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Encounters in African urban peripheries: Exploring people-supermarket dynamics in a South African neighbourhood

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Abstract
The increasing dominance of large supermarket chains is often criticised, including for impacts on poor households as well as effects on small businesses. Yet retail investment in malls and supermarkets is a strategy for economic development in some marginalised areas, and can elicit positive customer responses. A diversity of positions signals the need to understand the supermarket effect better, including at the specific zone of encounter between supermarkets and their local customers and contexts. In this article, consumer narratives from urban peripheries in South Africa complexify assessments of big retail in poorer neighbourhoods. They show the multiple and diverse ways supermarkets are intertwined in residents' lives, far beyond grocery supply and access, and how this is largely positively experienced. The data also shows the many ways a local retail store works to enhance its relationships, building links across geographic scales and institutions but particularly at the micro-local level of the neighbourhood. Showing there is 'more' to supermarket experiences and interactions than is sometimes recognised, the article argues for understanding this hyper-local interface better to help inform how community gains can be crafted, despite the dominance of large retail.

Keywords
African urban peripheries, consumer narratives, encounters, local embeddedness, supermarkets

Introduction

'WELCOME TO SPAR COUNTRY' exclaims the roof of the Waterloo SuperSpar to passengers descending into King Shaka International Airport in eThekwini, South Africa. Down on the ground, the manager of the supermarket proudly says: 'there was nothing in

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this area…and now you have a fully-fledged, Spar…… [people] love it, this is their home' (Interview, Manager, Waterloo SuperSpar, June 2018). This celebration of the scale and impact of a supermarket underscores the well-documented ascendancy of big retail across large parts of the global south (Reardon et al., 2003). But its increasing dominance is strongly criticised in some scholarly work, including for effects in low-income areas. At the same time, attracting big retail to underserviced areas remains a core development strategy in places. With these diverse perspectives there is much still to uncover about supermarkets and their effects, including on the African continent (Battersby and Watson, 2019).

In this article consumer narratives from South Africa (SA) complexify assessments of big retail in poorer neighbourhoods. Chiming with the Waterloo Spar manager above, this research encountered multiple positive, and further, emotional, sentiments about large supermarkets, such as 'it is joyful to have the Spar' (Interview, female (MM), Waterloo state-funded housing project, 2017). Residents' accounts show the multiple ways supermarkets are intertwined in their lives, but how this is largely positively experienced. Further, the story of the Waterloo SuperSpar shows the many ways the store works to enhance this experience, building relationships across geographic scales and institutions.

The article does not contradict the oft-criticised power and dominance of big retail: indeed it illustrates it. It shows the intensity of this in peripheral locations where supermarket amenity is enhanced by relative geographic dislocation. But it draws attention to the highly local, more intimate scale of the neighbourhood and the immediate relationships around the supermarket, as well as those at other scales. Showing there is 'more' to supermarket experiences and interactions than is often recognised, the article argues for deeper understanding of these interfaces so that greater and more diversified local gains can be negotiated, despite the dominance of large retail.

This discussion is positioned in the zone of encounter where people's experiences meet big shops' practices. It acknowledges the expansion of supermarkets across Africa, their supremacy in the SA context, and criticisms of their impact. Beyond supermarkets' prominence in retail-led development in SA, the article flags their significance in urban-edge locations. It reflects on the attraction of retail complexes for people across income ranges, and how these establishments work to foster these relationships. I draw on qualitative methods to illustrate residents' interactions with large supermarkets in SA, beyond grocery shopping, and focussing in on the Waterloo SuperSpar I show how it constructs diverse liaisons to help entrench its position in the neighbourhood. I then discuss the dramatic events of July 2021 in SA, in which this SuperSpar and multiple other shops were extensively looted, reflecting on what this episode of destruction and its aftermath adds to understanding the shopper/ supermarket interface. In conclusion I argue for paying close attention to the zone of encounter which potentially offers greater opportunity and agency for local people to shape the effects of big retail than might be assumed.

The supermarket encounter

Expanding across many parts of the global south in recent decades (Reardon et al., 2003), supermarkets represent a shift and centralisation in food supply and access that is nothing short of 'a supermarket revolution' (Crush, 2014: 544). Criticisms have followed, including that supermarkets undermine small retailers, ignore local suppliers, and can have negative as well as positive impacts on consumers (Battersby and Peyton, 2014; Ledger, 2016).

Amongst multiple areas of research on supermarkets are their effects on nutrition, health and diets; shifts in pricing and availability of food types; household expenditure patterns; as well as responses to their changing marketing and other strategies. Rather than dealing with these aspects, however, a key concern of this article is with consumer perspectives and sentiments on a neighbourhood supermarket, and what underpins these views. This is closer to the terrain of the 'social, symbolic and emotional meaning' of supermarkets, particularly in relatively isolated areas (Christiaanse and Haartsen, 2017: 330). Complementing this angle, the article discusses in turn the supermarket's interactions with local actors, including but going beyond interactions with shoppers. This article is thus positioned in the 'zone of encounter' where community members and supermarkets interact, to borrow from Watson's (2009) phrase.

For the shopper, the retail encounter can take diverse forms, including in the realm of emotional impact, a theme extensively discussed in relation to malls (see Miller and Laketa, 2019). As findings of this research show, supermarkets particularly on the urban edges can assume in the consumer imaginary the trappings and attractions associated with malls. The term 'mall' was used quite often by respondents, to reference quite diverse conditions: sometimes a large establishment as conventionally understood as a mall, sometimes a small handful of shops others might term 'a small convenience centre' (Adatia, 2010), and sometimes simply to a supermarket on its own.

