Evaluating Factors that Impact Sme's Npd Success in South African Retail Industry

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the determinants of new product development (NPD) performance and retailer engagement among South African small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It investigates how strategic orientation, NPD research, team collaboration, and retailer–supplier relationship quality shape innovation outcomes in a resource-constrained retail environment. A positivist quantitative research design was adopted, and data were collected from 74 SME owner–managers using a structured online questionnaire. Descriptive, correlation, and regression analyses were conducted in SPSS (v28.0). Findings show that NPD research is the only statistically significant predictor of retailer engagement ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < 0.05$). Structured customer validation, market testing, and evidence-based learning therefore play a decisive role in improving SMEs' credibility with retail buyers. Although strategic alignment and cross-functional collaboration show positive associations with NPD outcomes, neither exerts a significant effect on retailer accessibility. The results highlight a persistent "intent–execution gap" in SMEs: while strategic awareness and innovation culture are strong, weak institutionalisation of research and collaboration limits NPD effectiveness. Retailer–supplier relationships remain characterised by information asymmetry, limited feedback, and procedural opacity, reflecting structural power imbalances in South Africa's concentrated grocery sector. Strengthening research-driven NPD routines, shared market intelligence, and transparent supplier-development mechanisms can improve SME access to dominant retail channels. The study contributes to the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT) by demonstrating how research intensity and learning routines enhance SMEs' market legitimacy within asymmetric value chains.

Keywords: *SME innovation; New product development; Market intelligence; Retailer–supplier relationships; Strategic alignment; Dynamic capabilities; South Africa; Innovation performance.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In developing economies such as South Africa, the contribution of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to economic growth, employment creation, and poverty reduction is well established (Fajarika, Trapsilawati, & Sopha, 2024). Despite sustained policy attention and developmental finance, many SMEs still struggle to access mainstream retail value chains dominated by powerful national retailers. In these buyer-driven chains, smaller suppliers often depend heavily on large buyers, resulting in "captive" relationships that restrict supplier autonomy (Glavee-Geo, Engelseth, & Buvik, 2022).

In South Africa's grocery retail sector, exclusive lease agreements have strengthened incumbent dominance and created barriers for new entrants (Das Nair & Landani, 2021). Such exclusivity arrangements have been highlighted by the Competition Commission of South Africa (2019) as a key factor limiting new entry and shaping unequal bargaining relationships with suppliers. Listing protocols at major retailers are particularly challenging, requiring SMEs to upgrade their capabilities to meet rigorous standards before their products can be listed (Das Nair & Landani, 2021).

Although leading retailers operate supplier-development programmes intended to support SMEs, not all participating firms succeed in achieving product listings. At the same time, new product development (NPD) has

Nurture*: Volume 19, Issue 4, 1-21,* ***2025***
Online ISSN*: 1994-1633/* ***Print ISSN****: 1994-1625*
DOI*: 10.55951/nurture.v19i4.1053|* ***URL****:* www.nurture.org.pk
Publisher: *Nurture Publishing Group*

been repeatedly recognised as critical for SME differentiation and competitive advantage, as the creation of novel and meaningful products strengthens both market positioning and firm performance (Yi, Amenuvor, & Boateng, 2021). However, despite extensive research on SME innovation in South Africa, few empirical studies link NPD activities directly to successful product listings within major retail chains. This limited evidence suggests a significant research gap that this study seeks to address (Matekenya & Moyo, 2022).

The present research explores the relationship between SMEs' internal NPD capabilities and their experiences of the product-listing process at a dominant South African retail group. It is guided by the perspectives of SME suppliers that have developed new products but continue to face difficulties in obtaining listings despite considerable investment in innovation. The study therefore shifts the analytical focus away from post-listing financial performance and instead examines the disconnect between NPD investment and retailer acceptance - a pressing issue within South Africa's SME ecosystem (Das Nair & Landani, 2021). Within this framework, NPD failure is defined as a product not being selected for listing by the major retailer, rather than poor post-listing sales performance.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although innovation and NPD are increasingly emphasised within South African SME policy, many enterprises remain excluded from formal retail distribution channels (Das Nair & Landani, 2021). Government initiatives - including the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition's (DTIC) localisation drive and Enterprise Supplier Development (ESD) programmes - aim to integrate small producers into large value chains, yet only a small proportion of SME products advance beyond the initial buyer-screening stage (Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), 2024). This outcome highlights ongoing capability and structural barriers that prevent SMEs from converting product development efforts into market access.

Empirical evidence points to high SME failure rates and low levels of innovation despite these interventions. More than 70 percent of South African SMEs close within their first five to seven years (Bushe, 2019; Matekenya & Moyo, 2022) and fewer than half report any form of innovation activity (Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), 2024). Such findings reflect systemic weaknesses in moving SMEs from product ideation and development to formal buyer evaluation and retail integration. Existing studies tend to focus on firms that have already succeeded in achieving NPD or are embedded within established supply chains. As a result, limited attention has been paid to SMEs that have engaged in structured NPD processes yet fail to secure retail listings. This gap raises an important question: do internal NPD structures and execution influence listing outcomes, or are broader relational and systemic barriers within buyer-supplier dynamics more decisive? Addressing this question is crucial for understanding how SMEs can translate innovative effort into tangible market opportunities and sustainable growth.

3. RESEARCH AIM

The primary aim of this study is to examine how SME new product development strategies, collaboration processes, and engagement with retail buyers affect their ability to achieve product listings at a major South African retailer. Rather than assuming that NPD automatically results in success, the study investigates how the quality, structure, and perception of NPD processes intersect with retailer-supplier relationships and listing outcomes. The emphasis lies in understanding the mechanisms that connect internal SME capabilities to external buyer evaluations within South Africa's concentrated retail sector.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

4.1. Primary Objective

To assess the current state of NPD strategies within South Africa's retail sector and develop an evidence-based policy framework aimed at improving the success rate of SME new product listings.

4.2. Secondary Objectives

- Examine the internal NPD strategies and practices used by SMEs attempting to list new products with a national retailer.
- Explore the extent of cross-functional collaboration and team dynamics within SME NPD processes.

Nurture**: Volume 19, Issue 4, 1-21, **2025
***Online ISSN**: 1994-1633/ **Print ISSN**: 1994-1625*
***DOI**: 10.55951/nurture.v19i4.1053| **URL**: www.nurture.org.pk*
***Publisher:** Nurture Publishing Group*

- Investigate retailer-supplier relationship dynamics, focusing on communication, support, and feedback mechanisms during the listing process.
- Determine which NPD dimensions, if any, are statistically associated with perceived barriers or progress in the product-listing journey.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1. Introduction

Achieving excellence in New Product Development (NPD) is a strategic necessity for SMEs striving for competitive advantage and sustainable growth in resource-constrained economies such as South Africa. For SMEs attempting to enter dominant retail supply chains, the interaction between internal innovation capabilities and external buyer relationships is crucial for navigating power imbalances and achieving product acceptance (Glavee-Geo et al., 2022; Purmonen, Jaakkola, & Terho, 2023). This review synthesises theoretical and empirical advances in NPD, strategy, collaboration, and digitalisation to build the conceptual framework that informed the study's survey design.

