The drip footwear brand: managing a successful start-up launch and rapid expansion during Covid-19 pandemic

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Case summary

Learning outcomes: Students will be able to: describe the entrepreneurial traits required for successful business venturing; evaluate the entrepreneurial risks associated with a rapid business expansion in the early start-up phase of an entrepreneurial venture, especially in crisis; select and defend appropriate management systems that will contribute to the sustainability of a business post the crisis and rapid expansion; and evaluate the online social media optimisation strategies.

Case overview/synopsis: In July 2019, Lekau Sehoana launched branded sneakers called Drip. It took Lekau six weeks to sell the first 600 pairs of shoes from his car boot, not having applied any robust marketing strategies. During the interactions with customers, it became clear that there was a demand for a new South African sneakers brand. In December of the same year, he manufactured and within a few days, sold 1,200 sneakers. This rapid achievement was enough confirmation for Lekau that there was a need for locally manufactured and branded shoes. Based on this success, Lekau started to consider the launch of his own business. However, during the process of the formal launch, the world was suddenly experiencing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. During the planning stage regarding the mode of operation and the full business launch, in March 2020, South Africa was placed into the Covid-19 Alert Level 5 lockdown, complicating the decision-making process even further. Despite the extremely severe lockdown regulations that lasted more than a year, in May 2021, Lekau had already managed to open 11 stores in reputable malls and sold hundred thousands of his sneakers. This instant success, putting pressure on the manufacturing ability, distribution and costing structure, led to Lekau becoming concerned about having grown and still growing too fast too soon during a pandemic. His concern was what would happen when the country would move back to normal, without the constraints caused by the lockdown, would he be able to sustain the growth and how would he achieve this, and how would he be able to manage the fast-growing venture?

Complexity academic level: Entrepreneurship, Innovation, General Management and Marketing courses at the Postgraduate Diploma and Masters level.

Supplementary materials: Teaching notes are available for educators only.

Subject code: CCS 3: Entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship; Business formation/start-ups; Entrepreneurial skills
Introduction

In July 2019, Mr Lekau Sehoana launched his start-up business venture called Drip Footwear [1], which sold branded sneakers. It took Sehoana 6 weeks to sell the first 600 pairs of shoes from his car boot, not having applied any robust marketing strategies. During his interactions with customers, it became clear that there was a gap in the market and demand for a new South African sneaker brand. In December of the same year, he manufactured and sold 1,200 sneakers within a few days. This rapid achievement was enough confirmation for Sehoana that there was a need for locally manufactured and branded shoes. Based on his early success, Sehoana decide to launch of his own business. However, during the process of planning the formal launch, the world suddenly experienced the first impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. During the stage of planning the mode of operation and the full business launch, in March 2020, South Africa was placed into the Covid-19 Alert Level 5 lockdown [2], which had an impact upon and complicated Sehoana’s decision-making process. Despite the extremely severe lockdown regulations in place at the time, in May 2021, Sehoana had already managed to open 11 stores in reputable malls and sold multiple thousands of his sneakers. This instant success, putting pressure on the manufacturing ability, distribution and costing structure, led to Sehoana questioning the cause of the rapid growth during a pandemic and whether this level of sales would continue to post the Covid-19 era. His major question was whether and how he would be able to sustain the fast growth of his business without the constraints caused by the lockdown.

Background and early years

Lekau Sehoana was born in Limpopo [3] and is an entrepreneur who progressed from a stage in his life when he did not have any shoes to wear in High School, to establishing, owning and managing one of the biggest and fast-growing sneaker brands in South Africa. Sehoana’s upbringing was a challenging and difficult one because of the poor economic living conditions in Limpopo [4] and the family issues he had to master. In the early 1990s, Sehoana and his mother and three siblings moved to Gauteng Province to settle in a township called Alexander [5] to seek better economic and living opportunities.

When Sehoana was still in Primary School, his family had relied on government feeding schemes, and thus he was unaware of his poverty. However, in 2003, when he started High School at Equinisweni Secondary School, he realised that his family was poor when he compared himself with other learners who came from middle-class families [6]. His mother did not even have enough money for the school’s fundraising activity known as Civvies [7] day. Since he did not own any fashionable clothes, Sehoana decided to make himself a T-shirt, which he used as his Civvies attire. He received such positive feedback from his peers that this encouraged him to also design a pair of sneakers. This was the beginning of his love and passion for fashion design and entrepreneurship.