Beyond consumer experiences of a supermarket, the second dimension of the encounter, referred to above, is how these shops embed within a particular context. Across the retail landscape large global chains work hard to adapt and entrench into local markets, including through stocking culturally familiar product lines and in-country staffing (Coe and Lee, 2006). Amongst multiple themes explored in this terrain are retail procurement and supply chain strategies; supermarket resilience to economic and contextual turbulence; and the penetration into particular contexts of developer capital, established companies and specific supply chains (see for example Maumbe and Chikoko, 2022; Nickanor et al., 2021; Reardon et al., 2007). The discussion in this article however focuses much more specifically on what a local supermarket does to build relationships in its immediate neighbourhood, and how this relates to consumers' interactions and emotional relationships.

Before exploring these themes further, I provide some contextualisation to the supermarket situation in Africa and particularly in South Africa.

The rise of supermarkets in Africa and in South Africa

Across much of the African continent there has been a notable expansion of supermarkets, particularly South Africa chainstores, often establishing in malls linked amongst other things to a growing middle class, consumption practices, the purchasing power of foreign employees, as well as the penetration into other countries of South African development capital (Yeboah et al., 2023). This boom in malls over the last 20 years is counter to trends in what Yeoboah et al. (2023) term the global core, where malls are declining (in part due to the expansion of online shopping) and the phenomenon of idle or decayed malls has arisen in some places (Miller et al., 2019).

In many countries, supermarkets entered a context of multiple existing small and medium food and grocery suppliers. In places such as Brazil, fears that supermarkets would simply displace these existing small businesses have proved unfounded (Crush, 2014), although concerns remain. Similarly in many African countries, supermarkets may be one player in a diverse array of retailers, including informal (Crush and Frayne, 2011) or traditional suppliers, and therefore be less prominent, sometimes even eventually withdrawing from an area (Yeboah et al., 2023).

In South Africa (SA), however, supermarket chains – and particularly the 'big four'[1] – are highly dominant in food retail. Informal food suppliers only emerged in any substantial manner after apartheid ended, developing at the same time as supermarkets were multiplying (Crush, 2014). The South African economy is particularly concentrated and centralised, with large formal businesses reaching throughout the country (Philip, 2010). Even where supermarkets are not physically close by, Ledger notes that households travel from deep rural areas to buy at supermarkets 'sometimes travelling in round trips of more than 100 km to do so' (Ledger, 2016: 61).

Supermarkets are seen as 'natural oligopolies': their ongoing extension on top of sunken costs effectively preventing other players from entering the market and competing on price, quality, range and service (das Nair, 2018: 318). Following an investigation between 2015 and 2017, the SA Competition Commission found that structural conditions in the sector restricted opportunities for small businesses (Competition Commission of South Africa, 2019). In effect, these retailers dominate 'entire value chains' (das Nair, 2018: 319 citing Dobson, 2015).

In established residential areas, there are often advantages of new retail development for consumers, such as expanded ranges and lower prices (Adatia, 2010). However, where these new players squeeze out existing small food suppliers and also thus consumer options (such as the ability to purchase in small quantities and on credit), Battersby and Peyton (2014: 162) argue this likely impacts badly on poor people. Additional criticisms include the negative impact on people's diets of supermarkets and fast-food outlets in malls, the latter at times a spin-off of a supermarket chain (Battersby, 2017). On the other hand, other benefits of large retail development have been flagged: for example, Miller (2005: 117, 124) shows how workers in the Shoprite chain in Zambia capitalised on their South African links to undertake 'regional claim-making': asserting their right to inclusion in the company 'on an equal basis with South African workers'.

In SA, research from Cape Town published in 2014 showed low-income areas with very limited access to retail chains, while more prosperous areas enjoy wide choice (Battersby and Peyton, 2014). This is in part a legacy of apartheid urban geography. 'Townships' – neighbourhoods established for non-white populations in terms of separationist ideology – intentionally had almost no business and retail activity, being designed as predominantly residential areas with limited facilities. Subsequently, supermarkets have emerged in these areas but somewhat later than in formerly white suburbs, with retail growing strongly post-2000 (Adatia, 2010), in part through deliberate strategy as discussed below.

Supermarkets and malls as a strategy

In recent decades promoting formal retail development has been a key component of the SA government's economic revitalisation of townships which often reflect large low-income populations. The number of shopping centres in townships has grown considerably (partly in response to increasing market saturation in former white suburbs), as has the number of malls across South Africa as a whole: between 2007 and 2015, nearly 900 new malls were developed (Nickanor et al., 2017). Beyond SA, retail may emerge in the vicinity of poorer areas through other drivers: for example, in the predominantly low-income peripheries of Santiago, Chile, new upmarket residential estates responding to land opportunities are bringing with them shopping complexes (Sabatini and Salcedo, 2007).

In SA, the government views a laudable shopping centre as one with a positive impact on its surrounds, for example, through contributions made to public spaces and facilities (Adatia, 2010). Battersby (2017: 423) argues that in South Africa the facilitation of malls 'is viewed by local government as a means of achieving social and political, as well as economic development objectives', given amongst other things, anticipated contributions to job creation. However, both 'urban planning decisions, and non-decisions', she argues (2017:

422) are shaping the proliferation of malls and where they happen, contending that private sector interests are shaping the spatial patterns of malls more than government plans are.

