



A SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF INFORMALITY – A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE INFORMAL FOOD MARKETS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Disclaimer: I hereby declare that this dissertation is my own original work and has not been submitted before to any institution for assessment purposes.

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Abstract

In current debates surrounding informality, an economic perspective is dominant – viewing informality as a transitional phenomenon with the eventual aim of the actors being to get absorbed into a formal framework. However, a sociological perspective of the concept is less explored. This master’s thesis aims to explore this gap in literature. Guided by the sociological lens of social practice theory (SPT), a systematic literature review (SLR) of informality is conducted to gain an understanding of how social structures, agency, and other factors rooted in social systems play a role in shaping informality as discussed in current academic literature. To provide a well-rounded understanding with both theoretical and practical footing, the findings of the SLR is supported by instances of informalities present in informal food markets of South Africa – a country with a largely active informal food sector. The findings reveal that the interplay and dynamics between formal and informal structures as well as the agency vested in actors, play a pivotal role in the existence and sustenance of informality. Additionally, the meaning, materials, and competence associated to informal practices is seen to be largely rooted in social norms and local community and is more complex than being informed solely by rational economic theories. These findings are illustrated through instances in the general context of the South African informal food markets as well as through three specific regions in the country – Cape Town, KwaMashu Town, and Western Cape Province.

The findings of this thesis contribute to the theoretical discussions surrounding informality and call for attention to a sociological perspective. It also has potential policy implications to make systems more inclusive of informal practices.

Key Words: Informality, Sociological, Food, Informal Food Vendors, Informal Food Markets, South Africa, Social Practice Theory

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1. Introduction

Informality is a phenomenon that is widely prevalent in society. It can comprise of several things – relationships outside of a formal structure, a casual demeanor not following a prescribed protocol, or means of carrying out processes driven by local or historical knowledge (Ledeneva, 2018). It pervades our everyday lives when we exchange food items with our neighbors out of goodwill, foregoing the process of “purchasing” said items, when we drop off our children at our relative’s place instead of availing childcare services arranged by social security programs, or often when we decide to purchase goods from a travelling local vendor.

Informality is also a term that is heavily used in academia. A simple search on Scopus yields 1,247 results while that on Google Scholar yields 5,230 results, featuring the word when searched by “titles” alone; and generates exponentially more results when the search is expanded to “all fields.” The resultant finds range across various disciplines from economics to sociology & social studies to urban planning and many more. Its relevance also varies across topics of informal settlements (Wolff et al., 2023), the informal economy (Hart, 1973), legal informality (Macaulay, 2020), etc. Despite it being a frequently experienced phenomenon and the word being frequently used in everyday conversation, as well as discussed in academia, there is little consensus on its scope and definition.

Following from the above, this master’s thesis attempts to delve into understanding informality – it tries to gather a sociological understanding of informality and uses instances of it from informal food markets in the South African context, to further this understanding. The sub-sections below provide some background into (i) informality, (ii) informality and food system processes, and (iii) informality amidst food vendors & markets in South Africa. Thereafter, the problem statement and the relevance of the thesis are discussed.

The Introduction section concludes with a brief overview of the structure and contents of the thesis.

1.1. Background

This sub-section provides some preliminary theoretical background to the concepts which are of relevance to this thesis.

1.1.1. Informality

Many studies regard informality as a function of its actors – informal economies or the informal sectors and its constituent actors and institutions. These actors are regarded as playing roles outside of an official or recognized institutional framework, often associated with words such as “hidden”, “shadow”, “underground”, “invisible”, or “missing” economies or activities or practices. Famous works on informality, for example: Keith Hart’s “Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana” (1973) or his “The Informal Economy” (1985) borrow from these notions as underlying assumptions of their research. Indeed, the concept of informality was initially associated with economics in the form of the informal economy. A wave of studies and research were conducted on it under the assumed pretext that informality would be wiped out by the advent of modernization, since it was considered to only be transitory during times of financial crisis (Polese, 2021; Lewis, 1954).

However, it persisted, and in some cases increased (Kanbur, 2017), penetrating different disciplines and leading scholars to branch out into exploring their potentials.

Many prominent and well-known schools of thought exist on “informality”, where the word or concept is treated as synonymous to the informal sector: The Dualist view is the one as mentioned above and propagated through Hart’s works – where informality is dispensable and merely a result of not being granted access to a formal economy (Hart, 1973). The Marxist perspective sheds light on the “structural dependency” (Otekhile et al., 2017) between the formal and informal sectors – seeing the informal as inferior and speculating that its eradication would not have negative consequences on the concerned state. It portrays the informal as being exploitative (Tokman, 1978) of those with less resources, offering low-income opportunities. In both cases, positive characteristics of stability and an overall desire to attain it are attached to the formal, while the informal is seen as lacking organization and stability and as a last resort. This dichotomous characterization is slowly being subject to criticism overtime (Guha-Khasnobis et al., 2006). Moreover, in both the Dualist and Marxist perspectives, the understanding of informality is linear – it is an effect of individuals not being able to participate in formality; no context – historical, cultural, or political is taken into consideration. The Reformists or the Neoliberal sect on the other hand, see informal sectors and its participants in a more positive light, seeing it at a space that offers creative freedom and gives breeding ground to entrepreneurs (Lubell, 1991). It provides an easily accessible space with low barriers to entry for most people. This school of thought, though highlighting the positive aspects of informality, does not delve into what shapes informality besides the drive to survival either. Over time, informality began to often be just loosely defined based on these fragmented ideas generated from the different discourses. In fact, owing to its colloquial usage and diverse areas of application, informality can sometimes even be seen to be used in conflicting manners (Guha-Khasnobis et al., 2006).

However, taking into account a sociological view of informality, removed from the quintessential economic debate is underexplored. Buchenau & peers (2022) believe that history and social and cultural context are so important, that informal practices, networks, and relations are intrinsically the natural way of human organization, and that formality is an imposition above and beyond. Therefore, we consider another way to view informality – not only as a product of its actors/entities or a byproduct of formality, but as a performative concept grounded in society and its dynamic nature. Muller (2017), in his work, draws a comparison between informality and performativity as described by Butler (2010), which is to say that informality is a set of related actions which are “renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (Butler, 1988). Additionally, the continued social reproduction of “informality” is made possible due to the interactions and dynamics between structures and actors participating in it (Peterson et al., 2010), and is informed by the lived experiences, culturally ingrained practices (Gandhi, 2016), and historical setting (Ziv, 2022) in which informality has flourished. These social interactions and factors thus *inform* and *enable* informality. Such an understanding may be important, not only to add to existent academic knowledge but to understand important implications of informality in the realm of policy and inclusivity. This is the knowledge gap that this master’s thesis primarily attempts to tend to.

To enrich the study of the gap, examples of informality as observed amidst food vendors & in informal markets in the South African context is taken into consideration. The next sub-section elaborates first on the importance of informality in informal food markets around the globe and sets the stage for discussion for such markets and enterprises in the context of South Africa.

1.1.2. Informal Food Markets & the South African Context

Chase and peers (2014) define a food system as an “interconnected web of activities, resources, and people that extends across all domains involved in providing human nourishment and sustaining health, including production, processing, packaging, distribution, marketing, consumption, and disposal of food.” Of these “domains involved” informality plays a significant role in many – such as informal food trade in bazaars, informal food distribution systems set up by families and acquaintances, informal food production in backyards, etc. – leading food system transformations towards a more sustainable and inclusive direction (Ziervogel et al., 2010). This prevalence is most overtly observable in informal food trade or markets or the informal food economy. For instance, a study based in Hanoi (Wertheim-Heck et al., 2016) found that food shopping practices are informed by existent and historical informal modes of acquisition such as produce grown by oneself or received from family, produce bought from informal street vendors, or from the farmers directly. The dairy system of India too, which is the largest consumer of milk globally, was estimated to source 70-75% of its milk through informal and traditional means as of 2010 (Kumar, 2010). As will be discussed in the later in this section, informality is also largely present in informal food markets in the South African context. Such informal practices are important to both securing livelihoods of actors of the informal food sector (IFS), as well as in ensuring food access and food security (Nickanor et al., 2016).

These instances corroborate that informality is indeed ingrained in informal food markets and can play a role in promoting food security and inclusive food systems, if recognized and effectively placed in governance. Ziervogel et al. (2010) highlights the need for consideration of both formality and informality (with respect to food and agriculture) in policy, especially in countries of the Global South since they cater to different demands and different purchasing powers. Keeping this in mind, this thesis narrows down its scope to a country of the Global South – South Africa, to derive instances of informalities from. Within the food systems of South Africa, the informal food markets are focused on. The next section provides more context for the same.

Of late, a region frequently discussed amidst debates of informality and its importance to food and food systems, is South Africa. The Covid-19 pandemic and the disruptions resulting from it brought South Africa to the forefront of such discussions (Skinner et al., 2021). The non-recognition of informal activities as part of the formal food system, led to challenges of food access and provision as well as endangered the livelihoods of many, resulting in increased inequality (Rwafa-Ponela et al., 2022). Hence, it was considered important to look closely into the interrelationships between informal food markets and informality in South Africa – the results of which could potentially also add to global debates and be relevant to the Global South, South Africa being a part of it.