Although Sehoana essentially recreated the shoe for his own use, there was a huge interest in his ability to remodel sneakers, and this soon became a business venture for the youngster. He continued to pursue the passion for remodelling sneakers throughout his years at High School from 2003 to 2008. It was the sneakers venture that helped him to be able to buy a decent pair of school shoes, and also financially support his family.
Past entrepreneurial failures

When Sehoana was in his mid-teenage years, and while balancing his High School efforts with his fashion enterprise dream, eager to take the sneakers business to the next level, he conducted an intensive research on the fashion industry. After this process, when he started to understand the industry a bit better and who the key role-players were, he developed a business plan to be able to apply for funding. With the support from one of his teachers, who believed in his vision and a good design portfolio, he approached established organisations for potential partnership and funding. Sadly, he failed to obtain funding and support.

In 2012, he went back to the drawing board, believing there was an opportunity to launch a cleaning business. Despite the promising performance of the business, he felt as though the returns were not sufficient or worth any sleepless nights. He decided that he wanted more out of life, one of which was to study at a college, and thus he passed on the business to his cousin.

He registered to study Civil Engineering at Ekurhuleni West College in 2013. While he was still in the final year of his studies, he was already used as a site manager in a construction company. Sehoana felt that his life was now restarting on a positive level, but within eight months, he was retrenched on the basis of “last in first out”. However, despite this setback, he was able to find another job in the mining industry, and in 2018, he married his High School sweetheart. With the increasing family responsibilities in his role of provider, he decided to launch a Chicken Dust [8] business. Upon conducting in-depth research on the different locations and developing a business plan, he was convinced he had found the big break-through concept. In 2018, he resigned from his work and sold his car to raise capital for the new venture. Unfortunately, and because of too many assumption having been made by him, the Chicken Dust business did not do well and had to be closed down within five months. This left him in debt.

Reflection and re-entry into entrepreneurship

After the failure of the Chicken Dust venture, Sehoana found himself without a job, no income and drowning in debt. He reflected on why he was failing and not able to sustain his businesses. Fortunately, his wife believed in him, motivated and assured him that he was going to rise again and be a successful entrepreneur. Following this business failure, he took a gap year in 2018 and became a stay-at-home husband. He had been reading fashion magazines and that is when the “fashion bug” bit him again. Sehoana remembered that he had always had a passion for fashion entrepreneurship as demonstrated during his High School years. He conducted a study on the industry from the comfort of his home, looking for an entry angle that would work for him. He settled on pursuing the sneakers business, but said to himself that “If I am to do this thing, then I have to do it big”. From his research, he knew that he would need to target ladies for his products because they are the major buyers of shoes and the target market for his sneakers. Since South Africans actively engage on various social media platforms, he believed he had to drive the marketing of his business via social media. Having decided that social media would be the most suitable platform to launch into the market, he knew that he had to present a different persona from the one he had before on all his previous social media pages. Upon the crystallisation of the sneaker business idea, he had the courage to approach his wife for emotional and financial support. Shortly thereafter, the couple used some of the money Sehoana’s wife earned to raise the capital for a future business opportunity.
The birth of drip footwear sneakers

Thus, in 2019, Sehoana started afresh, having explored the possibility of launching a sneaker footwear business. He conceptualised an ideal sneaker that was unique, fashionable and relevant. During the design process, Sehoana came across a locally-branded sneaker that had already been launched. This made him doubt his launch plans and instilled the fear of competition and possible failure in him. However, he then went on to differentiate his business by focussing on the brand message, the target market, the price, the distribution channels, the product designs and the funding model.

Searching for a suitable and distinguishing name that he could register for his company, he looked to social media and noted that when people, and especially young people, were referring to “swag” clothes, they would say “you are dripping”. Thus, he decided to use the slang word Drip as a brand name for the sneakers and his registered company, as he wanted the company’s name to be product-driven. In urban street culture, the name means looking nice, having high fashion sense, also known as Ukotini [9], being stylish or highly fashionable. It is against the backdrop of urban street language that Sehoana positioned the Drip brand. The bold designs of the sneakers displayed in Exhibit 1 and their collaborative style used by various clients are what makes the brand stand out from other sneaker brands.