Economic and other impacts of formal retail development on local areas are arguably difficult to establish (Adatia, 2010). New supermarkets have been assessed as 'pushing out independent retailers and informal traders' (Ledger, 2016: 61). However, increased footfall and proximity to other businesses and their employees in a new centre can also benefit existing small businesses, though adaption may be required to maximise advantages (Adatia, 2010; Nickanor et al., 2019). There are instances of notable concentrations of small and informal businesses thriving in the vicinity of some malls or large supermarkets (Ligthelm, 2012; Nickanor et al., 2019), but controls on informal trade may also be implemented. Thus, relationships between big retail and small businesses vary considerably, from 'displacement' to forms of 'co-existence' (Battersby and Watson, 2019: 19), with, in some cases, more complementary 'co-habitation' (Nickanor et al., 2019). The Santiago example above implies a level of mutual acceptance, at least by consumers: retail complexes and supermarkets linked to upmarket housing developments are viewed by poorer neighbours positively, both practically and symbolically, whilst at the same time their new wealthy neighbours have 'no problem' buying at existing small neighbourhood stores (Sabatini and Salcedo, 2007).

Supermarkets on the urban edge

While support for retail development in apartheid era townships is a strategy in SA as noted above, this article includes fieldwork from study sites beyond this context. Localities included what Meth et al. (2021) term a transitioning area – an urban-edge area semi-rural in character but becoming better serviced and consolidated – as well as 'vanguard peripheries', formed in part by more recent, large government-funded housing developments. In these, formal shopping facilities can be slow to establish: in the pioneering mixed-income development Cosmo City in Johannesburg 'it has taken nearly a decade for supermarkets, petrol stations and other formal retail outlets to open there, let alone tradable activities' (Turok, 2015: 6). Some small businesses may emerge in the interim, but generally limited in scale and nature.

For residents in these peripheral areas the cost of travelling to supermarkets elsewhere may be unaffordable unless an employed family can combine shopping with work (Battersby and Peyton, 2014). But with SA's extremely high unemployment rate, job opportunities can be very constrained even in areas of infrastructure and economic growth (Todes and Houghton, 2021). The transport industry may also interfere with better retail access: in one of our research areas we were told that mini-bus taxis blocked the development of a mall because of reliance on income from transporting people elsewhere. Where a supermarket does exist in a peripheral area, it is all the more laden with opportunities and dependencies, an effect intensified in low-income housing settlements where every cost is carefully weighed up, and new demands have arisen (such utility consumption charges and formal house maintenance) for residents previously living in informal areas.

Relative spatial dislocation heightens how consumers experience a store, and how the supermarket relates to its environment. Thus, this article contends that a form of 'micro-localisation' at the much more intimate scale of the neighbourhood is significant. This is not the same as the localisation efforts big retailers practice at regional or country-level: Coe and Lee (2006), for example, discuss product lines, staff employment, product sourcing and freshness, all of which involve local adaption. This extent of 'territorial embeddedness' assists large chains to maintain relevance in different country contexts, and, the authors argue, may in turn influence practices in other contexts across the global chain.

At a very different geographic scale, however, Hall studies a London high street in a deprived area, viewing the sometimes a-typical combinations of goods and services – such as a shop where one could both 'make a money transfer and buy a wedding garment' – as 'embedded innovations' highly responsive to local preferences (Hall, 2011: 2578, 2579). Hall argues for a deepened understanding of 'the local' at this level, and 'its cultural, social, and economic interrelationships' which she encapsulates as 'particularity'. Although her study is of small, independent retailers and not the large chains, and the problem of declining shopping streets rather than new areas of expansion, the shared concern with this article is with the need to comprehend better actual retail practices and responses to them in neighbourhoods – the micro level. Amongst other things Hall calls for 'greater analytic depth of 'the local', for her constituting 'the intricate and complex socioeconomic profile of an area' (Hall, 2011: 2582). Similarly in this article it is the local neighbourhood dynamics and relationships, in addition to those at other scales, that are illuminating about the supermarket encounter.

Malls, big shops and building relationships

Supermarkets are frequently anchor tenants in malls, and often valuable in persuading banks to finance a new centre (das Nair, 2018). In people's perceptions too supermarkets are often intimately associated with malls, as was the case also in this research. Miller and Laketa (2019) argue that some people interact with malls in ways beyond transactional consumer aspects and which can be joyful (Pyyry, 2016; cited in Miller and Laketa, 2019). The notion of the 'magic of the mall' (Goss, 1993 in Miller and Laketa, 2019) encapsulates the idea that developers employ deliberate strategies to distract shoppers from the 'emptiness' of consumerism and the capitalist relations embedded in the mall, to take the experience of shopping into the realm of non-real, escapism.

Though malls are often convenient, gaining traction in Accra, Ghana, for example, 'largely on how they help meet consumption needs efficiently, conveniently and hygienically' (Edufel and Edful, 2022: 964), they also facilitate social interaction, for 'business, eating out, meeting friends, family outings as well as hanging out' (Yeboah et al., 2023). Other attractions may include air-conditioning in steamy climates, and entertainment sessions such as live music (Yeboah et al., 2023: 190, 197). Visiting malls may involve 'symbolic consumption' rather than actual purchases (Eduful and Eduful, 2022). Malls can be 'places where political, social and economic subjectivities are produced and consumed in intricate ways' (Miller and Laketa, 2019: 921).