Not only does informality play a role in ensuring food security, but it also bridges the formal with the informal – the state and its actors in the domain of food with the informal food sellers and acquirers. The South African food context has frequent interactions between the formal and informal systems and the latter is on occasion recognized as part of the food value chain in some capacity (Crush et al., 2019). There is a degree of coexistence and collaboration, especially post the pandemic in 2019. While there is reliance on the formal and centralized formal food system, the informal markets in question make up to 45 percent of the vendors and markets (Greenberg, 2017). The informal food markets which make up this percentage are heavily relied on by both urban and rural actors. In addition, the South African society is very community driven and often operates on community driven approaches or philosophies (Petersen et al., 2018) in many aspects of social life, including in that of food, and informally established markets are in line with their community driven nature. In 2011, the

African Food Security Urban Network (AFSUN) conducted surveys whose data suggested that 70% of the sampled population sourced their food from informal outlets and enterprises (Crush and Frayne, 2011). To this end, the informal setting also helps tackle food and nutrition insecurity in the country (Skinner et al., 2016; Mathaulula et al., 2016). Despite playing a significant role in the domain of food, actors of informal markets and economies are seldom represented in food policy debates (Skinner et al., 2016). Hence, instances of informalities these food markets in South Africa can not only support the theoretical understanding of informality but highlighting it will also generate insights into the need to include it in food policy debates.

While the central focus of this thesis would be the sociological understanding of informality, there is much to gain from infusing illustrations from the above South African context. Firstly, the theoretical discussion around informality will have much to gain from practical real-life examples, and the inferences will be well-rounded. Secondly, as mentioned in section 1.1.2., informality is widely present in the Global South and at the same time widely underrepresented. The findings from delving into informalities prevalent amidst food markets and vendors in South Africa will not only have implications in policy and governance within South Africa but will most likely have findings which can be borrowed by other countries of the Global South. Lastly, the high degree of interaction between formal and informal bodies and the high level of influence of social norms in this South African context, showcases that is well suited for a sociological analysis.

1.2. Problem Statement & Relevance

Informality has, overtime, been widely expressed in economic terms – its merits and demerits in providing jobs, efficiency levels of informal sectors & their monetary contributions to economies, their disservices, etc. However, a concept as complex as that of informality that is deeply rooted in systems around us, requires a more nuanced and multi-dimensional perspective; a wider and more inclusive area of analysis can even help inform and improve governance and policy (Davis, 2017). Inferring from preliminary findings as mentioned in the introduction (section 1), one such perspective of informality is that which is rooted in the social realm. McFarlane (2012) in his paper says that a social understanding of informality – one that is driven by cultural and historical context, and social power dynamics, is highly understudied. This “understudied” social perspective of informality is the knowledge gap this thesis attempts to explore.

1.3. Roadmap

The next section of the thesis will discuss the theoretical framework that will be employed for the analysis of this thesis’ findings, and specific research questions will then be formulated driven by context and theory. Section 4 will elaborate upon the methodologies used for data collection and how they were executed. In section 5, the findings of this thesis will be presented. Thereafter, the discussion section will discuss comprehensively the findings of the thesis employing the chosen analytical lens, and also reflect upon the components of this thesis. Lastly, the thesis ends with the conclusion section with future scope for research and recommendations.

2. Theoretical Framework

To gain a sociological understanding of informality, Social Practice Theory (SPT), along with ideas borrowed from Structuration Theory (ST), guide the analysis of this master's thesis. This section provides a description of the theories, their relevance to the overarching thesis, and how they will be used for analysis in later sections.

SPT posits that social life is governed by dynamic “practices” of individuals, groups, and societies, which develop specific patterns overtime. These practices are collectively shaped via the consensus of individuals, groups, or societies partaking in them, as well as other existent social norms (Schatzki 2002, Waarde 2005), and are therefore highly contextual. In this thesis, these “practices” are the informalities or informal activities/ practices performed, and an attempt is made to understand how the aforementioned social factors and interactions between them influence these informal practices. There are studies stating that informal practices are often influenced by the meanings their practitioners attach to them and to the interpersonal relations and interactions that are part of the practice, rather than by economic gains (Alacovska, 2018), while other studies emphasize the roles of social power and interactions (Peterson et al., 2010), lived experiences (Gandhi, 2016), and historical setting (Ziv, 2022) in dictating the existence of informality. But what *is* a practice? Spaargaren and peers (2016) define social practices as “*shared, routinized, ordinary ways of doings and sayings, enacted by knowledgeable and capable human agents who – while interacting with the material elements that co-constitute the practice – know what to do next in a non-discursive, practical manner*”.

However, Social Practice Theory (SPT) is not one homogenous or stand-alone theory (Schatzki, 2002), but a collection of many approaches and ideations that lay unified focus on social practices. An underlying theme across SPTs is to understand the relationship between structure and agency (Browne, 2015; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002; Shove, 2010; Shove et al., 2012). In doing so, it acknowledges that both individuals and social structures work in tandem to allow a practice to persist spatially and temporally. Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu are accredited as founders of this conceptualization of the structure-theory relationship, which is considered a key theme in various social theories (King, 2004). This conceptualization, by itself, is also often referred to as Structuration Theory. While Social Practice Theory (SPT) and Structuration Theory (ST) are separate social theories, they align on their idea that social structures and human agency are paramount in shaping social practices. SPT even borrows from Giddens's exploration of the interplay between structure and agency according to structuration, and hence in this theoretical framework elements of ST are borrowed, specifically to analyze this interplay in the context of informality.

Another ideation of SPT is provided by Shove and peers (2012). Their work theorizes that social practices, on a micro level, consist of 3 components: materials, competencies, and meanings, while on a larger scale, practices are intertwined with other practices. This holds relevance in the concepts of “zooming in” to and “zooming out of” practices – which is discussed later in this section.

SPT is ascertained as the theoretical framework due to four reasons. First and foremost, from preliminary findings in section 1.1.1., informality has been viewed as a performative concept in existent literature, which by extension allows it to be seen as a practice (Muller, 2017), since (i) both performativity and social practices are affected by social norms and context, and (ii) both concepts emphasize the role of reiteration of activities over time as the factor influencing our social realities. While performativity focuses on repetition and social reproduction of norms and habits overtime, SPT does so in addition to emphasis on or regard for the structure-agency interplay. Thus, SPT allows for a more holistic approach to understanding informality on both a micro and macro level. Secondly, in

upcoming studies informality is said to be highly contextual, dynamic, and rooted in history and culture (Ledeneva, 20018; Basel Institute of Governance). Similarly, social practices have history and are situated historically and spatially (Nicolini, 2009), thus enabling a parallel to be drawn between the two. SPT will allow informality to be placed in a wider context of everyday life and to study how activities are performed and shaped through dynamic social influences, especially in the case of specific instances of informalities present in South African food systems. It contends the economic or business-oriented conceptualizations of informality, wherein it is universally regarded only as a mode (of production or consumption) to be used for its contributions or dismissed for its illegitimacy; variations in the practice are left unattended as outliers. In contrast, an analysis relying on SPT, is capable of revealing and acknowledging informality as a response to sociological factors which may shape different dimensions of social practices differently. Thirdly, seeing as SPT, along with ST, balances the consideration of structure and agency, it will prove to be a holistic tool in studying the interplay between individual or group agency (e.g., of individuals partaking in informal activities) and the structure of social institutions (e.g., the influence of formal entities which exclude informalities in frameworks) in understanding informality. And lastly, a shift in perspective by highlighting social factors and their roles in the emergence, persistence, and therefore even transformations of informalities, may reveal novel insights, delivering interpretations for academia and policy.

For the purpose of analysis, the findings of this thesis will be discussed in light of two things: (i) the interplay between structure and agency; and (ii) zooming into and zooming out of practices. The structure-agency interplay can help shed light on the sociological interactions shaping informality on a macro level, while zooming in and out can help to look at other social factors that shape specific informal practices (especially in the instances in the context of informal food markets in South Africa) on a micro level. The two are elaborated upon in the following paragraphs.

To understand and analyze the structure-agency interplay, this thesis borrows from Giddens' works. Giddens (1984) concludes that the dynamic relationship between the two highly impact social practices. He states (Giddens, 1979) that structure comprises rules as well as resources, which actors borrow from or abide by in regulating their practices. Following this, any system that informs informal practices in the context of this thesis – rules and regulations, resources, socio-cultural norms, will be recognised as “structures” in the analysis of this thesis. Agency on the other hand is vaguely defined by Giddens (1979) as the situation in which the actor could have “acted differently”. Following from this outlook, circumstances wherein actors have the ability to make a choice and intentionally act upon it will be recognized as “agency”. Giddens mentions a “circularity” which exists between the 2 concepts – wherein actors draw upon or abide by structures, and the action, which is the outcome of this, displays agency (Giddens, 1984). By Giddens' Structuration Theory, this process is what “maintains and produces” social structures over time through the performative actions of individuals (Fuchs, 2003). This circularity and its iterated reproduction lead to the emergence of social practices.

While exploring the sociological nature of informality, an analysis of social structure allows to understand how social norms, contexts, and institutions interact and help shape informal practices, in the presence of individual and societal agency. When analysing the instances of informal practices in informal food markets in South Africa, this aspect helps recognize structure and agency based on real-life empirical evidence, adding further support to the thesis and its findings.

For the next part, Nicolini’s (2012) concepts of (i) “zooming in” – which follows variations within a single practice and (ii) “zooming out” – which follows connections between practices, are primarily relied upon.

For zooming in, recognized social practices will be analysed by breaking it down to its 3 components as suggested by Shove and peers (2012): *material* (things, technologies, infrastructure), *competence* (knowledge, skills), and *meaning* (symbolism). This model of zooming in is used because Nicolini (2012) himself suggested “zooming in” by considering the above three components. Additionally, it is the most commonly used model used in social studies for “zooming in”. These elements or components show the links that exist within a certain practice and thus zooming in explains internal variations within a practice. A pictorial representation of zooming in is presented in Fig.1.a below.

