

## Investigating Customer Perceptions of Using Internet Services Providers' Websites to Access Internet Services in Tembisa Township

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### Abstract

Economic ecosystems are found in township markets, which are defined by lower income levels, distinct consumer behavior, limited digital access, and a rich cultural diversity. Website sales of internet-related goods and services are crucial to the survival of South African Internet Service Provider (ISP) businesses in today's digital economy. This research looked at the opinions of internet users about websites of ISPs based in the Tembisa township of Gauteng, South Africa. The research added to the growing body of knowledge on digital accessibility and targeted marketing approaches. The research was qualitative in nature and used a group of 10 subjects. Semi-structured interviews comprising 9 questions were conducted with participants. The study's findings revealed that limited internet access and language barriers were critical concerns. Participants emphasized the need for improved infrastructure, affordable internet packages, multilingual websites, and transparent security measures to enhance trust in online transactions. Some of the recommendations made by the study include creating personalized internet bundles, advertising in a way that is sensitive to different cultures, providing support in more than one language, making cybersecurity a top priority, and providing digital customer service. Businesses, politicians, and groups working to close the digital gap and advance inclusive and equitable economic development can benefit from the study's findings, which deepened our comprehension of digital dynamics in township markets and consumer behavior.

**Keywords:** internet services providers, marketing; customer service, online sales, digital inclusion.

**JEL classification:** M31, M37.

### 1. Introduction

Township markets tend to be underserved and represent unique economic ecosystems distinguished by social, cultural, and economic factors (Miana, 2021). These markets are characterized by lower income levels, unique consumer behavior, limited digital access, and a rich cultural diversity. Township markets are generally situated close to central business districts, but they differ in infrastructure, income levels, consumer behavior, and digital access (Lorenz et al., 2019). Notably, diverse consumer bases with varying needs exist, characterized by price sensitivity and cultural influences (Das Nair, 2020).

There has been progress in digital technology in South Africa (S.A.), yet there is still a digital divide that reflects the divisions that existed under apartheid, especially in the townships (Leurs and Shepherd, 2017). Business initiatives by Vodacom and Vumatel, as well as government initiatives emphasized in President Ramaphosa's State of the Nation speech, sought to address the persistent issue of inequality in access to technology (Presidency, 2022:14).

Despite existing research on township markets (e.g. Nwafor, 2020; Mahlangu, et al. 2020; Masojada, 2021; van Eyk, Amoah, and Yase, 2022), a gap remains in understanding the

specific obstacles faced by ISP Organizations when using websites as their primary sales channel in these markets. While some studies touched upon the general obstacles related to lower income levels, limited digital access, language barriers, and consumer trust, there was a lack of in-depth exploration and understanding of how these challenges manifested in the context of website-based sales for a specific ISP Organization.

For example, Mbatha, (2020) concentrated on the issues of security and trust, emphasizing the difficulties that underserved areas face in navigating websites; however, their study did not explore recommendations, nor did it delve into the reasons behind the prevalence of these challenges. There is limited research that delves into the specific strategies and approaches businesses could adopt to navigate the complexities of website-based sales in township markets. As the digital environment continued to evolve, new challenges and opportunities have emerged, warranting a more current and relevant analysis (Torous et al. 2021).

Millions of South African live in townships, presenting a large potential customer base that desires to use internet services. The aim of this study was to investigate and understand the perceptions of customers in Tembisa township in Gauteng, South Africa when using websites owned by South African Internet Service Provider (ISP) companies. This study has two research questions that are as follows:

- What are the experiences of township customers in accessing internet services, using websites owned by ISPs?
- What practical recommendations can be derived to enhance website-based sales in township markets, to promote equitable economic development and bridge the digital divide?

Conducting this study is important for several reasons. Firstly, it is important for ISP companies as it directly addresses the challenges, they encounter in utilizing websites as their primary sales channel in S.A township markets. By identifying and dissecting these challenges, the study provides these organizations with actionable insights and practical recommendations to enhance their website-based sales strategies, ultimately improving their market penetration and sales performance.

Secondly, this study benefits the township residents by focusing on promoting more equitable digital access and economic development in underserved areas. By addressing the barriers to online sales in township markets, it contributes to bridging the digital divide, enabling residents to access essential internet services more easily.

Finally, this research adds to the body of knowledge in the study area by offering a nuanced understanding of the specific challenges faced by organizations in township markets. It also contributes by providing recommendations tailored to this unique context, benefiting both businesses and policymakers working towards inclusive economic development.