Consumption practices and mall experiences are typically discussed in relation to the middle class, both in global north contexts (Miller and Laketa, 2019) and in African cities, though what constitutes the middle class may be complex in the latter (Yeboah et al., 2023). But malls are assumed to largely alienate the poor, with limited studies specifically considering poor visitors. In one such study in Johannesburg, 'township' users of an upmarket mall, including those without disposable income, would sometimes 'escape to the mall' as a way of removing themselves from everyday problems and to 'calm down', even if it was inconvenient to access:

> 'Entering this "beautiful" place and being in the shiny world of consumption is experienced by many of my female interlocutors from Alexandra as rejuvenation, as an escape from their lives full of economic hardship and strained social relations' (Aceska and Heer, 2019: 52).

With diverse physical forms, attractions, and terms of use, malls and mall-type spaces span may facilitate forms of inclusion and exclusion in a range of ways (Eduful and Eduful, 2022; Landman, 2016). Thus, focusing only on the exclusionary or elitist nature of malls often fails to explore their role as 'spaces of encounter' between people of different classes, ethnicities or religions, (Aceska and Heer, 2019: 57; see also Houssay-Holzschuch and Teppo, 2009 for a Cape Town example). Landman argues that in both design and function some aspects of shopping centres in SA constitute 'quasi-public spaces', though with limits and specificities. In various ways, therefore, the inner lives of retail spaces are argued to be worthy of analytical attention, particularly in contexts of inequality or conflict (Aceska and Heer, 2019; Kenny, 2019; Miller et al., 2019) – and, I argue in the relatively isolated or edge localities of this research.

Method

This article draws on a large study conducted between 2016 and 2018 that included Waterloo and Hammond's Farm residential neighbourhoods in the north of eThekwini municipality (Durban), and it references data from two other peripheral localities in South Africa: Molweni, on eThekwini's western periphery, and the neighbourhoods of Protea Glen and Lufhereng on the western edge of Soweto in Johannesburg. All three areas formed part of the seven different urban-edge study sites in a cross-country, multi-partner project spanning South Africa and Ethiopia.[2]

In each of the seven sites, we explored, amongst other things, the everyday experiences of residents, relative to large infrastructure investment and other drivers of change in or near the localities. A quantitative survey was conducted with 200 respondents in each study site, and approximately 50 residents per study site participated in qualitative investigation. These 50 respondents per site were invited to keep diaries for a period of 2 weeks, and through their reflections, their photographs and the follow-up interviews conducted with them, the project probed experiences daily life in these geographically peripheral areas.

From both the survey and qualitative data the research analysed many themes, including on unemployment, crime, violence, boredom, the condition of infrastructure, and forms of authority in peripheral areas, several of which are discussed in Meth et al. (2024). But this article is inspired by multiple unanticipated references by SA respondents to the experience and convenience of shopping in a supermarket near their houses, or their difficulties when supermarkets were more distant. These were spontaneous remarks respondents[3] chose to make when invited to reflect on life in the area or to respond to questions such as 'What is your major concern or joy about your life and your wider family'? We were intrigued by the prominence given to supermarkets.

A range of key informants were also interviewed across the seven study sites, including an in-depth discussion with the manager of the Waterloo Superspar. The Spar is located at the entrance to Hammond's Farm, a development of approximately 1800 state-funded residences started in 2011, located across an arterial road from the predominantly low-income, government-built housing of Waterloo, begun in the late 1980s. The area around the Spar thus consists mainly of low income or indeed, indigent households. The Spar complex is simple in design, with shops on two sides of a parking lot, but with little attention to the public space amenity Landman (2016) describes in some other retail complexes.

In late 2021, several years after the main body of fieldwork for the Living the Urban Peripheries project was completed, interviews were conducted with nine of the original 36 qualitative study participants in Hammond's Farm and Waterloo.[4] This followed the events of July 2021, in which malls, shops and other facilities were extensively attacked and looted in several parts of South Africa, in an unprecedented episode of destruction termed by the country's president a 'failed insurrection' (Rosenburg, 2021, paragraph 5). Estimates were that 200 shopping complexes were attacked (SAPOA, 2021), including all of the supermarkets or malls referred to in this article. In this article the focus is on residents' views on the damage to and closure, for a period, of the Waterloo SuperSpar, which they had earlier expressed mostly positive sentiments about.

Supermarkets entwined in the lives of respondents

In divergence from literature reflecting on the negative effects of the arrival of supermarket in a poor neighbourhood, we were struck by the significant emotion people in our study expressed about having a large shop nearby, using words translated as 'joy' and 'happiness', or comments such as, 'We were thankful to get a Spar' (Interview, female (GM), Waterloo, 2017). By contrast in supermarket-less Lufhereng, Gauteng, there was a longing for large shops: 'It would bring me great joy to have a mall close by' (Diary, female, (IN) Lufhereng, 2017).

Material aspects

These emotions reflected, in the first instance, a range of very material benefits. These included the freshness of the products, in contrast to the claim of often 'expired goods' in the small shops in an area without a supermarket (Diary, female (AM), Lufhereng, 2017). Further benefits were to do with cost savings, being able to access financial and other services, gaining employment, visiting the facility as a treat or an outing and witnessing charitable contributions from the supermarket, briefly elaborated below.

The key advantage, remarked on repeatedly by respondents in all three study sites drawn on for this article was the cost saving of not having to pay for transport: 'we do not waste a lot of money going to town' (Interview, male (FM), Waterloo, 2017). Until the establishment of SuperSpar in 2016, the closest supermarket was in the nearby town of Verulam, some five kilometres away: now, 'the money we were using for the transport…helps to add the groceries for your house' (Interview, female (ZN), Hammonds Farm, 2017).