While zooming out, connections between the recognized informal practices and other relevant practices will be ventured in the form of – complex of practices (co-dependent practices), bundles of practices (loosely related practices), and nexus of practices (seemingly unrelated practices that lie at the intersection of many practices). Nicolini (2009) suggests different ways to zoom out. For the purpose of this thesis, following the relationships among practices is the one deemed most suitable. These practices can exist within food systems (e.g., distribution processes, production processes, etc.) or outside of it, as well as within informal practices or outside of it. Zooming out provides external context to a practice, allowing us to observe links between different practices. A pictorial representation of zooming out is presented in Fig.1.b below.

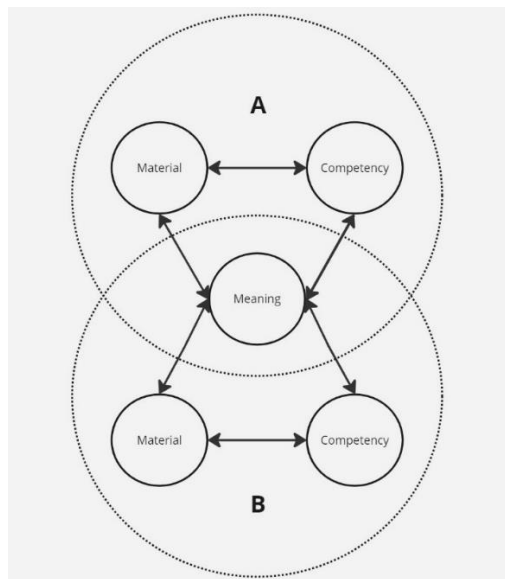
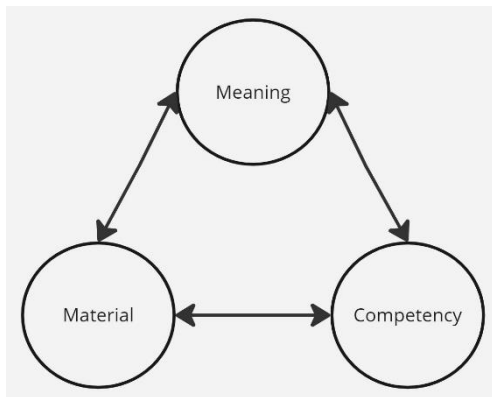


Figure 1.a. (Left) Zooming into a practice and its elements

Figure 1.b. (Right) Zooming out of two practices, A & B, sharing a common “meaning”

(source: created by author on Miro based on Nicolini’s (2012) concepts of social practice)

The organic creation or breakdown of “links” within and between practices reflect the dynamic nature of social practices and lead to social transformations (Shove et al., 2012). In Fig.1.a, and 1.2, the arrows between the elements depict the said “links”. One may also strategically alter these links to induce desired transformations. This may be relevant in making further research and policy recommendations later in the thesis.

Hereon, it is beneficial to keep in mind that since informality is being viewed as a performative concept or as a social practice, the words “informality” and “informal practices” may be used interchangeably. Similarly, it is the case for “formality” and “formal practices”.

3. Research Aim & Scope

3.1. Objective & Research Questions

The objective of this academic master’s thesis is therefore to recognise and understand the sociological nature of informality through the lens of social practice theory (SPT). This “sociological understanding” will be gained by exploring social factors and social interactions that affect informality. To extend this understanding beyond the theoretical, a connection between informality and food systems in South Africa is made. This aspect of the thesis attempts to solidify the understanding of informality gained in a practical setting. A parallel is thus drawn between theoretical discussions and real-life practices.

Informed by the background and context provided in section 1 and the theoretical framework option for in section 2, the following research questions were formulated to achieve the aforementioned research objective:

RQ1. What are the prominent sociological factors and interactions that shape informality according to current academic literature?

RQ2. How do instances of informal practices observed food markets in South Africa relate to the findings of the first research question?

3.2. Scope

It is important to note that the scope of this research is limited to a sociological understanding of informality, driven by the above research objective and questions. While as discussed in the introduction, informality is often colloquially used as a replaceable term for illegal, corrupt, or unofficial activities, the scope does not delve into the intricacies and legalities of this. The scope also does not try to venture into developmental or economic studies of informality discussing labour, economic contributions of informal sectors to national economies, etc. The goal is not to discredit these views, but to delineate the lesser explored sociological nature of informality. Of course, socio-economic relations will not be left out, but it may prove difficult to completely include all relevant studies since some may get filtered out due to filtering out economics.

Lastly, the scope of the research for the second research question (RQ2) is limited to recognizing instances of informalities in the informal food markets of South Africa – this does not entail an exhaustive list of all such informalities. The research question aims to generate illustrations to support the findings of RQ1. How this will be attained is explained in the next section.

4. Methodology

This thesis aims to answer its two research questions using two different methods. For the first question (RQ1) – “*What are the prominent sociological factors and interactions that shape informality according to current academic literature?*”, a systematic literature review (SLR) is conducted to gain an overarching sociological understanding of informality. A systematic literature review attempts to recognize, evaluate, and put together empirical literature that answers given research questions based on predetermined criteria (Bero, 2017). Based on the research question, the criteria for the SLR will be defined in sub-section 3.1.2. Employing such a methodology serves to advance and enrich existent academic knowledge and implore further development of theory (Fisch and Block, 2018) while also helping in identifying gaps in current research or professions to help direct efforts towards it in the future (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). As highlighted in the introduction section, the sociological perspective of informality remains underexplored. The findings of this SLR may help in furthering the pursuit of a sociological understanding of informality in academia, while also allowing policy and governance to borrow from these findings. The processes involved in an SLR are scientific and induce transparency (Huang et al., 2017), and will be elaborated upon in sub-section 3.1. For the second research question (RQ2) – “*What are some prominent informalities observed in food systems in South Africa and how do they relate to the findings of the first research question?*”, a scoping literature review (ScLR) is conducted. This question aims to support the previous research question with examples of informalities as observed in food systems in South Africa. Scoping reviews can be utilized when attempting to identify the types of data available regarding a certain topic or field or to map shared evidence in a certain topic or field (Munn et al., 2018). A scoping review also differs from an SLR in the sense that it does not aim to provide a structured synthesis of all findings from the selected literature but only aims to provide an outline of the studies found and selected or an overarching description of the findings (Pham et al., 2014). Hence, it was seen as a fitting secondary data collection method to *support* the findings from the first research question. It is important to note that the research question does not aim to generate an exhaustive list of literatures to understand a large array of informalities observed in food systems in South Africa, but only aims to complement the SLR on the sociological understanding of informalities by providing illustrations from a selected geographical area. For this reason, the search is conducted on a smaller scale. The empirical examples found through this question thus aim to support the theoretical findings of the former. The ScLR will help enrich the analysis of the SLR on informality. This two-step approach of relating theory to real life illustrations was used to generate a comprehensive as well as robust examination of the sociological side of informality.

Lastly, the findings of both questions have been qualitatively analyzed from a social practice perspective as discussed in section 2. The results of the reviews are presented in conjecture in section 5 and analyzed in discussed in section 6.

The following sub-sections elaborate upon the two methods in further detail.

4.1. Systematic Literature Review

In accordance with Khan et al.’s (2003) recommended 5-step method for conducting systematic literature reviews and the PRSIMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Moher et al. 2015), the following 5-step method was adapted in this master’s thesis:

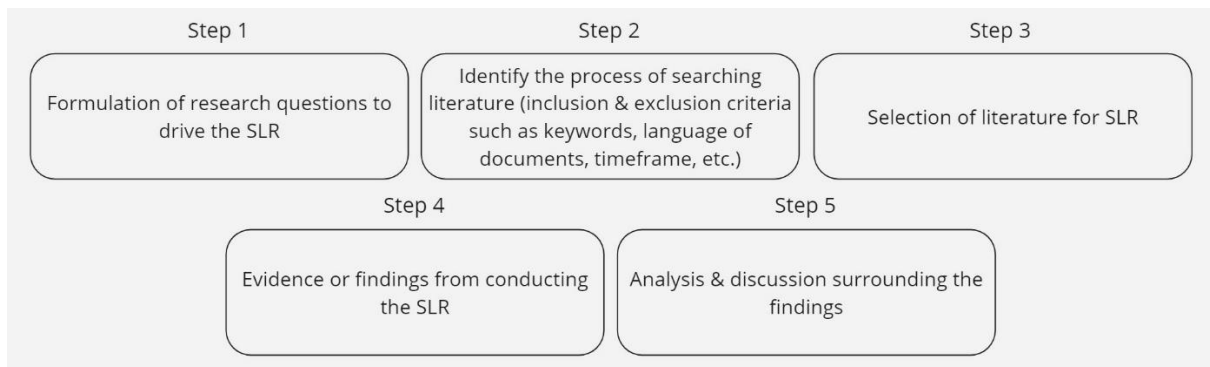


Figure. 2. Flowchart of steps involved in conducting the SLR (source: created by author on Miro based on Moher & peer's (2015) guidelines)

For step 1, the research question driving this SLR has been previously defined as “What are the prominent sociological factors and interactions that shape informality according to current academic literature?”. For step 2 in section 4.1.1., the search strategy, i.e., the sources or databases used for data collection, inclusion & exclusion criteria, and search yields & queries are discussed below in this section. Figure 3. and Table 1. show the brief process of arriving at the selected literature and the list of selected literatures, respectively. Lastly, steps 4 & 5 are reflected in the results and discussion sections of this thesis – sections 5 and 6.

4.1.1. Search Strategy

Data Bases

Literature for the systematic literature review was drawn from three online bibliographic databases – Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Searches were conducted based on certain inclusion/exclusion criteria and screened to determine relevance.