5.2. New Product Development in Emerging Markets

In emerging markets such as South Africa, NPD operates within institutional voids and resource constraints that drive firms toward frugal or lean innovation, prioritising cost-efficiency and affordability (Edacherian, Panicker, & Chizema, 2024). Integrating indigenous knowledge with modern technologies enhances innovation relevance and cultural resonance, particularly in sustainable-enterprise sectors (Manyaga, Goldman, & Thomas, 2024).

Community-based innovation engaging local stakeholders improves product launch outcomes in underserved areas (Schaumann & Tarnovskaya, 2023). Firms increasingly run dual product-and-business-model tracks-serving formal retailers while tailoring offerings for informal markets-to reach heterogeneous consumers (Onsongo, Knorringa, & van Beers, 2023; Rajaguru, Matanda, & Siaw, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated adoption of digital prototyping and virtual engagement tools, enabling manufacturing SMEs to iterate and launch products faster (Dzogbewu, Afrifa Jnr, Amoah, Fianko, & de Beer, 2022). Many firms employ frugal and reverse-innovation strategies, adjusting products to local constraints to achieve viable innovation outcomes (Sharmelly & Ray, 2021).

5.3. SMEs in the South African Retail Industry

South African SMEs face entrenched structural barriers limiting growth and market integration. Misaligned government policies, financing gaps, and weak managerial capacity continue to constrain development (Ogujiuba, Eggink, & Olamide, 2023). The grocery retail market is concentrated- Shoprite, Pick n Pay and SPAR together hold over 50 percent-making them pivotal gatekeepers for SME suppliers (Bowman, 2025). While access to these chains offers scale and visibility, exclusionary practices and stringent listing standards reinforce unequal power dynamics (Competition Commission of South Africa, 2019). At township level, SMEs compete with migrant-owned retailers that exploit collective buying networks to secure price advantages (Malgas & Zondi, 2020). Aligning SME product development and market strategies with retailer requirements is therefore vital, yet no reliable statistics exist on average rejection rates for new product listings-an evident research gap (Bowman, 2025).

5.4. Key NPD Models

NPD models provide structured guidance from idea to launch, helping firms balance speed, collaboration, and risk (Rehder, Souza, Marx, & Salerno, 2023). Models were benchmarked through literature and practitioner inputs using flexibility, speed, risk-management, and adaptability as evaluation criteria (Panizzon, Vidor, & Camargo, 2022). They are grouped as Linear and Structured, Iterative and Adaptive, and Collaborative and Integrated.

5.4.1. Linear and Structured

Sequential Stage-Gate approaches offer control and predictability, suiting regulated or high-risk contexts. Projects advance through formal evaluation gates to optimise resources and terminate weak concepts early (Edwards, Cooper, Vedsmand, & Nardelli, 2019). South African retailers such as Shoprite and Pick n Pay combine Stage-Gate with Agile sprints for faster responses to supply-and-demand shifts (García-Sánchez, Vargas-Martínez, Candia-García, & Contreras-Lima, 2024; Rehder et al., 2023).

Nurture**: Volume 19, Issue 4, 1-21, **2025
***Online ISSN**: 1994-1633/ **Print ISSN**: 1994-1625*
***DOI**: 10.55951/nurture.v19i4.1053| **URL**: www.nurture.org.pk*
***Publisher:** Nurture Publishing Group*

5.4.2. Iterative and Adaptive

Agile and Spiral models emphasise iteration, rapid feedback, and flexibility-critical in dynamic markets. Agile, originating in software, now drives physical-product innovation for responsiveness and early customer validation (Gerdes, Phaal, & Lynch, 2021). The Spiral model blends structured planning with continuous iteration under uncertainty (Patterson, Gujarathi, & Norris, 2024).

5.4.3. Collaborative and Integrated

Concurrent Engineering (CE), Integrated NPD (iNPD), and Open Innovation (OI) stress teamwork and shared learning. CE promotes parallel workflows that shorten development cycles (Park, Han, & Childs, 2021; Rihar & Kušar, 2021). iNPD synchronises internal and external actors to align design with market needs (Nguyen et al., 2023). OI allows SMEs to leverage outside expertise and share risk-an approach that strengthened SME resilience during the COVID-19 period (Jabeen, Belas, Santoro, & Alam, 2022; McGahan, Bogers, Chesbrough, & Holgersson, 2021).

Hybrid models that blend structure and agility are especially relevant in emerging economies where volatility and resource limits demand both flexibility and control.

5.5. The Agile-Stage-Gate Hybrid Model: A Critical Analysis

The Agile-Stage-Gate hybrid integrates Stage-Gate discipline with Agile flexibility to offset each method's limitations (Robert G Cooper & Sommer, 2018). Gates serve as decision checkpoints, while Agile sprints between gates allow iterative development and validation. Empirical studies report roughly 30 percent faster time-to-market and 40 percent higher success rates under this hybrid system (Robert G Cooper & Sommer, 2018).

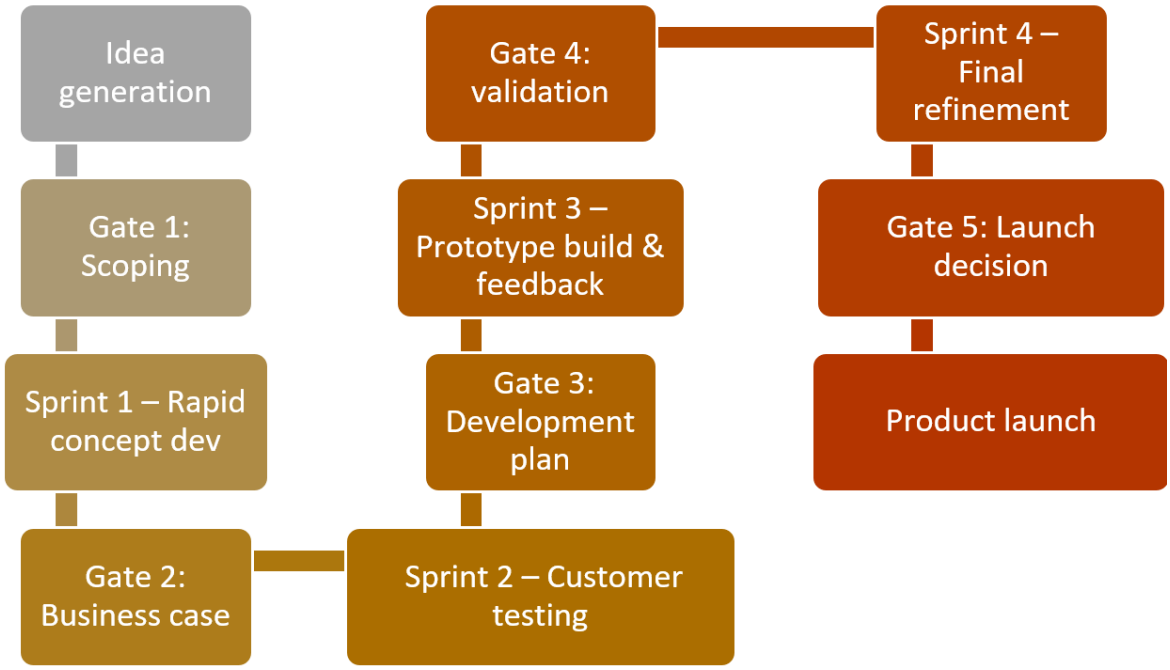

Figure 1. Agile-Stage-Gate Hybrid Flow.