In our Molweni case study area, some residents reported paying for transport to the Watercrest Mall but walking some seven kilometres back to save costs. Despite its relative distance they were still pleased to have this mall. In Lufhereng, Gauteng, respondents commented repeatedly on the costs of travelling to large shops: '...when you want to buy meat for R50[5] at the Mall, you must have taxi fare as well and there is no money [for this]' (Diary, female (EN), Lufhereng, 2017).

People being able to get to the supermarket 'with their own feet' (Interview, male (ZD), Waterloo, 2017) referenced also the diversity of services available. At Waterloo SuperSpar and other supermarket chains in South Africa vouchers can be purchased for electricity, social grants are disbursed, and people can withdraw cash. Other conveniences include buying airtime and lottery tickets, purchasing long-distance bus fares, paying bills, receiving and sending money, and accessing 'pension loans'.[6] Respondents also appreciated the long trading hours, and some appreciated the reward system: 'when you have these points you are able to buy things at a lower price. On Fridays, there is always a sale (Crazy Friday)' (Diary, female (NG), Waterloo, 2016). In this basic shopping strip, this range of conveniences helped invoke the notion of a 'mall' through comments such as 'The best improvement yet is the mall and the ATMs [automated teller machines]…' (Diary, male (ZD), Waterloo, 2016).

A few criticisms expressed included a concern that the supermarket no longer gave leftover food to needy people, and a degree of frustration at being captive to the local prices By contrast some respondents commented on affordable prices and supermarkets offering 'lay-by' (pay later options), and also noted alternative local choices: 'We have a huge space to grow our food… we do not buy vegetable[s] from the market but we buy from the gardens' (Diary, female (NG), Waterloo, 2016).

Overall it was the diversity of goods, services and other benefits that was overwhelmingly positive about the supermarket experience for many respondents, encapsulated in this unprompted diary reflection:

> The life is very easy in this area and the Spar also near to the people. We have everything in that Spar, even if I need little things such as bread, I get it from Spar… we buy fresh things even the bread is fresh. We do not find any expired food from that Spar. If I have the shortage of the electricity I get it from Spar… I like the Spar because I just walk for [a] few minutes and I do not spend money for transport to go there. We have also the ATM and if a person needs cash, they go to the ATM and withdraw some money (Diary, female (LS), Hammond's Farm, November 2021).

Transcending material aspects

Beyond material benefits to consumers, there were other positives associated with a nearby shopping centre. Respondent FM was amongst those who opted to take a photograph of Spar, specifically linking it to poverty relief beyond the savings in transport costs:

> I took it because we are happy to have this shopping centre… There are people from this community who was employed by this Spar. It is helping us because it minimises the poverty (Interview, male (FM), Waterloo, 2017).

Feeling safe while shopping is also a key benefit '…we walk freely at the mall' (Diary, male (VN), Molweni, 2017). In a country where the threat of crime can often colour the use of public spaces, escape from this anxiety is significant. The recreation function was also noteworthy, including for an outing for cooked food: 'If it is a weekend, I took out my children to Spar for eating' (Diary, female (ZN), Hammonds Farm, 2016). The Watercrest Mall on the road to Molweni was noted for a play area for children with a jumping castle, cheaper to access than the more distant Pinetown centre (Interview, female, (MF), Molweni, 2017). Echoing Aceska and Heer's (2019) study, the retail space was an escape for some of our poorest respondents living in difficult conditions near Protea Mall in Gauteng:

> Q: What do you do for fun around here?
>
> A: I go out to the mall with my friends and take pictures (Interview, female (MG), Waterworks informal settlement, Gauteng, 2018)

Notably, some respondents associated the arrival of a large private retailer with the notion of 'development', and with a community being recognised, not by the private sector but by the state. This was expressed through the use of phrases such as 'they built it for us', and 'for/in the community' (Diary, female (TD), Hammonds Farm, 2016).

Or conversely, from one of our other study sites: 'I wish the government could construct a shopping mall for us, closer to our area' (Diary, female (LL), Ekangala, 2017).

Concrete realisation of the development rather than mere promises was also noteworthy for people: 'The development in this area we see by our eyes and not hear by my ears**.** They build for us the Spar…' (Interview, female (ZN), Hammonds Farm, 2017). For some of our respondents, the Spar's arrival loomed as large as or more important than the construction of the international airport nearby (Interview, male (MG), Waterloo, 2017).

The work of constructing the SuperSpar's niche

Arguably the very size and muscle of the big supermarket made it appealing to our respondents. The multiple facets of their interactions chime with the contention that supermarkets provide 'much more than a "basket of goods" at a specific price' (das Nair, 2018: 318). Thus a supermarket on the urban edge may function similarly to a small centre in a rural area, which in effect performs regional roles in the absence of alternative complexes (Adatia, 2010).

As das Nair (2018: 320) notes, 'supermarkets are "local" from the customer's point of view, irrespective of whether they are part of large multinationals'. They strategise accordingly. The SuperSpar had just changed to a non-Halaal store to better cater to the local market: 'the Waterloo community would now stand behind you more knowing that you are going to carry the range like pork, the non-halaal stuff…that [change] just generates loyalty in the customers around you' (Interview, Manager, Waterloo SuperSpar, June 2018). The shop was also inviting requests from its customers so it could target needs better, and working closely with political representatives in the area:

> [this] we discussed with the councillor last week, we are urging him to ask [residents] to come and ask us, what is it that they require that we don't have, and we are putting a book out now [so] that they would be comfortable to sign in there and say, i.e., we want cheaper maize meal or we want cheaper rice… so if we see that 50 customers are asking for the same thing, we will now go and do that for them (Interview, Manager, Waterloo SuperSpar, June 2018).