The next essential business activity was for Sehoana having to decide on the product’s pricing formula and the communication channel. He found a web designer to build the e-commerce website for the business, which he intended also to use as an online store. During the design process, Sehoana decided that he would anchor the product on his story that started in 2003 when he did not own any shoes. He described his background, how he entered the fashion industry and the product development process to allow his customers to identify with him. In his own words, Sehoana declared, “One thing that even today holds the company together is my story, and nothing else”.

Sehoana set off to the local industrial sites, looking for factories that would like his designs and be willing to work with him. Based on his previous experiences, he knew that it was not going to be easy to find a partner. After a lengthy search process, he found a local factory that was at least willing to listen to him. This started an exciting process for him because he had learned that this was the same process that another of his fashion idols, Kanye West, had followed when he brought out his famous sneaker brand – Yeezy. After having spent many hours at the factory, many sleepless nights, late night phone calls made towards achieving the ideal design, the optimal material, look and feel; they finally agreed on the sneaker he wanted to market. The end product were the colourful and comfortable Drip sneakers.

When the design process was completed, another challenge was that the manufacturer could only produce 600 sneaker pairs per colour as a test batch. This first batch accounted for sizes 3 to 7 in pink. If he wanted other sizes and colours beyond the first range, Sehoana would have had to pay the extra money, which he did not have. Having to decide on the colour of the first batch was not that difficult because he was targeting ladies, and therefore, he decided that there were going to be 600 pink pairs of sneakers. His strategy focussed on the following three factors: Firstly, he decided to manufacture and sell pink sneakers, so that men would know the sneakers were not for them. Second, he would use the sneakers’ comfort quality as the major selling point. Finally, he planned to produce more sneakers across different colour ranges and sizes to also eventually also accommodate men’s purchasing decisions.
The first sneaker was sold on 26 July 2019 in Midrand, a town in central Gauteng. Within six weeks, all 600 Drip pairs were sold. Since these were the first sneakers he had produced, they were not yet branded. Seeing that the first batch was successful, Sehoana worked on the branding and logo, changed the sneakers’ sole and produced different sizes and colours to accommodate the appeal to men and women. The feedback he received from the customers were that the Drip sneakers were comfortable, light and designed for walking.

The first branded sneakers were sold in red and yellow as a bulk order of 1,200 sneakers on 2 December 2019 (Exhibit 1). In 2020, within a period of 6 months, and despite the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, he had sold thousands of Drip sneakers. The process enabled him to put systems, processes and policies in place. He moved into rented offices and bought the relevant infrastructure to aid the delivery of the products while also putting in place all the legal and financial processes and systems of a fully-fledged business. The business then recorded the sale of 4,000 pairs of sneakers per month and recorded a total of requested or ordered 6,000 pairs. At this stage, it was clear that there was more demand for the product, and he had to gear up his operation to be able to deliver. The money that he was generating was invested back into the business to support the growing production level. He had started the business with no external loans and no investor capital, except for the payment arrangement with the factory. Due to the nascent nature of his business, he had experienced distribution and logistics challenges. His plan forward was to move into a physical infrastructure, but Sehoana was unsure if that was a “great idea” or too great a risk.

**Social media optimisation to enter the market**

In December 2019, when the website was up and running, he was ready to launch the sales and marketing process. He created Drip sneakers’ social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, all anchored on his personal sneakers’ story. Once people saw the story and the sneakers, they commented positively and asked questions about the ordering system, delivery mechanisms and pricing.

His telephone was ringing non-stop, with people from all corners of the country placing orders for the advertised sneakers. He opened a business banking account and provided the banking details to the people who placed orders. Customers deposited the money into the business account and sent proof of payment to him. Thereafter, he went to the factory, showed them the orders and signed an acknowledgement of debt to aid the release of the sneakers. Sehoana reflected on the first release of the sneaker after the approval of the payment arrangement:

“I have never seen so many pairs of sneakers in my life. I remember asking myself, am I really going to sell all these sneakers? Doubt crept in for a little while, but I mediated it off”.