## 2. Literature Review

According to Gounaridis et al. (2018), township marketplaces can be great places for businesses to grow. Rapid urbanization, population growth, and increasing disposable incomes were common features of these marketplaces. The potential for township marketplaces to attract new customers, broaden a company's consumer base, and stimulate economic growth in underserved areas was highlighted by Swati, (2020).

While there was a lot of promise in township markets, studies had also shown that companies there faced certain special difficulties. According to Msosa (2023), one of the main challenges was the lower income levels that were common in township areas. Consequently, buyers in these marketplaces frequently cared most about cost-effectiveness. Inadequate digital infrastructure and restricted access to the internet also made it difficult for township markets to successfully conduct business online. Because of this internet outage, not only were

consumers unable to complete online purchases, but companies also struggled to contact their ideal clients (Lee and Lee, 2020).

Language barriers were another crucial aspect that added complexity to website-based sales in township markets. In many cases, residents of these areas preferred local languages or dialects over the dominant official language used in mainstream digital platforms. This linguistic diversity called for businesses to adopt multilingual strategies to effectively engage with their potential customers (Elo et al. 2022).

Another major obstacle was the fact that some township people just do not trust online purchases. Possible consumers may be hesitant to shop online due to worries about security, privacy of personal information, and the reliability of online retailers. To thrive in these marketplaces, companies had to earn customers' trust through online purchases (Arifin et al. 2018).

It is necessary to develop marketing tactics that are relevant to township markets and online sales strategies had to take community dynamics and cultural factors into account (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). For the implementation to be a success, it was essential to understand the digital preferences and behaviors of customers in these areas.

The literature on online sales and township markets has already set a solid groundwork by recognizing the opportunities and threats of serving these neglected regions. When developing sales strategies for these markets, experts have stressed the significance of taking community dynamics, linguistic preferences, and cultural influences into account (Stallkamp and Schotter, 2021).

## **2.1. Theoretical framework**

To begin understanding the complex and varied township market, we looked to market segmentation theory for a foundational framework. A wide range of cultural influences, customer tastes, and socioeconomic statuses were represented in these marketplaces. To better serve their customers in township markets, ISPs should use market segmentation theory to divide their clientele into different groups with unique needs. Tomlinson (2017) found that this method increased the success of online sales by tailoring marketing campaigns to each audience's specific traits and interests.

Another important theoretical consideration in relation to township marketplaces was comprehending customer behavior. The purchase decisions of consumers in these disadvantaged locations were influenced by cultural factors, low-income levels, and limited internet access (Thomas et al., 2019). To meet the requirements and expectations of customers in township markets, ISPs should research their motives, views, and tastes to create website experiences that are tailored to them.

## **3. Research Methodology**

This study's research strategy is qualitative and based on an exploratory design. Understanding the complex social phenomena and acquiring deep insights from individuals' viewpoints is best accomplished through the qualitative approach. According to Dawaddi et al. (2021), an exploratory design permits thorough examination, enables for the research process to be adjusted according to new results, and makes use of qualitative approaches like interviews to catch relevant data.

An interpretivist research philosophy was utilized for this investigation. Given the nature of the research challenge and the complexity of the social phenomena within these markets, as well as the cultural diversity, limited internet access, and consumer behaviors that shape them, an interpretivist approach was appropriate (Bremner, 2017). The research strategy utilizes semi-structured interviews, which include nine questions that were answered freely. The

interpretivist research method is well-suited to interviews because it allows participants to freely share their subjective opinions and thoughts. The study's aims and the thorough exploration of participants' viewpoints were carefully considered while crafting each question.

Depending on participant preferences and logistical factors, the semi-structured interviews could be done remotely or in person. The interviewees were put at ease and allowed to freely express their thoughts and feelings because the setting was secure and pleasant. Accurate data capture and analysis were aided by obtaining prior consent from participants to record the interviews. The typical duration of an interview was between twenty-five and forty-five minutes. This time limit was suitable for both the participants and the researcher, allowing for an in-depth examination of their findings.