Amongst the crucial financial services offered by the store is the disbursement of government social grants. A highly significant benefit, about 26 million people per month in South Africa received one of the main grants[7] or other forms of social relief in 2023 (Steyn, 2023). Grants represent significant spending power in supermarkets: in a report in 2012, The Spar Group Limited (2016) noted 'massive spikes' in trade around grant payment day (Steyn, 2012). More recent research has confirmed both the local economic benefit of grants and also various links between them and supermarkets (Plagerson et al., 2023). Drawing on Steyn (2012), Battersby (2017: 425) claims that 'major retailers… are keen to locate in township areas in order to capture social grant money'. While in the past some of the shops reportedly required the grant holder to spend money at the store itself to access the grants (Ledger, 2016), the Waterloo SuperSpar manager contends that there is no pressure placed on grant beneficiaries:

> …no one forces you to buy [from us], if you don't want to buy the specials we have, you get your money back (Interview, Manager, Waterloo SuperSpar, June 2018).

The Waterloo SuperSpar pays out grants to 'well over' 1 000 people a month, providing them with refreshments along the way, indicating the significance of these clients to the shop :

> …we open the shop on the first [of the month] at 5.30 am and we start preparing the meals… and as soon as we open the doors we feed them because they have been standing there for about two hours.
>
> ...we have quite a nice long queue. They don't stand in the sun, they are actually inside the mall in the passage area, so there is a toilet facility right there…we would either give our clientele tea or juice or coffee depending on the weather and we might make sandwiches… (Interview, Manager, Waterloo SuperSpar, June 2018).

Much care goes into specials at the end of the month. Due to the structure of Spar stores, which are in effect run as a form of franchise, individual shops have some discretion and pricing is highly competitive. The SuperSpar calculates the tradeoffs people make on prices, price specials and taxi fare to travel elsewhere. The manager had a variety of tactics to engender customer loyalty and build relations with residents, including charitable as well as recreational efforts:

> So we are on the drive with them [the councillors], we are hosting a singing, artisan show next week Saturday… we from the Spar we have decided we will pay those… local artists, they are

> quite popular and we are going to pay them to sing and entertain the Waterloo community.

Other strategies to build a customer base involved paying the local taxi association to transport groceries to people's homes, for free to the customer: '…. You buy as much groceries as you want and then you just wait there, if he's out with a delivery with 10–12 customers, it takes him 20 min, he's back and then he loads again and he drops off'. This is a considerable outlay for the Spar: 'Trust me, it is quite a lot that we pay for [the transport] for a month', but the benefit for the store is making people 'feel they are part of the Spar family' (Interview, Manager, Waterloo SuperSpar, June 2018).

But the manager also spoke about the local difficulties he had encountered, partly because of employees' ability to mobilise community support and political representatives: 'Very quickly, they get the councillors involved, they get everyone involved':

> It's such a volatile area. I've had two strikes in the six months I've been here… if you do tend to dismiss employees…they go into the community and get the community to rally behind them… but they are starting to understand what I am here for and they are starting to work with me. At one stage they would say they want me out of here but now they've totally turned it around and they say, please don't leave (Interview, Manager, Waterloo SuperSpar, June 2018).

Looting and re-establishing

Despite the Waterloo SuperSpar's efforts to build good relationships locally, it was extensively looted on 11 July 2021, along with multiple other retail facilities in three provinces in SA. Shops were emptied out, storefronts broken, glass smashed and ATMs pulled out of walls. Our follow-up interviews confirmed that in the supermarket everything was stripped, even the copper pipes supplying water (Interview, female (NM), Waterloo, November 2021).

> At Spar it was completely empty, and everything was gone. They took even the scale of weighing (Interview, female (AZ), Waterloo, November 2021).

The Watercrest and Protea Malls mentioned earlier were also amongst the 1 735 retail stores damaged or destroyed around the same time mainly in the provinces of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. Included were 184 Spar outlets. Amongst these were one hundred shopping centres that were burnt or suffered significant fire damage. The impact on the gross domestic product was estimated at R50 billion (about $2.6 billion) (SAPOA, 2021).

Explanations and experiences

The startling attacks were interpreted by analysts as an attempt by a disaffected faction of the ruling African National Congress party to unseat the faction in power. The spark was the imprisonment of former president Jacob Zuma, after he defied the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (Rosenburg, 2021). Further explanations centred on the frustration of ever-deepening poverty, inadequate infrastructure and stalled aspirations for the trappings of suburbia decades after the transition to democracy in 1994: 'almost as if the citizens of the townships were taking for themselves what the state had promised with liberation and failed to deliver' (Bank, 2021: 57).