After some research on other online stores and product distribution, he opted to distribute his sneakers through Aramex in South Africa, which is a reputable logistics, courier and package delivery company. Aramex works with one of the leading local retailers. He advised the clients that the sneakers would be delivered at their nearest local retailer that works with Aramex. With the product trending online and increasing interest in his personal story, he was interviewed by several print media and broadcast media (radio and TV stations). These interviews and media exposure fuelled an even bigger interest in the Drip products.

Sehoana created his Drip social media accounts anchored on his personal entrepreneurial journey and enhanced the business’s presence on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook (Exhibit 2).
He then reintroduce himself and his Drip brand using his personal story of hardships. In his story, he highlighted how he grew up in informal settlements, having no shoes to wear and how those experiences influenced him to become a sneaker designer. The social media campaign was a massive success, with an increased number of people making enquiries, placing orders and liking or following the Drip social media pages in ever-growing numbers. To learn more about how Drip and Mr Sehoana optimised the digital platforms, see Exhibit 2.

**Drip footwear as a formal business**

In early 2020, Sehoana converted his start-up business into a fully-fledged business. He described Drip Footwear as a brand that is dedicated to working with customers to design the future. Sehoana’s intention was to make Drip sneakers accessible to all customers and to collaborate with various stakeholders to amplify the business’s impact. A year after the initial design, thus July 2020, the business had 20 employees, three delivery vehicles, two bricks-and-mortar stores and online sales were skyrocketing.

Drip Footwear had started with an online store, which proved to be highly successful except for supply chain glitches. To meet the increasing demand and circumvent some of these supply chain challenges, he fast-tracked the move to bricks-and-mortar stores. He tested this potential move with a pop-up shop in Newton Junction in Johannesburg, and the resulting demand led him opening his first physical store on 27 June 2020 in Johannesburg, during the Covid-19 lockdown. Beyond the need for growth, and in an effort to circumvent distribution costs, the move to a bricks-and-mortar store was a business decision to eventually be able to reach customers across the length and the breadth of the country while also ensuring customers’ ease of access to the Drip sneakers.

Drip’s competition is Bathu, one of the local sneakers brand. It is the brand that had initially concerned Sehoana, when he had considered to embark on his entrepreneurial journey, focussed on manufacturing sneakers. Established in 2015, Bathu has continued to thrive, demonstrating the demand for locally produced sneakers. With over 24 stores country-wide compared to the 14 stores selling Drip sneakers, it shows that these brands can successfully exist side by side. The two young, driven entrepreneurs continue to change their customers’ perspective with regard to sneaker brands. This duo has created what the majority of youth still long for and can call truly African shoe brands. The growth of these businesses is a demonstration that they serve two distinct markets. One can, therefore, confirm that judging by the growth in demand for both shoe brands, Drip did not need to “steal” Bathu customers to win in the sneaker category; instead, it picked up an additional gap in the market and managed to capture a significant share of the expanding market for locally manufactured sneaker brands. For Drip, it was not a matter of avoiding a playing field that held a fierce competitor, it was about expanding the market place for the two competitors to gain momentum in a fiercely competitive industry.

Despite the head-on competition from Bathu, in 2021, Sehoana opened six stores in Gauteng and Limpopo and sold more than 100,000 pairs of sneakers yielding sales of more than 10m ZAR (US$670,000). Sehoana completed building the business head office and opened five more stores in May 2021. He explained that the business’ success is based on a notion that during the country’s national lockdown, most people had changed their habits and decided that it was a better option to wear comfortable shoes.
Sehoana and his team moved to the new head-offices and set in place a managerial structure comprising seven senior executives. The number of employees increased from 20 to more than 80. At the time of the interview, the top of the organisation’s hierarchy was occupied by the founder and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) – Sehoana, and the organisation’s managing director. Reporting to these executives were financial, e-commerce, area, assets and community managers. The e-commerce and area managers had subordinates reporting to them (Exhibit 3).