Inclusion Criteria

The keyword of primary relevance to the search was “informality.” On all 3 databases, an attempt was also made to scope documents using the word “informal” which yielded results pertaining to informal economies/ sectors, and their impacts on growth, labour markets, and other related concepts. A preliminary title & abstract screening of up to 10 pages showed the majority of results to be pertaining to the economic and financial dimensions and analysing micro and macro implications in the same fields. This largely diverged from the objective of the thesis – to delve into understanding the concept of informality and how it is *understood* or *conceptualized* in existent literature. The use of the term “informality” yielded relatively favourable results. Hence the term was chosen as the preferred keyword for the thesis. Next, the search for keywords were limited to the title alone, and not extended to abstract and keywords. This is because: (1) Studies (Mateen et al.2013) suggest that screening for SLRs based on titles may be a more effective approach; and (2) It was noted that in various abstracts, the term was used in passing in a colloquial sense, bearing little relevance to the overarching scope of the document. A similar problem was noted when screening documents with “informality” as a

keyword – wherein it was used synonymously to words/phrases such as unregulated, illegal, or rural activities. This already creates a bias in the review since the word is being ascribed a negative connotation. The word “informality” has also been used in a variety of different contexts, not always related to each other, and sometimes even conflicting in nature (Routh 2011; Kanbur et al. 2006). On the other hand, documents with “informality” in the title primarily centred around the topic at hand while introducing and defining the word in its contents to remove ambiguity.

Another important addition to the criteria section is that filters were used wherever available with regards to the subject area of the yields. Scopus and Web of Science, for example, have exhaustive lists of subject areas to aid in refining the resultant yields further. Filters of the subject area of “sociology” and other closely related subject areas were used strategically. This was done to better align the results to the focus of the thesis and eliminate noise in the form of other irrelevant studies which would have to be eliminated during step 3 (screening and selection of literature) of PRISMA anyway. Narrowing down the subject area also helps in producing better results and hence a better analysis, since the context of the thesis is already accounted for in the initial stages. Lastly, the filters help optimize time in a manually screened systematic literature review.

The time-period for the short-listed literature was capped between 2012-2022, to only consider relevant and state-of-the-art literature. Lastly, only documents drafted completely in English were taken into consideration, considering my proficiency in that language alone.

Additionally, the kind of documents taken into consideration were peer reviewed journal articles, relevant books and book chapters, grey literature, and review articles.

The enlisted criteria above are the important general inclusion criteria used in the SLR. Other criteria specific to individual databases or individual data queries will be listed under their respective sub-sections below.

Search Queries & Yields

Scopus

On Scopus the word “informality” was used as the criterion to conduct the search and the word was searched within the article title. Articles between the years 2012 to 2022 were considered to ensure that the reviewed literature was state-of-the-art. Further, with the use of the filters available, the subject area was limited to “social sciences” and “arts and humanities”. Within the delivered results, the exact keyword of interest was set to “informality”. Lastly, only English documents were considered.

The customizations resulted in the final search query being *TITLE (informality) AND PUBYEAR > 2011 AND PUBYEAR < 2023 AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , “SOCI”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , “ARTS”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , “Informality”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , “English”))*.

The Scopus query yielded 228 results. A preliminary abstract screening showed 61 of the documents to be unrelated or very vaguely related to “informality”, while 75 were economic analyses of informal activities and/ or its impact on different sectors, or countries (a large body of articles provided statistical data regarding the prevalence of informality, with little to no discussion about the nature or cause of the phenomenon). The 92 remaining articles underwent complete document-text screening. Of these, 30 were deemed to be relevant to understanding informality in a sociological context to various degrees.

Web of Science

On Web of Science too, the word “informality” was used as the criterion to conduct the search and the word was searched within the article title. Articles between the years 2012 to 2022 were considered to ensure that the reviewed literature was state-of-the-art. Further, with the use of the filters available, the subject area was limited to “sociology”, “humanities multidisciplinary”, “cultural studies” and “social sciences”. Lastly, only English documents were considered.

The customizations resulted in the final search query being *informality (Title) and English (Languages) and Sociology or Humanities Multidisciplinary or Cultural Studies or Social Sciences Interdisciplinary (Web of Science Categories)*

Timespan: 2012-01-01 to 2022-01-01 (Publication Date)

The search yielded 45 results. Of these 6 were book reviews, 2 were repeats of an unrelated article, another was focused on gender studies with the word used colloquially. 3 documents were unavailable online or could not be accessed. 21 articles underwent abstract screenings and were very vaguely related to the topic at hand. The remaining 12 articles underwent thorough document-text screening. All were deemed relevant to this SLR and selected for the thesis, of which one coincided with the documents selected in the Scopus search.

Google Scholar

Finally, on Google Scholar, conducting a search based on the word “informality” being in the title , between the years 2012-2022, yielded 3,530 results. A preliminary scan of the first 10 pages showed little relevance of the documents to exploring informality and the word was often used colloquially. To narrow down the searches an advanced search was conducted to include at least one of the following words in the title: “understanding”, “concept” or “defining” to attempt to yield results where informality is the central topic of the literature. The aim is to generate results in which an understanding of informality or looking into the concept of informality or delving into its definition is the central focus.

The customizations resulted In the final search query being *allintitle: informality understanding OR concept OR defining*.

The search on Google Scholar yielded 75 results. Of this, 3 results discussed “digital informality”, 8 results had a focus on analyzing & calculating levels of informal labor, 6 results provided statistical data enumerating the presence of informality with little to no discussion surrounding the phenomenon – all not within the scope of this step of the thesis. 15 articles were inaccessible and/or could not be retrieved. 5 documents were in a language other than English. 2 documents were drafts. The remaining 36 articles underwent document-text screening. Of these, 5 were selected, while 4 articles coincided with the selected findings on Scopus.

4.1.2. Summary of Selected Literature

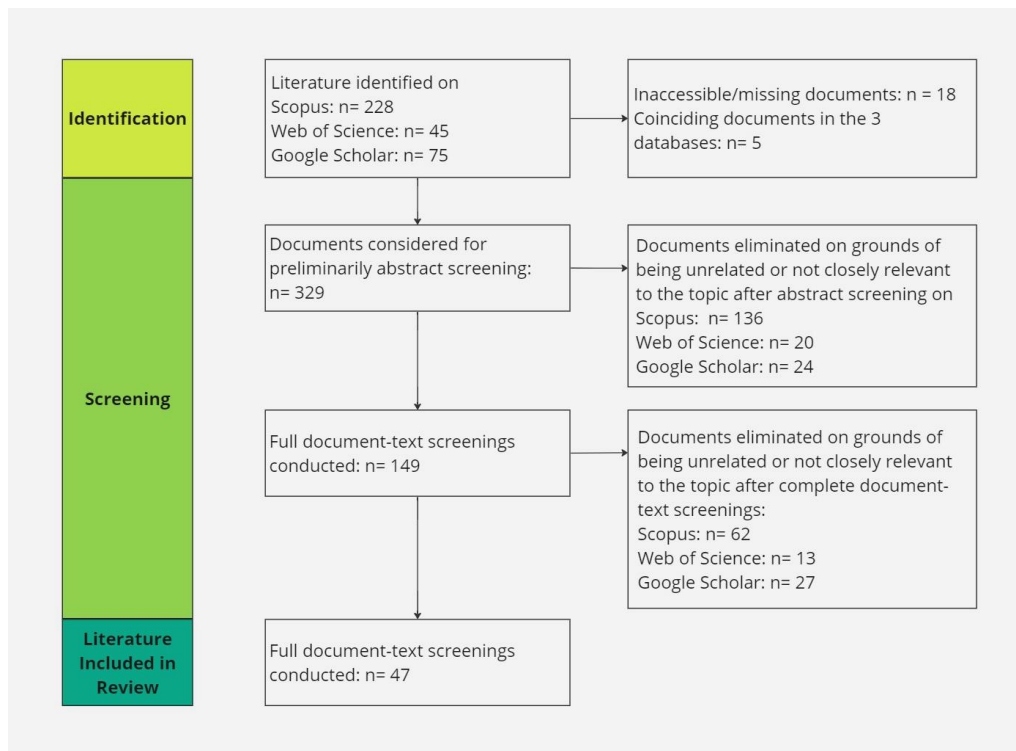


Figure 3. Summarizing SLR using PRISMA flow diagram (source: created by author on Miro)

Fig 3. summarizes the method selection process used in this step. The literature selected for this step is enlisted in the table below in Table 1:

Author (s)	Year	Title
Klaus Buchenau, Barbara Frey, Jovana Jović, Miloš Lecić, Damjan Matković and Vasile Mihai Olaru	2022	Vitamin Sea against Corruption: Informality and Corruption through the Interdisciplinary Lens
Tali Ziv	2022	The Practice of Informality: Hustling, Anticipating And Refusing in The Post-Industrial City
Muhammad Abid, Joel Bothello, Shoaib Ul-Haq and Alireza Ahmadsimab	2022	The Morality of Informality: Exploring binary oppositions in counterfeit markets
Abel Polese, Gian Marco Moisé, Talshyn Tokyzhanova, Tommaso Aguzzi, Tanel Kerikmae, Ainoura Sagynbaeva, Arnis Sauka and Oleksandra Seliverstova	2022	Informality versus shadow economy: reflecting on the first results of a manager’s survey in Kyrgyzstan