Participants in this study were residents of the Tembisa township who are current or former users of Internet service providers (ISPs) in the area. Ten participants served as the study subjects, with a target demographic of one hundred current and former clients. The study's exploratory character involved delving deeply into participants' unique viewpoints on the difficulties encountered by South African ISPs operating in township markets. Also, with the limited resources available for qualitative research, we were able to examine the study problem thoroughly with a manageable and practical group of subjects of 10 people, and all participants successfully responded to all the questions from the discussion interview guide. Data saturation was achieved by carefully selecting subjects that adequately addressed the study's unique aims, which were to offer a comprehensive knowledge of the difficulties.

The data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a powerful and adaptable tool for discovering themes, patterns, and significance in qualitative data. To uncover important insights and recurring patterns connected to the research objectives, the interview replies are coded and categorized in a methodical manner. Rather of relying on statistical methods, we will be utilizing qualitative data analysis software like NVivo to help us organize, code, and understand the data efficiently.

Several ethical considerations were implemented to ensure the protection and well-being of the participants. The following are some of the most important things to keep in mind: getting participants' informed consent, protecting their confidentiality and anonymity, and getting the necessary permissions. The research was impartial since it avoided gender preconceptions, used gender-neutral terminology, did not identify individuals by race or ethnicity, did not assume their ages, and did not use any other identifying information (see Table 1). These procedures aid in giving an impartial and fair assessment of the participants' experiences, which is consistent with ethical norms.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

This section begins with an overview of participants' ages and their overall encounters while using websites for purchasing goods and services in Tembisa township. All 10 participants successfully responded to all the questions from the discussion guide. The study identified six key themes: digital access barriers, cultural diversity impacts, economic constraints, website user experience, customer service concerns, and, finally, trust and security issues.

*Table 1. Subjects characteristics*

Age of participants	Number of participants
18-25	4
26-30	3
31-40	2
41 and over	1

Source: Authors' calculations

#### 4.1 Qualitative analysis thematic

The following sections delve deeper into each of these identified themes.

##### *Theme 1: Digital access barriers*

The research sought to find out from its participants specific difficulties or frustrations they encountered while trying to purchase products from ISP website in Tembisa Township. Respondent 2 said: *“I have challenges trying to navigate X website, I just find it to be too complex”*. Respondent 5 mentioned: *“How am I expected to navigate through a website to buy internet services, when I don’t have internet looking for internet? They need it consider navigating their websites just like famous banks do, free of charge”*.

People in Tembisa township encounter difficulties while trying to buy goods and services online through ISP websites, which is why digital access restrictions became a major subject in the study. Ndulu, Ngwenya, and Setlhalogile, (2022) cites research that shows how digital access barriers can include things like slow internet, outdated technology, and high prices for gadgets. Specific investments in digital infrastructure, efforts to lower the cost of internet access, and community-based programs to increase digital literacy are all suggestions for addressing this issue in township marketplaces. Bridging these gaps can contribute to a more inclusive and accessible online environment.

##### *Theme 2: Cultural diversity impacts*

The theme of ‘cultural diversity impact’ emerged as a significant aspect influencing the challenges faced by individuals using ISP websites in the diverse cultural landscape of Tembisa. Respondent 1 said: *“diverse cultural perspectives influence preferences and expectations; ISP cannot just copy and paste a website used in Sandton (a wealthy part of Johannesburg) to townships”*. Respondent 6: *“Most people here are not fluent in English so immediately when I see a jargon, or misunderstand anything I step away, I don’t want to purchase or sign up for things I don’t understand”*.

Work by Smith (2019) and Hoel and Chen et al. (2020), highlights the profound influence of cultural diversity on consumer behaviors and preferences. In Tembisa, with its rich cultural tapestry, varying cultural norms and practices were found to impact users' interactions with ISP websites. For instance, the study revealed that website content and interfaces not aligned with the cultural expectations of certain demographic groups led to disengagement.

##### *Theme 3: Economic Constraints*

The theme of economic constraints highlights the challenges faced by individuals in Tembisa township concerning their financial capacity to access and utilize internet services from ISPs.

Respondent 3 stated that: *“being locked into a contract by ISPs does not really work in markets like this, most people do piece jobs and do not have a constant clearly put out income”*. Respondent 5 stated that: *“affordability is the issues, they should consider different prices or smaller packages”*.

Research has extensively examined the effects of socioeconomic determinants on digital inclusion in such settings, particularly in relation to economic restrictions (Udimal and Biyase, 2021; Wiid and Cant, 2021). The capacity to participate fully in online activities can be hindered when financial resources are inadequate to cover the costs of high-quality internet services.