Malls came in for particular attention in explaining people's frustrations: 'Malls are, quite simply, where the stuff of everyday consuming is now located' (Swilling, 2021, paragraph 3). There is significant public investment in shopping malls in South Africa, viewed by some as part of a deliberate politics of financialisation underpinned by a particular financial system, (Battersby, 2017; Swilling, 2021). Swilling (2021) links malls to the enormous debt burden carried by many South Africans, arguing also that social grants payments play into this by encouraging 'a consumer spend'. He cites a Facebook post widely circulated at the time of the July 2021 lootings (though written in 2020), *The Dark Side of the Current Mall regime* by Tshwane businessman and social commentator Djo BaNkuna, whose assessment is that 'township Malls are instruments of poverty and exploitation' and celebrating their establishment is 'myopic, ill-educated and misguided'. Djo BaNkuna claims that 'members of the community do not have an emotional connection to the mall. For many, each visit to the Mall is like a visit to the zoo where they observe what they can never own'. He dismisses the jobs in malls as poorly paid with limited benefits. 'A Mall is NOT development' he states.[8]

In our follow-up interviews in November 2021 in Hammonds Farm and Waterloo, most respondents linked the attack on their local shops to the jailing of the ex-president. The Waterloo SuperSpar was spraypainted with 'release Zuma' (Interview, female (NN), Waterloo, November 2021), and the fact that many retailers that were attacked elsewhere showed that 'this thing was associated with the politics' (Interview, female (MM), Waterloo, November 2021). Residents made specific links between the start of the violence and a televised address by President Ramaphosa, in which people expected him to defer the former president's arrest, though he did not:

> I remember at SuperSpar, it had started after the speech of the president. I heard a loud noise and it was after 8 at night. After [a] few minutes, I saw people passing near my house carrying things from Spar and running. (Interview, female (TD), Hammond's Farm, November 2021).

Several respondents referred to social media communication in advance of the attacks predicting 'the country will shutdown', referring to the organised and instigated nature of the attacks: 'I hated myself because we received the warning messages to buy everything we need for the house and we [were] just ignoring…We did not believe because we never thought people will do such a fearing thing' (Interview, female (TD), Hammond's Farm, November 2021). Other respondents recorded their disbelief at the events that unfolded:

> It was like a bad dream …. Our Spar become as an unknown place because they vandalised and left everything empty (Interview, female (ZN), Hammond's Farm, November 2021).

Feelings expressed included the guilt of being tainted by association with the looting, through being given small goods by others or even by merely living in the same neighbourhood. 'We could not sleep because of the noise and trollies from shops' (Interview, female (AZ), Waterloo, November 2021).

In the general period of lawlessness and violence, with respondents hearing of people killed in other localities during the widespread looting, there was a sense of abandonment by the state: 'The president took his time to bring the soldiers in[to] the province' (Interview, female (ZN), Hammond's Farm, November 2021), leaving people feeling vulnerable and adrift:

> I was very traumatis[ed] because of the things I saw… Everybody was quiet, even the president of the country… The smoke of burning the factories and warehouses bring[s] the fear to the people. (Interview, female (MM), Waterloo, November 2021).

There was a sense of how the devastation to retail and other infrastructure had set the area back in terms of development and ravaged the city's economy.

Impacts of the looting of Spar

A few days after the looting, people sought food in other areas where some shops had been protected by private security, though some respondents reported racial slurs as they were assumed to have been part of the looting: 'they said we had enough food as black people' (Interview, female (NN), Waterloo, November 2021). It was clear that 'our Spar' (as referred to by several respondents) was missed by people:

> It was a difficult time for me because we lost our Spar, and it was costing a lot to go to Verulam when you need just…bread and milk. It was a big problem because most of us are unemployed… (Interview, female (AZ), Waterloo, November 2021).

Social grant payments could not be made, and with the pharmacy in the complex also looted people needed to travel to get their chronic medication (Interview, female (TD), Hammond's Farm, November 2021). The impacts were multiple.

> The people who did that incident never think more what the results would be to the residents, workers and shops owners… We [were] left without [having] any shop in the community. The people who worked on those shops their life stop because [they] did not have any income to pay for their regular instalments, buying food. We, as the community, we [were] affected because we lost our Spar, and I miss the Crazy Friday at Spar (Interview, female (MM), Waterloo, November 2021).

Re-opening of the Spar

The re-opening of the Spar some ten weeks after the looting was facilitated by the building not having been destroyed, a key point recognised by some respondents:

> I heard that the manager for Spar came and asked people to take whatever they need and not burning [*sic*] anything …We are lucky that our SuperSpar did not burn down like other shops. It makes our Spar to recover, and it is operating right now because [it] did not burn (Interview, female (AZ), Waterloo, November 2021).

People employed by the state through public works programmes laboured to assist the re-opening but ordinary members of the neighbourhood also provided unpaid labour and 'removed all the waste', mobilised through their community facebook page (Interview, female (AN), Waterloo, November 2021).

> After eight days the community asked the permission to go and clean all the litter at Spar because they felt that pain (Interview, female (TD), Hammond's Farm, November 2021).

Subsequently the refurbished Spar was seen to offer similar advantages as before: 'it is local, and the prices are reasonable' (Interview, female (TD), Hammond's Farm, November 2021). Several changes were also spoken of approvingly, such as uniformed assistants who transport shopping to people's houses, and an expansion of product ranges. People used terms such as 'very happy' and 'excited' about the re-opening:

> … it is huge, and you can buy whatever you need… We are very happy with our Spar (Interview, female (TD), Hammond's Farm, November 2021).

Some respondents thought a similar incident as the looting would not happen again:

> I heard some people talking that if [we] were aware how that thing will affect them, they would protect SuperSpar because they are paying more money to go to Verulam (Interview, female (LS), Hammond's Farm, November 2021).

However, a few respondents' relationship with the Spar appears to have been altered in the long term: some believe there are increased prices at the Spar as a form of 'revenge' for local people having taken part in the looting, and others claim they have now got used to shopping in Verulam. One respondent was sceptical though: ‘Those who fear to go to Spar it’s just their conscious because [they] were involved in looting Spar’ (Interview, female (NM), Waterloo, November 2021). Mostly there is a sense of distress about what transpired:

> I still feel sad about what happened. I think we were supposed to get counselling after that event because it has traumatised the mind, especial[ly] for us as cleaners. It was difficult to clean the place you know well, and you buy food every day and [the] next day [it] is gone (Interview, female (MM), Waterloo, November 2021).