Abel Polese	2021	What is Informality? (mapping) “The Art of Bypassing the State” in Eurasian Spaces – and beyond
Constance Gordon, Kyle Byron	2021	Sweeping the city: infrastructure, informality, and the politics of maintenance
Francoise Montambeault, Annabelle Dias Felix	2021	When Informality Matters: Participatory Security Reform and Mechanisms of Social Embeddedness in Nezahualcoyotl, Mexico
Nancy H Kwak	2021	Urban informality in the global north: A view from Los Angeles
Vanessa Boanada Fuchs and Anthony Boanada-Fuchs	2021	Understanding Informality Towards a Multi-Dimensional Understanding of the Concept
Bhaskar Jyoti Neoga and Bimal Kishore Sahoo	2021	Defining and Measuring Informality in India
Sven Horak, Fida Afiouni, Yanjie Bian, and Alena Ledeneva	2020	Informal Networks: Dark Sides, Bright Sides, and Unexplored Dimensions
Andreaa Rigon, Juliana Walker and Braima Koroma	2020	Beyond formal and informal: Understanding urban informalities from Freetown
Lela Rekhviashvili and Wladimir Sgibnev	2020	Theorising informality and social embeddedness for the study of informal transport. Lessons from the marshrutka mobility phenomenon
Rune Steenberg	2020	The formal side of informality: non-state trading practices and local Uyghur ethnography
Edgar Pieterse, Gareth Haysom and Jonathan Crush	2020	Hungry cities partnership: informality, inclusive growth, and food security in cities of the global south – final project report – period May 2015 – August 2020
Byoung-Hoon Lee, Sarah Swider, Chris Tilly	2020	Informality in action: A relational look at informal work
Jen Snowball, Aviwe Mapuma	2020	Creative industries micro-enterprises and informality: a case study of the Shweshwe sewing industry in South Africa

Melanie Lombard	2019	Informality as Structure or Agency? Exploring Shed Housing in the UK as Informal Practice
Jenny Mbaye and Cecilia Dinardi	2019	Ins and outs of the cultural polis: Informality, Culture, and Governance in the Global South
Predraga Cvetičanin, Misha Popovikj and Miloš Jovanović	2019	Informality in the Western Balkans: a culture, a contextual rational choice, or both?
Aysegul Can	2019	Informality and affordability: Approaches from the global south and opportunities for the global North
Rivke Jaffe and Martijn Koster	2019	The Myth of Formality in the Global North: Informality-as-Innovation in Dutch Governance
Ryan Thomas Devlin	2019	A focus on needs: toward a more nuanced understanding of inequality and urban informality in the global North
Peter N. Sterns	2019	Informality: A Window on Contemporary Emotions History
Cecilia Dinardi	2019	Creativity, informality, and cultural work in Rio de Janeiro's favelas
Faiza Moatasim	2018	Informality Materialised: Long-term Temporariness as a Mode of Informal Urbanism
Abel Polese, Borbála Kovács & David Jancsics	2018	Informality 'in spite of' or 'beyond' the state: some evidence from Hungary and Romania
Adam M. Auerbach, Adrienne LeBas, Alison E. Post, and Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro	2018	State, Society, and Informality in Cities of the Global South
Raul P. Lejano and Corinna Del Bianco	2018	The logic of informality: Pattern and process in a São Paulo favela
Michael West Mehaffy and Tigran Haas	2018	Informality in the new urban agenda: A "new paradigm?"

Abel Polese	2018	Informality and policy in the making: Four flavours to explain the essence of informality
Deepanshu Mohan, Richa Sekhani, and Arun Kumar Kaushik	2018	On the Ways of Knowing and Understanding Informality
Rodolfo	2018	Informality, Class Structure, and Class Identity in Contemporary Argentina
Ravi Kanbur	2017	Informality: Causes, consequences, and policy responses
Daine E. Davis	2017	Informality and state theory: Some concluding remarks
Seth Schindler	2017	Beyond a state-centric approach to urban informality: Interactions between Delhi's middle class and the informal service sector
Silvia Pasquetti, Giovanni Picker	2017	Urban informality and confinement: Toward a relational framework
Christian G. Haid	2017	The Janus face of urban governance: State, informality, and ambiguity in Berlin
Frank I. Mueller	2017	Urban informality as a signifier: Performing urban reordering in suburban Rio de Janeiro
Abel Polese and Lela Rekhviashvili	2017	Introduction: Informality and power in the South Caucasus
Rosilawati Zainol, Luiza FL Sarayed-Din and Faizah Ahmad	2017	Exploring informality in a global south city: Issues of power and urban development in Kuala Lumpur
Rupert Hodder	2016	Global South and North: Why Informality Matters
Rune Steenberg	2016	The art of not seeing like a state. On the ideology of "informality"

Quentin Batreau, Francois Bonnet	2016	Managed Informality: Regulating Street Vendors in Bangkok
Yosef Jabareen	2014	“Do it yourself” as an Informal Mode of Space Production: Conceptualizing Informality
Andrea Varriale	2014	Informal Practices, Formal Regulations. Understanding Informality as Spatial Dialectics
Colin McFarlane	2012	Rethinking Informality: Politics, Crisis, and The City

Table 1. List of literatures considered for the SLR

4.2. Scoping Literature Review

4.2.1. Search Strategy

Literature for the scoping literature review was drawn from the online bibliographic database – Scopus. The search was limited to one database since the aim of the research question is not to produce an exhaustive list of informalities in food practices as observed in South Africa, but to draw instances of informalities to complement the findings in the systematic literature review conducted prior to this. Searches were conducted based on certain inclusion/exclusion criteria and screened to determine relevance. Once selected, the findings of the review were analysed alongside the analysis of the systematic literature review.

Criteria

The keywords of primary relevance to the search were “informal” or any variation of the word with suffixes, “food” and some variations of the word with added words as mentioned in the next section, and “South Africa”. The search for keywords were limited to title, abstract, and keywords as in the SLR. Additionally, the kind of documents taken into consideration were peer reviewed journal articles, relevant books and book chapters, grey literature, and review articles. The time-period for the review was set between 2012-2022 to ensure state-of-art literature. And lastly, documents were only selected if written completely in English.

Search Queries & Yields

On Scopus, the search query used was:

TITLE-ABS-KEY (informal* AND (“food practices” OR “food sector” OR “food vendor*” OR “street vendors” OR “food market”) AND “South Africa*”) AND PUBYEAR > 2011 AND PUBYEAR < 2023 AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , “English”))

The Scopus query yielded 41 results. A preliminary screening of all the titles showed 6 of the documents studying respiratory diseases and other nutrition and health related correlations in the informal food sector of African countries, which is not within the scope of thesis. In addition, 3 documents were duplicates of a single scientific paper (Horwood et al. 2020), which was considered in the literature review. 2 documents were not accessible online (Bhoola et al. 2020; Battersby et al. 2016). A total of 11 articles were selected for scoping for the review in this step.

3.2.2. Summary of Selected Literature

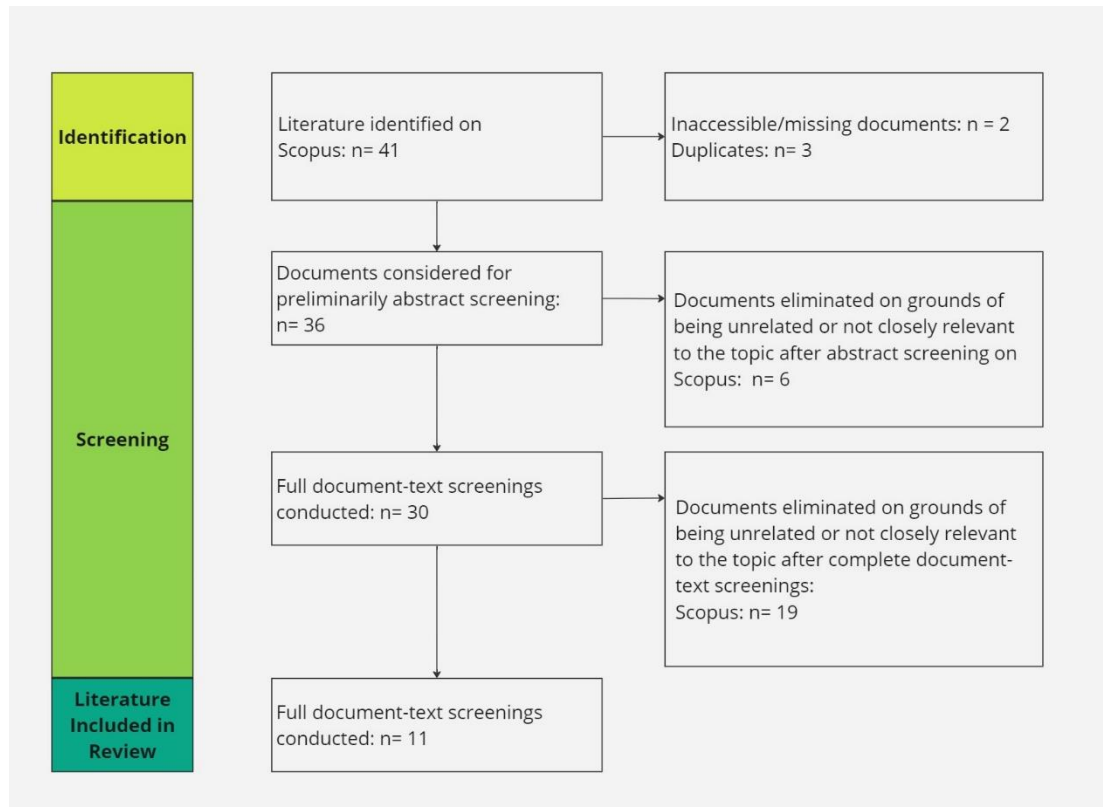


Figure 4. Summarizing SCLR using PRISMA flow diagram (source: created by author on Miro)

Fig 4. summarizes the method selection process used in this step. The literature selected for this step is enlisted in the table below in Table 2:

Author (s)	Year	Title
Teurai Rwafa-Ponela, Susan Goldstein, Petronell Kruger, Agnes Erzse, Safura Abdool Karim, and Karen Hofman	2022	Urban Informal Food Traders: A Rapid Qualitative Study of COVID-19 Lockdown Measures in South Africa