Source: Robert G Cooper and Sommer (2018).

This model is particularly suited to volatile, resource-constrained contexts such as South Africa, where SMEs face capital, skills, and infrastructure limitations (Department of Trade, 2023; Owoseni & Ahwireng-Obeng, 2024). Although adoption challenges persist-culture change, empowerment balance, and training-the hybrid improves efficiency, speed, and customer alignment (Gerdes et al., 2021; Patterson et al., 2024). Its balance of structure and adaptability makes it a pragmatic framework for SMEs facing uncertainty.

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5.6. NPD Failure and Success Strategies

In South Africa's grocery value chain, buyer dominance and opaque onboarding continue to restrict SME market access (Competition Commission of South Africa, 2019) increasing rejection risk at early gatekeeping stages. The constructs discussed below were tested empirically via a structured SME-supplier survey.

5.6.1. Resource Constraints

Limited time, data, and skills often weaken market-insight work and delay customer feedback loops, undermining innovation performance (Sancho-Zamora, Gutiérrez-Broncano, Hernández-Perlines, & Peña-García, 2021). Digital-readiness gaps further slow learning, while firms using virtual testing tools achieve shorter iteration cycles (Nguyen et al., 2023). Formal process governance and clear decision rights improve NPD-portfolio discipline (Competition Commission of South Africa, 2019).

5.6.2. Strategic Orientation in NPD

Clear alignment between strategy and NPD execution enhances innovation outcomes (Miroshnychenko, Strobl, Matzler, & De Massis, 2021). Firms that translate strategic intent into portfolio rules-deciding which projects to start, continue, or end-achieve faster learning and better resource reallocation (Competition Commission of South Africa, 2019). Digital and customer orientation jointly improve sensing of external signals and reduce feedback lag (Pan, Oh, & Wang, 2021; Sancho-Zamora, Hernández-Perlines, Peña-García, & Gutiérrez-Broncano, 2022).

5.6.3. Absorptive Capacity and NPD Research

Absorptive capacity (ACAP)-the ability to acquire, assimilate, transform, and exploit external knowledge-positively influences innovation capability and firm performance (Sancho-Zamora et al., 2021). In volatile sectors, premature release of under-tested products leads to incremental "patching" rather than robust design; formal evaluation and pre-launch learning are therefore critical (Nguyen et al., 2023). Building ACAP through networks and scanning reduces SME misinterpretation of retailer requirements (Sancho-Zamora et al., 2021).

5.6.4. Organisational Collaboration

Cross-functional integration across R&D, marketing, and operations enhances NPD quality by aligning feasibility with customer needs and reducing rework (Sancho-Zamora et al., 2021). Collaboration with external partners-customers, suppliers, or support agencies-lowers information asymmetry and shortens iteration cycles (Competition Commission of South Africa, 2019). Effective collaboration relies on dedicated teams with clear roles, shared metrics, and frequent portfolio reviews.

5.6.5. Digitalisation and its Transformative Role in NPD

Digitalisation enables faster prototyping, co-creation, and iteration. AI tools accelerate idea screening, concept testing, and design refinement, improving time-to-market and innovation quality (Robert G. Cooper, 2024). Digital-twin technologies let firms virtually design and validate products before production, enhancing reliability (Soori, Arezoo, & Dastres, 2023).

For South African retail SMEs, digital maturity strongly correlates with organisational resilience, while low maturity heightens exposure to shocks (Robertson, Botha, Walker, Wordsworth, & Balzarova, 2022). Suppliers lacking baseline digital capabilities-shared data, workflows, remote collaboration-risk exclusion from digitalised retail chains (Robertson et al., 2022).

5.6.6. Retailer-Supplier Relationships in Asymmetric Markets

South Africa's concentrated grocery sector gives large retailers significant buyer power that shapes supplier access (Competition Commission of South Africa, 2019). International evidence shows dependence asymmetry increases perceived risk and discourages supplier innovation unless governance and feedback are transparent (Ma, Hofer, & Aloysius, 2021). SMEs countervail through specialisation and diversification, but these strategies succeed only when retailers provide clear criteria and structured feedback (Competition Commission of South Africa, 2019; Talay, Oxborrow, & Brindley, 2020).

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***Online ISSN**: 1994-1633/ **Print ISSN**: 1994-1625*
***DOI**: 10.55951/nurture.v19i4.1053| **URL**: www.nurture.org.pk*
***Publisher:** Nurture Publishing Group*

5.7. Conceptual Framework of the Empirical Study

Synthesising these insights, the study adopts a multi-dimensional framework capturing four interrelated constructs that influence SME NPD performance and retail integration in developing economies such as South Africa:

- Strategic Orientation - directs innovation priorities and resource investment aligned with long-term goals.
- NPD Research - reduces uncertainty, validates demand, and strengthens buyer confidence.
- Team Collaboration Dynamics - facilitates internal and external knowledge flow, ensuring coordinated delivery.
- Retailer-Supplier Relationships - define access to dominant supply chains, shaped by power and information asymmetries.

This integrative model (Figure 2) reflects current thinking on innovation under constraint and power imbalance and forms the empirical foundation for testing within South Africa's retail ecosystem.

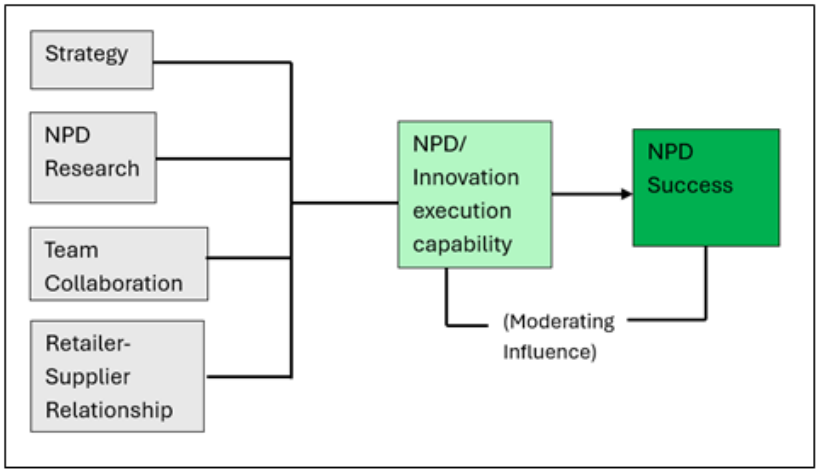

Figure 2. A Multilayered Conceptual Model for SME NPD Success.

5.8. Hypotheses Development

This study examines how key NPD dimensions influence retailer-supplier relationships and, ultimately, product-listing success.

1. Aligning NPD projects with overall strategy focuses resources and clarifies priorities, strengthening communication and trust with retailers.

H_1: NPD Strategy is positively related to the retailer-supplier relationship.