*Theme 4: Website User Experience*

Respondent 4: *“I have a hard time navigating any ISP website and I would rather go to a store and get assistance there”*. Respondent 2: *“some websites are not friendly to the type of mobile devices we use, so proper formation of web pages to suite mobiles would be good”*.

According to Roux (2018), user experience encompasses pragmatic aspects like usability and efficiency, coupled with hedonic qualities such as aesthetics and emotional appeal. Participants in the study expressed challenges related to the navigation, design, and overall functionality of ISP websites.

*Theme 5: Customer Service Concerns*

Respondent 8 and 10 stated: *“it is difficult to find immediate assistance in a website, and usually their self-help guides to not include everything or are hard to follow”*.

The theme of Customer Service Concerns highlights the pivotal role of service interactions in influencing individuals' experiences with ISP websites in Tembisa. Work by Felix and Rembulan, (2023) emphasizes the significance of customer service in shaping overall customer satisfaction and loyalty.

*Theme 6: Trust and security issues*

Trust and security emerged as pivotal concerns in the study, reflecting participants' worries about the safety of their data on ISP websites.

Respondent 9: *“I have been scammed once buying things online, since then I have been careful to not put my banking details on websites*. Respondent 10: *“I don't buy things online, I have never felt comfortable giving banking information online, it's dangerous”*.

Online shoppers' trust in brands is a key factor in their propensity to make purchases (McKnight, 2019). There were concerns voiced by participants over the safety of their data and finances. Online shopping in township marketplaces might thrive in an atmosphere of increased trust.

**Conclusions, limitations and future directions of research**

This study explored challenges faced by Tembisa township residents using ISP websites, identifying six key themes: digital access barriers, cultural diversity impacts, economic constraints, website user experience, customer service concerns, and trust and security issues. Participants across diverse age groups highlighted difficulties in navigating complex websites, cultural expectations influencing interactions, economic challenges hindering accessibility, and concerns about website usability, customer support, and data security.

The study recommends targeted investments in digital infrastructure and community-based programs to improve internet accessibility. It is further recommended to provide culturally relevant content and perform sensitive user testing to address the implications of cultural diversity. Constrained budgets necessitate work with local authorities to reasonable price arrangements. Prioritizing usability testing and clean design is key to improving website user experience. Issues with customer service point to the necessity for both rapid response and detailed instructions for troubleshooting. The significance of strong security measures and transparent communication of privacy policies is highlighted by trust and security concerns. The overarching goal of these suggestions is to make internet access in Tembisa more accessible for all inhabitants by reducing digital divides and resolving the complex issues that locals have while making purchases through official ISP websites.

An important limitation of this study lies in the challenge of not being to generalize the findings beyond the specific context of the Tembisa township market in Johannesburg due to the limited group of investigated subjects. In addition, the unique socioeconomic and cultural

characteristics of this market may limit the applicability of results to townships that are in other South African provinces that are very diverse. Future research could investigate the experiences of different ISPs that operate in South African townships, to understand their experiences and challenges in trying to access and service these markets. That will be valuable in helping ISPs develop strategies that are better informed on the dynamics of operating in townships.

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### Appendix: Interview questions

#### ***Identifying Challenges in ISPS Website for Online Product Purchases in Tembisa Township:***

1. Can you share specific difficulties or frustrations encountered while trying to buy products on ISPs website in Tembisa Township? Provide details about your experiences.
2. What aspects of ISPs website do you find confusing or inconvenient during the purchasing process? How do these factors affect your online shopping experience?
3. In your view, what improvements could enhance ISPs website for a more seamless and user-friendly online purchasing process in Tembisa Township? Share any suggestions you may have.

#### ***Evaluating User Experience on ISPS's Websites in Tembisa ownship:***

4. Describe your overall experience using ISPs websites in Tembisa Township. What aspects were particularly satisfying during your interactions?
5. What improvements would you recommend enhancing the user experience on ISPs websites in Tembisa Township?
6. Are there specific features or changes that would make the website more enjoyable and efficient for users like yourself?

***Providing Recommendations to Enhance Online Product Purchasing for ISPS:***

7. Based on your experiences, what strategies or improvements could ISPs implement to make their website more user-friendly for customers in Tembisa Township?
8. In your opinion, how important is customer support in the online product purchasing process, and how can ISPs better support customers through their website?
9. Are there additional services or features you believe would improve the overall experience?