Marketing Review
Professor: Department of Marketing and Retail Management

Volume 21 Issue 2 (2025)

The retail sector, both globally and at home, continues to move through a period of significant transition. What once felt like a slow, predictable evolution has become a rapid reconfiguration of how consumers live, work, travel and connect with businesses. As we prepare this issue of The Retail and Marketing Review, it is clear that retail is no longer defined merely by the movement of goods, but by a wider set of economic, social and technological forces that are reshaping the entire landscape.

Despite the many pressures facing households and firms, retail in South Africa has proved unexpectedly resilient. While growth is uneven across categories, many retailers have managed to stabilise their operations, adjust their formats, and hold their ground in a market that remains highly price-sensitive. Food, clothing, homeware and speciality retail continue to show moments of strength, often driven by sharper value propositions, more targeted assortments and an ongoing shift towards private-label ranges.

This resilience is not accidental. It reflects years of investment in logistics networks, digital capability, loyalty ecosystems and store modernisation. Many retailers have become considerably more disciplined in how they manage stock, analyse consumer behaviour and respond to changing demand patterns. These operational improvements have allowed the sector to maintain a degree of stability even as broader economic uncertainties persist. Retail remains one of the country's largest employers, absorbing a wide range of skill levels and playing an important role in youth employment. Yet the sector is not insulated from the wider challenges of the labour market. Many roles are becoming more technologically orientated, requiring staff not only to serve customers but also to work confidently with digital tools, online fulfilment systems and data-driven processes.

Retailers now face a delicate balancing act: maintaining accessible entry points for new entrants while also building a workforce capable of supporting more digitally integrated operations. This shift raises important questions about training, career pathways and the role the sector can play in developing practical, future-focused skills for the South African economy.

The Retail and Marketing Review

Volume 21, Issue 2, November 2025, Pages i-iii

Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17745779

Competition within the sector has intensified. International brands continue to enter or expand within the local market, often bringing new expectations around convenience, delivery speed and integrated digital experiences. At the same time, South Africa's home-grown retail groups are strengthening their positions through multi-format strategies, investment in innovation, and more sophisticated use of data to understand shopper behaviour.

Alongside formal retail, the informal sector remains a powerful and often underestimated economic force. Spaza shops, independent traders, street vendors and township shopping districts form a vital part of everyday commerce. Increasingly, we see interesting intersections between formal and informal systems-a space ripe for further research, particularly around supply partnerships, mobile payments and localised distribution models.

One of the most notable developments of recent years has been the movement of online retail from the margins to the mainstream. What began as a niche convenience for certain categories has become a routine part of South African shopping behaviour. The rise of mobile-first browsing, app-based grocery delivery, and faster fulfilment options has set new benchmarks for convenience.

Retailers are now expected to offer seamless integration between physical stores, online platforms and social media touchpoints. The most successful brands are those able to provide coherent, consistent experiences across all channels-something far easier in theory than in practice. This shift brings important questions about data governance, consumer trust, personalisation and the long-term sustainability of quick-commerce models.

Operational challenges remain significant. Energy interruptions, logistics bottlenecks, inconsistent infrastructure and rising input costs continue to complicate daily trading. While many retailers have made substantial investments in alternative energy and more efficient supply chains, these costs place increasing pressure on margins and pricing decisions.

For scholars and practitioners, this raises questions about resilience: How should retailers structure their operations in environments where interruptions are expected rather than exceptional? What innovations will allow supply chains to remain reliable and adaptable? And how do these pressures affect affordability for consumers already navigating tight household budgets?

Although consumer confidence remains fragile, South Africans continue to spend-carefully, selectively and often in ways that reflect a blend of price-consciousness and a desire for small, meaningful indulgences. Fashion, personal care, home improvement and small electronics often perform better than expected, especially when supported by promotions and loyalty rewards.

Shoppers today are more informed, more deliberate and more comfortable mixing channels. It is increasingly common for consumers to compare online, purchase in-store, supplement through informal outlets and engage with brands on social platforms. Understanding this hybrid behaviour is becoming essential for both marketing strategy and academic research.

Looking ahead: An agenda for the sector and for research

The themes emerging across retail point towards several priorities for the coming years:

- Strengthening resilience in the face of energy and infrastructure constraints
- Supporting inclusive economic participation and skills development
- Ensuring ethical, transparent and consumer-centred use of data and technology
- Developing more sustainable models of sourcing, distribution and packaging
- Deepening our understanding of township and informal retail ecosystems

The Retail and Marketing Review remains committed to providing a platform where these issues can be examined with rigour, creativity and a sensitivity to the realities of the South African context. The insights offered by our authors are not only academically valuable; they speak directly to the practical challenges and opportunities shaping the sector.

Retail in South Africa is dynamic, adaptive and deeply woven into everyday life. Its future will be shaped not only by economic conditions, but also by the imagination and resilience of the people who work within it. Our hope is that the thinking shared in this issue contributes-however modestly-to that next chapter.

Prof M.C. Cant
Manager
Retail and Marketing Review