2. Conducting rigorous market and customer research during NPD reduces uncertainty and enhances product fit, improving collaboration with retail buyers.

H_2: NPD Research is positively related to the retailer-supplier relationship.

3. Strong cross-departmental collaboration fosters innovation and responsiveness, enhancing retailer engagement and partnership quality.

H_3: Team Collaboration in NPD is positively related to the retailer-supplier relationship.

The following section outlines the study's research methodology.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

6.1. Data Collection and Sampling

This study employed a quantitative research design grounded in a positivist epistemological stance, which assumes that reality can be objectively measured through empirical investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data were gathered via a semi-structured online questionnaire distributed through Google Forms over ten weeks. The sampling frame included SME owner-managers and senior executives engaged in NPD and external retail

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***Online ISSN**: 1994-1633/ **Print ISSN**: 1994-1625*
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***Publisher:** Nurture Publishing Group*

partnerships. From a population of 92, 74 valid responses were obtained-an 80% response rate, consistent with recommended thresholds for quantitative surveys (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019).

A purposive sampling approach targeted firms that had actively pursued retail listing but were yet to secure onboarding, ensuring participants possessed operational and strategic oversight of NPD and buyer engagement. Within the sample, 59.46% were owner-directors, 24.32% senior managers, and 16.22% middle managers or technical heads. Most respondents (83.78%) held tertiary qualifications, supporting their analytical ability for process-oriented questions.

The questionnaire comprised two sections:

- Part A collected demographic and organisational data (firm size, sector, respondent position, qualification).
- Part B captured NPD practices and retailer engagement, subdivided into four constructs: strategic alignment, NPD research intensity, internal collaboration, and retailer-supplier relationship quality.

Prior to rollout, the instrument underwent pilot testing with seven SMEs, consistent with recommendations for questionnaire validation (Taherdoost, 2021). The Statistical Consulting Services (SCS) at North-West University reviewed the tool and advised refinements. Minor wording and sequencing changes improved clarity and internal consistency before full distribution. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured in accordance with the Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act. Reminder emails were issued at weeks six and eight to enhance response rates. Ethical approval was obtained from the North-West University Ethics Committee (Approval No. NWU-00574-20-A4), and confidentiality was strictly maintained.

6.2. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Statistics v28.0 by the Statistical Consulting Services of North-West University. Initial descriptive statistics summarised central tendencies, variability, and distribution patterns for all variables (Somasundaran, 2022). Bivariate correlation analysis then explored relationships among the independent constructs and NPD performance outcomes. Correlation coefficients were interpreted following Akoglu (2018) where *r > 0.7 = strong*, *0.4-0.6 = moderate*, and *< 0.3 = weak*. This step provided preliminary evidence of construct interdependence and guided checks for potential multicollinearity.

To assess the influence of NPD dimensions on retailer-supplier relationships, multiple linear regression analysis was applied. The dependent variable, *ease of securing appointments with retail buyers (E3)*, served as an indicator of relationship quality. Independent variables included.

- NPD_Strategy - strategic alignment of innovation initiatives.
- NPD_Research - market and customer research intensity.
- Team_Collab - cross-functional collaboration effectiveness.

Firm size and years in operation were incorporated as control variables to account for organisational scale and experience effects. The model quantified linear relationships between these predictors and retailer accessibility, allowing hypothesis testing of their relative significance. Two models were estimated: one with the three primary predictors and a second incorporating the controls.

Model assumptions-linearity, normality, and homoscedasticity - were examined to ensure statistical validity. Significance was evaluated at the 5% level, offering empirical insight into how specific NPD practices influence relationship outcomes within South African retail SMEs.

Before regression, sampling adequacy and inter-item correlation were verified using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, confirming data suitability for factor analysis. Subsequently, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) identified latent constructs underlying NPD and retailer-relationship variables (Dalawi, Isa, & Aimran, 2025). Items with factor loadings below 0.5 or exhibiting cross-loadings were removed to enhance construct purity and discriminant validity.

To ensure measurement reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed for each construct, with $\alpha \geq 0.70$ indicating acceptable internal consistency (Sharmelly & Ray, 2021). The resulting scales demonstrated strong reliability across all four constructs: strategic orientation, NPD research, team collaboration, and retailer-supplier relationship quality.

Nurture**: Volume 19, Issue 4, 1-21, **2025
***Online ISSN**: 1994-1633/ **Print ISSN**: 1994-1625*
***DOI**: 10.55951/nurture.v19i4.1053| **URL**: www.nurture.org.pk*
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7. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

7.1. Biographical Questionnaire

Table 1 summarises the sample profile. In the participating major retailer's universe, suppliers are ~53% food and 47% non-food; our realised sample is 65% food and 35% non-food. Given voluntary participation (self-selection, non-probability), this discrepancy is expected and is commonly addressed via fit-for-purpose evaluation and, where needed, post-survey adjustment (Haddad et al., 2022; Wiśniowski, Sakshaug, Perez Ruiz, & Blom, 2020).

Table 1. Biographical profile of respondents.

Item	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	42	56.76
	Female	30	40.54
	Prefer not to say	2	2.7
Age Group	Younger than 20	0	0
	21 - 35	9	12.16
	36 - 45	32	43.24
	46 - 60	32	43.24
	Older than 60	1	1.35
Educational Qualification	Grade 12 or lower	10	13.51
	Qualified artisan	2	2.70
	Diploma	21	28.38
	Graduate	20	27.03
	Postgraduate	21	28.38
Dedicated NPD address	Yes	61	82.43
	No	13	17.57
Type of designated/ dedicated NPD address	Person	31	46.97
	Department/ Business Unit/ Branch	17	25.76
	Head Office/ Parent	3	4.55
	Outsourced	15	22.73
Job Level	Entry level	1	1.35
	Supervisor	5	6.76
	Middle Management	6	8.11
	Senior Management	18	24.32
	Director/ Owner	44	59.46
Direct Reports	None	31	44.29
	1 – 5	22	31.43
	6 – 10	6	8.57
	11 – 15	11	15.71
	More than 15	0	0
No. of Permanent employees	1-5	12	16.22
	6 – 20	26	35.14
	21 – 50	24	32.43
	51 – 250	8	10.81
	More than 250	4	5.41
Legal Status	Sole Proprietor	13	17.57
	Partnership	10	13.51
	Close Corporation	12	16.22
	Company (Pty Ltd)	39	52.70
	Franchise	0	0

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Respondents were predominantly male (56.76%), with females at 40.54% and 2.7% preferring not to disclose. Age clustered between 36-45 (43.24%) and 46-60 (43.24%), indicating mid-career representation in retailer engagement. Qualifications were broadly distributed (Diploma 28.38%; Graduate 27.03%; Postgraduate 28.38%); artisans were 2.70%. Seniority was high: 59.46% directors/owners and 24.32% senior managers, supporting suitability for strategy/process questions. Most firms had <50 employees (67.57%); legal forms were mainly (Pty) Ltd (52.70%) and sole proprietors (17.57%). Overall, the profile aligns with SME characteristics relevant to NPD and retail listing.