**Drip footwear’s logistics and operations management**

Supply chain management is the integration of the activities that procure materials and services, transform them into intermediate goods and final products, and deliver them through a distribution system. When Sehoana launched his online business campaign, he admitted that he had not fully thought about the operations side of the business. Through the social media campaigns, he solicited a high response and greater demand for the products. However, at the time, he had limited experience on how to navigate the key operational elements.

These key operational elements included as follows:

- The ordering systems: He did not have an ordering or process system in place or a plan for these aspects.
- The distribution of the sneakers across the length and the breadth of the country, given the increased response across all provinces of South Africa: He did not have logistics management or delivering system in place.
- The pricing for the sneakers or a combo that included distribution costs: The buyers or those who responded to the social media campaign were informed about the transportation costs only at the time they wanted to place the order, and most were only willing to pay the advertised price.

All these challenges sent the entrepreneur back to the drawing board. He researched other online stores, courier services, distribution systems and effective pricing. This led to him investing in the development of an online platform and a website. He partnered with a goods distribution company that worked with retailers and used WhatsApp and social media as the customer order receiving platforms.

At the time of writing up this case, Sehoana had introduced operational processes that enabled the business to manage the online sales. He chose to handle warehousing and shipping internally. The operational processes enabled the business to deliver (shipping execution and tracking) across the country. Since the online business required a robust system, Sehoana decided to drive sales through a rapidly increasing bricks-and-mortar footprint. Together with his team, they quickly learned that for a new company looking to stand out from the crowd and make its mark in this specific industry, the supply chain was one of the most crucial operation points. Hence, by addressing this factor and controlling it tightly, the business was able to make its mark and beat its competition regarding speed, reputation and overall customer service.

**Building relationships and partnerships**

Having made the decision to go online, implied that Sehoana had to commit and deliver on the orders, and build a strong relationship with the customers, which included being responsive to queries and requests. In cases of personal deliveries, he would take pictures with customers receiving their Drip sneakers and post these photos on social media. Customers who could not
be reached in person would take their own pictures with the sneakers they bought, and publish them on social media, tagging Sehoana’s company. The establishment of the bricks-and-mortar stores had also been a blessing because Sehoana started to attract a number of local celebrities who visited the stores to support the brand and post their purchased Drip sneakers on their social pages. The support from the local celebrities created an even bigger interest in the product.

In the first year of his business activities, Sehoana had established partnerships with some of the reputable leading businesses in South Africa. Although most of the partnership agreements were private, he was happy to make a public announcement of the partnership with Mr Casper Nyovest, a South African rap artist. Drip and Nyovest signed a contract worth 100m ZAR (US$6.7m) of footwear products. The contractual agreements suggest that Drip will produce the selected footwear products worth that amount of money until the contract term ends.

However, despite all the reported successes, there were some customer complaints regarding the quality of the shoes during the start-up phase of the business. The complaints were to be expected because the business still needed to refine the quality of the sneakers. Since the early line of sneakers, the company has since improved the quality and thereby improved customer satisfaction. In 2021, Sehoana also introduced a programme that focuses on involving the customers in the Drip sneakers’ design process.

**The impact of Covid-19 on the South African economy and drip footwear**

In March 2020, South Africa was experiencing the serious impact of the identified coronavirus, which gives rise to the Covid-19 disease. As a consequence to the outbreak of the pandemic, the South African Government introduced various levels of lockdown [10] to reduce contagion by organizing the existing social and economic forms of contact. While these measures were also taken to reduce the South African health-care system becoming overburdened, the measures imposed a severe negative shock on the economy, with immediate loss of economic activity in many business sectors, and negative consequences in the medium term and long-term on the economy.

The four channels, which the various national lockdown levels and other efforts used to curb the spread of Covid-19, and that negatively influenced the economic activity are distinguished as:

- reduced (or totally stalled) production as a result of a national lockdown and other restrictions on non-essential business operations;
- diminished household demands for goods and, especially, services (for example, tourism as a result of travel and movement restrictions);
- disrupted global production and supply chains of South African exports; and
- increased levels of uncertainty regarding any business investment.