Sikhulumile Sinyolo, Peter Jacobs, Admire Nyamwanza and Matume Maila	2022	Women informal food traders during COVID-19: A South African case study
Caroline Skinner and Vanessa Watson	2021	Planning and informal food traders under COVID-19: The South African case
Camilla Adelle, Florian Kroll, Bruno Losch, and Tristan Görgens	2021	Fostering communities of practice for improved food democracy: Experiences and learning from South Africa
B. Masuku, and O. Nzewi	2021	The South African Informal Sector's Socio-Economic Exclusion from Basic Service Provisions: A Critique of Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality's Approach to the Informal Sector
Marc C.A. Wegerif	2020	"Informal" food traders and food security: experiences from the Covid-19 response in South Africa Open Access
Godfrey Tawodzera	2019	The Nature and Operations of Informal Food Vendors in Cape Town
Jonathan Crush and Graeme Young	2019	Resituating Africa's Urban Informal Food Sector
Leif Petersen and Andrew Charman	2018	The role of family in the township informal economy of food and drink in KwaMashu, South Africa
Leif M Petersen, Andrew JE Charman, and Florian J Kroll	2017	Trade dynamics in Cape Town township informal foodservice—a qualitative and supply chain study
M. A. Mathaulula, Joseph Francis and Marizvikuru Mwale	2016	Perceived Solutions to Constraints to Small-scale Food Vending in a Growing Town in Limpopo Province of South Africa

Table 2. List of literatures considered for the SCLR

5. Results

This section presents the findings of the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and the Scoping Literature Review (ScLR). The results are presented in conjunction since the findings of the ScLR are aimed at supporting and better illustrating those of the SLR. For this purpose, the findings of the SLR are followed by parallel illustrations recognized through the ScLR wherever present or relevant. The findings are presented bearing in mind the two dimensions described in the theoretical framework of the thesis: (i) the structure-agency interplay shaping informality, and (ii) zooming in & zooming out of informal practices. It is important to know that the results presented under each of the two dimensions may have bearings in the other as well – this will be addressed if needed in section 6. In this section, the results are presented with preliminary connections made to social practice theory (SPT), while the next Discussion section (section 6) will reflect upon the results more analytically.

The Structure-Agency Interplay

One of the conceptualizations of informality discussed by Haid (2017) is that of informality “as a product of the state”. In this, there is an implication of action as well as inaction on behalf of the state, with regards to informal social practices, as being an *enabler* of informality. In such a case, overregulation or action may be viewed as a method to curb the agency of practitioners, while underregulation/ no regulation or inaction may be viewed either in the light of allowing informality to flourish or be perceived as a “void”. In either case, informality, in a circular fashion, can both be seen as the object to be regulated by state intervention, as well as the product resulting from said intervention. The structures and functions of informality and formality are thus intricately linked and coexist and the two are not merely the opposite of one another. This view is upheld by various authors (Polese, 2021; Bonada-Fuchs et al., 2021; Buchenau, 2022; Polese 2018; Steenberg, 2020; Elbert, 2017). Following from Haid’s (2017) claim about state action & inaction or overregulation & underregulation, the systematic literature review yields two sets of results in the domain of the structure-agency interplay – (i) authors discussing the collaboration between the formal and the informal (the two *supplementing* each other), and (ii) authors discussing the role played by informality in filling in perceived gaps or shortcomings of the state or other authorities in charge (the two *complementing* each other).

When looking at the coexistence of the formal and the informal in the form of collaboration – i.e., where the two do not inhibit each other, but work in tandem – it is found from literature (Mbaye et al., 2019; Moatasim, 2018; Le et al., 2020) that often informality is present *within* formal institutions. Mbaye and peers (2019) give the example of the presence of grass root intervention processes in governmental processes to showcase this. While conducting the scoping literature review (ScLR), for example, informal food acquisition through vendors and from acquaintances was seen to be widespread in Cape Town of South Africa (Petersen et al., 2017a). The authors suggest a large degree of interconnectedness between the informal practitioners and their formal counterparts – such as licensed food sellers or supermarkets – especially since the latter often have better food provisioning and are backed by the state and pass this on to the informal markets (Elbert, 2017). Such an interaction of informality existing within a formal framework (or being allowed to exist) is also made possible since regions in Cape Town are not always accessible by such licensed food sellers or supermarkets, so informal means of mobilizing the provisions are often allowed (Petersen et al. 2017a). There is therefore an understanding that is reached by both sets of individuals to arrive at a mutually beneficial state of coexistence. On the flip side, “formality” is also observed in informal settings and structures.

Ziv (2022) gives the example of market gatherings, where the organization of the market is akin to or based off formal regulatory processes of the same kind (such as in supermarkets, or by licensed sellers). Informality borrowing from formal practices is another view that is recurrent in the reviewed literature (Ziv, 2022; Steenberg, 2020; Rigon et al., 2020; Jabareen, 2014). Moatasim (2018) refers to this derivation or inspiration from formal processes as “nomotropism”. In the ScLR conducted, Adelle (2021) further illustrates this process through Communities of Practice (CoPs) and CoP workshops in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. CoP workshops allow stakeholders of, in this case food systems, to come together and foster discussion and learning from lived experiences of each other and expert knowledge. During the course of the study (Adelle, 2021), one such workshop was organized by scientific experts but attended by different actors – both formal and informal – to get inputs of all stakeholders. CoPs are attended by all members but are not an “official” body. In the case of the CoP in Western Cape Province, the set-up was additionally approved by the municipality/ local government. It is notable that CoPs are well organized workshops and follow the structure of any formal gathering of the same degree would. There may be deviations based on local and societal inclinations, but the idea is the same. concerns and to arrive at ways to deal with food insecurity in the region while being just and inclusive. It is interesting to note that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the CoP used its means and networks around Western Cape to ensure food security was not endangered with the help of governmental bodies as well as local stakeholders who were capable of response. Action was rapid and effective with such a set-up. This was driven by the actors’ understanding of the situation prevalent locally. It follows from this example that informality is built upon the mutual consensus of individuals who participate in it rather than by the state or other governing authorities. Overall, in the above results we see that both formal and informal structures employ formal and informal practices to achieve a shared goal.

Informality may also in the following cases attempt to fill in gaps in formality – (i) when there is a perceived lack of formality in a certain area, or (ii) when there is a perceived lack of efficiency in formality (Polese 2021; Polese et al. 2018; Rigon et al. 2020; Rekhviashvili et al. 2020). Polese and peers (2018) refer to the former as informality “beyond” the state, and the latter as informality “in spite of” the state. The first case provides a sort of “loophole” in the system but is more of a theoretical characteristic, than one with real life instances in literature, and is not largely discussed. In the second case, informalities spring up in places where dwellers feel like the imposed regulations are contrary to their societally accepted norms or that regulations encroach on the rights of said individuals (Polese 2021). Rigon and peers (2020) even suggest that informality often *makes up* for what formal bodies and regulations lack, while Mehaffy and peers (2018) say that the state/authority often *create* constraints which in fact shape and enable informalities to exist and thrive while moving away from formality. This deviates from quintessential economic debates based on rational choice or rational thinking where informality is rooted in the desire to stay out of the purview of formal structures for monetary benefits such as to evade taxes. In this way, there is a dismissal of rational theory as the only way of analyzing informality since it leaves social and cultural factors out – not considering the lived experiences of individuals. This gap or void in formal structures, such as the state or the respective body of official authority, leads to individuals developing ways to regulate themselves based off social and cultural norms as well as historical context (Rekhviashvili et al. 2020). In the food and beverage economy of KwaMashu town in South Africa, as discussed by Petersen et al. (2018b), a large number of participants in food systems are reliant on family bonds to run trade. When members of the town and the food and beverage economy were surveyed, they highlighted the role informality plays in their lives as providing “social protection” and securing employment – two functions which participants regarded as functions of the state but did not believe were being fulfilled in a satisfactory manner.

The two kinds of interaction within the structures mentioned above is depicted pictorially in the following figure (Fig.5):

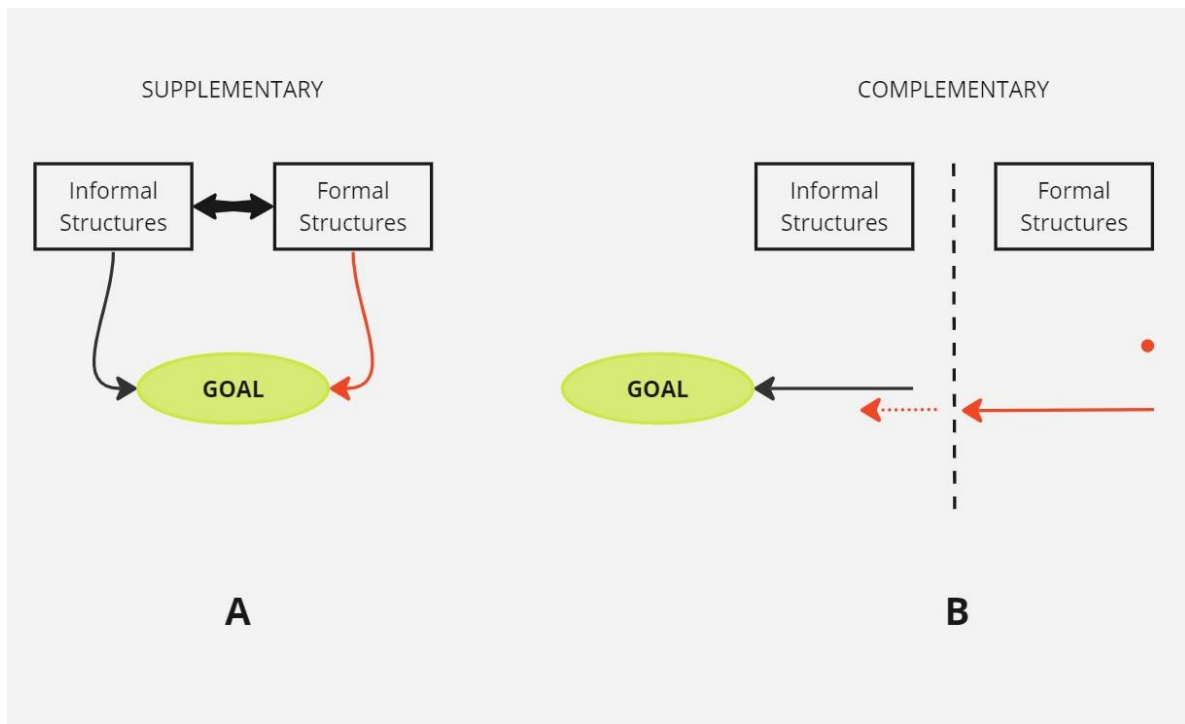


Figure 5. Interactions within social structures. In case of A, the formal and informal structures work towards a common goal (indicated by the black and red arrows), while borrowing from each other (indicated by the bold arrow between the two). On the other hand, in case of B, the formal structure either works towards a goal (indicated by the red solid line) shared with the informal but is perceived as inefficient (indicated by the red dotted line), or there is inaction on behalf of formal structures (indicated by the red dot); the two operate exclusively (indicated by the dashed line in between).