7.2. Descriptive Statistics and Construct Profiles

Descriptive statistics for the study's constructs are presented in Table 2 which reports mean scores, standard deviations, and internal consistency coefficients. Overall, the results reveal strong strategic intent among South African SMEs but persistent weaknesses in execution, process formalisation, and retail access.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and reliability scores.

Construct	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Items	Cronbach's α
Strategic Planning Culture	74	3.32	0.58	1.17	4.00	6	0.90
Goal Visibility and Internal Alignment	74	2.94	0.75	1.00	4.00	3	0.84
Structured Evaluation and Prioritisation	74	2.70	0.86	1.00	4.00	2	0.63
Customer-Centric Discovery	74	2.78	0.76	1.00	4.00	4	0.88
Evidence-Based Validation	74	3.19	0.58	1.20	4.00	5	0.85
Structured R&D Investment	74	2.67	0.79	1.00	4.00	3	0.79
Inclusive Collaboration	74	2.86	0.72	1.14	4.00	7	0.89
Strategic-Operational Alignment	74	3.32	0.52	1.67	4.00	3	0.78
Retailer Relationship Climate	74	2.65	0.74	1.00	4.00	5	0.85
Accessibility and Onboarding Barriers	74	2.31	0.81	1.00	4.00	3	0.84
Supplier Initiative and Coping Tactics †	74	3.20	0.79	1.00	4.00	-	Removed (α = 0.36)

(*Source: Own Compilation*)

7.2.1. Frequency Patterns of Responses

7.2.1.1. Strategic Orientation

The descriptive frequencies show a generally positive strategic posture. Most SMEs (95%) reported that their new product development (NPD) activities align with company mission statements, and 84% indicated the presence of formal NPD goals. These results confirm that innovation intent and strategic awareness are embedded within SME cultures (Mogashoa & Kalitanyi, 2023). However, the translation of this intent into operational clarity remains uneven: only 68% considered NPD goals clearly defined, and 57% perceived them as visible across employees. Such gaps reflect common implementation frictions in smaller firms, where communication channels and participation mechanisms are limited (Mousa, Ali, & Gurler, 2024).

Prioritisation emerges as a notable weakness: although 92% of respondents account for resource requirements, just 58% reported formal project ranking or selection routines. This under-prioritisation aligns with findings that many SMEs rely on informal, centralised decision making that treats concurrent initiatives equally (Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2020; Iqbal & Suzianti, 2021). Nonetheless, strategic foresight remains visible - 95% of firms view NPD as a long-term commitment and roughly 85% conduct periodic project reviews -indicating that while planning exists, formalisation and goal visibility lag behind intent.

7.2.1.2. NPD Research

The results reveal a pattern of high awareness but partial institutionalisation of research practices. While 88% conduct some form of market research, only 51% perform systematic customer-needs assessments. Similarly, 58% test ideas prior to development and 59% conduct structured market tests, suggesting resource-driven constraints in pre-launch validation (Falahat, Ramayah, Soto-Acosta, & Lee, 2020). Only 36% maintain a dedicated research or testing budget, although 66% employ personnel responsible for R&D - a gap reflecting the tension between intent and resourcing. This shortfall is critical because consistent R&D spending is empirically linked to pipeline

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***Publisher:** Nurture Publishing Group*

sustainability and competitiveness (Darfo-Oduro, Prokop, Stejskal, Klímová, & Žítek, 2024; Labeaga, Martínez-Ros, Sanchis, & Sanchis, 2021).
Positively, 93% of SMEs value customer feedback and 92% benchmark competitors, reflecting adoption of lean, iterative learning practices typical of agile SME contexts (Agag et al., 2023). In addition, 81% consider socio-economic conditions when developing products. Collectively, these figures illustrate that SMEs aspire to be data-driven; however, formal budgeting and structured validation remain underdeveloped.

7.2.1.3. Team Collaboration
Team collaboration indicators highlight moderate integration across functions. Only 57% of respondents reported active multi-departmental input in NPD and 53% indicated that employees at all levels contribute ideas. These findings underscore limited diffusion of participation despite 93% agreeing that strategy guides product development and 68% confirming product -objective alignment. Cross-functional meetings occur for 62% of firms, 75% encourage the identification of innovation opportunities, and 84% have adopted new working methods. A high proportion document their NPD processes (91%) and designate an NPD process owner (81%), yet structured, cross-team coordination mechanisms remain sporadic. Such patterns are consistent with SME characteristics - lean hierarchies, informal procedures, and flexible teams - that foster responsiveness but limit institutionalised collaboration (Atkinson, Lupton, Kynighou, & Antcliff, 2022; Harney, Gilman, Mayson, & Raby, 2022).

7.2.1.4. Retailer-Supplier Relationships
The results reveal pronounced asymmetries in supplier-buyer interactions. Fewer than half (45%) receive adequate feedback from retail buyers, and only 31% find it easy to secure appointments. This mirrors broader evidence that weak communication and opaque supplier requirements hinder SME integration into formal value chains (Haywood, De Lange, Musvoto, & De Wet, 2021; Mahmud, Paul, Azeem, & Chowdhury, 2021). As documented in the South African grocery sector, dominant buyer practices frequently disadvantage smaller suppliers (Nabee & Swanepoel, 2021) particularly when power asymmetries are high (Glavee-Geo et al., 2022; Johnsen, Lacoste, & Meehan, 2020).
Nevertheless, SMEs show resilience and persistence: 87% seek alternative retailers after rejection, 69% report learning from buyer interactions, and 84% would re-engage with the retailer for future listings. Yet only 41% feel treated equally to large suppliers, 63% describe the environment as supportive, and just 54% state that procedures are clearly explained. Most (89%) believe retailers could offer stronger NPD support. These findings portray a relationship climate where engagement exists but transparency and procedural clarity are weak (Grant, 2024).

7.2.2 Construct Means and Interpretation
Mean scores (see Table 2) allow comparison of the relative strengths and weaknesses of SME innovation capabilities prior to modelling (Hair Jr, Howard, & Nitzl, 2020). The highest mean values are observed for Strategic Planning Culture (M = 3.32; SD = 0.58) and Strategic-Operational Alignment (M = 3.32; SD = 0.52), followed by Supplier Initiative and Coping Tactics (M = 3.20; SD = 0.79) and Evidence-Based Validation (M = 3.19; SD = 0.58). The lowest means belong to Accessibility and Onboarding Barriers (reverse-coded; M = 2.31; SD = 0.81) and Retailer Relationship Climate (M = 2.65; SD = 0.74).

7.2.2.1. Strategic Orientation
he high scores for strategic orientation and innovation culture confirm that SMEs conceptually link innovation to their overall business vision, supporting claims that strategic clarity enhances innovation maturity (Muskat, Hörtnagl, Peters, & Zehrer, 2021). However, lower ratings for Structured Evaluation and Prioritisation (M = 2.70; SD = 0.86) and Goal Visibility and Internal Alignment (M = 2.94; SD = 0.75) reveal that strategic execution often falters at the implementation stage, where communication and delegation weaknesses hinder consistency (Őri & Szabó, 2024).