Macroeconomic imbalances in South Africa are dominated by fiscal fragility, which has been marked by deterioration of fiscal revenue in recent years, alongside the extremely high levels of unemployment (32.6% in Q1 2021) [11] and low local, as well as foreign investment. The debt-to-Gross Domestic Product ratio has been steadily rising, and this has led to downgrades and a debt service burden that accounts for nearly 15% of public revenues [12]. Domestically, multiple sectors have fragile balance sheets, also reflected among rising debt levels in middle-
class households and increasing poverty levels in low-income households that recently experienced a high growth in unsecured debt.

During the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions, most South Africans were forced to work from home to protect themselves from becoming infected by the virus. As the movement of individuals were severely restricted to essential goods, there was a surge of online sales for many businesses. South Africans traded wearing their corporate attire of formal suits, suits and stilettos or other formal shoes with wearing casual clothes and sneakers around their homes. The Drip shoes were designed for comfortable walking and seemed to be a perfect stiletto replacement for female shoppers. While many retailers were struggling because of the lockdown restrictions, Sehoana was winning customers, with hundreds of orders placed on the online sales platform, and the ability to distribute the products across the length and the breadth of South Africa. During the height of the pandemic’s first wave, Sehoana had opened his first bricks-and-mortar business. By the end of 2020, 4 new stores had been opened, recording high sales and leading the young entrepreneur to believe that more stores should be opened in 2021. It clearly indicated that one of the few, truly African new businesses seemed to have bucked the trend during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the industry experts reported that during one of the worst crises faced by the apparel industry in decades, the sneaker market was considered one of the biggest success stories of 2020 [13]. Furthermore, the fact that a number of customers were interested in an active lifestyle to keep themselves fit during the restrictive lockdown levels, contributed to the increased sneaker sales.

After reflecting on a successful year of being in business and the opportunities relating to the increased demand for the Drip Footwear brand during the Covid-19 pandemic’s lockdown, Sehoana decided that he will have to expand the business, and also aim for the number one sneaker brand spot, something he promised himself. His next challenges will be that the organisation will have to grow, partnerships could be formed and more stores opened.

However, the question remains, how will he cope with meeting the growing demand? How will he be able to manage the fast growing venture? Must he increase the number of designs now or must he move only slowly into the next phase? Sehoana is concerned about growing too fast, too big and too soon. So far, he had not considered diversification or any other business options. Also, he will have to consider building up financial reserves, conduct a thorough risk analysis and a new strategy for the road ahead.

Acknowledgements

Disclaimer. This case is written solely for educational purposes and is not intended to represent successful or unsuccessful managerial decision-making. The authors may have disguised names; financial and other recognisable information to protect confidentiality.

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Notes

1. Drip is a slang word for being cool, having status and showcasing a sense of style.
2. Alert Level 5 indicates a high Covid-19 infection incidence, and a low health system readiness.
3. A province in South Africa.
4. Limpopo is known to be the poorest province in South Africa, with a poverty level at 67.5% www.statssa.gov.za/?p=12075
5. A township in Gauteng, situated 13 km north-east of Johannesburg and a few kilometres from South Africa’s richest square mile – Sandton City.
6. In South Africa, middle-class citizens earn between $1,550 and $4,800 per month.
7. Civvies day is a widely used fund-raising intervention, where schools select a day when the learners have to contribute a minimum fee to skip having to wear their school uniform on the day.
8. Chicken braai or barbecue business, popular in townships.
9. Wearing a high-end brand label.
10. www.gov.za/covid-19/about/about-alert-system
13. www.bbqonline.co.za/current-issue/
Exhibit 1. Drip footwear sneaker designs

Figure E1

Source: Courtesy of Drip, available at: https://dripsa.co.za/

Exhibit 2. Drip footwear social media platforms

Figure E2

Source: Courtesy of Drip https://twitter.com/DRIPFootWear?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctewgr%5Eauthor
Figure E3

**Source:** Courtesy of Drip [https://www.instagram.com/dripfootwearsa/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/dripfootwearsa/?hl=en)

Figure E4

**Source:** Courtesy of Drip [https://www.facebook.com/DripFootwearSA/](https://www.facebook.com/DripFootwearSA/)
Exhibit 3. Drip Footwear Organisational Structure

Figure E5

Source: Authors’ analysis of Drip Footwear Team https://dripsa.co.za/about-us/