A social phenomenon that been associated with informality is the process of urbanization. Certain authors (Bonada-Fuchs et al. 2021; Lejano et al. 2018; Auerbach et al. 2018; Mehaffy et al, 2018) state that especially in the global south, urbanization is often the leading cause of informality and informality is a key process of urbanization. The urban demography in the global South is often more diverse in terms of beliefs, religions, cultural associations, classes, and ethnicities (Auerbach et al. 2018, p2) which may result in individuals requiring a larger amount of time to acclimatize themselves to a standardized way of living – hence, resulting in resorting to informal practices rooted in their own background. These “beliefs, religions..., ethnicities” are the informal social structures present in urbanization. Urbanization also promotes the need for complicated processes to procure basic goods and services and encourages the state or authorities to indulge in complex bureaucracy (Auerbach et al. 2018, p5; Kuznets 1967, p103); this makes new settlers or even existent ones turn to other simpler and accessible modes of living. The adjustment period resulting from displacement during urbanization may thus lead to this form of “inertia” of wanting to rely on the familiar ways of living and thus using individual and collective agency to engage in informal practices. An example of this is the supermarketization of regions of South Africa (Crush et al., 2019), where the actors having indulged in informal food acquisition practices from informal food vendors overtime want to continue acquiring food from these markets, owing to ease of access, convenience, and first-hand associations with sellers.

Lastly, with regards to the agency of the actors or practitioners of informality, Lee and peers (2020) state that informal practices, in for example employment, may be resorted to for achieving a variety of goals – such as economic stability, securing a social safety net, for convenience and access to flexibility, and more. Going back to the example of Cape Town in South Africa – street food sellers of “spaza shops” (informal vendors) may choose to set up business during busier hours or on busier days to efficiently manage time, and customers can often make requests to get services on a personal capacity (Petersen et al. 2017a). Actors exercise their agency in accordance to local and communal convenience. Though literature does not point towards which goal is more or less prioritized, it is evident that the actors are able to make an intentional choice and hence exercise agency in the participation in informality.

Zooming in & Zooming out

In addition to drawing a parallel between informality and performativity, Muller (2017) in his paper takes the stance that meaning, and value are ascribed to everyday activities and routines amounting to informality. The essence of a practice perspective is present in this work. Many of the literatures reviewed in the SLR shed light on informal practices resulting from meanings, materials, and competencies that the practitioners ascribe, rather than strictly following the structural framework set in stone by formal institutions.

Informal settings and spaces, such as local markets composed of vendors, often have their own set of regulations (Ziv, 2022; Steenberg, 2020; Rigon et al., 2020; Moatasim, 2018; Jabareen, 2014) which stem from a “system of norms” (Bonada-Fuchs et al. 2021) specific to a local context. Examples of such systems, as mentioned in a study by Steenberg (2020) are codified sales and oral contracts based on good will and trust amidst individuals. The mode of engagement in such spaces may therefore very much be formal in terms of well-built regulations and monitoring, as discussed previously as well, while operating outside of written rules laid out by the state or other authorities (Ziv 2022, p3). The regulations in such settings are not dictated by written laws of the state but are most often influenced by local communities, and patterns of social relations observed within close groups (Ziv, 2020; Polese et al., 2015; Ledeneva 2013; Polese et al., 2014; Steenberg, 2016), and sometimes even may even extend to distant relations developed through for example trade (Steenberg, 2020). This form of influence from close as well as distant systems shows a probable connection between different practices. The instance of informal food markets in Cape Town of South Africa mentioned previously is also relevant here. In Cape Town of South Africa, informal food acquisition through vendors and from acquaintances are opted for due to the convenience it offers to both service providers and consumers. Street food sellers of “spaza shops” (informal vendors) may choose to set up business during busier hours or on busier days to efficiently manage time, and customers can often make requests to get services on a personal capacity (Petersen et al. 2017a). In this instance of informally selling food, there is *meaning* vested in the convenience and flexibility offered by partaking in informality. The *material* needed to execute the practice is the food provision, which may be procured formally or informally. Lastly, the *competence* which enables this form of informal vending is the knowledge of local norms and preferences – based on which both consumers and sellers can engage in the practice. In the instances of KwaMashu town and Western Province too, the elements of practice are made up of similar concepts. In KwaMashu, the meanings of “trust” and “reliance” on family are additional since the informal businesses are most often family-run.

On a larger South African context, it is important to note that an important concept which informs decisions and structures, especially in food systems, is the philosophy of “Ubuntu” (Petersen et al. 2018b) – the prioritization of the collective and their welfare over the individual’s needs. This leads to

informality being built around a community, and not just a standalone practice to benefit an individual or one particular unit.

Figure 6 below depicts examples of the elements of engaging in informal practices in food markets in South Africa discussed above.

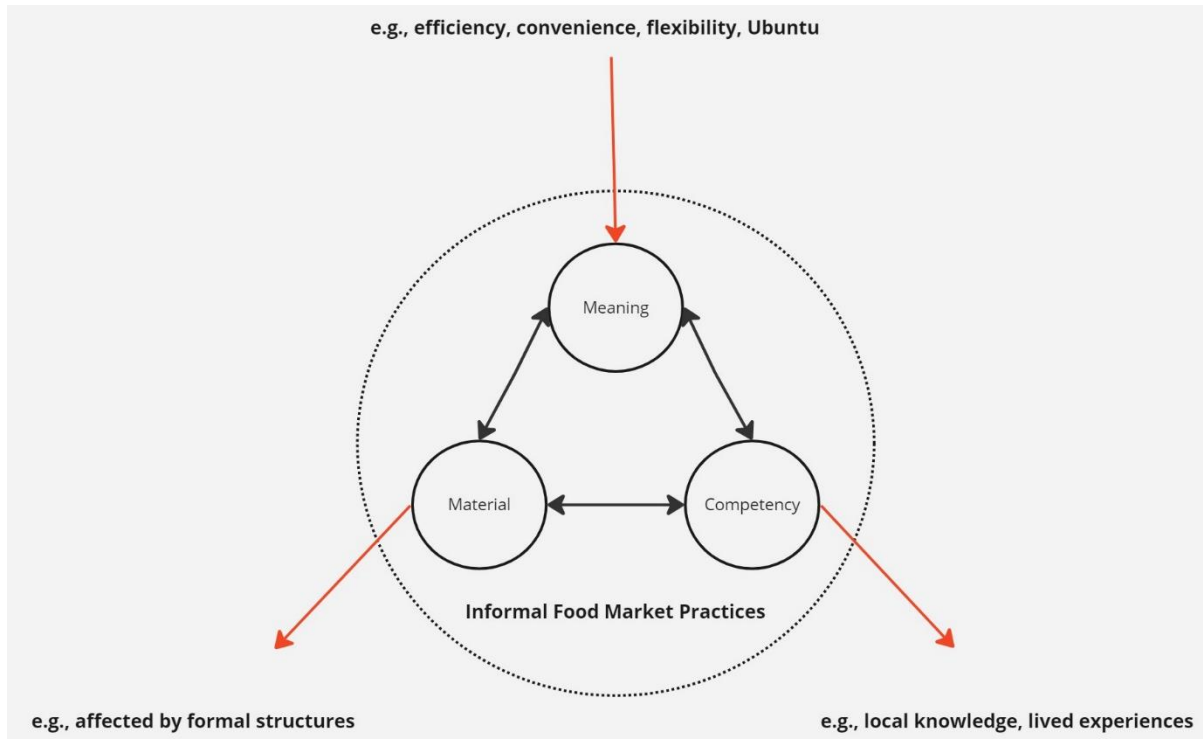


Figure 6. Recognized elements of the informal food market practices in South Africa

Another interesting driver of what informs informality, as highlighted in Abid and peers' work (2022) is the moral justifications of those who partake in the informal practice – whether *they* see it as rational and necessary or not. Buchenau et al. (2022) similarly reflects that the informal practices originating within a society are closely linked to their moral compass or “value system”, which individuals may assign *meaning* to. A perceived gap in formality leads to individuals developing ways to regulate themselves based off social and cultural norms as well as historical context (Rekhviashvili et al. 2020). Such gaps may lead to the belief that straying from the formal status quo *is* right (Polese et al. 2018), resulting in the actors perceiving their regulations as the “right” or the “moral” thing to do. Pieterse and peers (2020, p33) further mentions that “embeddedness” of a practice may enable other related practices. The report makes use of the example of the practice of food vending enabling the practice of financial short-term credit, implying a connection between food practices and financial borrowing practices.