7.2.2.2. NPD Research
Evidence-Based Validation ranks high (M = 3.19; SD = 0.58), underscoring SMEs' efforts to test concepts, benchmark competitors, and integrate learning loops (Carrasco-Carvajal, García-Pérez-de-Lema, & Castillo-Vergara,

Nurture**: Volume 19, Issue 4, 1-21, **2025
***Online ISSN**: 1994-1633/ **Print ISSN**: 1994-1625*
***DOI**: 10.55951/nurture.v19i4.1053| **URL**: www.nurture.org.pk*
***Publisher:** Nurture Publishing Group*

2023). In contrast, Structured R&D Investment (M = 2.67; SD = 0.79) and Customer-Centric Discovery (M = 2.78; SD = 0.76) score below the midpoint, highlighting limited capacity for sustained research and customer immersion - an issue typical of resource-constrained environments (Ćirović, Dabić, Melović, & Backović, 2025; Van de Vrande, De Jong, Vanhaverbeke, & De Rochemont, 2009).

7.2.2.3. Team Collaboration

Inclusive Collaboration (M = 2.86; SD = 0.72) reflects aspiration toward cross-functional work that remains hampered by informal structures and operational overload (Costa, Crupi, De Marco, & Di Minin, 2023; Zahoor, Al-Tabbaa, Khan, & Wood, 2020). High Strategic - Operational Alignment again signals coherence between goals and daily execution, but sustaining this alignment amid competing demands remains a challenge (García-Sánchez et al., 2024; Ngo, 2023).

7.2.2.4. Retailer-Supplier Relationship

Retailer Relationship Climate (M = 2.65; SD = 0.74) and Accessibility and Onboarding Barriers (M = 2.31; SD = 0.81) record the lowest scores, corroborating evidence of asymmetric information and procedural opacity (Matekenya & Moyo, 2022). In contrast, Supplier Initiative and Coping Tactics (M = 3.20; SD = 0.79) suggest adaptive resilience through strategic re-targeting and perseverance following rejection (Eggers, 2020; Puumalainen, Sjögrén, Soininen, Syrjä, & Kraus, 2023).

7.2.2.5. Synthesis

Taken together, the descriptive statistics reveal that while South African SMEs exhibit strong strategic intent and learning orientation, they remain constrained by limited formalisation of research and collaboration processes, and by opaque retailer gatekeeping mechanisms. The pattern underscores an "innovation intent-execution gap" that weakens market access despite demonstrated resilience. These findings justify the subsequent factor and regression analyses examining how internal capabilities interact with retailer-supplier dynamics to influence listing success.

Table 3. Construct-level correlation matrix (section-based panels; N = 7).

Panel	Constructs	1	2	3
A. Strategic Orientation	1. Strategic Planning Culture 2. Goal Visibility & Internal Alignment 3. Structured Evaluation & Prioritisation	-	0.46	0.41
B. NPD Research	1. Customer-Centric Discovery 2. Evidence-Based Validation 3. Structured R&D Investment	-	0.43	0.43
C. Team Collaboration	1. Inclusive Collaboration 2. Strategic-Operational Synchronisation	-	0.42	
D. Retailer-Supplier Relationship	1. Retailer Relationship Climate 2. Accessibility & Onboarding Barriers (rev.) 3. Supplier Initiative & Coping Tactics	-	0.51	0.39

Note: Correlations are construct-level mean Pearson *r* values computed from item-level matrices (B1-B11, C1-C12, D1-D10, E1-E10). "rev." = reverse-coded barrier construct. Dashes (-) denote identity or non-computable values within panels.

7.3. Correlation Analysis

Correlation gauges the direction and strength of associations (Schober, Boer, & Schwarte, 2018) and supports exploratory pattern detection (Jacobucci, 2022; Karch, Perez-Alonso, & Bergsma, 2024). Coefficients ≥ |0.30| were considered meaningful (Akoglu, 2018; Hair Jr et al., 2020). Construct-level correlations are reported in Table 3.

7.3.1. Section B: Strategic Orientation

Strategic constructs display cohesive alignment. Strategic Planning Culture correlates moderately with Goal Visibility & Internal Alignment (r = 0.46) and Structured Evaluation & Prioritisation (r = 0.41). This indicates that SMEs demonstrating deliberate planning cultures tend to maintain higher goal transparency and systematic

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***Publisher:** Nurture Publishing Group*

evaluation. Such coherence mirrors findings that strategic alignment strengthens NPD execution (Peljhan & Marc, 2023).

7.3.2. Section C: NPD Research

Within the NPD domain, Customer-Centric Discovery relates strongly to both Evidence-Based Validation (r = 0.43) and Structured R&D Investment (r = 0.43), confirming that market-sensing SMEs formalise testing and resource allocation. Evidence-Based Validation also associates with R&D Investment (r = 0.41), supporting the link between evidence-driven design and innovation learning (Feng, Zhao, Wang, & Zhang, 2022).

7.3.3. Section D: Team Collaboration

Inclusive Collaboration and Strategic-Operational Synchronisation show a moderate positive link (r = 0.42), suggesting that participative cultures partially translate into operational coordination. However, weaker associations overall imply that informal structures constrain systematic teamwork (Bento, Tagliabue, & Lorenzo, 2020; Zahoor et al., 2020).

7.3.4. Section E: Retailer-Supplier Relationship

Retailer Relationship Climate correlates positively with both Accessibility & Onboarding Barriers (rev.) (r = 0.51) and Supplier Initiative & Coping Tactics (r = 0.39). SMEs perceiving supportive, transparent climates report fewer procedural obstacles and greater adaptive initiative. Nevertheless, informational opacity persists, reflecting asymmetries typical of South African buyer-driven chains (Mahmud et al., 2021; Matinheikki, Kauppi, Brandon–Jones, & van Raaij, 2022).

Strategic and research constructs show stronger internal cohesion than collaboration and relationship constructs, implying that SMEs possess conceptual planning strength but limited cross-functional integration and relational leverage. These findings point to a capability gap between internal innovation routines and external retail engagement.

7.4. Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression was used to examine whether NPD Strategy, NPD Research, and Team Collaboration predict the ease of securing retailer appointments (E3). Two models were estimated: Model 1 with the core predictors, and Model 2 adding firm size and years in company as controls. The general model takes the form $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \varepsilon$, where Y represents retailer appointment ease and X_1-X_3 denote the predictor constructs. Table 4 presents the OLS results. Model 1 explains 23.4% of the variance in retailer appointment ease ($R^2 = 0.234$, $adj.\ R^2 = 0.202$). After adding controls, Model 2 explains 27.0% ($R^2 = 0.270$, $adj.\ R^2 = 0.216$; $F(5,68) = 5.027$, $p = 0.001$). These values indicate moderate explanatory power, consistent with comparable SME studies (Ozili, 2023).

Table 4. The OLS regression results for both models.

Variable	Model 1 Coef.	Std. Err.	t-value	p-value	Model 2 Coef.	Std. Err.	t-value	p-value
Constant	0.0772	0.577	0.134	0.894	-0.2910	0.614	-0.474	0.637
NPD_Strategy	-0.1684	0.229	-0.734	0.465	-0.1243	0.235	-0.528	0.599
NPD_Research	0.6243	0.286	2.186	**0.032***	0.6129	0.283	2.164	**0.034***
Team_Collab	0.2619	0.240	1.092	0.279	0.1974	0.241	0.820	0.415
Firm_Size	-	-	-	-	0.1394	0.105	1.332	0.187
Years_in_Company	-	-	-	-	0.0505	0.105	0.481	0.632

Note: *Significant at $p < 0.05$.