It is clear the attack on the SuperSpar in July 2021 was not specifically about this store but part of a wider instigation of lawlessness entwined with national factional politics. While the relationships the SuperSpar had built in the neighbourhood did not save it from the looting, they likely saved the store from being set alight, and assisted, symbolically and practically, towards its re-establishment in the same locality. A respondent summed up the interdependency evident in the relationship between the shop and the neighbourhood, despite what had happened: ‘The Spar needs the community and community need Spar’ (Interview, female (TD), Hammond’s Farm, November 2021).

Conclusion: reflecting on supermarket encounters and local embeddedness

Large supermarket chains have established themselves as a major force in retail in many parts of the world and are dominant in South Africa. They are critiqued for perceived adverse effects, including on pre-existing local retail and on food options (Battersby and Peyton, 2014). But forefronting the views of consumers in peripheral urban areas and the efforts of a supermarket to embed locally, this article draws attention to multiple dimensions at this interface. First, findings highlight the very material benefits of supermarkets’ multiple offerings, including the critical saving on transport costs they represent (Adatia, 2010).

Second, the article shows how supermarkets, often with a few satellite shops and services alongside, take on in practice and consumer imaginaries some of the characteristics and attractions of malls. These include performing as places of escape and recreation, as with large malls elsewhere including on the African continent (Aceska and Heer, 2019; Eduful and Eduful, 2022; Miller and Laketa, 2019; Yeboah et al., 2023). The article draws attention to this role particularly in urban-edge localities, and in situations of predominantly poor customers rather than the middle class consumers more commonly associated with shopping complexes. The study resonates with Christiaanse and Haartsen’s (2017) conclusion, from the very different context of a supermarket closure in rural Netherlands, of the importance for local residents’ sense of identity of the supermarket, and the emotional meaning they confer on the it.

Third, the article highlights a degree of ‘publicness’ amongst the roles of the supermarket, including in this case, its crucial disbursement of social grants and facilitation of payments and financial services. The Waterloo SuperSpar does not have the physical amenity of the ‘quasi-public spaces’ in retail centres Landman (2016) describes – referring to seating, safe outdoor recreation space and so on – but through its financial and other services it has some ‘quasi-public’ *functions*, to a degree. Further, in people’s imaginaries, the supermarket, though an embodiment of big capital and its dominance in the SA economy, is also associated with the notion of development led or instigated by government. The supermarket’s strategies in working with local representatives no doubt contribute to blurring these distinctions, and its presence is celebrated by many residents despite representing a highly skewed and exclusionary share of the retail economy.

The article describes the active relationship-building the supermarket does to entrench itself in multiple ways and with various institutions and individuals, across spatial scales and degrees of formal authority, such as with elected politicians, the mini-bus taxi association, schools, charities and performers locally, as well as with the municipality (for utility payments), national government (for social grants), and the financial sector (for loan finance). This goes beyond more typical strategies retailers might invoke to build customer loyalty at a broader scale and highlights also an intimate type of 'neighbourhood localisation', chiming with Hall's (2011) call to understand 'the local' and its 'particularity' in retail interrelationships. At the same time the article points to the relative vulnerabilities of these powerful retail players to wider political and social forces such as the 'failed insurrection' of 2021 in SA, but also how local relationships, whilst also fraught at times, may also assist with a degree of protection and rebuilding in a time of crisis.

Big retailers' power, the multi-directional relationships they construct and activities undertaken are significant in shaping the experience of consumers, for whom the neighbourhood supermarket is local and is 'ours' despite its chainstore nature (das Nair, 2018). Centring analysis on the zone of encounter between supermarket and shopper helps with conceptualising additional or alternative roles and relationships at this interface, and how these can be crafted. From a food security perspective Battersby (2017) and others call for stronger planning initiatives to help shape mall development in SA, for example, by facilitating small independent retail spaces nearby, or incentivising or requiring this within malls themselves (Denoon-Stevens, 2016). The case of the SuperSpar in this article shows how this large supermarket, despite its strength and dominance, needs local orientation and adaption, in the goods it keeps and the services it offers, particularly perhaps to capture the limited spend of its predominantly very poor customers. Its franchise model clearly enables some flexibility to adapt to local conditions. In this situation therefore lies some agency with those living and working in the neighbourhood, and there exists some potential for further conceptualising how a degree of local sourcing of goods, provision of services, jobs, public space amenity or other neighbourhood benefits could be more systematically built into negotiations and approvals linked to the arrival of new supermarkets. Ultimately there is much still to probe about consumer/ supermarket experiences and relationships in diverse contexts, and how these insights can be used to shape more locally beneficial outcomes.

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Notes

1. Spar, Woolworths, Shopright and Pick n Pay, (das Nair, 2018: 328).
2. Living the Urban Periphery: Infrastructure, Everyday Life and Economic Change in African City-Regions.
3. In Waterloo and Hammond's Farm 23 out of 36 diary keepers made mention of The Spar.

4. The remainder of the qualitative study participants were located in other sub-areas that together with Hammond's Farm and Waterloo made up this 'Verulam' study site.
5. About $2.60 at Feb 2024 exchange rates.
6. A cash advance or small loan.
7. Child support, older person's grant, disability, war veteran grant, grant-in-aid, care dependency grant, foster child grant, social relief of distress.
8. He does not advocate for the removal of malls but for their transformation to be locally inclusive.

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