6. Discussion

In this section, we first reflect upon the results of the master's thesis and analyze their key takeaways in relation to social practice theory. Thereafter, we shortly reflect on the theoretical framework and the methodology before closing the section with implications and further scope for research provided by the generated knowledge.

Reflections on Results

The objective of this thesis was to gain a sociological understanding of informality. The results of the reviews conducted above (in section 5) show that informality indeed is a complex concept whose existence is highly embedded in society, driven and shaped by social structures and agency, and can be looked at through the lens of social practice theory. To gain a macroscopic perspective, when looking at the structure-agency interplay that exists within informality the results of the two reviews conducted show that the interactions between formal structures – such as state rules and regulations and provision of economic resources, and informal structures – such as social norms and community networks, play a pivotal role in shaping informality. In cases wherein informality *supplements* formality, i.e., the two work in tandem, informality persists while under partial regulation by formal structures, such as the state or other local authorities. This is reflected in Cape Town of South Africa, where both the informal food vendors and formal food actors, work together to make food accessible to all. This is an important realization since this noticeable trend of traditionally formal structures, enabling and employing informal practices signifies that informality is in fact not merely a transitional phenomenon – as postulated in various economic perspectives. On the other hand, in cases wherein informality *complements* formality, i.e., makes up for the lack of efficient implementation of formality (as perceived by the involved actors), informality falls back on its own structures dictated by socially embedded systems of norms, traditions, and local requirements. The instance of the food and beverage economy of KwaMashu town (Petersen et al. 2018) helps explain this. The individuals participating in this informal economy claim to do so since the state does not ensure their wellbeing sufficiently (in their view), due to which they fend for themselves in ways familiar and efficient to them. Moreover, they include family members in their daily business since they are (1) more trusted and reliant due to close ties, and (2) are well acquainted with the local ways and lived experiences, and hence seen as more apt to collaborate with. Structures familiar to themselves are thus favored.

In both cases of supplementary and complementary co-existence, it is evident that there are invisible forces of push and pull acting within social structures (formal and informal) and between these structures and agency. In the first case the two are balanced, with informal and formal structures existing alongside each other, the agency of the informal actors to partake in their practices is not constrained – albeit monitored or regulated. In the second case, we can see that the agency of the actors takes precedence, when individuals make the intentional choice to engage in informal practices in spite of the formal structure of the state, based on their perception of these said structures lacking “efficiency” or sometimes lacking coherence with their social and local norms.

When zooming into the individual practices in the context of the reviewed South African informal food markets, a trend emerges. The *meaning* is most often associated with efficiency, representation of local community, convenience, or flexibility. A *meaning* common to all of South Africa is also “Ubuntu” or communal welfare, which permeates all realms of day-to-day life. The *competences* prevalent in the reviewed instances are along the lines of local knowledge, lived experiences, skills, and know-how. The *materials* across the regions and practices differ depending on

the requirements but are often helped or constrained by formal structures. These three elements, through their associations and through repeated performances allow the practices to exist and evolve. These are the basic elements of informal practices in the South African informal food markets' context, and locating these not only helps gain a holistic view of why these practices came to be, but also gives us insight into how they may change owing to changes in social norms or in the structures or materials made available to the actors. They can also help inform social transformations. Although it seems that informality will persist over time, transformative changes in how they are regulated or informed may be something to consider in policy and governance. A practice approach to informality and understanding its components may be an effective first step in doing so.

An interesting *meaning* (Abid et al, 2022) that was attached to informality was individuals believing their actions to be rational, moral and right as compared to formal practices. This has potential for further research in the realm of behavioral or sociological studies, in seeing how one's value system or moral compass affects the practices they overtly engage in.

While zooming out, connections between different practices are gauged. Food systems in general consist of various practices such as procurement, distribution, production, selling etc. (Chase et al., 2014). However, not all of these practices were reflected in the instances considered through the scoping literature review. In Cape Town the practice of "selling food" is connected to "procuring food" or in other words, to food distribution. This connection exists as a complex of practices since there is co-dependence between the two – food is only informally sold if acquired (through a mix of formal and/or informal means in this context). Within the same region, Petersen and peers (2018a) mention that due to a lack of access to areas in Cape Town by formal food provisioning bodies, informal means of mobilizing food is deemed acceptable. This implies a connection between "food procurement or provisioning" and "mobility" as a nexus of practices. In the case of KwaMashu town (Petersen et al., 2018b), practices of "selling & buying food from the informal market" are connected to practices of "attaining social security". This is the case since the two practices are not co-dependent, and neither are the situated in the same domain (food vs social security) – they are at an intersection of different practices (Hui et al., 2017) and exert influence on each other across different domains.

Zooming in and zooming out allows for informality to be seen as a function of its social elements, as well locates it within a social canvas with links and relations with other domains.

Overall, the findings of this thesis is telling of the fact that informality is not far removed from society and does not exist in a vacuum – it is fueled and fed by its surroundings and studies and policies dealing with the concept should take this perspective into account.

Reflections on Theoretical Framework

As explained and rationalized in section 2 of this thesis, a social practice theory (SPT) framework was used to analyze the findings of this thesis. This provided valuable insights into a sociological understanding of informality, adding to the existent pool of knowledge through other perspectives surrounding the concept. Consideration of the view presented in this thesis may help look at informality from a more holistic and nuanced standpoint. Borrowing from structuration theory to inform the structure-agency balance component of SPT helped gain more insight into a macroscopic view of informality as well. An aspect that was not part of the thesis' framework but could be employed in future research is the role of power dynamics within the structure-agency relationship.

On the other hand, some limitations of SPT may extend itself to this thesis. One of such limitations is that SPT is not one homogenous theory but consists of propositions and frameworks suggested by various authors. SPT's components are also not widely operationalized. The resultant framework provides less guidance and needs to be built upon based on the understanding of the theories.

Reflections on Methodology

Despite "informality" being a widely used word, it is often used colloquially or in opposing contexts, further leading to ambiguity regarding the term. This led to the search query for the SLR requiring adjustments often, based on trial and error. Additionally, since efforts were made to try and narrow down the scope of the SLR to get results with a sociological focus, it is possible to have missed out on yielding relevant data with other sets of "keywords" – the social complexity surrounding informality is difficult to encapsulate in search queries.

Conducting an SLR helped synthesize and analyze sociological understandings of informality from already existing studies, thus reducing the risk of reproducing already existence ideas, while at the same time allowing the detection of potential gaps.

7. Conclusion

Evidence gathered in this thesis reflects that informality can be seen as an inherently social phenomenon. In answering the first research question "*What are the prominent sociological factors and interactions that shape informality according to current academic literature?*" we arrive at a two-fold answer. Firstly, the interactions within the informal and formal structures as well as the interactions between these structures and the agency of the actors, largely shape as well as enable informality. The domination of one of these "forces" over the other, has a bearing on the informality displayed. Another social phenomenon which largely interacts with informality is the process of urbanization. Urbanization consists of many structures within itself – such as urban spaces (housing & settlements), and economic structures (economic resources), whereas the social structures of urbanization consist of the various demographic groups and communities and their respective sets of norms and networks. Secondly, the thesis also further deconstructed informality in the context of informal food markets in South Africa according to social practice theory and found that they are usually driven by the need for provisions fitting the communal needs, the want for more efficiency in action, and the presence of the factor of "trust". The materials that allow for the practices to thrive are structures of social norms and borrowed structures and resources of formal institutions. The materials aspect is influenced by the structure-agency interplay discussed previously. And lastly, local knowledge and lived experiences usually inform these practices. When zooming out to examine the relationship between practices, we see that besides processes of food systems being linked to each other, practices lying outside of it such as that of mobility or monetary practices also play a role in influencing informality in food markets in South Africa.

The answer to the second research question "*How do instances of informal practices observed amidst food vendors and markets in South Africa relate to the findings of the first research question?*" is discussed in conjunction with the findings of the above research question as these illustrations act as practical examples of the findings. Instances of the above interactions are discussed (section 6) in the

context of the South African informal food market, with some specific examples from KwaMashu Town, Cape Town, and Western Province. These instances helped conclude how structures, agency and the elements of informality at play in real life.

Overall, this thesis has attempted to remove informality from the dominant economic debates and highlighted its social nature by using one of many social theories. An important takeaway of this thesis is that informality is not a transitory phenomenon and a rationally and intentionally chosen practice, that individuals indulge in. Bearing this in mind, there is scope for further theoretical research on the topic, as well as practical implications in the field of policy and governance. Some such recommendations could to:

1. Seeing that informality and formality often work and coexist together, blurring the line between the two, it may be interesting to question the dichotomous nomenclature. Are the formal and the informal binary, or is it a spectrum of activities and practices?

2. Stemming again from the coexistence of the formal and the informal, we see in the South African context of the thesis that though the state collaborates with informal actors when needed, there is little discussion about whether or not this collaboration results in the *acceptance* of informal actors as part of a bigger food system. The lack of an outright support (or outright denouncement) of informality by the state leads to an ambiguous understanding of that state's stance, possibly affecting the informal actors and their choices in not cooperating with the state. As seen in the example of the CoPs adopted by the Western Province, interaction and understanding between all stakeholders and actors may result in more inclusive and holistic solutions to problems.

3. An understanding links between the elements of meaning, materials, and competence, and the links between various practices, helps one in knowing informal practices better. Policy makers can work towards inclusive and efficient social transformation, for examples in the domain of food, by keeping this in mind. For example, as discussed in section 6, if meaning is ascribed to convenience and community and competencies include lived experiences and local knowledge, it may be beneficial to adhere to or adjust to the local working of the food markets since (i) the individuals are more accustomed to their everyday routines and willing to participate in it, and (ii) introducing transformations by altering these links slowly and one at a time may be more effective than imposing completely new and novel regulations.

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