Only NPD Research significantly predicts retailer accessibility ($\beta \approx 0.61$; $p < 0.05$), supporting H_2. This implies that SMEs conducting systematic market and customer research gain improved access to retail buyers. NPD Strategy ($\beta \approx -0.12$; $p > 0.40$) and Team Collaboration ($\beta \approx 0.20$; $p > 0.40$) show non-significant effects, leading to rejection of H_1 and H_3. Control variables are also non-significant, indicating firm size and tenure do not materially influence retailer accessibility.

Findings emphasise NPD Research as the key driver of retailer-supplier engagement. SMEs that invest in customer insight, market testing, and validation demonstrate stronger retailer appeal -echoing evidence that knowledge-

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***Publisher:** Nurture Publishing Group*

management and market-learning capabilities reduce uncertainty in retail listing (Hock-Doepgen, Clauss, Kraus, & Cheng, 2021).

By contrast, strategic orientation and team collaboration appear insufficient in isolation; without external validation, internal readiness rarely translates into buyer confidence (Asad, Asif, Sulaiman, Satar, & Alarifi, 2023; Hock-Doepgen et al., 2021). Thus, developing SMEs' research and market-testing infrastructure - through shared labs, subsidised trials, or innovation training - could strengthen their ability to overcome retailer gatekeeping barriers (Olaleye, Lekunze, Sekhampu, Khumalo, & Ayeni, 2024).

7.5. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was applied to uncover latent patterns among the variables measuring SME innovation capabilities and retailer-supplier relationships. The method identifies how observed indicators cluster into coherent constructs without assuming a pre-specified model (Goretzko, Pham, & Bühner, 2021). EFA was chosen because limited prior validation exists for these constructs in unlisted South African SMEs, making data-driven identification essential (Hock-Doepgen et al., 2021).

7.5.1. Data Adequacy and Procedure

Sampling adequacy was confirmed with Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values between 0.81-0.84, exceeding the 0.6 threshold (Sigudla & Maritz, 2023). Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant across all sections ($p < 0.001$), supporting factorability. Principal Axis Factoring with Varimax rotation was used, retaining items with eigenvalues > 1 and communalities > 0.40.

Four domains were analysed in alignment with the study framework:

- Section B: Strategic Orientation.
- Section C: NPD Research.
- Section D: Internal Collaboration.
- Section E: Retailer-Supplier Relationship.

7.5.2. Strategic Orientation (Section B)

Analysis of eleven items (B1-B11) yielded three interpretable factors, explaining 75.45% of total variance (*KMO = 0.82*).

- Strategic Planning Culture (B1, B5-B8, B10) captures structured goal alignment, resource allocation, and project review. Respondents value these principles but show partial implementation due to weak formal processes.
- Goal Visibility and Internal Alignment (B2-B4) measures communication and goal clarity; low scores reveal that unclear dissemination of innovation objectives limits execution.
- Structured Evaluation and Prioritisation (B9, B11) concerns ranking and formal assessment of NPD projects - practices often missing in smaller firms.

These results suggest that SMEs often articulate strategic aspirations but struggle with consistent operationalisation, leaving a gap between intent and implementation (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2022; Morgan & Anokhin, 2020).

7.5.3. NPD Research (Section C)

Twelve items (C1-C12) loaded onto three factors, explaining 70.17% of variance (*KMO = 0.81*).

- Customer-Centric Discovery (C1, C2, C5, C11) captures customer involvement and contextual insight generation; feedback loops are recognised but remain informal.
- Evidence-Based Validation (C3, C4, C9, C10, C12) represents testing, competitor analysis, and learning from previous projects. SMEs acknowledge its importance but face methodological and financial constraints.
- Structured R&D Investment (C6-C8) reflects budgeting and dedicated personnel; results indicate aspirational awareness rather than institutionalised practice.

Collectively, these factors depict SMEs that understand the value of systematic research but lack the resources to formalise it. The regression findings corroborate this - NPD Research was the only significant predictor of retailer

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***Publisher:** Nurture Publishing Group*

access ($\beta \approx 0.61$, $p < 0.05$), affirming that research-driven validation enhances SMEs' market credibility (Bertello, Ferraris, De Bernardi, & Bertoldi, 2022; Lee & Jung, 2024).

7.5.4. Internal Collaboration (Section D)

Ten items (D1-D10) produced two factors, explaining 65.27% of variance (*KMO = 0.83*).

- Inclusive Collaboration (D1, D3, D4, D6-D9) reflects broad participation in NPD and openness to new working methods. Respondents value collaboration but note centralised decision-making as a limitation (Fasth & Tengblad, 2023; Harney et al., 2022).
- Strategic-Operational Synchronisation (D2, D5, D10) captures the integration of strategy with execution and procedural planning. Some SMEs align well; others struggle with operational overload.

These results reveal that collaboration is appreciated but inconsistently institutionalised, explaining its non-significance in regression outcomes. Without structured systems and digital support, collaboration fails to translate into measurable market readiness (Agyapong, Ayentimi, & Sandow, 2024; Knudsen, Von Zedtwitz, Griffin, & Barczak, 2023).

7.5.5. Retailer-Supplier Relationship (Section E)

Analysis of ten items (E1-E10) identified three factors, explaining 70.91% of variance (*KMO = 0.81*).

- Retailer Relationship Climate (E1, E6, E8-E10) captures perceptions of fairness, feedback, and transparency. SMEs commonly reported limited communication and unequal treatment, consistent with evidence of power asymmetries in retailer-dominated channels (Glavee-Geo et al., 2022; Johnsen et al., 2020).
- Accessibility and Onboarding Barriers (E3-E5) reflect procedural obstacles - unclear listing criteria and difficulty securing meetings - aligning with prior findings on information opacity (Glavee-Geo et al., 2022).
- Supplier Initiative and Coping Tactics (E2, E7) captures adaptive behaviours post-rejection. Although some SMEs re-target new buyers, these responses remain reactive and individualised.

Overall, these relational patterns highlight systemic asymmetry: SMEs face restricted feedback and procedural opacity, undermining innovation diffusion despite internal readiness.

7.5.6. Theoretical Integration

Across all sections, extracted factors align with the conceptual domains of Strategic Orientation, NPD Research, Internal Collaboration, and Retailer-Supplier Relationship. The patterns indicate that SMEs recognise key innovation capabilities but display aspirational rather than embedded practices. Customer inclusion, research validation, and collaboration are valued, yet inconsistently enacted; relational asymmetries further inhibit translation of these capabilities into tangible retail access (Glavee-Geo et al., 2022). The findings extend SME innovation theory by showing that the gap between perceived and institutionalised capability - rather than the absence of capability itself - defines the commercialisation challenge in resource-constrained environments.

7.6. Validity and Reliability

Instrument validity and reliability were verified through pilot testing, expert review, and statistical analysis. A pilot with seven SMEs confirmed clarity and structure. Expert evaluation by the Statistical Consultation Services at North-West University ensured content adequacy. Exploratory factor analysis retained items with loadings ≥ 0.50, confirming construct validity (Howard, 2016) while AVE ≥ 0.50 and low inter-construct correlations supported discriminant validity (Stensen & Lydersen, 2022). Cronbach's α values ranged from 0.63 to 0.90, indicating acceptable to excellent reliability (Shrestha, 2021). The *Supplier Initiative and Coping Tactics* subscale (E2, E7) was removed owing to a low α = 0.36. Overall, the retained constructs exhibited strong psychometric adequacy for exploratory analysis.

7.7. Discussion

This study examined how SMEs' internal new product development (NPD) capabilities influence engagement with national retailers in South Africa. Descriptive, factor, and regression analyses reveal a consistent but uneven capability structure: SMEs display strong intent and learning orientation, yet weak institutionalisation and relational asymmetries limit impact.

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7.7.1. Strategic Orientation

SMEs recognise the importance of structured planning and prioritisation - captured in *Strategic Planning Culture*, *Goal Visibility and Internal Alignment*, and *Structured Evaluation and Prioritisation*. However, regression results show no significant relationship with retailer engagement (β = -0.12, p = 0.599), suggesting that strategy remains largely aspirational. Informal decision-making and limited managerial depth constrain translation from intent to execution, reflecting prior findings that planning improves legitimacy but not outcomes without embedded routines (Asa, Naruses, Nautwima, & Tsoy, 2023).

7.7.2. NPD Research

Among all predictors, NPD Research was the only significant determinant of retailer access (β ≈ 0.61, p < 0.05). Factors of *Customer-Centric Discovery* and *Evidence-Based Validation* highlight that systematic market scanning, customer input, and pre-launch testing underpin credibility with buyers. SMEs demonstrating organised intelligence use and validation are viewed as reliable partners (Gligor, Gölgeci, Newman, & Bozkurt, 2021; Kotcharin, Dehe, & Boonchoo, 2024). Even partial adoption of structured research routines therefore yields tangible engagement benefits, underscoring the strategic value of market-driven learning in constrained contexts.

7.7.3. Internal Collaboration

Inclusive Collaboration and *Strategic-Operational Synchronisation* showed moderate coherence but no significant relationship with retailer engagement (β = 0.20, p = 0.415). While respondents value teamwork, collaboration remains informal and poorly documented. Without process or digital integration, its impact on external legitimacy is limited. Effective collaboration must be coupled with cross-functional coordination mechanisms (Molinaro & Collins, 2023; Zhong et al., 2023).

7.7.4. Retailer-Supplier Relationship

Relational asymmetries persist: opaque onboarding procedures and limited feedback constrain SME access (Glavee-Geo et al., 2022). Some SMEs demonstrate adaptive coping - approaching alternative buyers - indicating emerging agility, but structural barriers endure. Sustained engagement requires transparency and supplier-development initiatives to institutionalise fairer participation (Das Nair & Landani, 2021).

7.7.5. Synthesis

Across analyses, knowledge capability - not strategic rhetoric - drives retailer engagement. Strategy and collaboration matter only when operationalised through research and validation that reduce buyer risk. For SMEs in resource-constrained environments, institutionalising evidence-based learning is pivotal to overcoming relational disadvantages and securing sustainable market access.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study examined how unlisted South African SMEs conceptualise and enact innovation capabilities and how these influence engagement with national retailers. Using descriptive, factor, correlation, and regression analyses, the study found that SMEs demonstrate strong strategic intent but limited operational institutionalisation. Strategic orientation - while valued as a signal of legitimacy-did not significantly predict retailer access (β = -0.12, p = 0.599), revealing a persistent gap between intent and implementation. In contrast, NPD research emerged as the only significant predictor of retailer engagement (β ≈ 0.61, p < 0.05), confirming that evidence-based practices-such as customer feedback integration, competitor benchmarking, and validation testing-most enhance SME credibility with buyers. Internal collaboration, though positively viewed, had no significant direct effect (β = 0.20, p = 0.415) without supporting coordination mechanisms. These results highlight a paradox: SMEs aspire to emulate structured innovation processes of larger firms, yet retailer engagement depends less on aspirational strategy and more on verifiable, research-driven readiness. Persistent relational asymmetries-opaque onboarding, limited feedback, and buyer dominance - further constrain SMEs' ability to signal preparedness, echoing findings on power imbalances in supplier networks (Das Nair & Landani, 2021; Glavee-Geo et al., 2022).

To strengthen market access, a dual agenda is needed. SMEs must institutionalise NPD research routines through formal budgets, dedicated personnel, and structured testing to demonstrate validated demand and product fit.

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Strategic planning should be operationalised via prioritisation tools and stage-gate processes to ensure strategy informs daily practice. Retailers, in turn, should increase transparency through clear listing criteria, feedback mechanisms, and supplier-development initiatives that reward validated innovation. Policymakers can reinforce this ecosystem by prioritising funding for SMEs demonstrating strong research capability, establishing inclusive matchmaking platforms, and integrating sustainability targets into Enterprise Supplier Development (ESD) frameworks.

Future research should expand across multiple retail chains and product categories to test generalisability, employ longitudinal designs to trace capability evolution, and include buyer perspectives to clarify evaluative criteria. Despite limitations-such as a modest sample (n=74), focus on one retail group, and reliance on self-reported data-the findings provide a robust foundation for theory and practice. They emphasise that institutionalised knowledge capability, rather than strategic rhetoric, drives relational success. Building research-driven, transparent, and mutually accountable SME-retailer systems is thus key to unlocking inclusive innovation and sustainable competitiveness in emerging markets.

FUNDING

This study received no specific financial support.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STATEMENT

The ethical committee of the North-West university, South Africa has granted the approval for the study on 28 February 2020 (Ref No. NWU-00574-20-A4

TRANSPARENCY

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author reports no competing financial or non-financial interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Devapriya Kailash Nath Sharma: Conceptualisation, data collection, formal analysis, investigation, and original draft preparation.

Ronnie Lotriet: Supervision, methodological guidance, critical review, and editing.

Both authors contributed to the study design, interpretation of data, and approval of the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work, in line with Nurture guidelines.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author gratefully acknowledges the guidance of the supervisory team at the North-West University School of Business and Governance for their valuable feedback during conceptual development and data analysis. Appreciation is also extended to the participating SME owner-managers and retailer representatives for sharing their insights and experiences that made this study possible.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 20 October 2025/ Revised: 3 November 2025/ Accepted: 3 December 2025/ Published: 8 December 2025

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Nurture**: Volume 19, Issue 4, 1-21, **2025
***Online ISSN**: 1994-1633/ **Print ISSN**: 1994-1625*
***DOI**: 10.55951/nurture.v19i4.1053| **URL**: www.nurture.org.pk*
***Publisher:** Nurture Publishing Group*

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Nurture**: Volume 19, Issue 4, 1-21, **2025
***Online ISSN**: 1994-1633/ **Print ISSN**: 1994-1625*
***DOI**: 10.55951/nurture.v19i4.1053| **URL**: www.nurture.org.pk*
***Publisher:** Nurture Publishing Group*